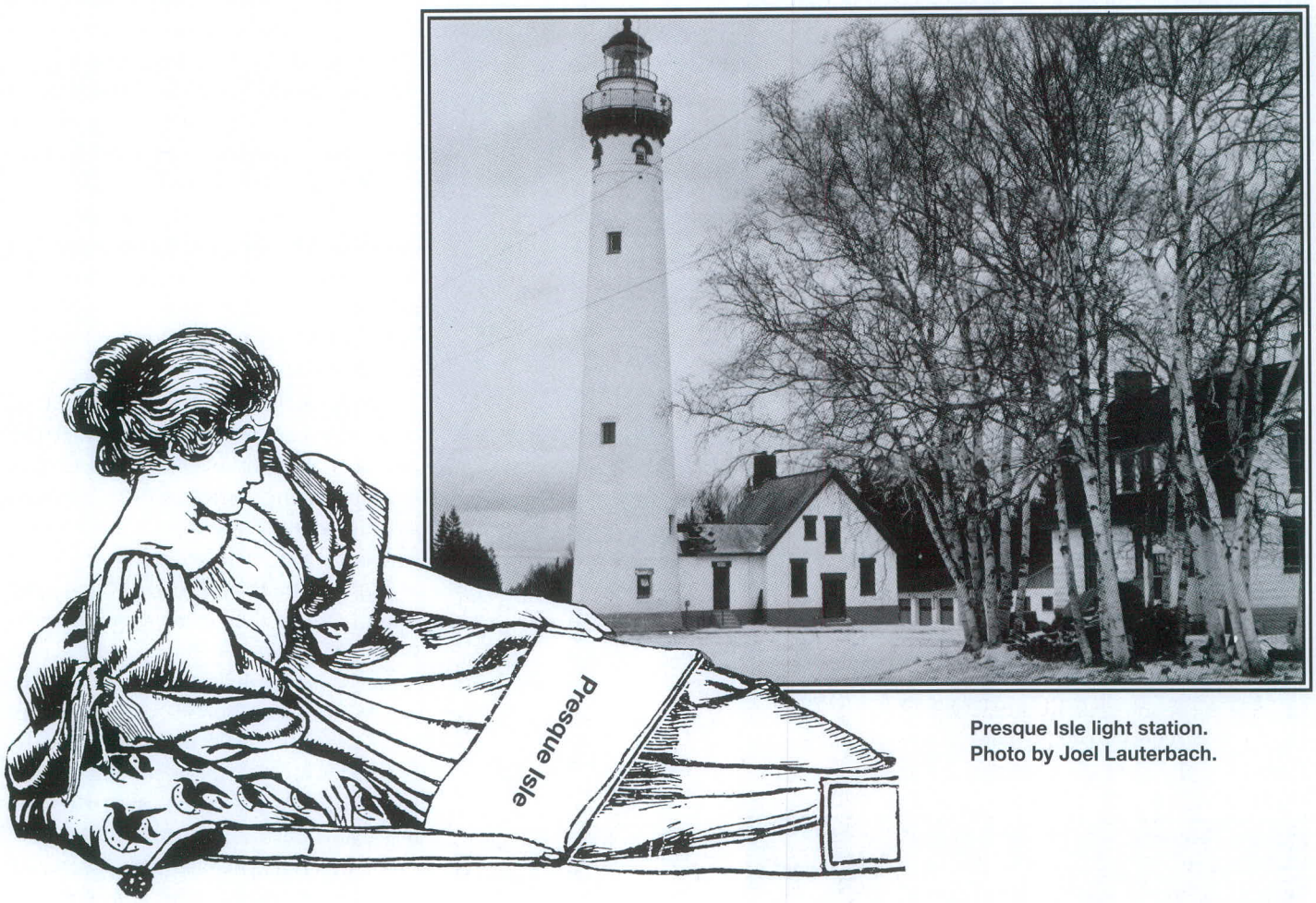
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The Second Lighthouse of My Life



Presque Isle light station.
Photo by Joel Lauterbach.

Lighthouse Memories

By Betty Byrnes Bacon

Illustrations by Linda Menges

Author Betty Byrnes Bacon was born at the Point Iroquois light station where her father, Elmer Brynes, was the head keeper. In Volume IV of the Log Betty wrote a charming four part article about growing up at Point Iroquois. Each part of that series was set in a different season.

We are pleased to publish the following story of Betty returing to the days of her youth, providing us with a glimpse into the past; a look at a "creative" young lady growing up on Lake Huron light station in the 1930's. Welcome back, Betty.

During my childhood at Point Iroquois I was firsthand witness to the faithful dedication of the keepers of the flame. I watched my father and his two assistants climb the 75 cast iron steps to the lantern room carrying large cans of kerosene to fuel the lamp. I saw them shovel tons of hard coal into the fog signal furnace which powered the steam whistle. I saw them fuel river buoys and range lights. I was always hovering around as they polished brass, painted and maintained the buildings and worked on the station grounds. At dawn the keeper on duty would raise the American flag, at sunset the man on duty would lower it, carefully fold it and lay it away to wait the dawn.

Wickies were a special breed of men. Their eyes constantly scanned the horizon for signals of incipient fog banks or, perhaps, a mariner in distress. They marked the rise and fall of the barometer and made scheduled notes of the temperature. They constantly monitored vessel traffic listening to the wail of the steamers as the long ships "talked" to each other in passing.

The keepers knew the lights and fog signals they tended were shepherd to the sailors, guiding their ships to safe harbor.

In 1935 we moved to the Presque Isle station on the Lake Huron.

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After the isolation of the Point Iroquois lighthouse, the Presque Isle station was a teenager's delight. It is located a few miles from a resort center with hotels, lodges and summer cottages. And, there were far more year around residents than at my first station; it was an exciting and scenic area.

Presque Isle was constructed in 1870 to replace the smaller Presque Isle Harbor Lighthouse built in 1840. The original Presque Isle Harbor Lighthouse, and range lights, were used to guide shallow draft coastal fur trading scows, lumber schooners and fishing boats. However, the influx of deep draft ore vessels navigating the shipping lanes way out on the lake necessitated a taller lighthouse and a fog signal to guide the vessels. The new Presque Isle station has the tallest tower on the Great Lakes. The land is flat and unlike Point Iroquois, where the ships passed close to the shore, the commercial traffic was miles out in the lake.

When my father became head keeper in 1935 he found that his predecessors, the Garrity family, were a hard act to follow, as they say in vaudeville. The Garritys had reigned supreme for generations. The elder, Patrick Garrity who was born in Ireland, became the head keeper of the old Harbor lighthouse in 1851. At first the Harbor Light Station was a one family station. When the service deemed two keepers were necessary, rumor has it Garrity dickered with the service to have his wife Katheryn put on the payroll as his assistant, as an alternative to constructing a new set of quarters. The Garritys raised a brood of five future keepers.

When the new light station was constructed, Garrity became the first keeper placing the station into operation at the start of the 1871 shipping season. Patrick Garrity retired in 1885 and his son Tom became the head keeper. His daughter was assigned keeper of the Presque Isle Harbor Range Lights. This was truly called "keeping it in the family."

When Tom Garrity retired in 1935 my father replaced him and, to natives and summer people alike, it was the end of a dynasty. My father, Elmer Byrnes, was looked on as an outsider and for many years his every move was compared to what Pat or Tom Garrity would have done. After all they had held sway at the two light stations for 84 years, since before the Civil War, and the local people considered the Range Lights and the Presque Isle station as Garrity holdings.



Keeper Elmer Byrnes in his office. Note the star and four stripes and his left sleeve. The star denotes 25 years service and each stripe five years. Betty Bacon photo.

During our first winter at Presque Isle we were "snowed in" because the picturesque winding dirt road to the harbor was too narrow for the county snow plows. The following spring Dad convinced the district to construct a wide gravel road, in a straight line, from the station to the harbor. That project caused a great hue and cry from the natives and tourists, "Elmer Byrnes has destroyed the scenic drive to the lighthouse and heaven knows how many lovely second growth trees!" But constructing the road proved a Godsend the very next winter when my brother was transported to the Alpena hospital with pneumonia during a terrible snow storm. He may have died if the snow plows had been unable to clear the road, enabling him to be driven to the hospital.

In the summer there were many small craft. Yachts, sailboats and cruisers passed close to the lighthouse on the way to and from the nearby Presque Isle small craft harbor. During the Detroit to Mackinaw Sailboat Races we saw hundreds of white winged vessels heading for the Straits.

I was a child at Point Iroquois. At Presque Isle I was a young lady, although I didn't always act like one. The tower room at Point Iroquois was a place to play. At Presque Isle it was "a room with a view to bill and coo."

The nearby resort areas of Grand Lake and Long lake were exciting places for teenagers. We girls dated the local boys all winter but dropped them when Memorial Day arrived, in favor of the well heeled and more sophisticated "city boys" or those college boys who worked as waiters and camp counselors.

On the shore of nearby Lake Chicagaume was a boys' camp with college boys for counselors. My girl friend and I would listen for the bugler to play taps which released the counselors for the evening. They would meet us at the dances held at the Presque Isle lodge where we pranced and danced to the sounds of the Big Bands. We sat around bonfires at open air beer gardens under slim white birches. The smell of the wood smoke, the scent of pine and cedar, sound of gentle waves lapping the shore and the "moonpath" on Grand Lake were all part of the summer nights of our happy youth.



The author as Betty Byrnes in 1940. Betty Bacon photo.

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One hotel even had slot machines. And while we were never asked for I.D. cards, we actually never had enough money to really go wild. We lived in a winter and summer wonderland, year around, and felt sorry for the tourists.

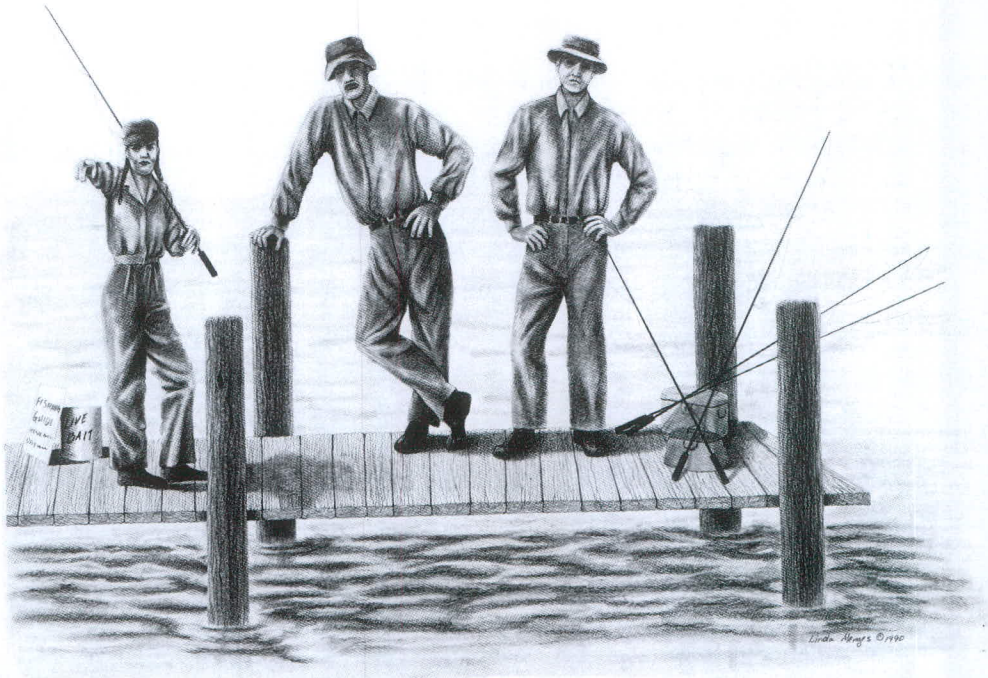
My brother, sister and I decided that if we were going to live life in the "fast lane" we would need spending money and who had the money? Why the tourists, of course!

We had visiting hours at the light station and the tourists were allowed up in the tower to admire the view. One of the keepers sat in the lantern room during these posted visiting hours. People arriving after 5 p.m. were denied admission. Our scheme was to drape ourselves over a bench at the parking area, feigning exhaustion. When a late visitor arrived we would remark that it was a shame they were too late, we had been giving tours all afternoon and were tired" . . . but just this once we'll take you up." We took turns giving these after hours tours and were usually tipped generously. We could now afford to attend the dances, play and slots and have an occasional beer. Because the head keeper's house was not in sight of the parking lot we escaped detection. However, some our friends, noting our sudden affluence, soon tracked down the source and made sure Dad found out.

Dad was thunderstruck. He told us that service policy did not allow keepers to accept gratuities and added that he could be fired for this disregard of the rules. A stern lecture and a week grounding to the station put an end to that source of revenue. To compensate for this lost revenue we decided to become fishing guides.

As I was an avid fisherwoman and knew the prime fishing holes on Grand Lake, I would, I thought, be of value to the tourists who summered at nearby Birch Hill Hotel and Fireside Inn. With visions of spending money dancing in my head, I decided to become a fishing guide.

I started hanging around the fishing docks and talking to the owners of the fancy fishing boats. I would casually mention that I was a native and knew where a lot of the hot spots were. I mentioned that I could get them bigger fish and their limits. The competition among the tourists was keen and I played upon it.



Being a live bait advocate, I always had a bucket of worms and live grubs with me. I believed that the fish preferred the real thing to some fancy tied fly or lure (and I still do).

Grand Lake was famous for Great Northern pike, walleyes, pickerel and perch. The hotels packed picnic hampers for the fishermen who departed at dawn and didn't return until late afternoon. The hotel kitchen would cook any fish that were caught.



Keeper Byrnes was a pretty fair angler himself. The family dog Piggy looks on. Betty Bacon photo.

My idea paid off, and getting paid for what I loved to do was sheer bliss. Those summer days were some of the happiest of my life. The beautiful lake, studded with wooded islands, and the brown and yellow swirl as a large pike hit the bait are vivid memories. And, as promised, I did deliver some large fish and many limits, although some diehard sportsmen spurned my live worms and grubs.

The teenage daughter of a lighthouse keeper had the advantage of a most romantic setting for dalliance, the lantern room of the tower. In this unusual location one felt above time. The circling rays of light gave an enchantment to the scene. The fairy lights of passing freighters, way out on the lake, a full moon outshining the bright northern stars and utter isolation from the everyday world cast a deep spell.

Out on the catwalk or gallery we could hear the murmur of night birds and sometimes the half wail, half laughter of the loon. Night odors of pine and cedar were borne on gentle breezes. Memories of handsome young boys and innocent hugs and kisses are clear and etched in my mind. The lantern room was a magical place, indeed a "Room with a view, to bill and coo."

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After Labor Day the native boys began to look pretty good to us, until spring rolled around again. Of course our winter boy friends preferred the girl tourists, so it all worked out.

One of the out buildings was a wash house with a stove. We cooked some brews that really packed a wallop. We used my father's empty beer bottles and his capping machine. Sometimes the bottles blew up, startling us and causing an awful mess. My mother thought we were making homemade soda until she missed some cakes of yeast. Her surprise visit put a stop to our operation and our spirits, both bottled and mood-wise, were drained.

Soon after we moved to Presque Isle the station was electrified. In 1939 the Coast Guard took over the Lighthouse Service, but father opted to stay a civilian until he retired.

In 1954 my father retired from the Service. He bought an acre near Grand Lake, a few miles from Presque Isle, upon which to build a cottage. But his health failed and he died in 1956 at age sixty-nine.

When he retired I realized that he had never owned a house of his own, having always lived in government quarters.



We could have danced all night.



"A room with a view to bill and coo."

At the beginning of his service he married a young Irish schoolteacher from Calumet, MI. My mother probably had dreamed of a big church wedding. However, my father was instructed to report for duty at Point Iroquois in early spring and they ended up getting married during Lent. During this period nuptial rites were discouraged except under special circumstances. Thus their wedding was subdued, in a side chapel with no fanfare or trimmings. After they arrived at the station, mother secured a teaching position at the local Chippewa Indian reservation; this career came to an abrupt halt with my arrival.

After my father retired there was no lighthouse for me to call home. Even when I had attended college in Marquette, MI I lived at a lighthouse with a former assistant of Dad's. From birth through college I always had a lighthouse to call home. But since college, living inland, I have felt like a fish out of water. After 45 years I still feel displaced without a friendly circling light, the sound of lapping waves and the cawing of seagulls.

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Safe Harbor

Storm warning reports were telephoned to the keeper from the Alpena Weather Bureau and appropriate flags were raised on the station weather mast to warn mariners of an impending storm.

In the spring of 1936 a violent storm lashed down from Canada and across Lake Huron. At the light station we were awakened in the night by the loud pounding and throbbing of a diesel towered ship. The main channel was miles away, but this ship sounded close by, and in trouble. Peering into the stormy night we saw her lights as she rounded the point and entered north bay. The vessel was a huge grain carrier heading south. She had begun taking on water and three quarters of her hull was submerged.

Except for a skeleton crew the men from the ship rowed to Presque Isle Harbor. A few days later hydraulic pumps were installed and the wet grain blown through large tubes onto the beach.

Ducks and song birds flying by looked down on bird heaven—piles of grain! They passed the word and soon other feathered friends arrived at the feeding frenzy. The hot sun caused the wet grain to ferment in a few days. We teenagers watched with amusement as the birds reacted to the combination of high-proof alcohol and the mating season in almost human ways. Some of the feathered imbibers became too inebriated to stand up, let alone mate. Others became noisy and belligerent and the happy drunks sang their hearts out like barber shop quartets. Normally coy hens began chasing cocks. Cocks trying to strut became tangled up in their own feet, stumbled, teetered and sprawled. The scene was reminiscent of a Saturday night honky-tonk at closing. This bacchanalia continued until the grain was trucked to a dump.

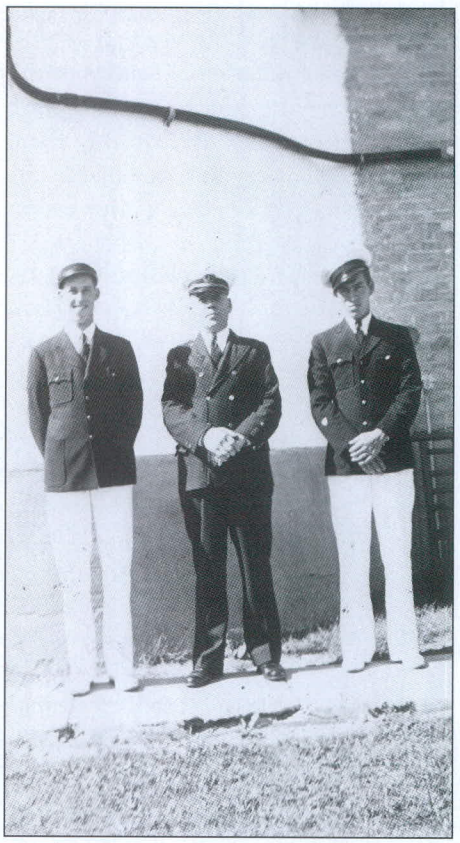
Eventually, repair crews patched the damaged hull and tugs towed the freighter out of the bay. The captain complimented my father on maintraining a bright beacon, one that had guided his ship to safe harbor that stormy night.



Above — The view from the lantern room at Presque Isle. Old post card.

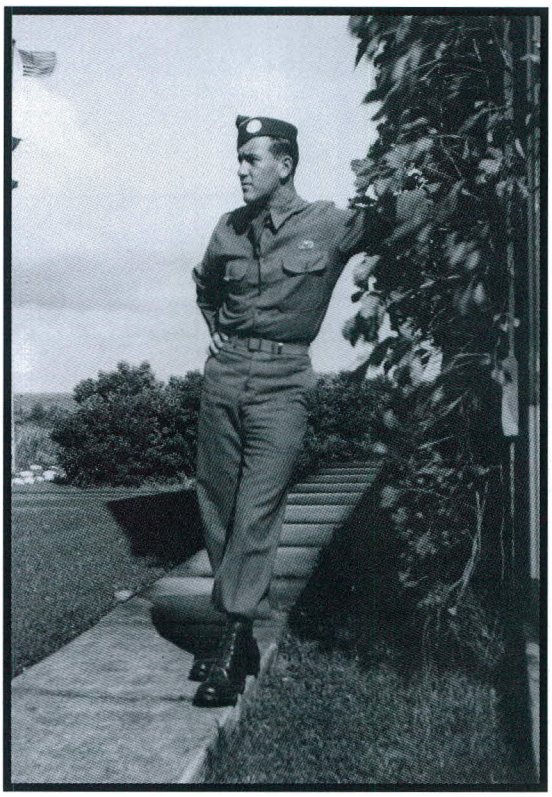


Keeper Byrnes and his assistants were responsible for painting the 109 foot high tower. We don't think that OSHA would approve of this arrangement. Betty Bacon photo.



Keeper Byrnes and his two assistants, who are young Coast Guard men. Betty Bacon photo.

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Great Lakes shipping played a major role in the movement of raw materials to fashion the machines of war. It began with the Lend Lease period and vastly increased after Pearl Harbor.

My brother Robert Byrnes joined the U.S. Army, 507 Parachute Infantry Regiment. After basic training he was stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia.

In 1943 he was given 30 days leave, before shipping out to England, and came home. My sister Nan and I also returned to Presque Isle. That month together was a bittersweet time; the war had changed all of our lives. Nan would soon join the State Department and also be sent to England. My husband joined the Marines and I moved to California to be close to him while he trained at Camp Pendleton.

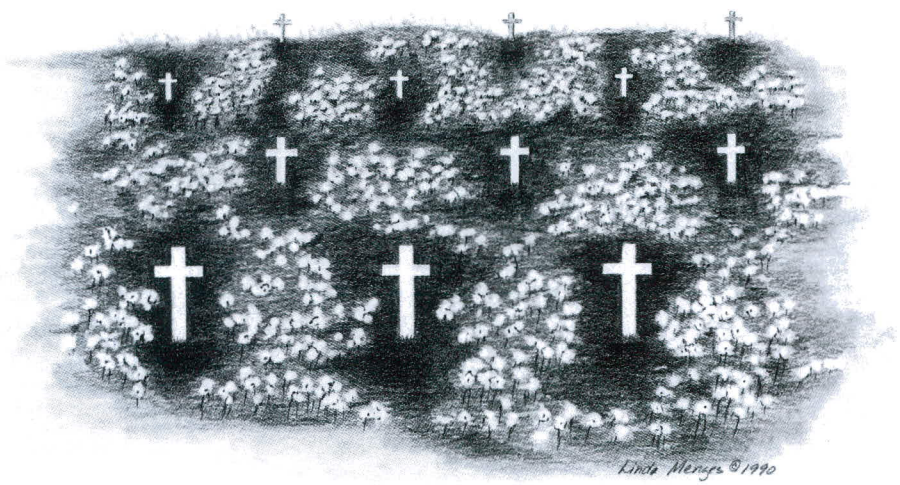
We spent that leave visiting friends and old stomping grounds. The Coast Guard had furnished the keepers with high powered rifles and ammunition to defend the station against — unlikely — sabotage. The three of us practiced firing Dad's new weapon. It had a kick like a mule and required a shoulder pad because of the recoil. Even firing from the prone position, the monster would drive me back three feet on slippery grass.

The time passed swiftly and with sad hearts we went our separate ways. Bob's troop ship survived a stormy North Atlantic passage. On D Day he was dropped behind enemy lines and survived the Battle of the Bulge.

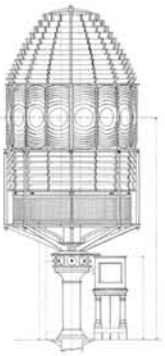
Nan flew to England and was, eventually, in the vanguard of civilian women to enter Paris, when that city was reclaimed. At first she was unsuccessful finding brother Bob, but one night at an embassy dance she met a Captain in the paratroopers. Miraculously she learned that Bob was one of his men and Bob was granted leave of three days. Brother and sister joined up to see the sights, take pictures and go dancing. A week later he was killed over Germany, before he hit the ground, two weeks before V-E Day.

A lighthouse lad lies buried in an American cemetery in Belgium. "In Flander's fields the poppies grow between the crosses, row on row. . . ."

Above — The keeper's son, Bob Byrnes, poses during his last leave, just before 'shipping out' to eternity. Note the storm warning flags flying at left. Betty Bacon photo.



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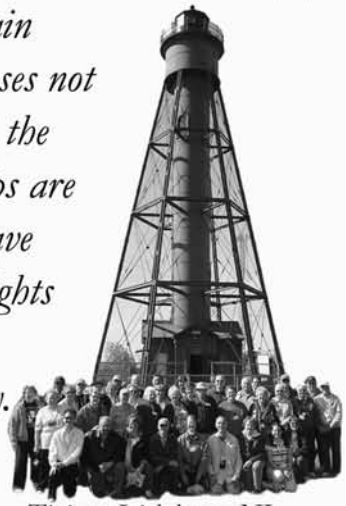
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