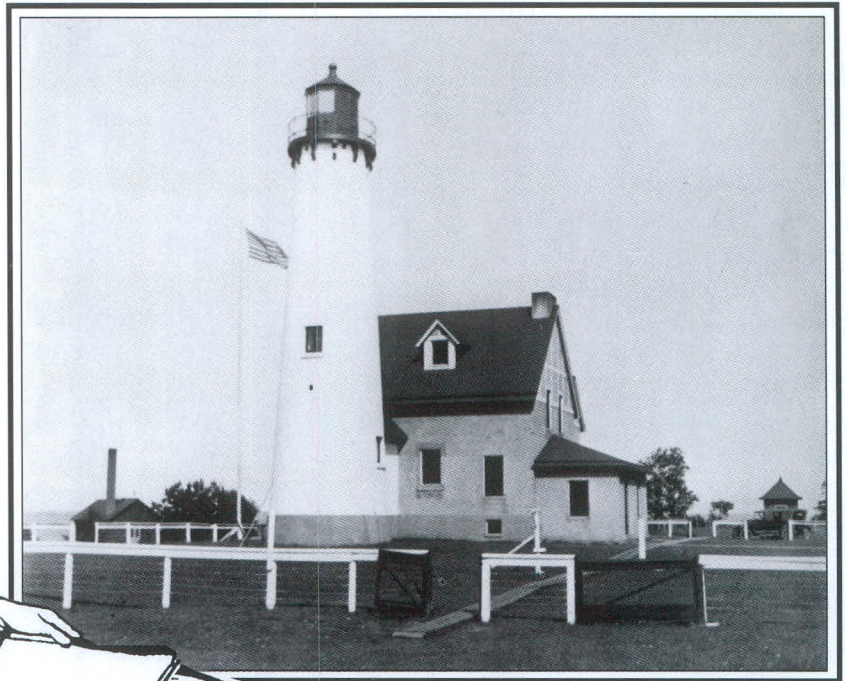




Lighthouse Memories—Spring

by Betty Bacon

This is the last installment of a four season odyssey in the year of a light station. The station is Point Iroquois located at the eastern end of Lake Superior on the Upper Michigan Peninsula. The keeper of the station during our visit (circa 1920) is Elmer Byrnes. Keeper Byrnes entered the USLHE as 1st Assistant at this station and within a few years was appointed Keeper. He served at Point Iroquois from 1915 until 1935 when he was transferred, as keeper, to the Presque Isle lighthouse (Lake Huron) where he completed his 43 year career. Our story teller is his daughter, Betty Byrnes Bacon, who dedicates this delightful story of growing up in a lighthouse to her father.

Above right—Point Iroquois Lighthouse circa 1922. The small building at the left houses the fog signals, the well house is at the right. Betty Bacon photo.



he first sign of Spring at the lighthouse was flocks of large, black, ragged-winged birds: squalling, squawking and squabbling against the blue March sky and white patches of snow. The crows had come back.

Each day the sun shone warmer and longer. The ice on the river and bay became honeycombed and began breaking up and shifting with the changing winds. Then a Northwester would roar down from Canada and the dawn revealed huge ice cakes piled against the shore. Some of the chunks would be broken into long needles, shining like rainbows in the sun. We children would climb up and down the shimmering piles, delighting in the tinkling sounds of breaking ice needles. To us they were like fairy chimes.

About the last of March or first part of April, the first boats would start pushing through the ice floes and emerging channels, heading for Lake Superior. For some inexplicable reason Great Lakes sailors call a five or six-hundred foot long vessel a boat. The iron and copper ore boats were racing to be the first to arrive in the Lake Superior ports, and bring back the first cargoes to the eastern industrial cities. Bonuses were given to the boats that broke through first. Sometimes the wind would change, and moving fields of ice would trap the vessels for days until the wind veered. Once they got through the St. Mary River and into Lake Superior, the going was easier.



Weeks before the opening of navigation, the keepers were busy polishing the lens, hauling oil and readying the light and fog signal. Our lighthouse had a 4th order Fresnel lens that produced a flash every 30 seconds. The lamp was a kerosene Incandescent Oil Vapor lamp (IOV) which had a mantle much like a Coleman lantern. At the end of each 4 hour watch the keeper on watch would climb the tower and wind the clockworks which rotated the lens. He would also trim the wicks as needed. Once each day the lantern room windows (storm panes) were cleaned inside and out. The lens was polished at the beginning of the season and cleaned weekly.

Once a year, usually before the Spring inspection, the exterior of the tower was whitewashed. The three keepers all cooperated to rig the bos'n's chair and hoist the painting keeper up and down the tower exterior. On clear nights the rays of light emanating from the lens revolved around and around against the star-studded night sky, like spokes of a giant golden cartwheel. There is nothing sadder to me than driving past a lighthouse tower at night and not seeing a light.

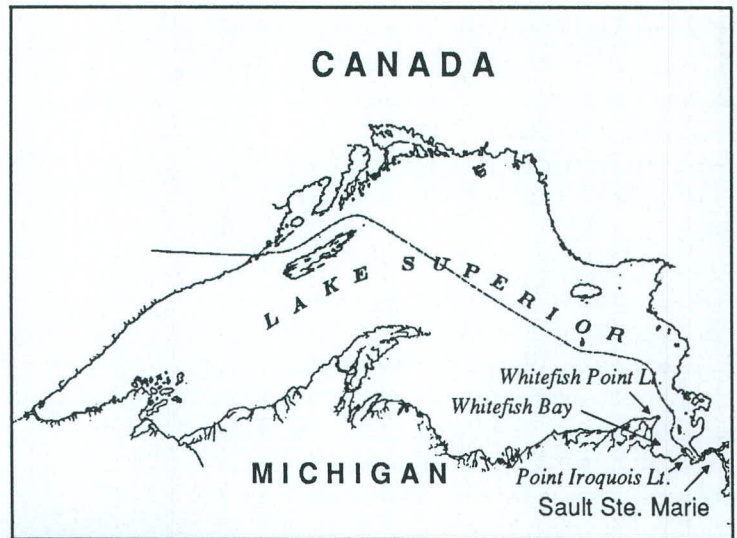
The fog signal at Iroquois was a steam whistle powered by a coal fueled boilers. The characteristic of our fog signal was one 5 second blast every 30 seconds (5s. blast, 25s. silence). However, during heavy snow storms the ships caught in the ice would sound their horn "requesting" a response from any fog signal in the area: dad would sound one long and one short blast, and this told the ships that they were near the Iroquois Light Station.

To the people of the North, the coming of Spring after the long cold winter was a welcome occurrence and something of a miracle. Although some lighthouses were abandoned during the Great Lakes Winters, all three families at Iroquois spent the Winter months at the light station. With Spring the reason for being there was reaffirmed. Once again the long ships needed the guiding light and fog and signal during periods of thick weather.



The keeper painting the tower by means of a bos'n chair. Photo courtesy of Betty Bacon.

Spring came to the North in fits and starts. A week of warm sunny weather would be followed by a blinding sleet and snow storm, but the storms grew fewer and the trees began leafing out and the grass greening. Along the shores of Lake Superior children had few choices with which to fill a May Basket. We did find arbutus between patches of snow and no perfume could compare with their fragrance. The clumps of waxy white and pink flowers were nestled in fuzzy round-shaped green leaves. When we found them, we knew Spring had finally ar-



rived. The only other decorations for our baskets were pussy willows. Their pearly grey buds were indeed like miniature kittens.

By late May and June, the woods were carpeted with white, blue and lavender violets, Dutchman's breeches, Jack-in-the-Pulpit, and dog-tooth violets. In the marshes we picked cowslips, which my mother called marsh marigolds. But the most exotic flowers were lady slippers or moccasin plants, as the Indians called them. These wild orchids were pink, white, and yellow.

The birds returned in mass migrations. Some flew at night and dashed themselves against the lantern room windows. Some mornings the lawn would be littered with bright colored song birds. The vees of Canadian Geese honked their way north and several times those heavy birds would crash through the storm panes (windows) of the lantern room and we would have roast goose.

Nesting birds and their chicks fascinated me. I was a great tree climber and knew where most nests were within a mile radius of home. My father told a friend, Dr. Christopherson (an ornithologist in the Soo), about my knowledge of nesting sites. He came out to the lighthouse with a box of bird bands of all sizes and showed me how to band nestlings. He explained that many things could be learned about bird migrations from the information on the bands and for years he called me his favorite assistant.

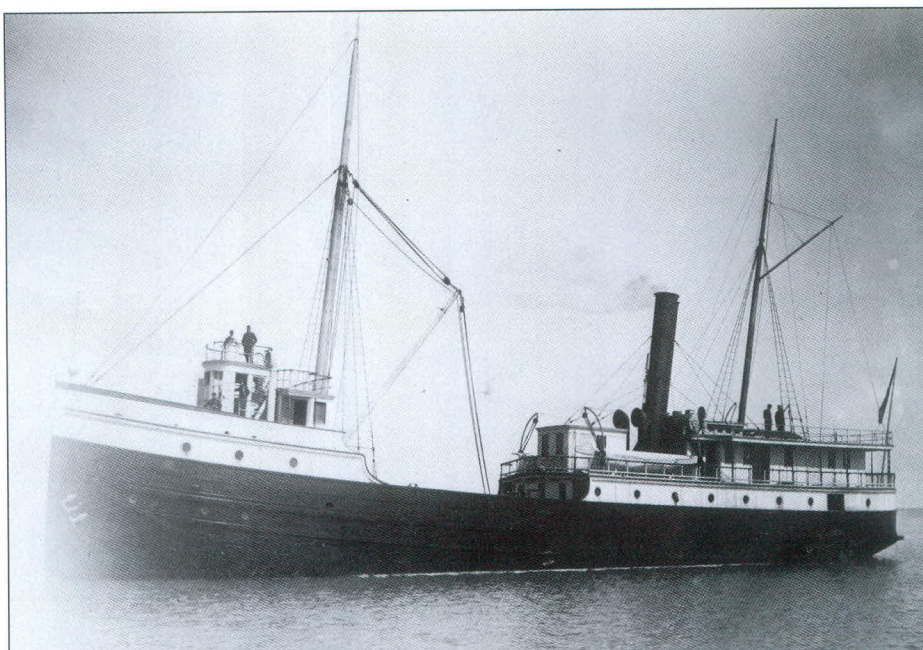
In June the spring Lighthouse Service Inspection took place. The inspector went from station to station on the Lighthouse Tender *Amaranth*. The tower, fog signal, quarters, and outlying buildings were inspected. For weeks my father and his assistants varnished, painted, polished and shined everything that didn't move. The inspector's visit was supposed to be a surprise, but stations down river would call us on the telephone to say that the *Amaranth* was on its way.

When the tender hove into view my father and his first and second assistants would get into their newly cleaned and pressed uniforms which were only worn on special occasions. Insignia on hats



Keeper Elmer Byrnes looking snappy in his inspection uniform. Betty Bacon photo.

were polished and buttons (each with a miniature lighthouse) shined. The rest of the family also dressed in our best outfits. There was much running around picking things up and seemingly never enough time. One time the sink was full of dishes, so my mother tossed them in a big bread pan, threw a clean cloth over them and put them in the oven. If by chance the oven door was opened by the inspector they were "rising bread."



The 166 foot long Lighthouse Tender *Amaranth*, one of the Lakes vessels used to carry the District Inspector on his periodic inspection trips. These ungainly vessels were called barges and they were reported to have rolled like a beast. Photo courtesy of the Van Hoey Collection.

Although we were never supposed to know when the inspector was to arrive, most keepers had a fairly good idea. Those stations with phones could alert the next station down the line that the ship had left and was heading their way. When the Lighthouse Tender dropped anchor the keepers hurried down to the dock and stood at attention as the launch drew near. The keepers saluted the Inspector and he returned their salutes. They would then escort him to the various buildings and up to the lantern room. The keeper of each quarters would take the Inspector to his door, where his wife and children greeted him. He was then escorted through every room in the house, including the attic and cellar. At the end of the inspection the District Inspector would go over the numerous Logs with dad and listen to complaints or hear the need for repairs beyond the capability of station personnel.

A head keeper's reputation depended on that one day of inspection, usually each quarter. However, in the Lakes the Inspector only held 2 or 3 inspections a year; Spring and Fall and sometimes a mid Summer inspection. The keeper who received the best marks of all the stations for all the inspections during one calendar year received the Efficiency Pin and was

authorized to fly the "E Flag" during the year. My father was a perfectionist and his men liked and respected him. For years he flew the "E Flag," a symbol of excellence. He never received a letter of reprimand for a light not burning or a fog signal not sounding. He retired with 43 years of service (all but his first few as head keeper.)

We children would roam the woods of second growth oak, birch, maple and poplar. The big pines were gone and we could see signs of old logging roads. One lightning-blasted pine that escaped the lumberjacks was a landmark, so we never got lost. This survivor was called the Eagle Nest Tree, and in a three-branched center near the top was a huge nest about four feet in diameter. Year after year, throughout my childhood, when Spring came, a pair of bald eagles would return and add to the nest. They caught fish in the shallows and squirrels and mice in the woods. Each year we would watch them feeding their two or three eaglets, and finally the young would learn to fly. In the Fall, they left for the South.

One Spring, the male eagle returned alone. For days he would sit on a limb above the nest, only hunting when hunger drove him to it. We wondered what had happened to his mate, and if he was grieving. For two years he came back and then we never saw him again.



Above—the four Byrnes kids at the 'Eagle Nest Tree' circa 1924. Below—the author at an early age. Betty Bacon photos.



One day my father and his assistant hitched up the horses with a cross cut saw in the wagon, and drove out to the Eagle Nest Tree and sawed it down for wood. We four children sat in the old nest and had our picture taken.

Like many rural families we had chickens for food and eggs. I kept pestering my dad to let me raise some baby chicks. I hovered over a broody hen sitting on ten eggs. I decided I'd be a midwife and help the chicks when they began to break out of the eggs. I injured two so badly that they died. I put the remaining eight in a pen and filled a lard-pail with water and I leaned a shingle against the pail so that they could walk up and drink; two chicks fell in and drowned. The weather turned cold, so I took the remaining six chicks home, wrapped them in a flannel cloth and laid them on the radiator. My dad stoked up the coal furnace and five roasted. The remaining baby chick looked sick, so I took it to be with me. I rolled on it during the night, and in the morning it was a quarter inch thick and very dead! I confessed the series of events to my father when he asked how my chickens were coming along. I was given a lecture, and never allowed to raise baby

chicks again.

We also raised one or two pigs a year. One young black and white pig (which I thought quite intelligent) became very attached to me. I used to ride on his back and one day I tied a rope around his neck and kept pulling on it to stop him. He fell over and I got off his back and kept pulling harder to make him get up. My father was up in the tower and happened to look down and see the pig lying there. He ran down the winding steel stairway, tore the rope off the pig's neck and kneaded its ribs until it started to breathe. I was six years old and started crying. My father said that I had tied a slip knot and that the pig could have died of suffocation. He showed me how to tie a knot that wouldn't slip and comforted me. But I never rode the pig again.



Children of the lighthouse keepers had a wonderful life. Our father was always there for us, and we could follow him around on his various tasks. We felt sorry for children who only saw their fathers at breakfast and in the evenings, when they came home from work. We had boats to row, woods to roam, and our parents always at hand. I would not change my childhood as it was exciting, happy and full of wonder.

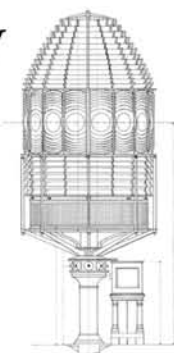


Inspection day in the Spring of 1919 or 1920. Left to right; 1st Ass't James Collins, 2nd Ass't Peter Day and Keeper Elmer Byrnes. Note 2nd Ass't Day has an extra button on his vest and is wearing a bow tie, maybe that's why he is the 2nd assistant. Betty Bacon photo.

This is the final episode of our four season odyssey at Point Iroquois light station on Lake Superior. We'll revisit a teen age Betty Byrnes at her father's next station, Presque Isle on Lake Huron, in a future edition of the Log.



Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today or Give the Gift of Membership!



Restoration & Preservation



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society has donated to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. Most recently we were honored by being presented with the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

*To learn more visit
www.uslhs.org
or
call Headquarters at
415-362-7255*

Help Support Our Important Mission!

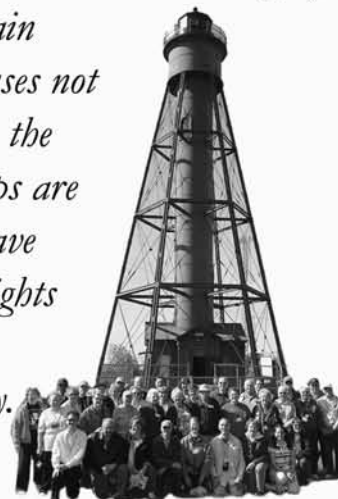
Education



The Keeper's Log magazine is the only one of its kind and has been published quarterly since 1984.

Receive this award-winning publication as a benefit of membership.

The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



Tinicum Lighthouse, NJ