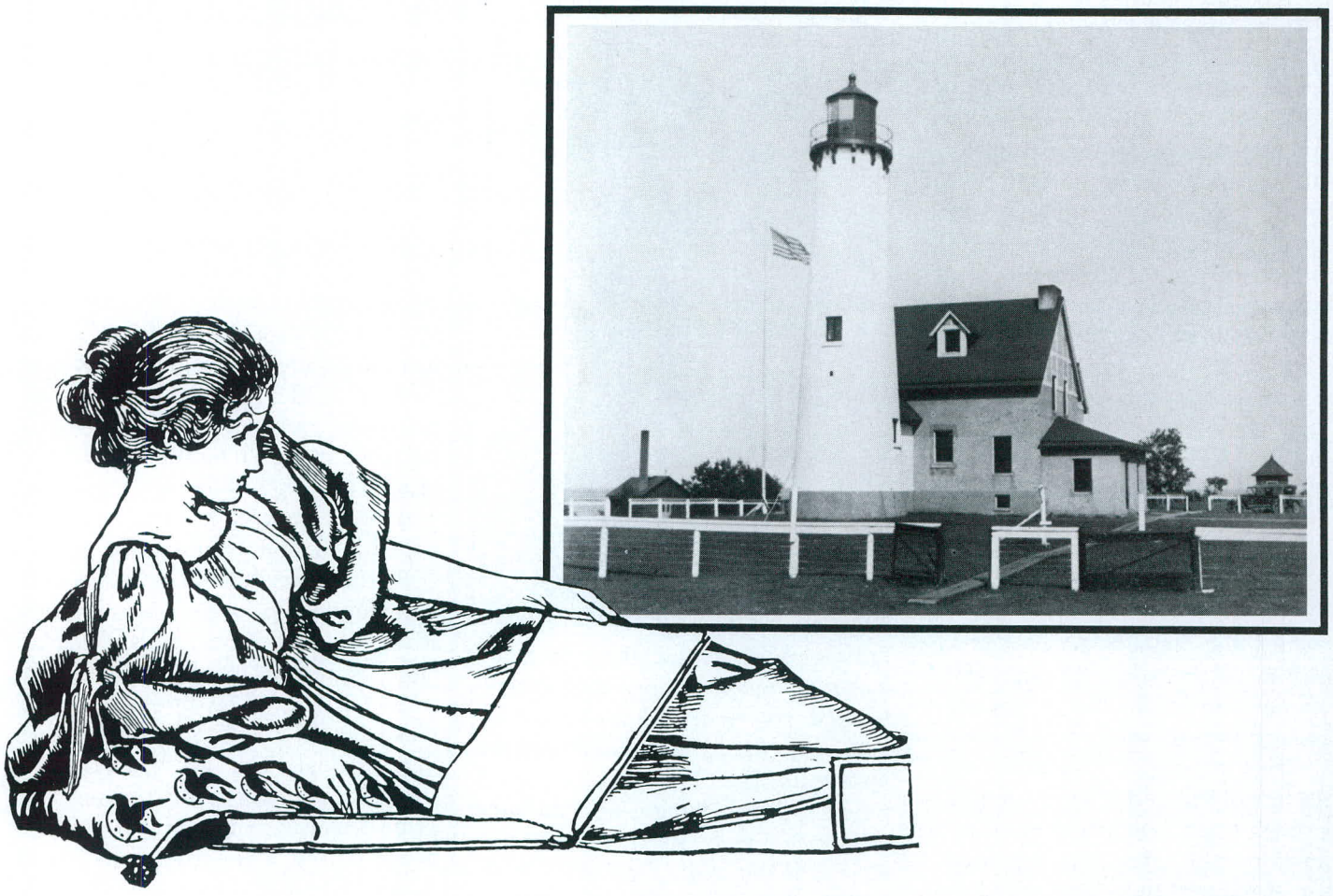
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Lighthouse Memories–Summer

by Betty Bacon

Beginning with this issue we will take you on 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 signal, the well house is at the right. Betty Bacon photo.

Summer is forever when you are a child. Time seems to stand still as one happy day drifts into the next. It was a dreamy time among the fields of daisies and buttercups and clumps of pink briar roses.

The brook trout and perch hung around the dock and we children, with bamboo poles and green fish lines, spent hours fishing. We would chase grey and tan grasshoppers and, when put on a hook, their yellow wings would spread out so that they floated on the water. We caught many a fish dinner. My father had a saying, "If you can catch them, you can clean them." He showed us how, so the fish we brought to the kitchen were neatly filleted.

The vessel traffic on Lake Superior was at a peak. The wail of steamers signaling to each other was part of our lives. Father told us that more tonnage passed our lighthouse in the seven month navigation season than the Panama and Suez Canals, combined, handled in a year.

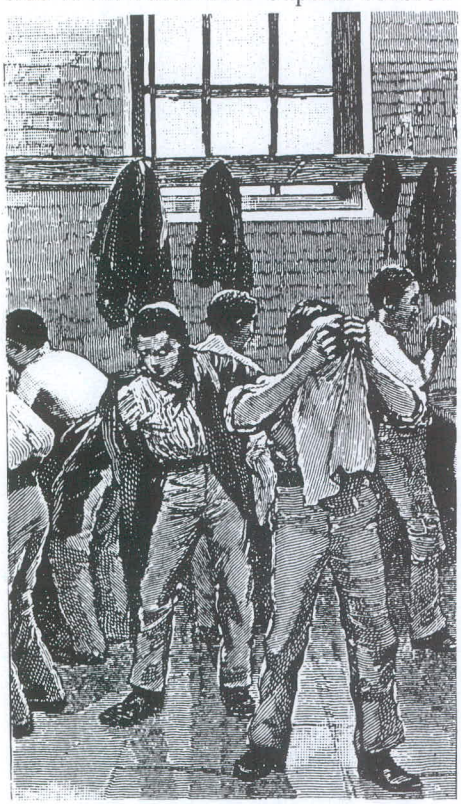
The twenty-four hour day was divided into four hour watches. At night my dad had the eight to twelve watch. His first assistant had the twelve to four, and the second assistant the four to eight. Each man on duty watched the light, and if the fog rolled in, started up the fog signal. During the day whoever had the watch for that day started the fog horn. When company stayed overnight, they would say, "I never slept a wink." He would answer that we never heard it. The fog horn was my first lullaby and a part of lighthouse life.

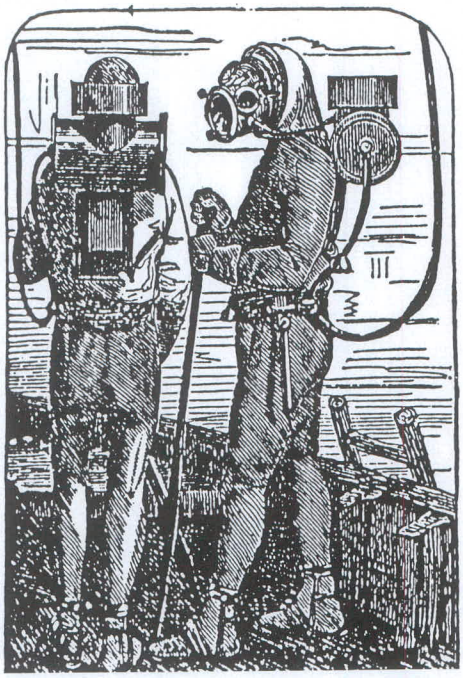
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Across from Iroquois Lighthouse on the Canadian side was a lightship which swung on a ninety-foot cable. It was a British mine sweeper converted after World War I to a lightship. It was a cramped and lonely life for the two or three keepers aboard. Their families lived in the Canadian Soo, and a relief team spelled them every two weeks or so. My father would take us to visit them in our cabin cruiser. They welcomed company, and served us tea and scones and cake. They would tell us about their children and we would be thankful that Iroquois was a shore station where we could be with our parents.

One foggy night around midnight, we children heard many voices downstairs. We rushed down to find our kitchen and dining room packed with men in various stages of undress. My mother was heating big pots of coffee and making sandwiches.

Their ship had sunk, a little west of the lighthouse. It had been rammed by a vessel attempting to make time in the thick fog. All ships were supposed to run at reduced speed and sound whistles to warn others. The sharp bow of the speeding ship had torn a hole in the side of the other. Her Captain ordered





full speed ashore and the helmsman, guided by our fog horn, reached shallow water where the forecastle and engine house were above water when she hit bottom. The Captain was later cited for his quick thinking. The men came ashore in life boats as the Captain feared the ship might capsize.

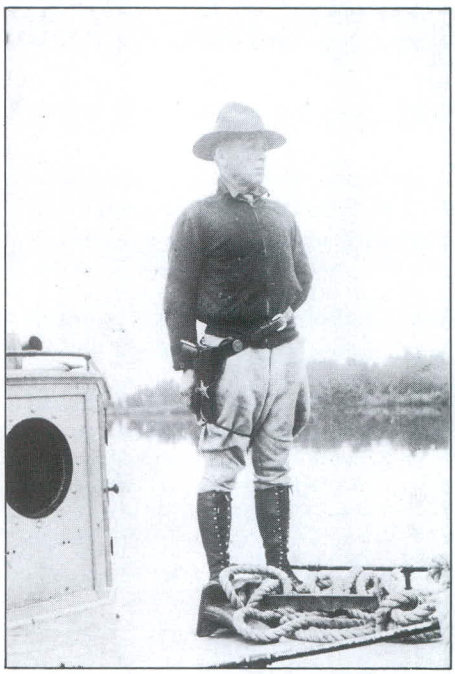
My father called the telephone operator and was connected with the Coast Guard in the Soo. Transportation was furnished and the men were taken by train from the Soo to their homes.

I heard that they never found the hit and run ship. The fog lifted in a few days and divers were sent to repair the damage. We children rowed around watching the divers get into their gear. They looked like men from Mars. After the divers repaired the torn hull and pumped out the water she floated like a cork. Her crew returned and she went on her way.

Lighthouse Keepers had to be self sufficient, so each Spring the three men plowed and disced a large fenced area for vegetable gardens. We were told to bring any lady bugs we found and put them in the garden as my parents didn't believe in insecticides. There were no poisonous snakes in Upper Michigan, so we didn't have to worry. Our parents told us that snakes ate their weight in insects. There were black and white and bright green garter snakes, and every one we found was thrown over the fence into the garden.

My Irish grandfather visited us one summer and my father and mother found him in the garden hitting a snake with a hoe. My father told him they were harmless. "A snake is the Devil in disguise," said grandfather; adding, "It was the Devil that talked Eve into eating the apple in Eden." My father remarked, "It wasn't the apple in the tree that caused the trouble, it was the pair on the ground." My mother said, "Not in front of the children!" We discussed this and couldn't figure it out. My brother thought it might be because the pear was rotten. It wasn't until years later that we found out what he meant.

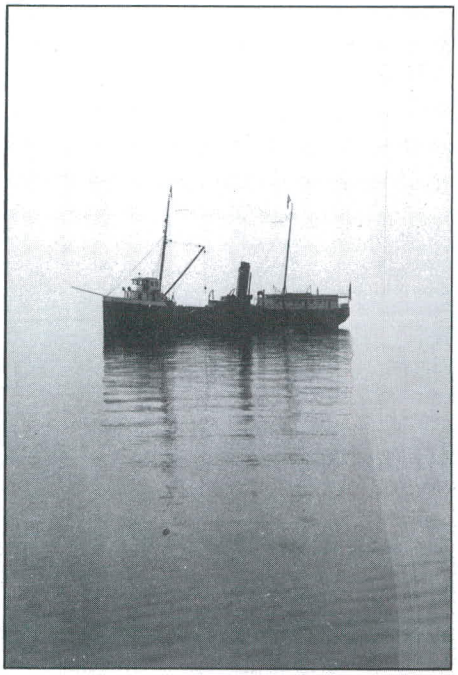
During my childhood there was a lot of rum running across the Saint Mary's River into the States, from Canada. Our government launch, painted gray with U.S.L.S. on the bow looked very much like the gray U.S.R.S. (Revenue Service) boats. The Lighthouse Service furnished my father with a revolver to protect himself while on buoy patrol. Some of our local fishermen found hauling Canadian whiskey much more profitable than herring.



Keeper Byrnes on the deck of the USLHE launch about to go on buoy patrol. Note the gun on his hip, insurance in case he runs into bootleggers. The star on the holster is from his days as Deputy Sheriff. Betty Bacon photo.

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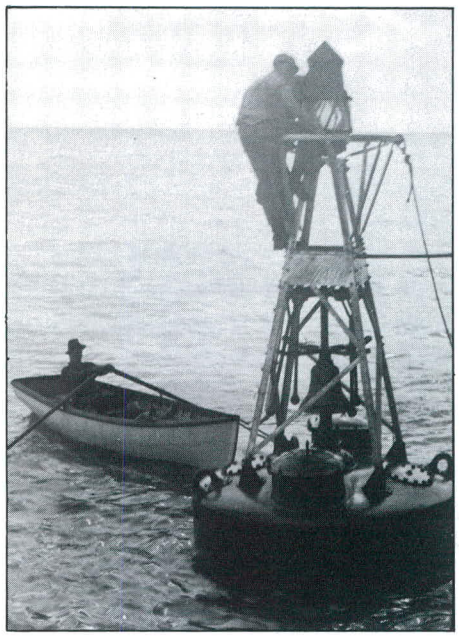




Above—The children of Keeper Byrnes, Betty at the left, aboard the station launch. Right—The USLH tender *Amaranth* lies off Point Iroquois during a quarterly visit. Below—Keeper Elmer Byrnes dressed for inspection, circa 1920. Betty Bacon photos.

We watched many an exciting chase and sometimes, if the revenue boat was gaining, the men would throw the cases overboard. When they were boarded there was no evidence except floating crates. After a heavy Northwest'r, we sometimes found unbroken bottles washed up on the beach.

Our launch was used to service lighted buoys down river from the station. My father would warp the boat up to the buoy and we would help him tie up. He would check them out and fuel them. Being deck hands was fun and we became very good with ropes.



A keeper servicing a buoy. USLHS photo.



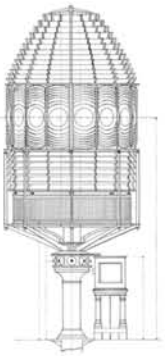
The visits of the Lighthouse Tenders *Amaranth, Marigold, Clover* and *Aspen* bringing supplies were exciting events. We children would row out and be welcomed aboard. We would be invited to dinner around noon and enjoyed the goodies in the officer's mess.

One day a brisk wind was blowing and the *Marigold* was riding at anchor and rolling. I came up on deck very seasick. A deck hand took one look at me and said, "You look green around the gills." When I said I felt sick, he said, "I know how to cure you. Come on down to the galley with me. I'll tie a piece of raw bacon on a string. You swallow it and I'll pull it back up." I rushed for the railing while he laughed hilariously.

The first mate of the *Marigold,* Mr. Snyder, was a good friend of our family. The lighthouse tenders would often put in to Isle Royal (a large island in Lake Superior) in the Fall to kill a deer or two for the ship's mess. Mr. Snyder, raised in a city, became lost in the thick woods. He kept going around in circles, panicked and started running. He became lodged in a couple of leaning trees and had a heart attack. He was only a short distance from the shore when they found him, another victim of the North Country. We children were taught that if we became lost we were to keep calm and stay where we were. Someone would find us if we kept our heads.

So went our golden summer days filled with excitement and dreams and surrounded by love.

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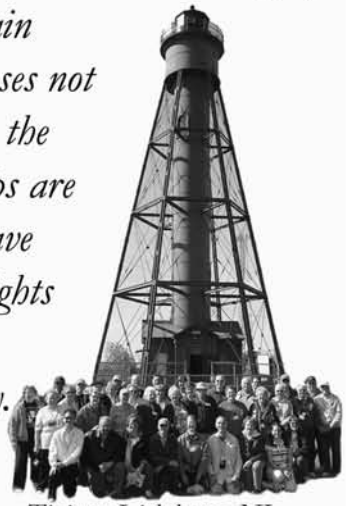
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