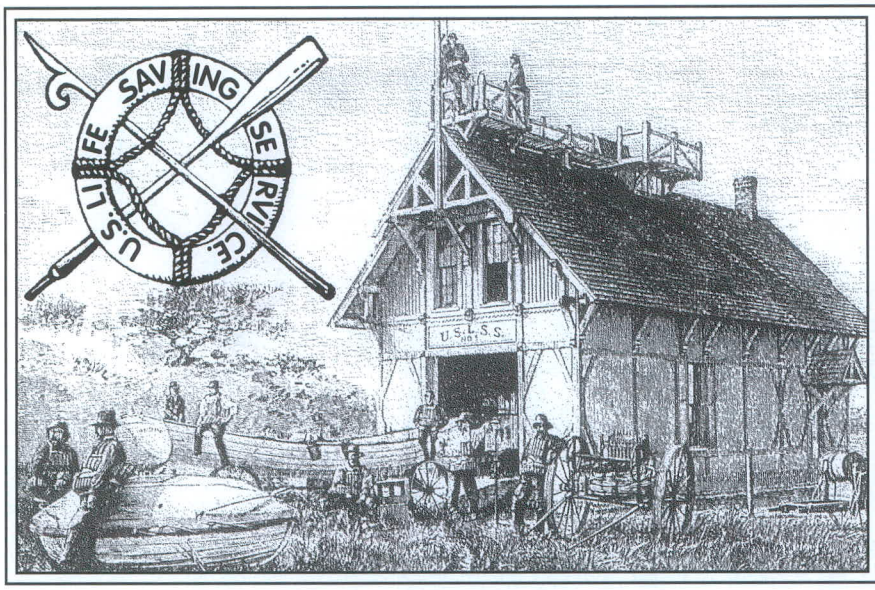
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OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life Saving Service
1878-1915

"Our Hands Were So Numb..."

By Dennis Noble



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At 12:30 a.m., November 27, 1889, Keeper Lawrence O. Lawson, of Evanston, Illinois, U.S. Life-Saving Station awoke to banging on the station's door. A messenger handed Lawson a terse telegram: "There is a large vessel ashore off Fort Sheridan. Come." These ten words would be the beginning of one of the biggest challenges of Keeper Lawson's career.

The events along Lake Michigan's western shoreline actually began on the Detroit River when the 500 ton *Calumet*, with a cargo of coal, struck an object in the river. The captain put into Detroit for repairs, which consisted of a temporary patch. The owners insisted the ship proceed to Milwaukee in order to have the coal delivered by Thanksgiving. With some reservations, the skipper ordered the crew to get the ship underway. To be on the safe side, the captain had a large steam pump brought aboard.

In the Straits of Mackinac, the *Calumet* ran into a howling blizzard. Building waves battered the ship and accumulation on the superstructure affected the vessel's stability. Next, the captain was alerted by the engine room that the ship's pumps were not capable of extracting the amount of water entering the *Calumet*. The precaution of the large pump had paid off.

The skipper realized that the driving sleet and snow would hamper his ability to see the navigation lights of Milwaukee, so he changed course to Chicago. The *Calumet* seemed destined to make the larger port, until the steam pump failed and could not be restarted. The skipper now had two choices: he could continue on the present course and perhaps reach Chicago, risking the lives of the crew, or he could turn west and run for the beach with a possibility of saving the crew, but losing the ship. The captain chose the beach. Once on a westerly course, the *Calumet* took the high seas on her beam, causing the ship to roll violently and water entered the cargo hold. At 10:30 pm, a large grinding noise echoed throughout the ship as the vessel ground to a halt on a sandbar 1,000 yards from the beach off Fort Sheridan. The captain ordered the sea-cocks opened enabling the ship to settle to the bottom, thus delaying it from breaking up from the pounding waves. The swells crashing over the *Calumet* froze as they hit the ship. The entire crew of eighteen, including the captain, huddled in the forward pilot house awaiting their fate.

Fortunately for the crew of the *Calumet*, A.W. Fletcher, of Highland Park, spotted the ship and ran to a telegraph office wiring the nearest U.S. Life-Saving Station at Evanston, twelve miles to the south.

Upon receiving the telegram and hastily dressing, Keeper Lawson trekked through the snow to reach the railroad dispatcher and find out when the next northbound train would arrive. The keeper had the dispatcher telegraph a request for an extra car on the freight train in order to carry the lifesaving equipment. The train had already departed and stopped at Evanston, but without the extra car to haul the lifesaving gear.

Keeper Lawson then ran to a livery stable, rented a team of horses and drove back to the station. He rounded up his crew, directing one man to remain at the station to await the return of the beach patrolman from his rounds. Two men then hitched the horses to the beach cart and the surfboat carriage and started for the site of the wreck. The rest of the crew went with Lawson on the train.

Lawson and his lifesavers were met at Highland Park by Fletcher, who guided the crew two miles to the wreck site. The group stood on a bluff of seventy to eighty feet in height, facing into the freezing wind. The temperature hovered around ten degrees above zero. The lifesavers worked down to the beach and built a large fire on the beach to alert the crew of the *Calumet* they had been seen and help was on the way.

By the time his rescue equipment arrived, Keeper Lawson decided to await daylight before beginning operations. At 7:00 a.m., Lawson put the Lyle gun atop the bluff, sighted and then pulled the firing lanyard. The projectile fell short. He sighted and fired again. When the smoke from the black powder cleared, Lawson saw the projectile again fall short. Lawson knew if his third shot failed he faced the arduous task of trying to get a surf-boat down a steep bluff and launching it into high waves with temperatures below freezing. The keeper pulled the firing lanyard and it was short again. The only option now was to man the boat.

A crowd had gathered at the site and amongst the onlookers stood Captain O.C. Penny, Sixth U.S. Infantry, who was stationed at Fort Sheridan. Captain Penny



The Evanston, IL Life Saving Service station sometime after 1915, as the sign states U.S. Coast Guard. That service came into being in 1915. U.S. Coast Guard photo, courtesy of the author.

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approached Keeper Lawson and volunteered fifty of his soldiers to assist in getting the boat down the steep bluffs. Onlookers, soldiers and lifesavers were soon hacking at the brush-covered bluffs and cutting steps in the snow and sand. The volunteers and saving crew managed to work the surf-boat down the precipice.

Once on the beach, they moved the boat down the beach in order to be upwind from the *Calumet*. Once in position, Keeper Lawson judged the breaking surf and then yelled for his crewmen to shove the boat into the surf and leap into the surf-boat. The craft slid off the beach into the freezing waters, and Keeper Lawson stood erect in the stern, urging his crew on as they strained at the oars.

Keeper Lawson later recorded in his station log book that they had received a very heavy wave, which knocked him off his feet and over the stroke oar. As soon as he had recovered another large wave "curled" over the boat, half-filling it with frigid water. The boat responded sluggishly and Lawson ordered the stroke oar to start bailing. The keeper later reported "our headway was hardly perceptible, the oar and oar-locks were covered with ice . . . Our hands were so numb we could hardly hold our oars and then came a lull which seemed to me providential . . . "

The lull allowed Keeper Lawson to work the surf-boat alongside the *Calumet*. Showing discipline, six of the ship's crew donned cork life-jackets and made the terrifying leap into the pitching surf-boat. The lifesavers turned their boat around and made their way back to the beach much faster than outbound. Upon reaching shore, volunteers had to pull both rescued and rescuers out of the boat and help them over to the roaring fire. The lifesaving crew's clothing was completely encased in ice.

It is hard to imagine what ran through the men's minds as they beat the ice from their clothing and warmed themselves. They had just gone through a terrible ordeal to reach the *Calumet* and knew they faced at least two more trips through the tempest to bring off the rest of the crew.

Whatever their thoughts, after warming at the fire, and without hesitation, the lifesaving crew dragged the surf-boat down the beach and again launched their boat into the high seas. Soon, the entire crew from the *Calumet* and their rescuers were enjoying the welcome warmth of the large fire.



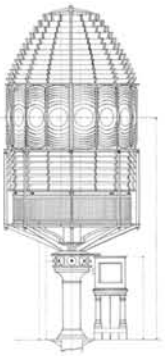
The crew of the Evanston Life Saving Service station five years after the dramatic rescue of the Calumet. The youth of the student crew is evident when comparing the photograph with other crews of the era. Keeper Lawrence O. Lawson is easily identified in the group. U.S. Coast Guard photo courtesy of the author.

For their actions on this cold November day, Keeper Lawrence O. Lawson and his entire crew won the Gold Life Saving Medal, the highest award for valor a member of the U.S. Life-Saving Service could win. The awarding of a Gold Medal to an entire crew for a rescue was a rare event, but then Keeper Lawson and his crew were rather unique. The Evanston Station, located on the grounds of Northwestern University, had surf-men who were college students.

The young crew did bring on some additional problems for the Keeper Lawson, as reported by the *Chicago Tribune* in 1900. Lawson feared his surf-men were not keeping their minds strictly on their duties because "every afternoon, before and after drill, the members (of the crew) are surrounded by bevies of fair maids, and in the evening the lake shore is dotted with groups of young women talking to the lifesavers. Even when it is time for their favorites to go on patrol duty the young women do not depart, but turn their attention to the reserve men."

Obviously, Keeper Lawrence O. Lawson had to possess high qualities of leadership to take college students and turn them into an exceptional crew. The events on that cold November morning in 1889 proved Lawson's leadership and how well the crew responded to his discipline.

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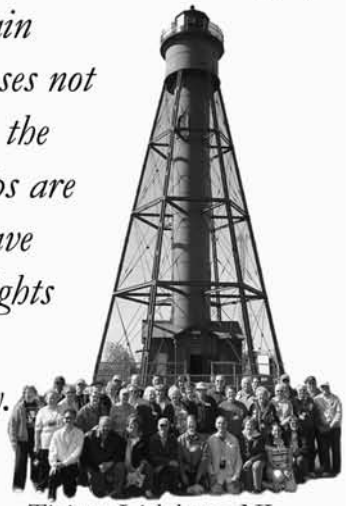
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