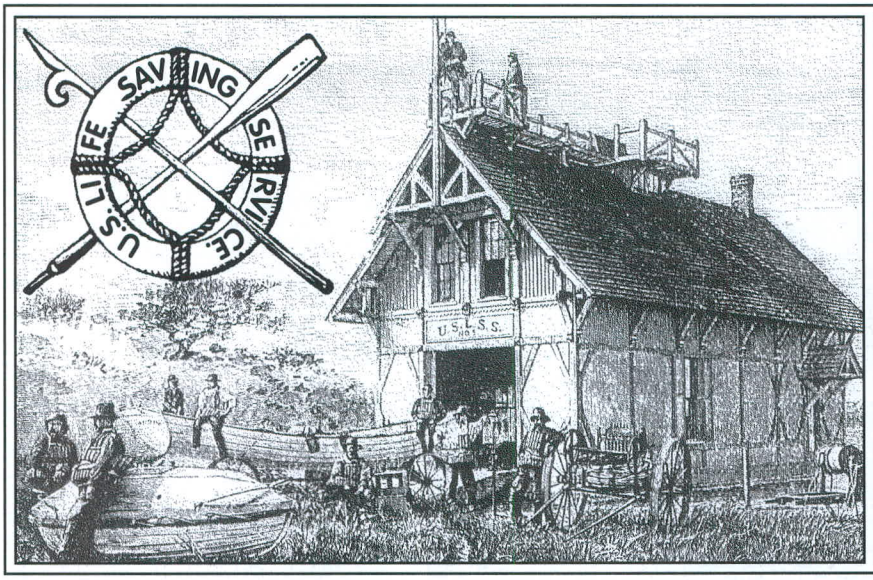
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# OUR SISTER SERVICE

The U. S. Life Saving Service
1878-1915

# Sandpounders

by Dennis L. Noble

The duties of the crews of the U.S. Life-Saving Service consisted largely of drill and everyday mundane work around the station. Service regulations carefully prescribed a certain evolution for each day of the week — except Sunday. The surfmen practiced everything from boat drill to beach apparatus and regulations even stated the day to clean the station, on Saturday. There remained but one other very important aspect of duty for the lifesavers: beach patrol and lookout duties. Before describing this last aspect of the duties of surfmen, let us turn to another part of life in the U.S. Life-Saving Service: pay, as demonstrated by the units on the Great Lakes.

The first stations on the Great Lakes were manned by volunteer crews who were paid nothing unless their efforts resulted in the saving of life. On each occasion that a crew saved a life, each man received ten dollars. Contrary to many accounts in the media of the day, shipwrecks did not occur everyday and the volunteers were forced to put up with long hours of drill and maintaining equipment without pay. (To some extent, the accounts written by some authors of today would have you believe that daring rescues were a daily occurrence at stations.) The lifesavers were also not paid if they only assisted a distressed vessel and rescued property. The volunteers, in other words, were laborers and every drill they attended or shipwreck they pulled to without saving lives cost them money. The service's annual report for 1877 said such a condition caused "the deeping of their poverty toward penury, the aggravation of the petty miseries of their straitened means, the diminution of their small home comforts, the deprivation of some of the common necessaries of life, the loss or want of some plain article of food or apparel for themselves, their wives, or their children."

In June 1878, after the service reorganized and full-time crews replaced the volunteers, crewmembers were paid $40 per month. Compare this, however, to the wages of Great Lakes seamen who earned $2 per day plus board during the summer of 1879 and by fall, the per diem rate had risen to $4. A surfman, on the other hand, received $1.33 per day, from which 40 cents was subtracted for board. In the



**A day at the office with the Captain (left) and the crew of the Big Sandy Life Saving Service Station preparing to conduct a drill with their beach cart. Photograph courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.**

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annual report of 1880, the service pleaded for higher pay, remarking, "Heroes on 93 cents a day, especially if they have large families to support, however full of human kindness or prone to daring exploits, will inevitably yield to the plump $2, or that fat $4 per diem of the Lake schooner or steamer." The low pay explains why, when the service became uniformed, there was a roar of outrage when the surfmen learned they had to pay for the outfits out of their own wages. Wages rose very slowly, but were eaten away by inflation.

On May 6, 1896, the service was brought under the rules of the Civil Service and personnel abuses brought about by the old spoils system were, for the most part, eliminated. Wages were brought up some, but the service never really earned large salaries considering the dangers of their profession.

The last duties of the "heroes on 93 cents a day" ensured that seldom did a lifesaver get a full night's sleep. The U.S. Life-Saving Service placed a great deal of emphasis on patrol and lookout duties. Originally, stations were to be approximately five miles apart. In these cases, every night during the active season a surfman would set off along the beach and about half way to the next station he met a patrolman coming from the other station, usually at a shed-like structure known as the half way house. The men would exchange a metal tag with their station's name embossed upon them to prove they had met the other patrol and then trudge back to their station. The patrols would run from sunset to sunrise. In foggy weather, the patrols would be run constantly. As more and more stations came into service, the distances between units opened and in these cases a stake or some device was driven into the ground with a watchman's clock key attached. The surfman would make his patrol to the location, insert the key into the clock he carried to prove his completing the hike, and then he returned to the station.

During daylight hours, a surfman climbed to the lookout tower located above every station, or very close by. The men stood in the tower — no chairs were provided — and scanned the water looking for vessels in distress. In addition, the surfmen were required to log the weather and most units required the men to record passing vessels. To insure the lookout in the tower remained alert, many keepers had the surfman ring a bell every half hour. If a keeper failed to hear the bell, he would soon be in the tower investigating the reason.



**A Life Saver on a lonely beach patrol. Photograph courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.**

Both lookout and beach patrol duties are definitely low technology solutions to guarding the coast line. Given the times, however, the method proved successful. Every night a beach patrolman would start off into the dark on his rounds, usually wearing oilskins, carrying a lantern and slung over one shoulder a pouch of Coston signals, flare-like signaling devices to warn a ship too close to the beach or to signal those in distress they had been located and help was on the way. Over the other shoulder hung a watchman's clock, if needed.

The service placed a great deal of emphasis upon lookout and patrol duties. An immediate method of dismissal from the service was sleeping on lookout duty or inattention on beach patrol. As one who stood lookout tower watches in the U. S. Coast Guard, I can assure the reader that the crushing boredom of scanning the water can make the duty wear thin very quickly. Strangely enough, even duty in lookout towers could be dangerous. The tower watch at Sleeping Bear Point, Michigan, for example, died when lightning struck the tower.

The idea of walking a moonlit beach might seem like pleasant, even romantic, duty. Along the eastern seaboard, however, much of the active season occurred during the winter months, and walking through gale-whipped storms can be anything but pleasant. In the Great Lakes, the active season continued well into November, hardly a time for a leisurely stroll along the beaches of Lake Superior. Accounts of the time tell of patrolmen walking beaches "clad with ice" and little more than "pathless deserts in the night." The surfmen plodded "through the soft sand, in spite of flooding tides, bewildering snowfalls, overwhelming winds, and bitter cold." Furthermore, because a station rarely had more than eight men, a surfman could come off his patrol cold, wet and miserable at midnight, lie down for an hour and or so, and then be called out to pull at the oars of a boat. There was no sleeping in at the station if help was needed on the water.

Walking the beaches caused the patrolmen to witness some unusual sights and situations. Probably the most grisly were the discovery of bodies washed ashore. Many of the victims were buried where they were found.

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There were the inevitable message-in-the bottle discoveries. A surfman from the Evanston, Illinois, station found a message in bottle that stated: "I, Peter Knowlton, of New York City, having taken a rowboat from near Van Buren Street on Monday to fish, have been caught in a storm."

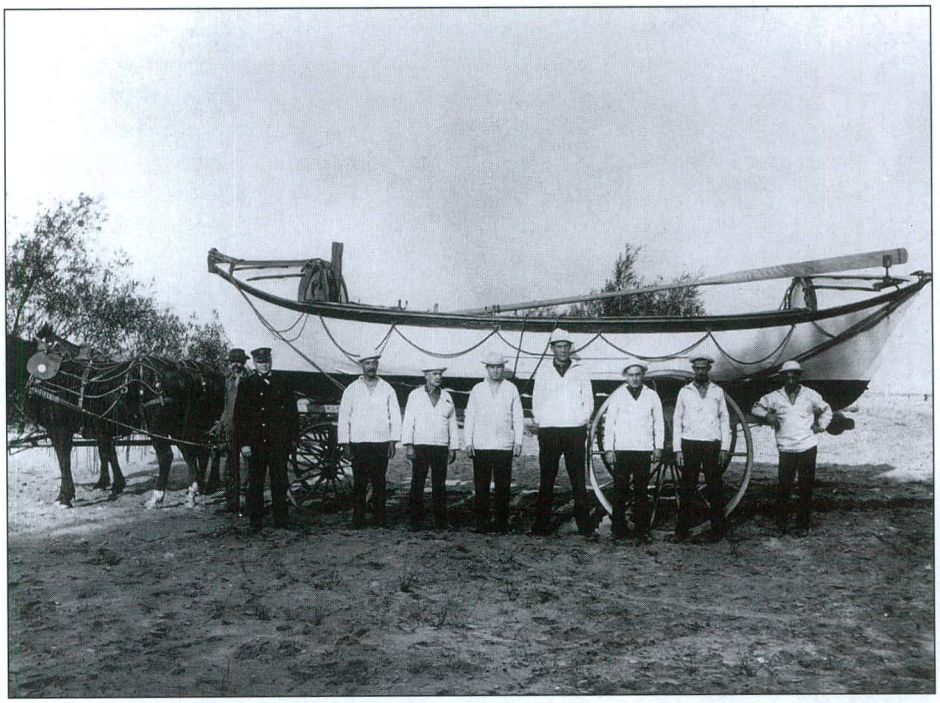
Those stations located near settlements of any kind were apt to run into human problems more than their fellow lifesavers in remote regions. During the 1902-1903 season, for example, a beach patrolman saved a woman from an assault. The Evanston station, unusual in the annals of the service as the surfmen were students from Northwestern University, seemed to attract incidents. One keeper reported that during the warm summer months the largest problem he faced was young women wanting to accompany the student-surfmen on their patrol. Two muggers near the Evanston station set upon Surfman H.C. Smith on his rounds. Smith fought off both footpads. A newspaper account reported the two crooks were given a "severe drubbing." It seems Smith was a former member of the Northwestern University football team and one of the "best athletes in Evanston."

Beach patrols were finally discontinued just before World War II. They were reactivated during the war, mostly to detect enemy agents. Patrols were stopped permanently after 1945. Lookout tower watches lasted longer. In the Great Lakes tower watches remained a part of the duty of U. S. Coast Guard Lifeboat Stations through the 1950s. Eventually, they too were discontinued. Some modern U.S. Coast Guard stations, such as Cape Disappointment, Washington, continue to have lookout tower watch during the heavy sport fishing season or when the Columbia River bar is especially bad.

Were the patrols and lookouts successful? Given the times, they were a good, low technology answer to covering an area of operations. Interestingly enough, a U. S. Coast Guard beach patrolman in WW II helped in the capture of Nazi saboteurs landed from a U-boat on a Long Island beach in 1942. Members of the U. S. Life-Saving Service and U. S. Coast Guard were given demeaning sobriquets of "dune hoppers" and "sand-pounders" by deep water sailors for their patrol work. Many blue water sailors, however, were rescued when the beach patrolman rushed into the station sounding the alarm of a wrecked ship. Furthermore, the patrols also warned many ships from running aground. During the active season of 1899, for example, surfmen nationwide warned off 143 ships in danger of grounding. Thus, the beach patrolman and lookout successfully fulfilled a need in maritime safety. Like almost everything else about the old U.S. Life-Saving Service, the work of the dedicated surfmen on their rounds, or in their towers, have been largely forgotten and have slipped behind the veil of history.

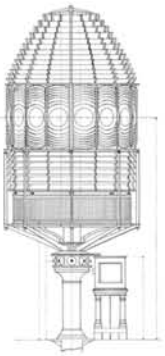
**Below - A Life Saver on watch at the North Manitou Station, no chair for the surfman on watch. Note the storm flags at right.**



**U. S. Life Saving Service Captain and crew with their surf boat. Location and date unknown. Photograph courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.**

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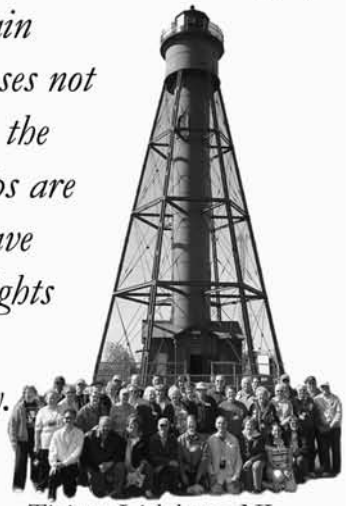
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