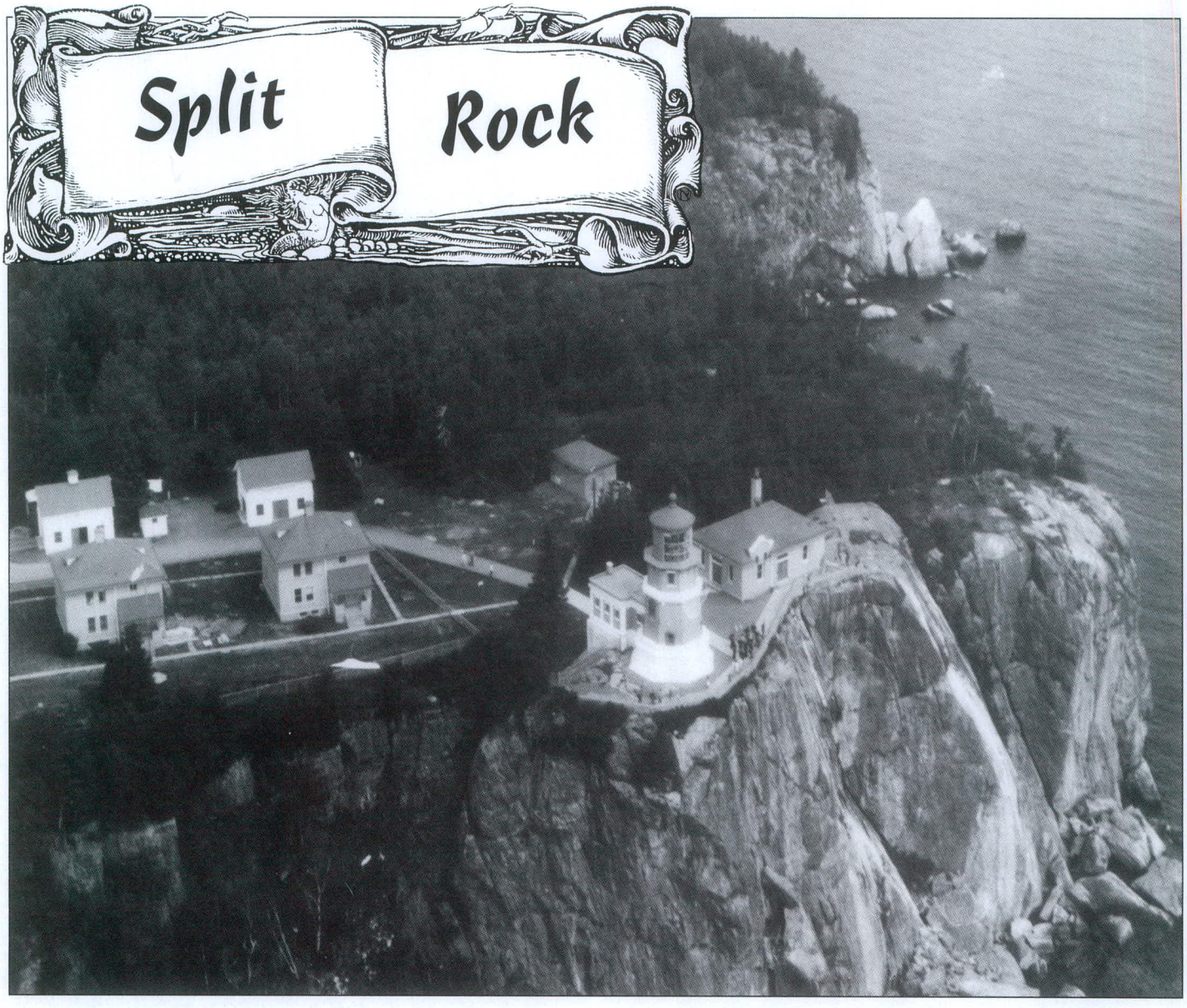
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Split Rock



By Lee Radzak

Perched on the edge of the Minnesota wilderness, Split Rock Light Station in its spectacular setting has been the pride of its lightkeepers and their families who have called it home for almost 80 years.

The date was November 10. The anniversary of the wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, the ill fated 729 foot ore carrier that had loaded at the docks in Superior, Wisconsin and headed downbound across the big lake past Split Rock Lighthouse to be swallowed up by Lake Superior during a massive storm on November 10, 1975 with the loss of all 29 hands. As historic site manager for the Minnesota Historical Society and resident keeper at Split Rock Lighthouse I have lit the beacon on the eve of November tenth for the last six years as a tribute to the ship and crew. Because Split Rock is a decommissioned light and no longer officially used as a navigational aid, the U.S. Coast Guard has stipulated that the Minnesota Historical Society can light the beacon if we follow three conditions: (1) reduce the wattage from its original 1000 watts, (2) adjust the beam slightly out of focus from the horizon, and (3) do not follow a regular schedule when lighting the beacon.

As I climb the 32 steps of the spiral staircase, wind up the 250 pound weights of the clockwork mechanism which revolves the 4½ ton lens assembly, and turn on the light, I always feel that it is also a tribute to the lightkeepers who served at the Split Rock Light Station. These were men who unfailingly kept the light burning for fifty-nine years under sometimes tedious and often adverse conditions.

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Split Rock Light Station was commissioned in 1910 and manned by the United States Lighthouse Service until 1939 when the U.S. Lighthouse Service was absorbed by the U.S. Coast Guard. The Coast Guard brought electricity to the light station in 1940, converting the illuminent from a kerosene vapor lamp (i.o.v.) to a 1000 watt light bulb. They operated the navigational aid until 1969 when, due mainly to technological advances in radar and ship to shore radio communication, Split Rock was deemed obsolete and was decommissioned.

As early as the 1930's the keepers at Split Rock were recording in excess of 50,000 people a year visiting the famous landmark during the summer months. Both the U.S. Coast Guard and the State of Minnesota were aware of the popularity of the lighthouse and in 1971 the 7.6 acres of federal land that comprised the lighthouse reservation was deeded to the State of Minnesota to be administered as a public historic site.

The history of the famous lighthouse shows that it possessed a divided personality which was due more than anything to the coming of the North Shore highway. In 1924 the "international highway" was built along the north shore passing near the light station. Prior to this time the station was an isolated outpost on the edge of the northern Minnesota wilderness and was accessible only by water. And isolated it was. Other than the lighthouse tender ships, which visited the light station two or three times during the shipping season, and the steamer *America* dropping off an occasional visitor, the only relief from the routine life of the keepers was a weekly 12 mile round trip by rowboat to Beaver Bay for the mail.

Three light keepers were stationed at Split Rock, a headkeeper and two assistants. Until 1931 the keepers occupied Split Rock on a seasonal basis. They would be dropped off by boat in early April, prior to the beginning of the shipping season and in early December they would shut everything down, drain all water and fuel lines, securing the station for the winter. Then they would wait for the steamer *America* to pick them up





Above – When construction operations were halted in the fall of 1909 the keeper's houses and fog signal building were well on their way to completion; the tower, however, had only its frame work completed. The station was completed the following year. National Archives photo, courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Left – Keeper Frank Covell and family on the steps of their quarters. Keeper Covell was 1st Assistant Keeper from 1913 to 1916. He returned as Keeper in 1928 and served until 1944. Photo, circa 1930, courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Below – General view of the housing at Split Rock from the tower in 1945. The buildings behind each house were originally barns, but were converted to a combination garage/storage building in later years. The flag flying at half mast "could" signify the death of President Roosevelt. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



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from Split Rock and take them to their permanent homes, usually in Duluth or Two Harbors. it was not uncommon for the keepers to have secured the light station for the winter only to have an early winter storm shut down all traffic on the lake and leave them stranded for days at a time before they could be pulled off the rock. Ileana Covell-Meyers, who spent her childhood at Split Rock with her father headkeeper Franklin J. Covell, talks of what life was like at the isolated light station:

> "I know one thing that I disliked as a child, and that was closing the light on December 15 and we had to pack and leave the place until April 15. There was always the changing of school twice a year and returning to a cold house that took days to get the frost out of. It was a joyous year when they finally consented to letting the keeps stay year-round. Those were good days. In the winter we had the pot-bellied stove in the front room . . . and Dad would play his violin and sing for us."

By 1925 the keepers had built a crude road into the lighthouse reservation from the brand-new North Shore highway, and in 1931 the U.S. Lighthouse Service gave them permission to live at Split Rock year-round. The privilege of year-round residency at the isolated and wind swept light station did give the keepers a healthy respect of winter on the north shore of Lake Superior as illustrated by Ileana Covell-Meyers comment:

> "The wind would howl and the snow would come thick and heavy. I have seen the time that Dad had to go outside and he would tie a rope around his waist and to the door knob so he wouldn't miss his way back. A miss would mean a drop over the cliff."

By the mid-1930's it was becoming obvious to the U.S. Lighthouse Service and the light keepers at Split Rock that the lighthouse was destined to become one of the most popular attractions on the north shore. In 1935 the Civilian Conservation Corps built a new access road to the light station and in 1941 a coffee and gift shop for tourists sprang up on private land within feet of the keeper's dwellings. By the mid-1940's the U.S. Coast Guard, which took over operation of all the nation's lighthouses in 1939, stated that Split Rock had become "probably the most visited lighthouse in the United States."

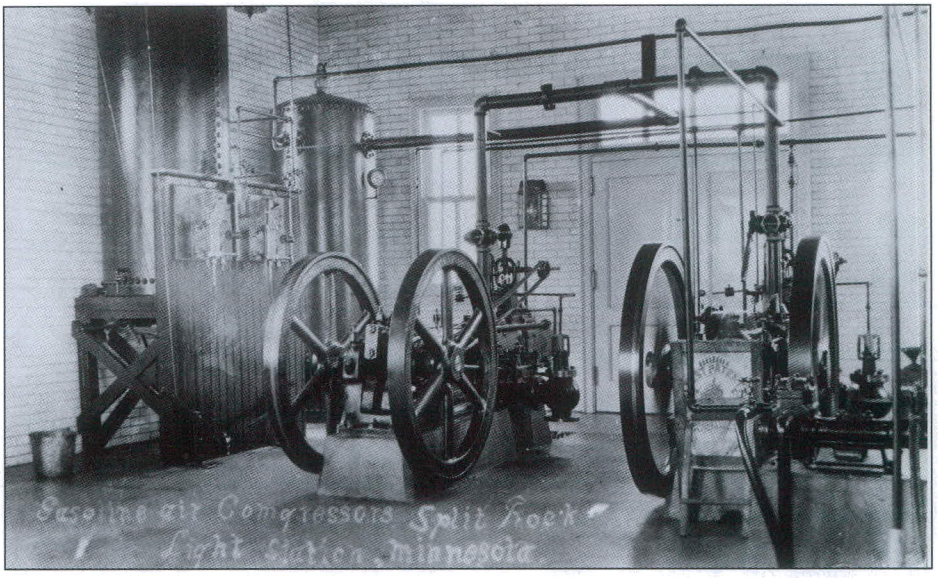
Although days could still go by during the winter without the keeper's families seeing another soul, gone were the days when Split Rock was considered an isolated outpost on the edge of northern Minnesota wilderness. The keepers were now expected to wear their dress uniforms and guide tourists through the lighthouse as well as performing their other duties.

When the Minnesota Historical Society accepted the responsibility of administering the decommissioned light station as a state historic site in 1976 it was obvious that the time period most visitors were interested in was the pre-highway period from when construction of the light station began in 1909 until the mid-1920's. Interpretation now focuses on life at the light station in the early



Above – The fog signal building supports eight foot long diaphone horns made of solid copper. During inclement weather the two-tone signal would emit a blast every 20 seconds. It had an audible range of five miles which often disturbed local residents. Old Post card.

Below – The engineering space of the Split Rock fog signal building, circa 1910-1915. Gas powered air compressors provided the energy for the BBBeeeeOOOHHHH signal. The air tanks can be seen behind the left compressor. Minnesota Historical Society photo.



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Above – A station boat motors past the steep cliffs at Split Rock. All the building materials for the station had to be hoisted up the face of the rock. Photo courtesy *Minneapolis Journal.* (circa 1946)

Below – Keeper Orrin P. Young decked out in his uniform at the door of the fog signal building on July 5, 1926. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



1920's and the historical society is restoring all of the historic structures and the grounds to that time period. This was a boom time for Great Lakes shipping, an era when the keepers could look out over the waters of western Lake Superior and see twenty or thirty ships at a time, instead of the one or two seen today. During the teens and 1920's the light station was as yet an autonomous social unit composed of three light keepers and their families. The duty of the keepers was to keep the light flashing on a ten-second interval from dusk to dawn, and to sound the fog-signal on a twenty-second interval if visibility dropped below five miles. These keepers were extremely dedicated to their responsibility. For example, Orrin "Pete" Young served as headkeeper at Split Rock from 1910 until 1928 when he retired at 70 years of age. Franklin J. Covell who was Young's first assistant took over as headkeeper in 1928 and served until 1944 when he retired at age seventy.

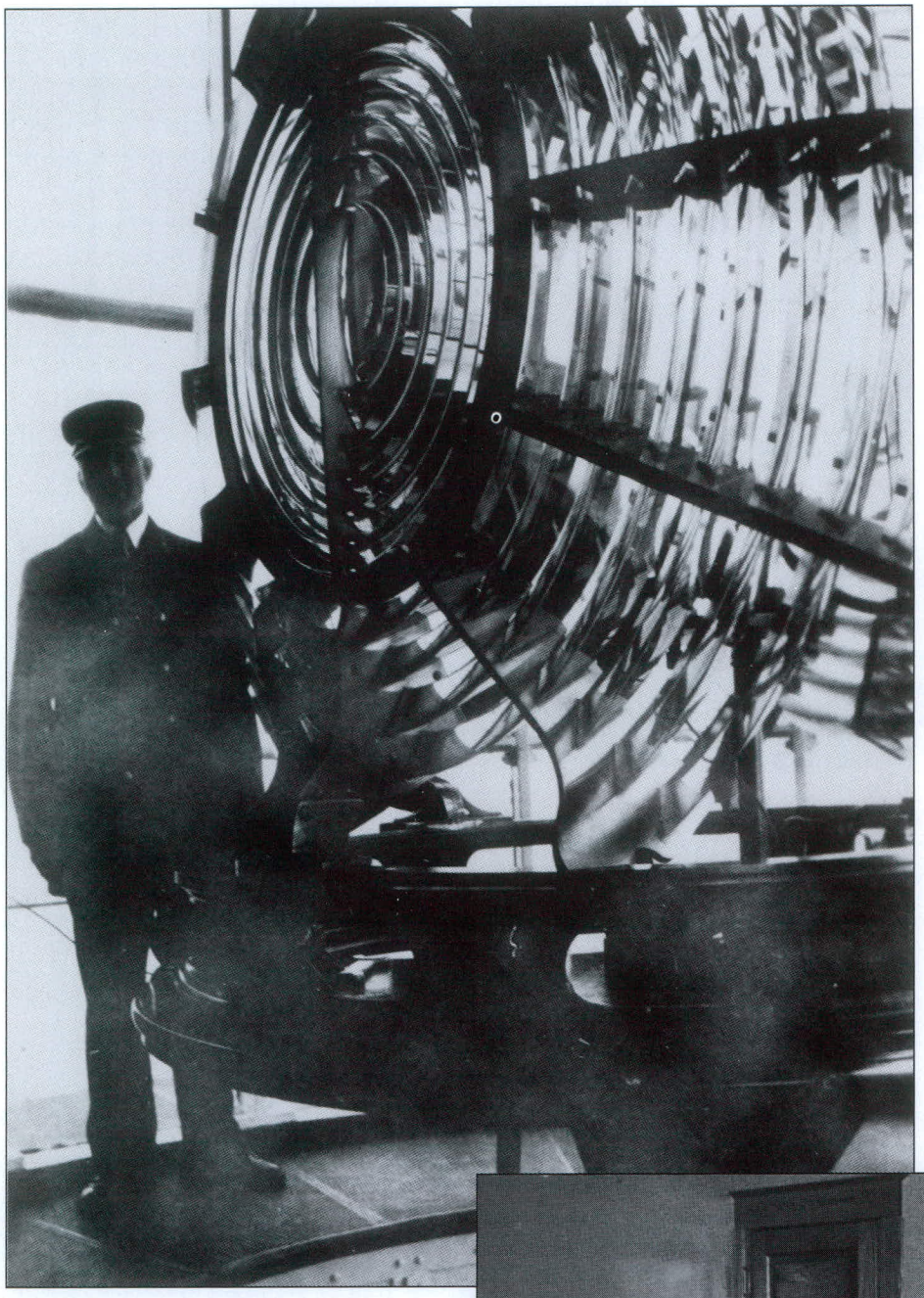
As present day historic site manager at Split Rock, I can understand the dedication these men felt for their work. With my family I live in the same keeper's dwelling that Keeper Covell and a long line of keepers and Coast Guardsmen occupied with their families for nearly eighty years. My son plays on the same rocks that the Young and Covell children played on and I walk the same rounds and maintain much of the same equipment that was so important to those early keepers. It is easy to feel the contrasts that Ileana Covell-Meyers remembers from her girlhood:

> "Thunderous waves pounding the caves beneath the cliff so hard the entire rock quakes. Gale winds driving the spray completely over the promontory, sculpting ice an inch thick on the east windows. Water pipes and ink bottles alike freezing; hot-water heat failing; lightning storms knocking down curtains and making the old fashioned telephone dance in the dining room. Summer nights so idyllically quiet fish could be heard jumping far below in the dark water, or through an open window a hand-wound victrola playing records newly arrived by boat from Chicago. Such were the early contrasts at Split Rock."

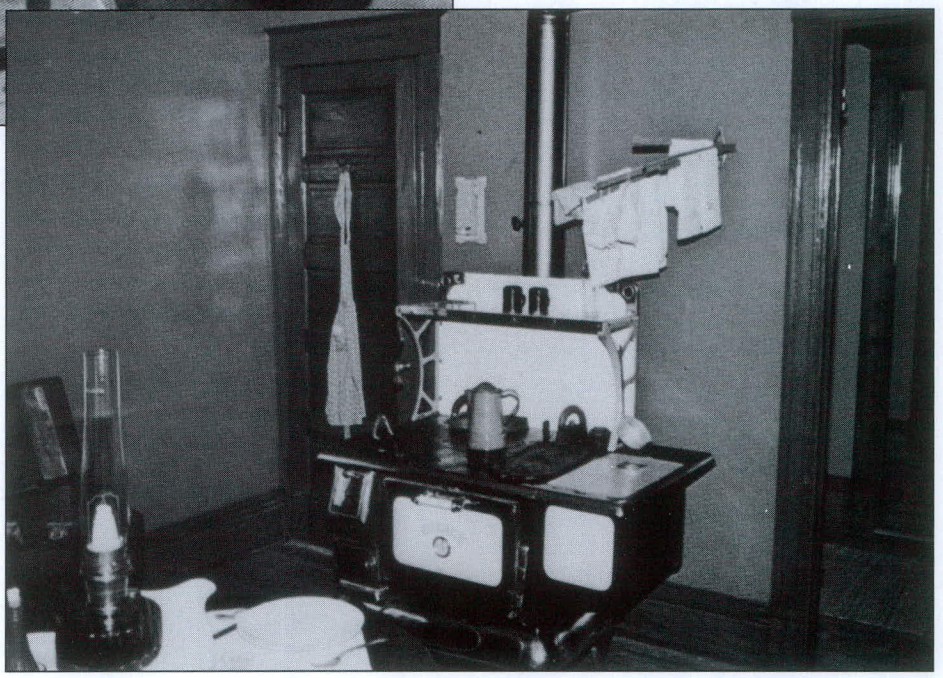
I too am captivated by the same sunrises and moonrises over Lake Superior that the keepers saw during their long nights on duty. My wife and I have stood in the March darkness and listened to the coyotes yapping and playing on the ice in the cove below the lighthouse while the timber wolves answered back from the long hills overlooking the big lake. We too have sat in the darkness of a power failure and listened to the windows rattle as a November storm pounds our isolated headland with fifteen foot waves rolling in from the northeast across 170 miles of open water. We have grown to appreciate that Lake Superior has its own personality, never showing the same face two days in a row.

Split Rock is a unique and scenic spot where a traveler can venture out and not only feel the past through the lives of lightkeepers who made this cliff-top their home, but can also experience the power and majesty of Minnesota's inland sea from the awakening of spring to the dead stillness of winter.

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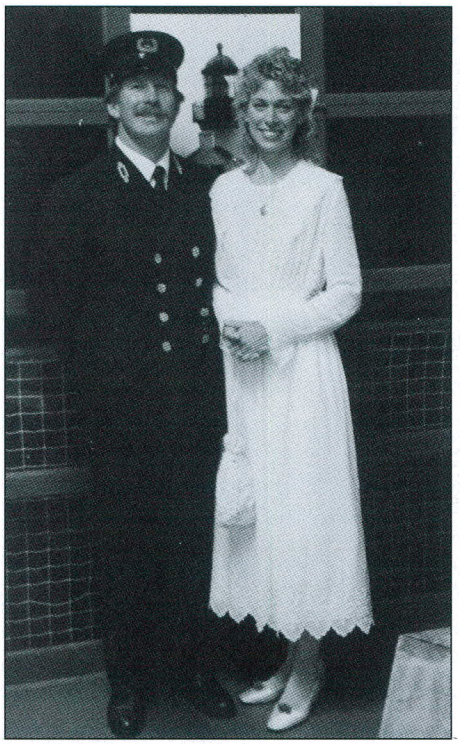


Above – Keeper John Covell in the Split Rock lantern room. This beautiful 3rd order Fresnel lens is of the Bivalve or Clam Shell style and rests on a bed of mercury. Photo courtesy of Split Rock Lighthouse Historic Site.



Right – One of the restored kitchens at Split Rock reflects the era of the 1920's. The kitchen was the hub of activity in the residence and provided a place in which to cook, eat, wash clothes and meet as a family. Since Split Rock was without electricity until 1940, all cooking was accomplished on a wood burning stove.

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Author Lee Radzak and his lovely wife Jane evoke the days of the lighthouse keeper in their period dress. Lee is site manager at Split Rock. He and his wife moved into one of the keeper's quarters just three months after they were married, eight years ago. They now have six-year-old John and four-year-old Anna to keep them company during the long, cold winter.



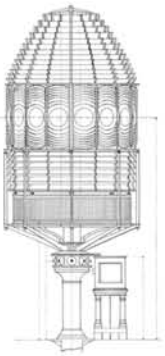
Above – The Split Rock Historic site boasts a comprehensive gift shop and a small theatre that shows the film "Split Rock Light: tribute to the Age of Steel." The site is open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. May 15 through October 15. During the winter it is open Friday, Saturday and Sunday from noon to 4 p.m. Photo by Lee Radzak

Split Rock Lighthouse Historic Site and Split Rock Lighthouse State Park have become one of the most popular destinations for visitors to the north shore in recent years. The combined efforts of two state agencies, the Minnesota Historical Society and the Department of Natural Resources, have made the historic site and adjoining state park an attraction visited by over 200,000 people a year.

The Minnesota Historical Society administers twenty-five acres which includes the original 7.6 acre light station with its ten historic structures. In 1986 the historical society completed the Split Rock Lighthouse History Center which is located adjacent to the historic site and serves as an interpretive facility for people visiting the lighthouse. Within the history center are exhibits on Lake Superior, Great Lakes navigation and shipwrecks, and north shore commercial fishing and tourism. The 22 minute film, "*SPLIT ROCK LIGHT: Tribute to the Age of Steel*" is shown every 45 minutes in a 90 seat theater and the history center also features a museum shop with publications and gift items relating to the lighthouse, Lake Superior and the north shore area. The Minnesota Historical Society has also developed a handicapped accessible trail loop to the cliff's edge and a trail system that ties in with an extensive hiking and cross-country ski trail system throughout the state park.

Over the last three years the state park has developed a lake shore picnic area, a comfortable trail center with indoor facilities, and an innovative 20 unit "cart-in" campground. This new kind of campground allows campers to park in a centrally located parking lot, load their gear into garden-type carts and wheel down the scenic trails from 50 to 400 yards to their campsites. Half of the campsites are on a reservation basis with half being first-come-first-served. One of the main attractions of the park is its extensive trail system, 10 miles of hiking trails and eight miles of cross-country ski trails. The park contains three miles of Lake Superior's shoreline, making it the longest continuous stretch of the north shore under public ownership in the state. A segment of the trail follows the shore for the entire distance giving access to rugged cliffs and remote coves, rewarding the hiker and skier with many spectacular views of the lighthouse atop its 130 foot cliff.

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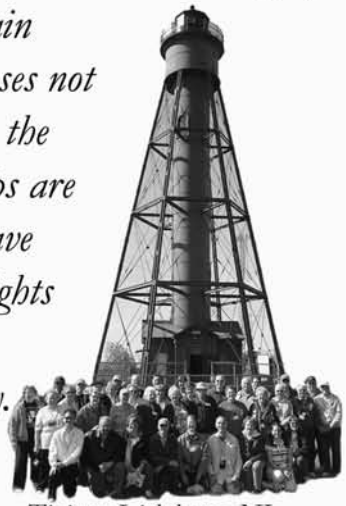
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