

## CHAPTER EIGHT--- TRAGEDY STRIKES

**Myron Vent in his book *South Manitou Island* describes life on South Manitou as "fundamentally a happy place." However he also states:**

***"As peaceful as South Manitou Island appears, its harbor was not always the scene of ships at anchor, with sunsets or sunrises, or lazy fishermen fixing their nets while seagulls floated by. Sometimes it was the scene of real tragedy."***

**Vent recounts in his book how several times sailors who had died on their ship were brought ashore to be buried in a small cemetery near the dock. The oldest tombstone on the island, showing a date of 1849, is in this cemetery and marks the grave of a young man who met an untimely end. Vent goes on to say that "one grave in this cemetery contains a grave of a member of the Sheridan family." Among the stories recounted by author Vent is the drowning of Thomas Kitchen in 1864. He and his brother were farmers on the island. One day, when crossing over the ice to the mainland, he hit a patch which had thawed and disappeared in to the water, never to be seen again. Another drowning occurred when Thomas Thomson attempted to save his young son who had fallen overboard from their skiff. The surfmen at the life saving station were able to rescue the boy and resuscitate him. The father, however, had gone under while swimming to shore with child. His body, extinct of life, was found about forty-five minutes later. This incident occurred in 1910.**

Another drowning recorded in an entry of the South Manitou Island Life Saving Station log recounts the accidental drowning of Joseph Haas in July of 1912. The Haas family was one of the early homesteaders on the island. Joseph's widow, Florence Haas, took over the responsibility for carrying the mail between Glenn Haven and the island and allegedly was the first woman on the Great Lakes to be given official permission to operate a motor launch.

There are other stories of accidents and untimely deaths on South Manitou which of course occurred over the years but Myron Vent in his book says.... "*the fate of the Sheridan family In 1878 was the most tragic of all.*" Vent recounts the event on page 50:

*"While their two older children watched from the lighthouse window, they started for a sailboat ride with Chris Ancherson, and were still within sight of land when a sudden squall came up and capsized the boat. The sail- boom swung around and struck Aaron with such force that he fell into the water . The blow probably knocked him unconscious for his body never reappeared. Mrs. Sheridan with her baby clasped tightly in one arm was clinging to the boat with her free hand. Ancherson looked around for rope with which to fasten Mrs. Sheridan and the baby to the boat. but when he found it, Mrs. Sheridan had lost her hold and both she and her baby had disappeared into the water. Ancherson clung to the boat and drifted toward North Manitou Island, which he finally reached the next day."*

Vent states that this version of the accident was recorded by Arthur and Evelyn Knudsen in their book *A Gleam Across the Waves: A Biography of Martin P. Knudsen*, published in 1948. Martin Knudsen became lighthousekeeper at South Manitou in June of 1882, replacing Lyman Sheridan who became keeper

there after Aaron's death. Following his description of the incident in his book, Vent went on to say:

*"This tragic occurrence happened when Louisa Hutzler was ten years old. It left a deep impression on her and she recounted how the Sheridan children walked along the shore weeping and looking out over the water for the bodies of their father and mother."*

In my research of the family I have found several different accounts of the drowning of the Sheridans. Various accounts of the incident will be frequently found in thumbnail histories about the South Manitou lighthouse now found on the internet and in other histories of the Great lakes Lighthouses. Probably the most reliable factual accounts are those found in the newspaper reports which appeared shortly after the date of the accident. For instance, in the "Family History Stuff" I got from Uncle Joe and my dad were two original newspaper clippings that were saved by Aaron's sister Harriet Ismon from the papers published at or near Sandwich Ill. Harriet and her husband George went to South Manitou as soon as they received the news of the drowning. Arrangements had to be made for the removal and care of the surviving five Sheridan boys as well as disposing of the personal belonging and affects of Aaron and Julia. One of the news clippings saved by Harriet was from a paper identified on the article as *The Free Press*. The article in its entirety reads:

*"Mr. And Mrs. George Ismon are still at Manitou settling and arranging the affairs of their deceased brother and wife and providing for the support of the five remaining children. The bodies of neither Mr. Sheridan or his wife have yet been seen and the following particulars written by Mr. Ismon to his son Willie are probably all that will be ever known of the awful disaster :*

**'You will be anxious to learn the particulars of your Uncle and aunt's death. Having some business on the mainland Mr. Sheridan and his wife and youngest child departed in a small boat for Glen Arbor, Mich., and on their return home, when within one mile from shore, with no wind at all, and the lake not very rough, the boat upset, and in all probability owing to some mismanagement, and all were drowned except a man named Anchor, who was with them and who clung to the boat for two hours and a half and was then rescued. The water was very cold and they were chilled through and nearly frozen to death so they could not cling to the boat. Mr. Sheridan's coat and hat were picked up over at the north Island soon after the accident, but the bodies have not yet been recovered and in all probability never will be. It is so sad to think that the bodies of three of our loved ones are still being buffeted about by the cruel waves of the deep never to be found. The residents on the island and along the beach have searched in vain for other traces of the bodies.'**

**Another newspaper clipping saved by Harriet appeared in a Sandwich area paper immediately after the accident. The name of the paper does not appear, however the headline read---- "A HORRIBLE DEATH" and underneath, the article appeared as follows:**

**"A dispatch was received yesterday by Mrs. George Ismon of Sandwich, stating that her brother Mr. Aaron Sheridan, who attends the lighthouse on South Manitou Island with his wife and youngest child, had met with a dreadful death on the Friday previous, March 22. They were crossing the channel returning home from Glen Arbor when in some manner their boat capsized throwing the occupants into the water. Mr. S., his wife and child were drowned and a friend who was with them saved his life only by clinging to the boat, and is the only one living to tell the sad tale. The bodies had not been recovered and it is highly probable they never will be found. A family of five small children is left to mourn the awful**

*death of their father, mother and baby brother.*

*Mrs. Sheridan was a daughter of Mr. More [sic] of Bristol, well known in Kendall County, and Mr. Sheridan had many friends and acquaintances in these parts. Mr. and Mrs. Ismon started for Michigan immediately upon receipt of the telegram and we await their return for further particulars."*

It is obvious upon a reading of the above accounts of the drowning together with the article in the Traverse City Eagle-Herald quoted in the beginning of chapter two, there are discrepancies, however, the essence of what happened certainly comes through in all of them. It is unlikely that Aaron and Julia were out for just a "sailboat ride" as indicated in the *Knudsen* account. It would still have been quite cold on March 15<sup>th</sup> in northern lake Michigan even on a nice day. And it would be unlikely they would take their one year old child for just a "sailboat ride." You will note that the Traverse City Eagle-Herald said it was "blowing quite a gale" at the time the boat capsized. On the other hand the news clipping from Harriet's Free Press article says "with no wind at all and the lake not very rough... and probably owing to some mismanagement.... all were drowned." All articles except the *Knudsen* account refer to the fact that the Sheridans and friend Ancherson (erroneously called "Ancher" in two articles) were returning from the "mainland" or from Glen Arbor. The *Knudsen* account says that Aaron was probably knocked unconscious when struck by the boom. On the other hand the Traverse City Eagle-Herald detailed Aaron's struggle with the cold waves as he fought to save the life of his wife and baby. The *Knudsen* Account has Ancherson being picked up on North Manitou the next day while Harriet's Free Press article has Mr. Ancherson being rescued while still clinging to the boat two and a half hours after being capsized.

None of these discrepancies is particularly important except that they all provide enough information to allow us to piece

together what most likely happened. Of course they also demonstrate that today's accuracy of the press in reporting an event has improved little since 1878.

Most probably the scenario of the incident is like this: Aaron and Julia had to go to Glen Arbor for some important reason. They had their youngest son Robert Rutherford Sheridan with them. Robert was born May 13, 1877 and so he was not quite one year old at the time. They had five other children who were left at the lighthouse with a babysitter. It is likely they were going to Glen Arbor to see a doctor for Robert and thus his presence for the trip. They went in a boat owned by Chris Ancherson. The 1880 census reveals that Ancherson was a fisherman and lived near the lighthouse. Thus, it was only natural that he would agree to take his friends and neighbors the Sheridans in his fishing boat so they could

get baby Robert to a doctor. The weather may have been quite nice for a March day when they left, however by the time they completed their business in Glen Arbor and were on their return, the weather worsened. Clouds came up, the temperature dropped and the wind began to blow "quite a gale." There was no foolhardy "mismanagement" of the boat, but in trying to handle the heavy waves the boom swung around and struck Aaron knocking him over board at the same time the boat capsized. Whether Aaron was immediately knocked unconscious or if he first struggled to save Julia and Robert for a time will never be known. Due to his Civil war injury, Aaron had no strength in his left arm and soon he succumbed to the cold water and high waves and disappeared into the water. Julia and young Robert, no doubt, soon followed him to their watery grave. Ancherson, who would have been the strongest and most able to hang with the boat was finally rescued. It's more likely he was picked up within two and half hours as reported in Harriet's Free Press Article rather than on North Manitou the next day as he probably would have died of exposure by then. Aaron's hat and coat were quite likely found washed up on North

**Manitou, but for sure the bodies of all three were never recovered.**

**This tragedy which befell the Sheridan family on March 15, 1878, is the seminal occurrence in the history of the family to date because it had a far reaching effect on the five young boys --- who remained at the lighthouse as Aaron and Julia set off on their trip to Glen Arbor that fateful day. It certainly significantly affected their lives at the time, as they were taken back to Yorkville Illinois by Harriet and George Ismon to be raised by their grandparents Henry and Julia Moore. At the time of their deaths, Aaron was but 43 years of age and Julia was just a few days short of her 35<sup>th</sup> birthday. As for the children, Levi Fisk, the oldest, was 11; George Henry was 9; James E. was age 7; Alfred was age 5; and the youngest Charles was only 3 years old.**