

CHAPTER NINE— THE LETTERS

I found contained within the "family history stuff," back in 1978, a letter appearing to be in my Grandmother Sarah's handwriting. It was undated and not addressed to anyone. The first paragraph read:

"A copy of a letter written by Mrs. R.M. Weidman whose second cousins of Leland Michigan remembered the incident relating to the drowning of the Sheridans, the lighthouse keeper of the light on South Manitou Island. Mr. And Mrs. Sheridan and baby girl [sic] were drowned and bodies never found.. This is the copy of the letter received from Mrs. Weidman's second cousin Mrs. E.U. Roosa of Leland."

Sarah had gotten this information which she reproduced in her "letter" through an unusual coincidence involving my mother Catherine Sheridan. It so happened that a Mrs. Weidman was taking some classes with my mother, who was attending summer school at Northern Michigan University in Marquette to get her teaching degree. As I recall, this was in the late 1950's and early 1960's. My mother was in her forties when she resumed her teaching career, but she needed further college credits in order to get the required certification to teach in Michigan. It happened to come up in their conversation while at summer school, that Mrs. Weidman had heard through her family the story of the Sheridan drowning on South Manitou Island. She no doubt associated my mother's last name "Sheridan" with this story and asked mother if she was related to these people. She told mother what she knew after Catherine confirmed that she was indeed married into *that* Sheridan family. Now, remember, this conversation between my mother, Catherine, and Mrs. Weidman occurred in the late 1950's or early 1960's, about 80 years or so after the actual incident. As a result, my

mother asked Mrs. Weidman if she could have Mrs. Roosa relate again what she new of this incident. Upon her return to Leland, Mrs. Weidmen contacted her second cousin Mrs. Roosa, and she recounted what she new about the Sheridan drowning:

"My mother was staying with the Sheridan Children while their parents came across the lake and it was on their way back to the island that a storm came up and they were drowned. Mr. And Mrs. Sheridan, another man and a small child were in the boat. Somehow the man was able to cling to the boat and got to the island- he told that the baby drowned first in Mrs. Sheridan's arms- Early in the morning someone came to the place where mother and the children were and told mother about the Sheridans being drowned and mother said the children screamed and ran down to the beach and she had such a time trying to get them to come back home. Seems just the night before the children had so much fun with mother being wit them. I've heard mother tell it so many times and this is the way I've remembered it."

Mrs. Weidman wrote down exactly what Mrs. Roosa told her and subsequently provided it to my mother who then gave it to Grandma Sarah. Sarah at some point recopied the letter in her own writing and it ultimately got put in the "Family History Stuff"

It was some time after I purchased Myron Vent's book on South Manitou Island in 1981 that I recognized the similarity of the story of the Sheridan drowning as told in Mr. Vent's book with the account provided by Mrs. Roosa. Vent notes the deep impression the Sheridan drowning left on Louisa Hutzler who was only 10 years old at the time. As recounted by author Vent, Louisa had remembered how the Sheridan children walked along the shore "weeping and looking out over the water for the bodies of their father and mother." The similarity of these accounts led me to write to Mr. Vent in

June of 1981. He had stated in his book that his mother was Louisa Hutzler, the youngest daughter of the first homesteaders on the Island, George and Margaretha Hutzler.

The question thus posed to Mr. Vent in my 1981 letter:

"Was there any relationship between Mrs. E. U. Roosa and his mother Louisa Hutzler? Was Louisa Hutzler possibly the babysitter who was staying with the Sheridan children when the drowning occurred?"

In July of 1981 I received a response from Mr. Vent and with regard to my question he stated:

"The question about Mrs. E.U. Roosa and my mother can be answered easily. There is no connection. Louisa Hutzler was not Mrs. Roosa's mother other wise Mrs. Roosa would be my sister- and that she is not. It is also unlikely that my mother who was ten years old at the time would have been put in charge of the Sheridan children even for a relatively brief period."

End of story? I thought so at the time. I wrote a letter back to Mr. Vent thanking him for the information. It was not until January 20, 1985 that I received another letter from Myron Vent, as I said earlier in this book, "out of the blue." I have already told of the fact that in this second letter he sent the picture of the Sheridan barn being raised on the farm. In addition to the barn picture he had some further information. He wrote:

"To return to your letter of June 11, 1981. I'm not sure how well I answered it. (I was coming down with Parkinson's disease at the time and experimenting with various drugs. Also the onset was accompanied by a lack of ambition and lethargy.) Mrs. E.U. Roosa was a first cousin of mine. She was the daughter of mother's sister Katherine Rohr, And it was she who stayed with the Sheridan children. She would have been eighteen at the time and my mother

ten years old. No doubt the story as told by Kate to her family i.e. the Hutzlers left an indelible impression on my mother at such an early age. The relationships can be seen as follows:

**Katherine nee Hutzler Rohr
Elizabeth nee Rohr Roosa**

**Margaret nee Hutzler Aylsworth
Georgia nee Aylsworth Norconk
Tellisa nee Norconk Weidman**

Louisa nee Hutzler

I hope this will give you a better picture of the Relationships raised in the first paragraph of your letter...."

And so there it was, four years later I found out who Mrs. Weidman was and who Mrs. Weidman' second cousin Mrs. E.U. Roosa was. Mrs. (Tellisa) Weidmans's grandmother was Margaret Hutzler, sister of Myron Vent's mother, Louisa Hutzler. Louisa was the younger sister of Katherine Hutzler who married Leonard Rohr. Katherine had a daughter Elizabeth who eventually married Mr. Roosa (Mrs. E.U. Roosa). And of course by this letter I found out, most incredibly, that it was Myron Vent's aunt Katherine Hutzler (Rohr) who was baby sitting the Sheridan children on March 15, 1878, the day their parents died. Myron has a picture of his Aunt Katherine in his book and I have included it at the end of this chapter.

I can only say, when I received this information along with the barn picture from Mr. Vent, that I realized I was destined to tell the story of the Sheridan family. And so here I am, 126 years later telling that story.

Myron Vent finished his 1985 letter to me with the following anecdote:

"Incidentally, your great, grandfather and my grandfather must have known each other, since my grandfather died there in 1888, arrival date circa 1856. My mother won a spelling bee once organized by a visiting teacher spelling the name AARON. Her version: "Big A little A RON. I'm sure my grandmother was proud of her. "

I read in a newsletter from the Manitou Memorial Society (of which I am a member) several years ago that Myron Vent has died. I regret I never had a chance to meet this man in person. Regardless, I still feel like I did know him. Our families were linked forever by those events occurring on that Island over 125 years ago, and nothing, not even the passage of all this time changed that. How else can you account for Myron telling me the story of his mother's spelling bee?



Louisa Hutzler, mother of author Myron Vent, who wrote the book *South Manitou Island From Pioneer Community to National Park*



Katherine Hutzler, aunt of Myron Vent, was babysitting the Sheridan children March 15, 1878, when their parents and baby brother drowned in Lake Michiga

Aaron's first cousin Lyman Sheridan was appointed to replace Aaron as head keeper at South Manitou on April 16, 1878. Living at the lighthouse with Lyman per the 1880 census are his wife Mary [McCullom], and children Phillip, 15, Lillian, 9, Francis L. 7, and Frederick, 3. We do not know why or how Lyman got this appointment as we have no indication that Lyman ever lived on South Manitou before his appointment as the keeper, or that he had any prior experience as a lighthouse keeper. Jeremiah Becker remained as 2nd assistant and Alexander Thompson was appointed 1st assistant to replace Julia.

Lyman's stint as the Keeper on South Manitou was not a happy one. In his book, *A Glean Across The Waves*, Arthur Knudsen recounts how his grandfather Martin Knudsen followed Lyman as keeper on South Manitou in June of 1882:

"There is an old saw which holds that it's an ill wind that blows nobody good' and Martin's good fortune in securing the keepership at the South Manitou Light came as a result of a chain of misfortunes to the family of the former keeper Lyman Sheridan. His wife had contracted tuberculosis while they were living at the lighthouse. Mr.

Sheridan claimed that her illness and death were due to the dampness of the dwelling. Shortly before this bereavement his brother [sic] Aaron and Aaron's wife and baby were drowned..... Former keeper Sheridan wanted nothing so much as to get away from South Manitou Island with no reminders of the sorrowful and tragic happenings there. The furniture at the lighthouse belonged to both of the Sheridan families and Lyman offered to sell it to the Knudsens for a very reasonable figure and leave it right where it was. This was another piece of good fortune for the Knudsens as they were in need of more furniture for the larger place. "

Martin Knudsen was transferred to South Manitou from the lighthouse on Washington Island, Wisconsin. This was a promotion for Knudsen. Because the South Manitou light was a larger, more important light, Knudsen received a nice salary increase and his family could live with him all the time.

And So, when Knudsen arrived, Lyman left his position as keeper and moved back to the mainland. Between 1866 and 1882 six members of the Sheridan family had died while living on the Island: Newton's wife Arcia, James, Aaron, Julia, baby Robert and Mary. Lyman's son Phil Sheridan returned to South Manitou as 1st Assistant keeper in 1892 but was transferred in 1895 to the lighthouse at Point Betsie near Frankfurt, Michigan. He remained there as head keeper until 1926 when he was transferred to the Michigan City light.

With Phil's departure in 1895 life of the Sheridans on the island came to an end for good. Only James remained--- buried in a small, lonely cemetery back in the woods near the spot where W.N. Burton, the islands first settler, established his dock and store in the 1840's.