



Manitou Islands Archives Newsletter

V2 No 1

Newsletter

Spring 2009



The Light Keepers' Quarters in the Winter of 1920

The South Manitou Island Light Station has long been a picturesque landmark, but in earlier times had an even more distinctive appearance than it has had during the past eighty years. Here are a couple of rare early photos of the Light Station of yesteryear. The above photo, taken on the rear approach to the light station during the winter of 1920, is from Mae (Tobin) Caron's photo album, generously submitted by her daughter Bonnie Bellmer. The photo at the right, provided courtesy of Jack Sheridan, a descendant of light keepers Aaron and Julia Sheridan, probably dates to sometime after 1878, the year that a second fog signal building was erected.

The keepers quarters, constructed in 1858, was originally built, as were several other lights, using Wisconsin lacustrine clay ("brown clay") brick. This was a highly popular building material at the time by virtue of its low cost, superior mechanical properties, and attractive light beige color. The building was originally the base for a short light tower, which was mounted on the lakeward peak of its roof. About twelve years later, the Lighthouse Board concluded that a larger, higher light was needed at South Manitou, and construction of a new tower and connecting corridor was begun in 1871. The project was completed the next summer, with the new 91-foot light having a range of some 17-1/2 miles.

In reality, the quality of lacustrine clay brick varied significantly, depending upon the source of the clay and the care taken in the manufacturing process. Some light station structures are as sound today as the day they were built some 120-years ago. Others began to deteriorate rapidly, as freezing

weather took its toll on bricks not sufficiently impervious to moisture. South Manitou was evidently not one of the lucky ones. It is probable that engineers noticed the that 12-year old brick was already beginning to deteriorate when the original light tower was removed from the roof of the structure, and decided that painting would be necessary to prevent further degradation. At the time, "battleship grey," a medium bluish grey paint, was a staple in the Lighthouse Service. The Park Service has since replaced the old coatings with a crème color, approximating the structure's original appearance.





Yesteryear's News ...

MANITOU ISLAND IS SINKING.**Probable That Lake Michigan Will Soon Be Shy
a Fine Harbor—Mysterious Pool Which Yields
Six Pound Bass.**

South Manitou island, in the northern part of Lake Michigan, is sinking. The south beach is rapidly being swallowed up, and the greatest concern is felt by those living there lest the entire area of 5,000 acres shall suddenly be submerged. The boathouse at the United States life-saving station has already disappeared, and where a month ago there was a high and dry beach deep drought beats now plough through the water.

Vesselmen and officials advance two theories as to the cause of the phenomenon. One is that the island, which seems to be of volcanic origin, has been shaken by the seismic disturbances felt this year in a belt encircling the earth. The other is that the action of the water has undermined sections of the land, thus causing submarine avalanches.

The first intimation received by outsiders that the area of the island was diminishing came from Captain Lafberg, who has charge of the life-saving crew at Sleeping Bear point on the Michigan mainland. He sent word to his superiors at Washington 10 days ago that the boathouse at South Manitou had dropped out of sight during the night. Further news came from lake captains, who said that many residents were alarmed over indications that the peculiar island may suddenly be swallowed up.

Soundings made during the last few days have served only to add to the alarm. A short distance off shore where shoal water was formerly from three to five feet deep the soundings line indicated a depth of from twenty to seventy feet. No ordinary shifting of the shoal sands is regarded as being responsible for the great change.

The strange sinking of the land is regarded by many as being a warning to leave the island. Several have already left and others are preparing to go. They think they foresee a disaster that will erase South Manitou from the map and drown the entire population. Some are keeping a watch upon an unfathomable lake in the center of the island. The Hollanders that inhabit the island do not share in the terror. They remain at their homes without fear, and while they are more or less amazed at the creeping in of the lake, they point to the sand hills, and say it will take a long time for the water to reach the top.

But it is not the gradual destruction of the island that is expected by the alarmists. They believe it will be swallowed up suddenly and that all who remain to tempt fate will perish. They fear destruction from two forces and look either for the land to sink beneath the surface of Lake Michigan or for a

volcanic eruption to rain fire down upon them. The cataclysm of St. Pierre and the tidal wave at Galveston are recalled and recited by the fearful ones.

The geological formation of South Manitou is different from that of most of the neighboring bodies of land. It is composed of clay upon a rocky foundation and upon the clay the wind has built gravel sand dunes and hills. Excavations have shown a trace of igneous rock, which is invariably cast up by volcanoes. The elevation of the islet is another thing that gives weight to the theory of seismic disturbances. It is piled up to a height of 350 feet and slopes away gradually to the north. The south side is formed of several plateaus, each of which is reached by precipitous inclines.

South Manitou island is inhabited largely by Hollanders. All told, not more than 100 families live upon it. The sturdy settlers have held possession of the majority of the acreage for many generations. The land passes from father to son in unending succession and many of the inhabitants have never been to the mainland. Vessels call at the harbor to take away the products the people have to sell and leave such merchandise as is required by them. The majority of the population is confined to the eastern and northern sides, which are furthest from the section that is rapidly sinking.

A map of South Manitou island resembles an artist's palette. It is shaped like an imperfect crescent, with the horns pointing southward. Between the horns is a deep harbor. The largest boats can steam in directly up to the beach until their prows rest against the shore. Many deep-draught vessels are taken so close alongside the land that piers are unnecessary and a short plank will reach the gang-way.

It is the west horn upon which the lighthouse and life-saving station are situated and which threatens to be the first part to disappear. The boat house, which was swallowed up in the lake, was built on the harbor side of the point. Where it formerly stood there is today 20 feet of water. The water is as clear as crystal and a pin dropped into the lake can easily be seen on the bottom.

Near the center of the island is the bottomless lake. The inhabitants believe this lake is the crater of an extinct volcano, and from this theory has arisen the fear that the origin of the peculiar changes in the island was seismic. The lake is entirely surrounded by dense woods and is almost two miles long. Like the harbor, its waters are as transparent as glass. It is a mysterious body of water and resembles the one in the old crater of Mount Shasta in California. It is not fed by streams or springs, although its level has not lowered or risen perceptibly during the many long years the Hollanders have lived on the island.

No exact survey has ever been made by the government officials, but casual observation leads them to state that the level of the little body of water corresponds very closely to the level of Lake Michigan. From this it is inferred that there is a



subterranean connecting channel. The Hollanders agree that this does not solve the problem regarding the depth of the water. Soundings have utterly failed to determine its depth. Even very close to the rim of the supposed crater the water is a great many fathoms deep.

Again, in the small lake there are species of fish not found in the big body of water. The mysterious pool yields up black bass weighing as much as six and one-half pounds. On the other hand, few of the fish found in Lake Michigan are ever caught in the deep hole in the island.

The first indication that the island was in danger of disappearing appeared a month ago. At that time it was discovered that the shoal sands extending two miles out from the western point of the crescent were covered to a greater depth than formerly. Lines let down near some of the buoys showed a like change. This was not regarded as being unusual, for the waters are constantly shifting the sand deposits.

About two weeks ago, however, the beach near the lighthouse appeared to be slightly changed. The water had crept farther around the boathouse at the life-saving station. Lines let down from a tugboat showed the water to be nearly twenty feet deep. The following night the boathouse was swallowed up. With it a long strip of the beach disappeared.

Next morning the water was still as clear as on the day before. Many said that the beach has slipped into the lake, but others pointed out that had that been the case the clay and sand would be mixed with the water. A hurried trip was made to the lake. The investigators believed they would find the water gone, and only an abysmal pit remaining. The lake, however, was as placid as ever, and a number of Hollanders, who had been fishing since daylight, declared they had noticed no peculiar phenomenon.

The entire population of the island then flocked to the beach. The members of the life-saving crew and the lighthouse tender expressed the belief that the entire point would soon be completely submerged. The islanders dispatched a boat to Sleeping Bear point on the mainland of the lower peninsular of Michigan and asked captain Lafberg to visit South Manitou.

Captain Lafberg, who is well versed in natural affairs, was greatly alarmed over the change he saw in the beach. He warned the people to leave the island at a moment's notice. The Hollanders laughed at him. They have always lived on the island in perfect security and scoffed at the idea that the high sand hills would ever be submerged. They were told that many oceanic islets had disappeared suddenly in a manner that defied explanation.

As soon as he returned to Sleeping Bear point, Captain Lafberg sent word to Washington that in his opinion a great disaster was in store for South Manitou island. He said that the water at points about the land had increased in depth from three to thirty feet and that the bed of the lake was greatly changed.

The change will necessitate the recharting of the shoals in the vessel passage. Until the strange happening there have been only such changes as are caused by the wind and waves. The buoys now anchored in the passage between the Manitou islands and Sleeping Bear have for many years been guides for the pilots, and it is believed by vessel men that the channel is wide enough to prevent any serious trouble to navigation, even though the island may disappear.

Lake captains fear that, even if the entire island is not destroyed, the splendid harbor of South Manitou will be ruined by the sinking of the two protecting points. Ever since the beginning of navigation upon the great lakes the harbor has been a shelter in time of storms. Hedged in on three sides by the island, the deep water has afforded a secure place, even for the biggest boats. During the squally season the harbor is often crowded with craft of every size and kind. The big freighters and the fishing boats alike run for the place.

Last summer a hotel syndicate sent representatives to South Manitou to arrange for the establishment of a summer resort, and the location most favored by the projectors was near the lake on the island. The plan was dropped, however, and after the present scare is not likely to be taken up again.

The foregoing article appeared in the Sunday, December 14, 1902 issue of the *Fort Wayne Morning Journal Gazette* as syndicated feature from the *Grand Rapids Herald*.



South Manitou Light Dedication

The beacon at the historic South Manitou Island Light Station will be officially re-commissioned and dedicated in a special ceremony on Saturday, May 30, 2009. Restoration of the beacon, including replacement of the fresnel lens, became



possible as a National Park Service Centennial Challenge project, with matching funding provided by a consortium of local park partners. Full details are available in articles available at <http://www.nps.gov/slbe/>, the park's official website.

Plans for the ceremony and celebration are still in the preliminary stages, with possibilities including mainland and island venues, and a special ferry voyage providing an opportunity to view the light as mariners saw it during its 115-years of service.

To learn more about the South Manitou Island Light, Terry Pepper's definitive lighthouse website is highly recommended; http://www.terrypepper.com/lights/lake_michigan.htm.

MANITOU ISLAND IS SINKING.

Probable That Lake Michigan Will Soon Be Shy a Fine Harbor—Mysterious Pool Which Yields Six-Pound Bass.

(Grand Rapids Herald.)

South Manitou Island, in the northern part of Lake Michigan, is sinking. The south beach is rapidly being eroded up, and the greatest concern is felt by those living there lest the entire area of 5,000 acres shall suddenly be submerged. The postoffice at the United States life-saving station has already disappeared, and twice a month ago there was a high and dry beach deep enough to walk across through the water.

Vermorel and officials advise two theories as to the cause of the phenomenon. One is that the island, which seems to be of volcanic origin, has been shaken by the seismic disturbances felt this year in a belt stretching across the earth. The other is that the action of the water has undermined sections of the land, thus causing subsidence.

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island. Some time for the water to reach the top.

But it is not the gradual destruction of the island that is expected by the fishermen. They believe it will be swallowed up suddenly, and that all who remain to tempt fate will perish. They fear destruction from two sources and look either for the boat to sink beneath the surface of Lake Michigan or for a volcanic eruption to rain fire down upon them. The cataclysm of St. Pierre and the tidal wave at Unalaska are recalled and recalled by the fearful ones.

The geological formation of South Manitou is different from that of most of the neighboring bodies of land. It is composed of clay upon a rocky foundation and upon the clay the wind has blown sand dunes and hills. Records show that there is a trace of volcanic soil, which invariably is covered by vegetation. The vegetation of the island is another thing that gives weight to the theory of volcanic origin.

It is piled on to a height of 254 feet and slopes away gradually to the north. The south side is formed of several steep, steep inclines.

South Manitou Island is inhabited largely by fishermen. All told, not more than 100 families live upon it. They study sealers have held possession of the majority of the land for many generations. The land passes from father to son in unending succession and many of the inhabitants have never been to the mainland. Vessels call at the harbor to take away the products the people have to sell

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No exact survey has ever been made by the government officials, but casual observation leads them to state that the level of the little body of water corresponds very closely to the level of Lake Michigan. From this it is inferred that there is a subterranean connecting channel. The Hollanders are of the opinion that this does not solve the problem regarding the depth of the water. Soundings have utterly failed to determine its depth. Even were done to the rim of the supposed crater the water in a great many fathoms

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The first indication that the island was in danger of disappearing appeared a month ago. At that time it was discovered that the usual mark extending two miles out from the western point of the crescent were carried to a greater depth than formerly. It was not long that the boys found a fine stream. This was not

MAINE'S CHRISTMAS TREES.

The Once Despised Fir Now a Popular Source of Revenue.

(Bangor Letter to New York Tribune.)

The Christmas tree industry is now at its height in this state. Many carloads, and even vessel loads, of the trees are going forward every week to the large cities. A few years ago the fir tree was looked upon as a nuisance in Maine. Now it is a source of considerable income to hundreds, and the transportation companies as well.

The beginning of its popularity was in 1832, when a party of hunters who had been in a steam yacht to New England to shoot caribou called at Bangorville, on Penobscot bay, to visit some abandoned copper mines a short distance inland. The leaves had fallen from the deciduous trees, causing the dark evergreens to stand out in bold relief against a neutral background of browns and greys. The owner of the yacht was struck by the beauty of the scene and also with the practicalness of the hired men and horses and had cut about six hundred of the fir, which he carried on the deck of his yacht to Boston, where they were offered for sale.

The demand exceeded the yachtman's greatest expectations, for the whole lot was snapped up in short order. So profitable was the first venture that the next Christmas season

Christmas
CHINA
QUEEN
SILVER
M. F.
& S
The Only
of China
we are showing



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