



Remembering the Ghost Light at North Manitou Island

By Timothy Harrison

In the early 1800s, Michigan's North Manitou Island was inhabited by settlers looking to establish a lumber industry, and, by the 1860s, there were nearly 300 people living on the island. By that time, as well as making their living from the logging industry, many of them made their living from farming.

North Manitou Island and its counterpart, South Manitou Island, soon became an important stopping point for early ships on Lake Michigan providing wood for the steamships along with food for their crews and passengers. South Manitou Island with its safe harbor provided shelter for many vessels in times of severe weather. As the areas importance grew, the federal government eventually established a presence in the area with the building of lighthouses and a life saving station.

Many of the tourists and lighthouse aficionados who visit Michigan are aware of the South Manitou Island Lighthouse, which was recently re-lighted, and many have even visited it by taking the ferry service provided by Manitou Island Transit. Many have also viewed the North Manitou Shoal Lighthouse, which is sits on a crib out in the water where lightships were once stationed. However, most are totally unaware of the Ghost Light that once stood on the 15,000-acre North Manitou Island.

In 1893 Congress approved the building of a lighthouse at North Manitou Island; however it was few years before the station could be completed. The fog signal was completed first, which was followed by the tower that was at first an open framework structure that was later enclosed in sheathing.

Although the island is beautiful and pristine, life at the island lighthouse in the late 1800s and early 1900s for a keeper with a family could be most difficult, especially in the winter months. However, the people who lived on the island were resourceful and loved their island life.

The first keeper was Andrew G. Bourissau. He was a veteran keeper by the time he arrived at North Manitou Island in 1897. Bourissau had two assistant keepers, John Mc Kinnon and Walter Grobбен, to help him out with the many duties that would have been required at a brand new lighthouse station.

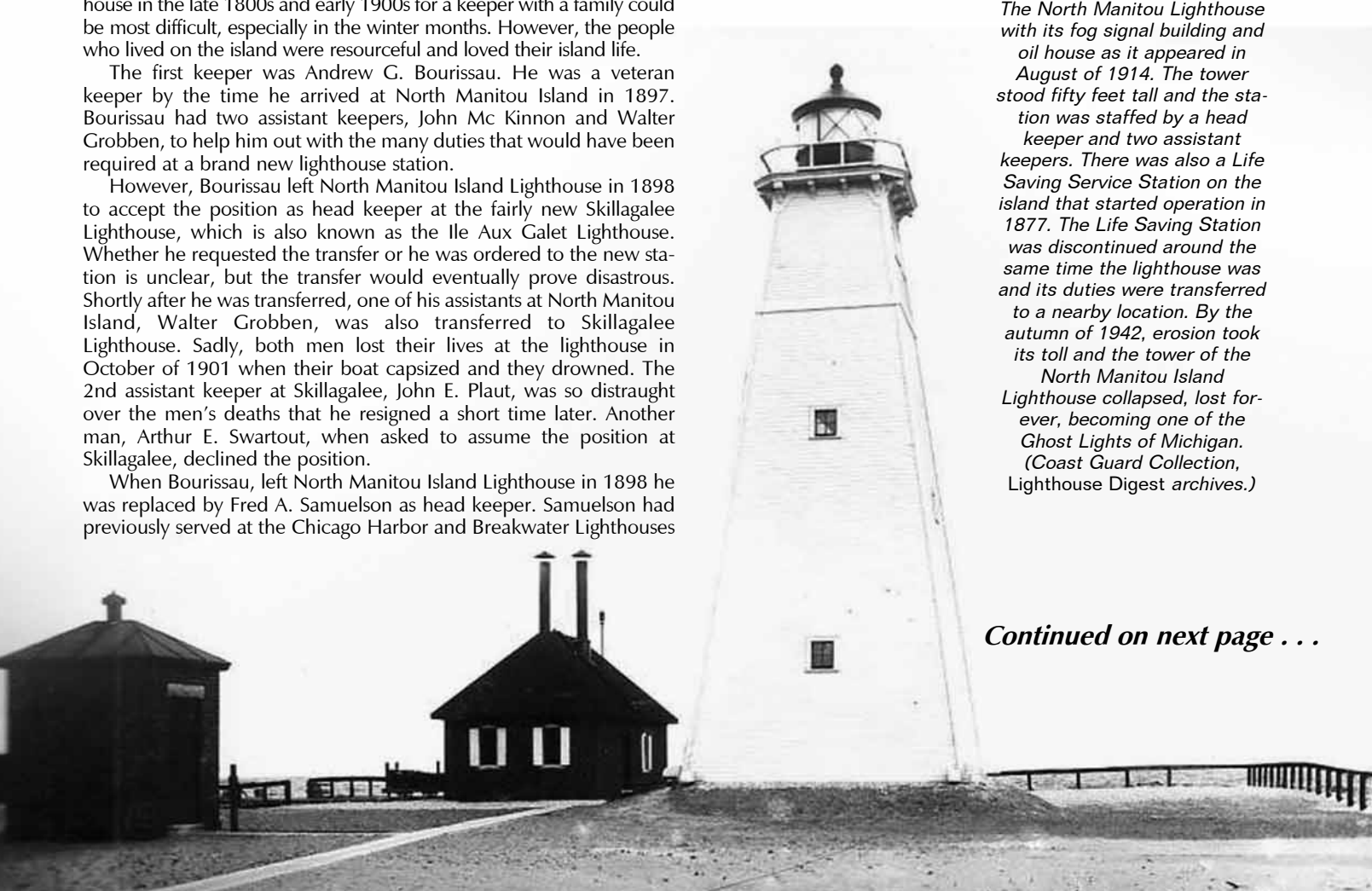
However, Bourissau left North Manitou Island Lighthouse in 1898 to accept the position as head keeper at the fairly new Skillegalee Lighthouse, which is also known as the Ile Aux Galet Lighthouse. Whether he requested the transfer or he was ordered to the new station is unclear, but the transfer would eventually prove disastrous. Shortly after he was transferred, one of his assistants at North Manitou Island, Walter Grobбен, was also transferred to Skillegalee Lighthouse. Sadly, both men lost their lives at the lighthouse in October of 1901 when their boat capsized and they drowned. The 2nd assistant keeper at Skillegalee, John E. Plaut, was so distraught over the men's deaths that he resigned a short time later. Another man, Arthur E. Swartout, when asked to assume the position at Skillegalee, declined the position.

When Bourissau, left North Manitou Island Lighthouse in 1898 he was replaced by Fred A. Samuelson as head keeper. Samuelson had previously served at the Chicago Harbor and Breakwater Lighthouses



The North Manitou Island Lighthouse keeper's house as it appeared in October 1928. The flag pole stood an amazing 60 feet tall. (Coast Guard Collection, Lighthouse Digest archives.)

The North Manitou Lighthouse with its fog signal building and oil house as it appeared in August of 1914. The tower stood fifty feet tall and the station was staffed by a head keeper and two assistant keepers. There was also a Life Saving Service Station on the island that started operation in 1877. The Life Saving Station was discontinued around the same time the lighthouse was and its duties were transferred to a nearby location. By the autumn of 1942, erosion took its toll and the tower of the North Manitou Island Lighthouse collapsed, lost forever, becoming one of the Ghost Lights of Michigan. (Coast Guard Collection, Lighthouse Digest archives.)



Continued on next page . . .



The North Manitou Island Lighthouse keeper's house was described as opulent, especially by the standards of the other homes on the island. The head keeper's quarters were on the first and second floors of one side of the building, while the 1st assistant keeper occupied the first floor of the other side of the building and the 2nd assistant keeper's quarters were on the second floor. The keeper's house remained intact until 1968 when the waters of Lake Michigan began pounding on the front door. (Photograph from the collection of Rita Hadra Rusco.)



The end was near in 1971 when this photograph was taken of the keeper's house of the North Manitou Island Lighthouse. The house eventually gave way to Lake Michigan. Today, only a few bricks remain laying about the beach. In season, Manitou Island Transit Co. offers boat rides to North Manitou Island as well as South Manitou Island. (Photograph courtesy Rita Hadra Rusco.)



When Ernest Hutzler left North Manitou Island Lighthouse he was transferred here to Michigan's South Manitou Island Lighthouse. The South Manitou Island Lighthouse was built in 1872 to replace an earlier tower that was built in 1840. In May of 2009, after being dark since 1958, the tower was re-lighted. Manitou Digest is looking for a photograph of the first South Manitou Island Lighthouse. If you can help, please e-mail Editor@LighthouseDigest.com or write to us at P.O. Box 250, East Machias, ME 04630.

from 1894 to 1895 and then at Grosse Point Lighthouse in Evanston, Illinois from 1895 to 1898.

Samuelson fell in love with a local girl, Augusta "Gusty" Swenson, and they were married on the island in 1905. Samuelson spent his first few years landscaping the lighthouse station. He would surely be disappointed if he were alive today to see what eventually happened to the North Manitou Island Lighthouse Station that he was so proud of. Samuelson loved photography and even built his own darkroom in the basement of the keeper's house. He reportedly took numerous photographs of lighthouses and other lighthouse keepers. Those photos today, if they could be located, would be a valuable addition to preserving lighthouse history for future generations. In 1909 Samuelson was transferred to the Ludington North Breakwater Lighthouse where he served until his retirement in 1937.

Lighthouse keeping always had its dangers as North Manitou Island Lighthouse keeper Edward Cornell found out in 1910. An experienced keeper, Cornell arrived at North Manitou after previously having served at South Fox Island Lighthouse in Michigan from 1899 to 1900 and Pilot Island Lighthouse in Wisconsin from 1903 to 1909. One of the station's metal gas tanks had a leak, so Cornell emptied the gas tank to solder the leak. However, he did not think about the fumes that remained in the tank. While soldering the seam in the empty gas tank, he was seriously injured when fumes from the tank caused an explosion. Being a dedicated lighthouse keeper, he put out the fire first and sought medical attention last. His recovery was long and painful, but he did make a full recovery. In 1909 Cornell was transferred to Pottawatomie Lighthouse in Wisconsin where he served until 1929 when he was again transferred, this time to Green Island Lighthouse, also in Wisconsin.

Glen Furst, whose stepfather, Ernest G. Hutzler, was the lighthouse keeper at North Manitou Island Lighthouse in the early 1900s to February 1928, provides a wonderful, homey and poignant account of life at the lighthouse in his book, *My Point of View*. The book, although difficult to find, is still available at a number of locations.

Hutzler, who was a veteran lighthouse keeper by the time he accepted the position North Manitou Island, said in later years, "The biggest mistake in my life was when I accepted the appointment of keeper at North Manitou Lighthouse Station." This may have been because the family arrived in the winter months to the remote island with its small population.

Furst recalled how his mother worried about the children and the nine miles they had to walk to and from school. In later years some of the children had to board on the mainland for school, something that distressed the entire family. To make life easier for the family, especially in transporting the children, Hutzler purchased a 1919 Model T. It was the first automobile on the island. However, with no real roads, the vehicle often got stuck.

The North Manitou Island Lighthouse was automated in 1928 and its keepers were removed. By 1935 the lighthouse had outlived its usefulness and was discontinued and sold a few years later to businessman William Angell for \$2,600. Angell, of Lansing, Michigan, was the president of Continental Motors. He had joined two Chicago businessmen, Roger Sherman and George McConnell, who were buying up most of the island to turn it into a deer hunting preserve. Eventually, Angell gained controlling interest and formed the Manitou Island Association.

Eventually the deer became so populous that deer feeding stations had to be established to keep the creatures from starving. By the mid 1900s, an airstrip had been established and a dock was built to accommodate the hunters who came and stayed in a lodge on the island that dated back to the late 1800s. The lodge was destroyed in 1953 by a fire caused by a lightning strike.

Mr. Angell had wanted the island to be turned into a nature preserve, but he died before seeing that dream become a reality. The trust managing his estate continued to run the lodge and even turned a profit that it donated to charity. However, no one was able to cope with maintenance and shore erosion problems at the lighthouse, which had plagued the station for many years. Erosion finally took its toll and the

lighthouse, which had not been properly cared for, simply toppled to the ground. However, the lighthouse keeper's house stood for many years after the tower's demise, but it also eventually met the same fate.

Eventually the government, through eminent domain, bought out most of the other land owners and North Manitou Island became part of the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. Some of the original buildings on the island were demolished; others were simply left to decay on their own and several are still maintained by the park service.

When Glenn Furst's family left the North Manitou Island Lighthouse Station, none of them felt sad about leaving as they headed to their new home at the nearby South Manitou Island Lighthouse Station. However, years later when Furst revisited the island and saw what had happened to the place they once called home, he became choked up and tears swelled in his eyes.

In later years, Furst, realizing that there were many unmarked graves on the island, returned and installed five headstones and made seventeen cement crosses for the names of the people whom he could recall who once lived and died on the island. In 1988 Furst helped create the Manitou Island Memorial Society to maintain those gravesites. 🗿

Editor's Note: An excellent account of life on North Manitou Island can be found in the book, *North Manitou Island, Between Sunrise and Sunset*, by Rita Hadra Rusco. I personally recommend this book to anyone with an interest in Michigan history or island life. I must not be alone in liking this book; it is now in its fifth printing.

Rita recalled, "When the sun set on North Manitou Island on September 26, 1979, it marked the end of community life on the island. For the first time in 125 years the island would become unoccupied by year-round residents." Because of this, and the fact that she had been a year-round resident, she felt compelled to write about the history of the island from the 1840s to 1999 and that the pioneers who once lived there should not be forgotten.

Rita's writing is rich, frank and full of life as she relates the island history from wilderness to thriving community to its return to wilderness. Her own adventures are intertwined with historical fact. You will not be disappointed. The book can be ordered on-line through www.ManitouIslandLady.com.

Another book that offers an amazing insight to anyone planning to visit North Manitou Island where the lighthouse once stood or the nearby South Manitou Island Lighthouse should pick up a copy of the book, *Exploring North Manitou, South Manitou, High and Garden Islands of the Lake Michigan Archipelago* by Robert H. Ruchhoft.

North Manitou Island is also one of the lighthouses featured in my book, *Ghost Lights of Michigan*.



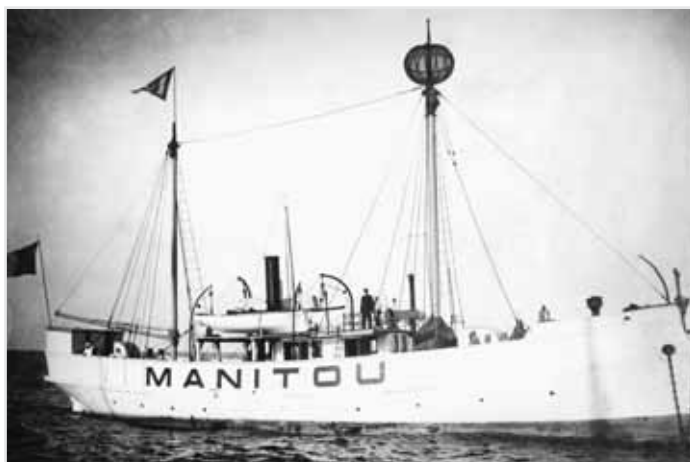
Frederick Samuelson was the second person to hold the position of Head Keeper at Michigan's North Manitou Island Lighthouse. He arrived on the island in 1898 to replace Head Keeper Andrew G. Bourissau who transferred to Skillagalee (Ile Aux Galets) Lighthouse. Samuelson is shown here with his pet rabbit. (Photograph from the collection of Rita Hadra Rusco.)



Edward Cornell served as a lighthouse keeper at Michigan's North Manitou Island Lighthouse from 1903 to 1909. During his illustrious career, he was also a lighthouse keeper at Pilot Island, Pottawatomie (Rock Island) and Green Island lighthouses in Wisconsin and at South Fox Island Lighthouse in Michigan. He was the grandson of James and Elizabeth Cornell who had ten children and 82 grandchildren. Some of them, including Edward, became lighthouse keepers. Sadly, the Green Island Lighthouse in Wisconsin, where he also served as a lighthouse keeper, has met a fate similar to North Manitou Island Lighthouse. (Photograph courtesy Art Cornell.)



The S. S. South American and the S.S. North American at their dock in Holland, Michigan. As a young boy living at North Manitou Island Lighthouse, one of Glen Furst's favorite memories was of watching the white gleaming S.S. North American as she sailed by the lighthouse. Both of the once luxurious ships, shown here, that once sailed the Great Lakes are now gone. Out of service for many years, the S.S. North American sank in 1967 and the abandoned S.S. South American was sold for scrap in 1992. My mother, Dorothy (Van Ommen) Harrison had her Zeeland High School Prom on board the S.S. North American. (Lighthouse Digest archives)



One of the early lightships that marked the shoal off the southern end of North Manitou Island. Slightly visible from the rear mast is the lighthouse pennant, which was the official flag of the United States Lighthouse Service. The man standing atop the pilot house is most likely the vessels captain. (Coast Guard photo, Lighthouse Digest archives.)