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END OF AN ERA

Cana Island, Wisconsin

by Louie and Rosie Janda

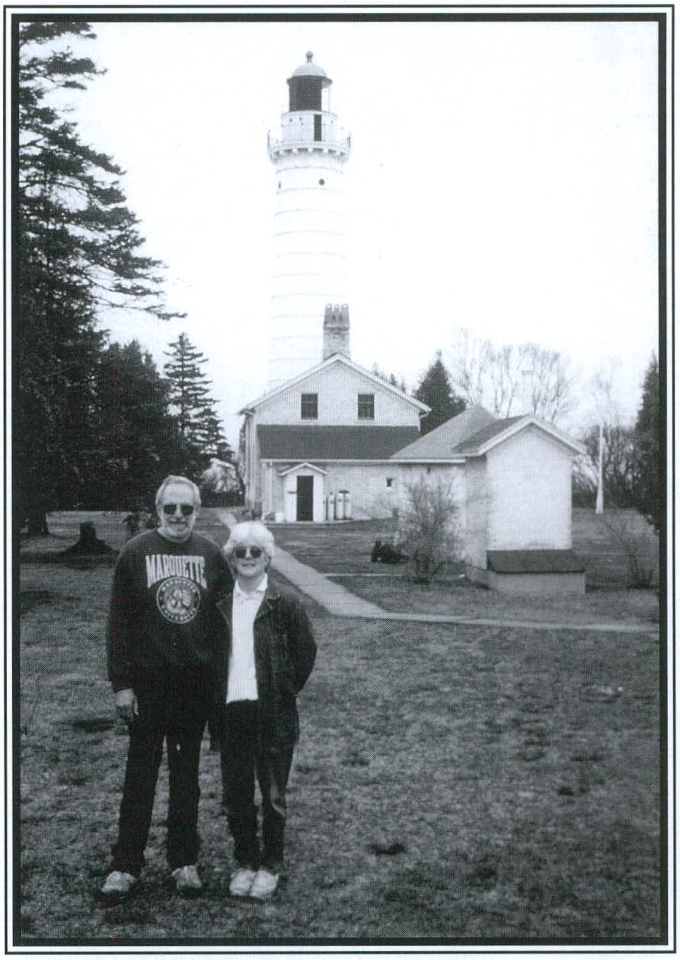
On October 7, 1995, the light station at Cana Island entered a new era — there are no longer caretakers living at the station. This may perhaps mark the last time that there will be a resident keeper at the historic lighthouse.

But it is not the end for Cana Island; rather it marks the beginning of a new era — an era of changing use, and an era where visitors may be expected to help fund the mounting costs of preservation.

The light station at Cana Island was constructed in 1869 and the first keeper, William Sanderson, was named. The light was shone for the first time during the shipping season in 1870. Keepers and their families were there continuously until the end of World War II.

For the past quarter century, the site was under license from the Coast Guard to the Door County Maritime Museum Inc., and the Museum became responsible for the maintenance of the property.

In 1977, the Louie Janda family, working with the Museum, became the resident caretakers. Family members are Louie and Rosie Janda and their five children, Paul, Dave, Margaret, Kathy, and Melissa. The family lived in the house during the summer and worked at restoring the buildings and keeping up the grounds. Some of the projects are listed in the side bar to this article. But changing times and changing pressures outside of the Museum's control forced changes in the residency at Cana Island. Here are some of the thoughts of the family.



Louie and Rosie Janda in front of 'their' lighthouse. Photograph, by Kathy Phythyon, courtesy of Rosie Janda.

What do you say after 19 years? How do you reminisce about a life-time? How can you get all those thoughts down on paper?

When we started, our friends thought we were crazy. The place was a mess. Lake Michigan had been high, and the causeway had been under water for a number of years — 1977 was the first year it was derivable in some time. All the buildings needed attention, windows were broken, paint was peeling, wall paper was peeling and dirty, light fixtures consisted of bare light bulbs, there were holes in the walls and ceilings, floors were rotted, there was no furniture, no tools, no maintenance equipment, and of course there was no potable water on the island, and there were no sanitation facilities.

But start we did! We scraped paint and cleaned, moved in some basic furniture, and fixed it up enough so that paint chips wouldn't fall from the ceiling into someone's soup. The chimney flues were blocked, and I can remember hauling out a dozen garbage bags full of grass and nests that birds had dropped in. Bats had full run of the place through holes in the soffits.

It started to shape up, and it became a good life for us, too. As soon as we moved in the magic of the place took over. It was very easy to forget that we even had a home in Green Bay. It was good for us and it was good for the kids. And, of course, it was good for Cana Island.

We all learned a lot about living with nature and with history. We can remember the twelve year old putting his five year old sister on his shoulders and going out for a walk — where in Green Bay would that happen? We remember beautiful days and picnics and sitting around the fire in the evenings. We can remember reading about muggy 100 degree days in Green Bay and digging out the sweatshirts — it's a good thing we prefer cooler weather!

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We remember tremendous storms that washed rocks as big as our heads through the walkways into the yard. We remember family times and card games, and good neighbors and friends near. The Augustines at Spikehorn took us under their wings, and we developed some good friendships among the neighbors and campers. The kids had a chance to take part in the community. The girls played softball in Baileys Harbor. As the kids got older, all five found jobs in Door County and they earned some money for college.

We remember struggling in the 1980's as the lake level rose to new highs. We floated stuff out to the island and had to work hard to exist, let alone complete projects. Two of the bigger projects were completed during this time. In one spring storm we had to get the van towed out of the lake and into town to dry out. In one nightmare crossing, we almost lost our pet dachshund. One of the kids dropped a bag full of clothes, shoes, baseball gloves, etc. into the lake. Needless to say a bag of garbage made it safely.

But we learned to cope and make do. We brought in a lot of furniture and clothes. Neighbors donated some items to the light house. We added tools. The Baileys Harbor Woman's Club paid for telephone service and donated some items. The Museum provided a budget with which projects could be done. Remember that the Museum at that time was totally a volunteer organization and did not have rnuch in the line of funds. We fixed up a collection box, set out some photos and a write-up, and visitors dropped in some donations, which helped

A major highlight for us was meeting some super people and making some good friends. We've mentioned neighbors, and this also refers to visitors. Some are people who just loved the place. Others are people whose families resided there, or who have other ties. People have said their marriage vows there and scattered ashes of loved ones — some very private moments.

Another highlight was celebrating the 125th anniversary of the station, observed in 1994. Over 100 descendants of keepers helped us mark the event and it was a great day. The loss of all this is a deep loss for us, and there is no way we can replace these kinds of contacts. I am sure that it is a loss for these people too.

Cana Island became a family refuge for us. Three of the kids held their wedding receptions there. The kids all came back for vacations and gatherings. We held a family fish boil there every fall — the last one in 1995 we served over 150 people.

Sure, Cana Island was good for us. But we were good for Cana Island too, and this goodness may have been part of its change. As we fixed up the place, it became more attractive, which brought more visitors. Cana Island as a tourist attraction is nothing new. Official records in 1936 showed over 6,000 visitors between Memorial Day and Labor Day — perhaps small by today's standards but large when you consider that the road was only a dirt and sand trail through the woods and you know what transportation was like.

The Island has always been popular with artists and images have shown up in galleries as far away as Los Angeles and New York. Other changes took place too. Since the 1980's, there has been a boom in building along the lake shore. Property lots that were under water in 1985 now have houses on them. We wonder what will happen to them when the lake comes back up again. Dirt roads have been paved. More traffic in Door County and more condos mean more people and more visitors.

And of course every one wants to see Cana Island. It is the only light house like it in Door County. It is still a place where you can get away from people, where you can go down by the rocks and watch the water, where you can visit the grounds and not have to contend with picnics and mess, where you can feel the history of a place, and where you can be part of the romance of a long-gone era and commune with the spirits of those folk who tended this place. No wonder people like to come here; we surely do.

We still don't have a well for drinking water, and there still are no sanitary facilities. During all those years that we were working and developing, no one said any thing and the powers that be tolerated the situation. Carrying in water was no problem for us, and we certainly were not polluting anything.

During these years, the Museum also changed. Louie became a board member, and



Cana Island from the air. The small buildings at left are an oil house and privy. Circa 1950 photograph courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.

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even the Museum president for a few years. Operations moved from a total volunteer organization to one with a paid staff backed by volunteers. We now have a full time director and an administrative assistant, plus paid staff at museums in Gills Rock and Sturgeon Bay. We have embarked on a $2.8 million fund drive to update facilities at the Gills Rock museum and construct a new building at Sturgeon Bay.

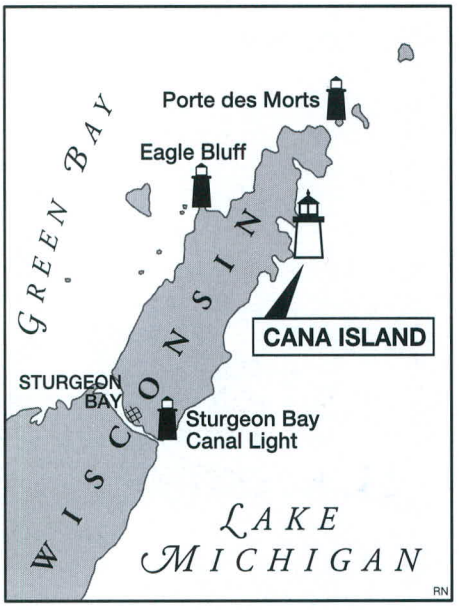
And then change was forced at Cana Island, a couple of years prematurely for the Museum. Perhaps the increased traffic got to some of the property owners along the road, or they began to realize that this is a highly prized area for visitors. This gem in the midst of the Baileys Harbor wilderness soon became a thorn to some. We began to hear from a few; certainly not the majority as there are many there who know what they have as their neighbor.

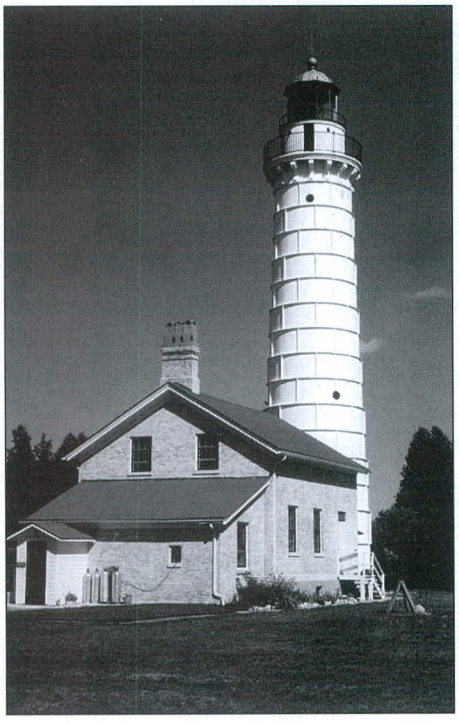
A sad note and a personal affront to us happened around Thanksgiving 1994. Our visitors stand was destroyed and Rosie's scarecrow was dumped face down in the garden. But worse, was that a yearling deer we had been enjoying was shot and left laying in the yard. All indications point to a local involvement.

In 1995, we heard a lot; letters were written to authorities in the Coast Guard, and local, county, state, and federal government agencies. The only complaint that seemed to stick was lack of sanitation facilities. While this was happening, the Coast Guard wanted to renegotiate the terms of the license with the Museum, and wanted to include some provisions that would make it prohibitive for us to operate the facility. It seemed that every time we made progress there would be another letter and the whole thing would be in limbo again.

Finally, it was resolved. The cost of sanitation facilities is prohibitive at this time — there would have to be a way to pump effluent off the island. There could no longer be resident keepers living in the house. The Museum will then have to hire care takers to keep up the grounds and buildings. This will mean initiating a charge for visitors.

So there will be changes. Traffic will continue along the road, and visitors will be encouraged. Cana Island will be maintained. Some day there may be a Museum there and trained interpreters who can help people more fully appreciate the history and atmosphere. The Janda's, who have become synonymous with Cana Island in recent years, will no longer be there. But, then, neither are the Sandersons. Only their spirits and their legacies remain.





Left - The Cana Island tower was constructed of Milwaukee 'cream' brick which began to fail. The tower was then encased in steel plates to protect the brick. The 3rd Order lens is still operational. Photograph courtesy of unknown photographer.

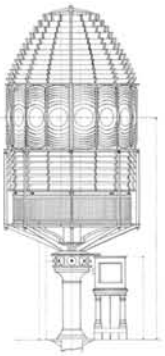
PROJECTS AT CANA ISLAND

Completed from 1977 to 1995

- Installed electricity in the house for the first time.
- Re-shingled and repaired roof.
- Two support girders under the house in the crawl space.
- Filled crawl space with crushed rock.
- Filled cistern with crushed rock.
- Replaced floor and walls in kitchen.
- Replaced cabinets in kitchen.
- Replaced floors and walls in entry room.
- Replaced many broken windows.
- Made new screens.
- Made screen doors.
- Scraped and repainted all woodwork in the dwelling.
- Repaired holes in plaster in walls and ceilings.
- Wallpaper in living room, dining room, hallway, and four bedrooms.
- Refurbished keeper's office.
- Refurbished cabinets in keeper's office and made two drawers to replace missing drawers.
- Refinished hardwood floors in two bedrooms and soft wood floors in two others.
- Painted exterior windows and rim.
- Repaired and painted soffits.
- Repaired and painted roof on oil house.
- Set up a display in the oil house.
- Replaced cedar shingles on storage shed.
- Repaired stone walls and walk ways.
- Cleaned up yard and removed brush.
- Planted flowers around house and stone walls.

This is only a partial list. Funds were provided by the Museum, from donations received at the Island, and from the Janda family.

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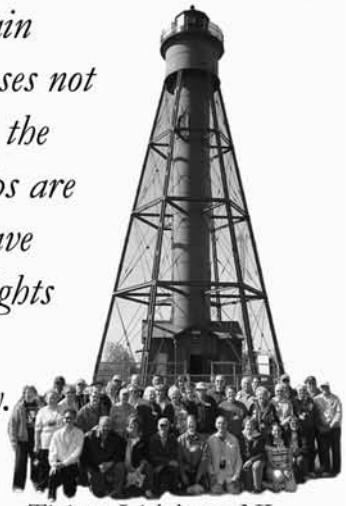
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