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Hank Vavrina

The Last Keeper of Michigan's Little Point Sable Lighthouse

Memories by Margaret Butcher

The first time I saw Hank Vavrina was in August, 1947, when my husband at the time, John Wood Dinges, and I were on our honeymoon at Floradale Resort on Silver Lake, Michigan. The resort was not far from the Little Point Sable Lighthouse on the shores of Lake Michigan. The resort was built and owned by John's cousin, Malcolm (Mac) Wood. Mac was famous for the DuneScooters he invented, using a Model T chassis.

John and I went for a walk in the woods. He wanted to show me the old corduroy logging road, so named because it was made of logs. As we came out of the woods onto the dirt lighthouse road, a car pulled up and who should jump out – but another cousin of John's – Glen Wood, from Detroit. He'd heard from Mac that John was here after a long absence and he had a new wife, so Glen was looking for us. Hank was with him and we were all introduced. Hank said he'd invited Glen and his family to Sunday dinner the next day and said we were welcome if we'd care to come. Would we ever! I was thrilled because I'd never been in a lighthouse, and John had not been in the Little Point Sable Lighthouse since he was a kid and "Captain" Hunter was the keeper.

What a treat that day was! First of all, Hank was an excellent cook. His wife had died many years ago and left him with two little girls. He raised them by himself with the exception of the three years during World War II that he served on active duty in the Navy. The girls stayed with his sister in Chicago,

They were about 10 and 12 on the day of that dinner. They had set the tables, including lovely linen cloths and helped with the serving, but Hank prepared all the food. The group included about seven or eight adults and several children. He made rolls and pies, too. It never occurred to me what a project that was at the time, considering there was no electricity or running water. I found out later.

Hank turned out to be a very charming and interesting man with twinkling blue eyes and a mischievous grin. He was polite and very funny. Hank and John soon discovered they had a lot in common because they were both in WWII in the Mediterranean area. They had much to talk about.

We left the resort a week later and went back to our home town, Decatur, Illinois to prepare for our trip down the Mississippi River and on to Florida where we planned to live. We arrived in January of 1948. By that fall I had developed some serious health problems and we felt they were caused or aggravated by the extreme heat and humidity. In addition, other things had not worked out as we'd planned so we left in September, just ahead of a hurricane, and headed back to Michigan.

We rented an apartment in Hart, Michigan, about 12 miles from the lighthouse and resumed our friendship with Hank. He told us he'd met a woman he liked who worked in a coffee shop in Hart. She lived on a 40-acre farm a mile past the tiny village of Mears, on the way to the lighthouse. The first time Hank took us to her house, she was under her car in the driveway fixing something and a neighbor was helping. Hank had told her about us and was trying to introduce us, but she just waved a foot and said "Hi," she'd be out later — first they had to get her car working. That was our introduction to Elizabeth Harkenrider, known to everyone as "Pinky." She was in the process of a divorce. She had two little boys, maybe five and seven.

On New Year's Eve in 1948, Hank invited John and me to spend the night at the lighthouse because he was on duty and could not leave the premises. Being on duty meant going up in the tower to get the kerosene light started by sundown and wind up the weights. The weights work like a grandfather clock and cause the lens to revolve. It is supposed to flash five seconds out of each 30, so the keeper on duty has to make sure the proper characteristic is being produced. If there is no problem he next ascends the stairs at midnight to rewind the weights, which will continue to rotate the lens until dawn. In the summer, when nights are shorter, the midnight trip was not needed. There was no alarm system to warn the keeper if the lamp went out or if the lens stopped rotating, so he really only got catnaps while on duty.

Hank fixed a venison dinner that night, the first time I'd ever tasted it. This was from a young buck he'd shot and the meat was tender and very good. He said older animals had stronger flavors and were tougher, but could be made delicious by cooking with different methods, and with wine and herb marinades. He ground up odd cuts left after he cleaned and butchered a deer to make "deer burgers."

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When we had that first dinner at the lighthouse with Hank in 1947 it was in the assistant keeper's quarters. They were not quite as nice as the head keeper's. By the time we returned to Michigan, Mr. Robinette, who had been principal keeper, retired and Hank succeeded him. He moved into the other side of the house, which had lake views. There was also a glassed-in sun porch where most meals were eaten and people gathered.

Mr. Robinette spent his own money to add a simple 32-volt generator – enough to run a few lights and a water pump. This was an improvement over the hand pump. Hank bought the system from Robinette when he retired.

We had a bottle of champagne and after Hank came down from the midnight session in the tower, we toasted the New Year – 1949.

We got to know Pinky and loved her. She was interested in hunting, fishing, bowling, softball and raising her two boys. She had a sense of humor to match Hank's. Eventually she decided it would be easier to bring up the boys if she lived in town. She wasn't anxious to leave her house in the country unheated and deserted, so asked if we'd like to move out to her farm for a very reasonable rent. We loved the idea and lived there until 1951, when we left Michigan.

Pinky and Hank got married after her divorce was final. John and I were attendants at their wedding, August 13, 1949. This also happened to be our second anniversary.

While Pinky and Hank were on their honeymoon, we had some excitement. We found out the boys' father, John Harkenrider ("Harky"), had traveled to the area from Chicago and was in Hart asking directions to the lighthouse. The person he talked to happened to be our good friend and had a hunch that trouble was brewing. He was right. Harky had somehow found out Pinky and Hank were gone and the boys were at the lighthouse. He intended to grab them and head back to Chicago. The boys would probably not have objected as he was their dad. But Pinky had been awarded custody. The chances of anything happening to them at the lighthouse were slim. Hank's girls were old enough to cook and look after the boys. They had a telephone, the assistant keeper and his wife were next door, and John and I promised we'd look in on the four kids each day.

When we got the phone call that Harky was on the way out of Hart and a description of the car, we first called Shirley, one of Hank's daughters, at the lighthouse and told her to take the boys and jackets and go to the corduroy road in the woods and we'd meet them there. Then when the coast was clear we'd take the boys for a sleep-out in the dunes, and bring them back the next day. We had an old 1928 Model A Ford truck that John had stripped to make it lighter. Even so, it was not capable of going on the dunes, but was good enough to cross "Termite Bridge," as Mac Wood called his ramshackle DuneScooter bridge across the Silver Lake Channel. Anyone looking for us would never suspect we'd crossed the bridge. When we got close to the dunes, we hid the truck in the woods and carried our supplies up into the dunes and into a valley where a fire would not be seen. We had a good time. The boys gathered pine knots for our fire and we had hot dogs. I don't remember what else, except we always toasted marshmallows. The boys understood we were evading their dad, and loved the drama and adventure of it, but of course were too young to understand all the true concerns. Pinky would have a hard time getting the boys back if Harky had taken them to Chicago. We got them back to the lighthouse safely and told Shirley that if Harky showed up (any car approaching the lighthouse could be heard quite a distance away) to immediately take the boys next door to the assistant's quarters. She could honestly tell Harky the boys were not there. If he gave her a bad time, we told her call the sheriff, and then go to the assistant keeper for safety.



Southeast side of the Little Point Sable Light Station dwelling. The ramp with cars led to a former barn that was converted to a garage for the station "jeep," and stored tools, lumber and chicken feed. Early 1950 photo by Vavrina, courtesy of the author.

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Harky never showed up, so fortunately there was no confrontation. The boys could hardly wait to tell Pinky about their adventure.

It's been 55 years, but Jim and Jerry still remember their big escape into the dunes. Pinky and the boys moved to the lighthouse with Hank and his two girls, and we stayed at the farm.

In the summer we had a lot of beach parties at the lighthouse. There was plenty of driftwood for fires. Everyone who came would bring something to share.

John and I went hunting and fishing with Pinky and Hank. We usually caught more fish than we could eat, so Hank would put the extra in special containers and take them in to Hart to a frozen-food locker he rented. That was something new to me. The locker staff would cut up meat, package and label it for freezing and put it in your locker. Even for people who had reliable power, having freezer space for a side of beef or a hog could be a problem. With no electricity, Hank's locker was a blessing. They kept fruits and vegetables in it too.

Another thing that ended up in the freezer was wild game – venison, geese and the like. During migration, the geese seemed to be entranced by the lighthouse beam, and it was not unusual to discover two-to-five dead geese outside the back door in the morning. It sure beat trying to hunt them and the bonus was they died of broken necks, so the flesh was not full of bird-shot. Wild geese have all dark meat and no fat, so have to be cooked differently than domestic geese. I really liked the taste of the wild ones.

In the winter, the surface of Silver Lake froze so thick that cars could drive on it. In earlier times people took horses and wagons on the ice and cut blocks of ice to pack in sawdust to use in the summer. It's interesting that ice skating was impossible because there was so much sand embedded in the ice. However, it was a great lake for ice fishing. It could be very cold out there waiting for the fish to bite; so many people built little, windowless shacks with benches. Eliminating the light made it possible to see the fish through the hole cut in the ice. Small heaters kept you from freezing. For Christmas in 1949 Hank made Pinky her own ice fishing shack. She was thrilled.

One of our greatest outdoor pleasures was beach combing, especially after a big storm. It was easy to walk at water's edge on the beach where the sand was wet and packed by the waves. We could cover a lot of ground in a day. We ventured to the looser sand portion only to sit and rest on logs or to look over some item washed up that far from waters edge.

The best thing we ever found was lumber — more than we could possibly haul away or ever use. We hadn't read of any lumber ships going down, so maybe a bundle came undone and washed overboard during rough water.

The usual driftwood that washed up was useful only for beach fires after it had been beyond the wave action long enough to dry out. It was always very battered. I never found any driftwood of real artistic merit on the beach. The beautiful pieces I have are from the dunes.

We found interesting glass shards that were so scoured by the water and sand they were like frosted glass. They were great to use in flower arrangements.

I found many beautiful rocks, worn flat, very smooth, and rounded into ovals. I still have a big box of them loosely referred to by my daughters as "Mom's rocks." These also are nice to use in flower arrangements.

Mostly what was on the beach, sadly, was garbage – mostly plastic cups, and containers and food-related debris.

We never found any notes in bottles though Pinky's two boys did.

The keepers and their families lived in a huge house that was divided down the middle into a duplex. It was made of brick, with solid walls two feet thick. When it was built in 1873, steel was not used to reinforce masonry buildings. The three story dwelling had a stone foundation containing a basement.

There was a brick enclosed passageway from the living quarters directly into the base of the tower, but it was not used when I was there. I never thought to ask why. I would think they would have been anxious to avoid those cold, fierce winds outside.

The dwellings' interiors were very nice with beautiful wood floors and trim, high ceilings, deep window sills because of the thick walls, and lots of rooms.

Heat was provided by big, free-standing stoves that were gun-metal gray with ornate nickel trim, not quite as shiny as chrome, but it had a deep luster that was beautiful. The door for putting in the coal had an isinglass window. Anthracite hard coal was used in this type stove. It burns slower, hotter and much cleaner that the cheaper soft coal. In the early years before there was a road to the lighthouse,



Little Point Sable Light Station on August 11, 1914. The vessel in the distance (at left) is either the Lighthouse Service tender *Hyacinth* or *Sumac*, both launched in 1903 and similar in appearance. Official U. S. Coast Guard photo.

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supplies, including the coal were brought by ship to a dock that had been installed (gone). It took two days to unload the coal, and haul it over the sand to the storage building. Later, after a road was built, the coal was brought by horse and wagon, then by truck.

In the beginning, cooking was done on wood stoves. Later they changed to kerosene stoves, and after WWII, to propane.

There was no electricity, so light was from kerosene lamps or candles. Water was from hand pumps and somewhere along the line, small hand pumps were put in the kitchen sinks, which saved hauling it in from the outside.

There were no bathrooms, only separate outdoor privies for each family. With no plumbing and no running water, bathing was in a big tub on the kitchen floor with water heated on the cooking stove.

No electricity meant none of the conveniences we take for granted today such as refrigerators, freezers, vacuum cleaners, TV, radios, toasters, blenders, mixers, fans, washers, dryers and irons.

At the lighthouse keeper's quarters small refrigerators were run by kerosene or propane. Washing was done in an agitating machine that probably was run by gasoline. I never thought to inquire, but it smelled like an outboard motor. The wringer was turned by hand.

Ironing was done with flatirons heated on the cooking stove. They used three, so two could be heating while one was in use. When I heard about this my thoughts went back to that 1947 dinner and those table linens Hank ironed, and the dresses for those two little girls.

Clothes were hung outside to dry, and with the constant breeze from Lake Michigan, it didn't take long. In the winter the clothes were dried in the attic.

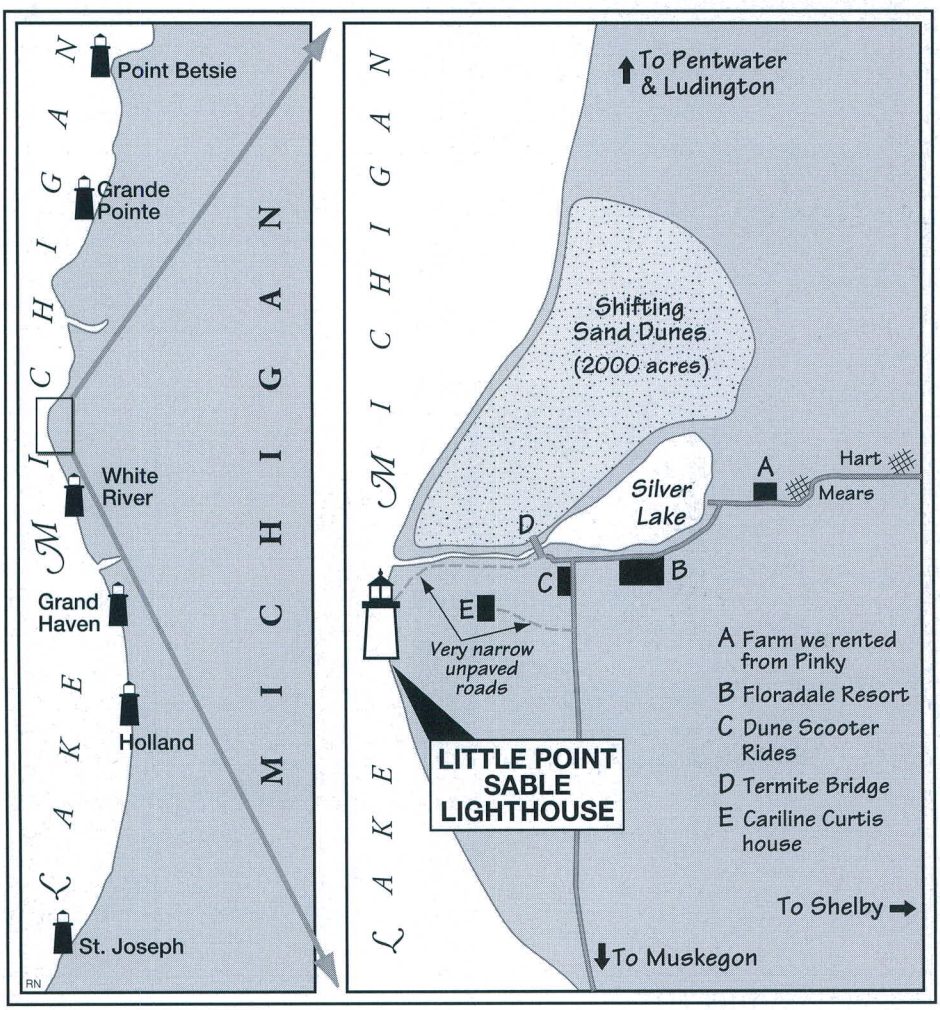
I found out first hand what it was like to be in such a primitive lifestyle in early 1949 when John and I spent a week at the lighthouse. The young Coast Guardsman, who was Hank's new assistant, moved in with his very pregnant wife. They had no relatives anywhere close, so they asked if we'd come stay with them when she came home from the hospital, and we agreed. I learned new respect for our ancestors who survived to create this great country. Taking care of a four-day old baby and a new mother with no running water or electricity, was not easy. Neither of the young couple had ever lived in the country. As kids, John and I had at least visited farmer relatives, so we knew about privies and pumping water. This was all a shock to this couple.

It's hard to understand why it took so long to bring electricity to the lighthouse. Power lines were only five miles away to the north, at the village of Pentwater. However, in between was the dune area which was a state park, so they didn't want to string wires on poles and spoil the view. From the east, power lines were less than a mile away through the woods, and to the south power lines were a few miles away at Shelby, MI. Whenever anyone talked about this paradox Hank always said not to stir the pot — he liked it there. He reasoned that if power was brought into the lighthouse, the operation would be electrified and automated – and he'd be out of a job and fine place to live. It seemed as if the Coast Guard had forgotten about Little Point Sable.

John and I were living on the West Coast when the power came in 1954. No poles were installed, it was all done underground. Hank was transferred to Big Point Sable where there was also a life-saving station.

The Coast Guard decided to demolish the Little Point Sable keepers' house and outbuildings and solicited bids for the job. I heard that the contractors removed only the windows and then put large cables around the house and pulled it down with bulldozers. They pushed the stone work and chunks of the concrete walkways around to the lake side of the tower to form extra rip-rap to keep waves from the tower base. The other house debris, including tons of those beautiful bricks were packed down with the bulldozer and then the mounds of sand around the area pushed over all the entire lot. It breaks my heart for two reasons. Good, used bricks, especially very old ones, cost $1.50 each (or more) in California, where I now live. The other tragedy is that the huge house would have made a great bed-and-breakfast inn or a youth hostel.

When Hank and Pinky wrote about the looming disaster I asked for some souvenir of the place if they could manage it. The next time they came to California they brought me a spectacular souvenir, a solid brass alcohol



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charging can, called a lucerne. Alcohol was used in the process of igniting the cotton mantle of the incandescent oil vapor lamp every night. Obviously when the light was changed to an automatic electric fixture there was no need for a keeper to carry alcohol up to the tower.

The pot is bell-shaped, with a comfortable handle and a long slender pouring spout with a narrow opening. There was a cap on the spout attached by a small chain. The filler cap also had a chain attaching it to the can. The object was constructed at the Lighthouse Service's General Depot on Staten Island in New York City.



Author Butcher's Lucerne.

There are two inscriptions engraved on the bottom:

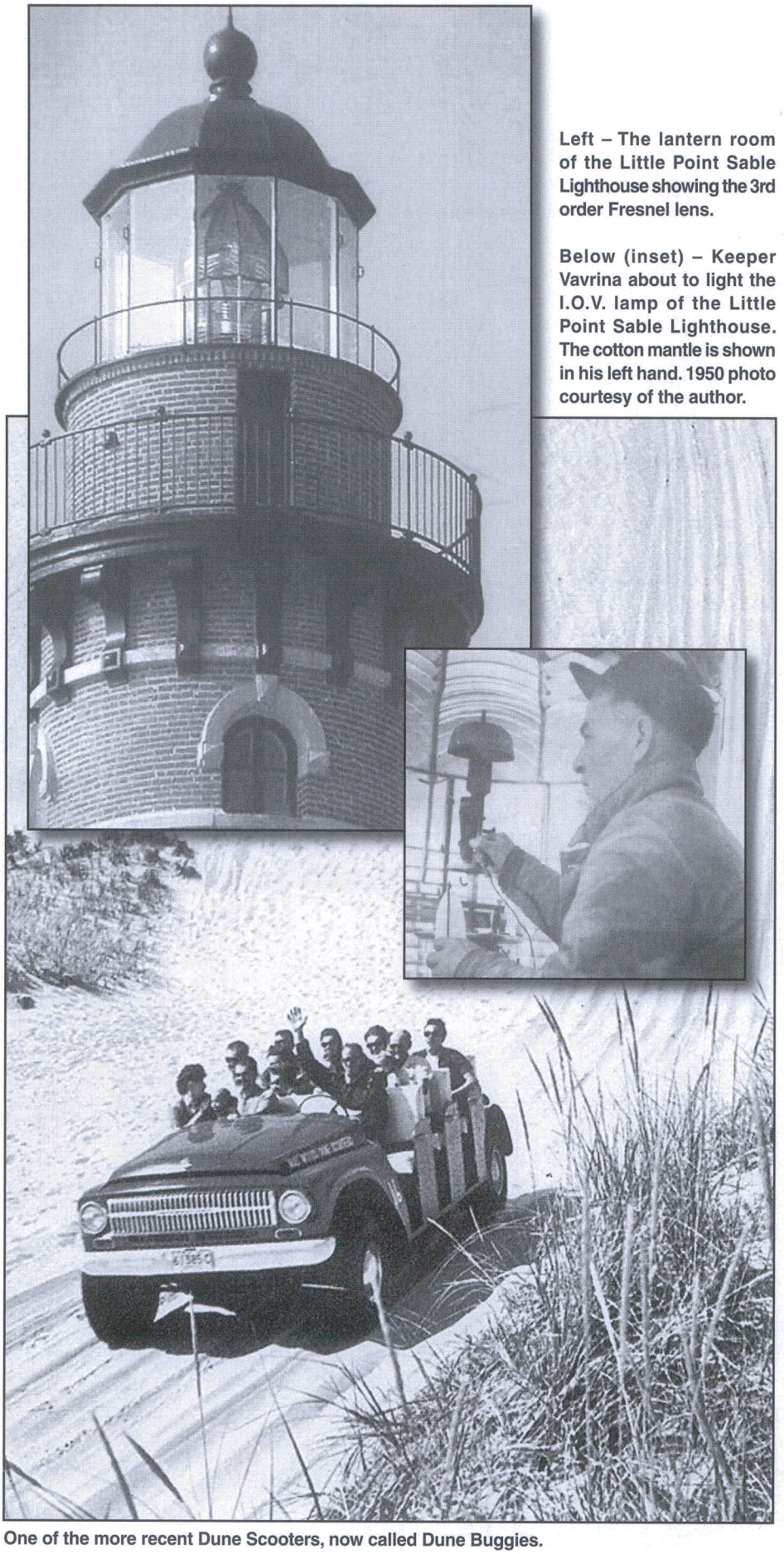
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In Model T days "Mac" Wood created what he called a "DuneScooter" and he eventually copyrighted that name.

The basic idea was to strip away much of the chassis to make it as light as possible, and then create as wide a "footprint" as possible. He did this by splitting wheel rims in half, then welding a wide strip of metal between the two pieces. He bought over-sized tires which he barely inflated and voila! He was able to scoot all over those dunes.

He started giving rides. Many years later when the dunes became Michigan State Park property, he negotiated a lease for using the south end of the dunes for his rides.



Left – The lantern room of the Little Point Sable Lighthouse showing the 3rd order Fresnel lens.

Below (inset) – Keeper Vavrina about to light the I.O.V. lamp of the Little Point Sable Lighthouse. The cotton mantle is shown in his left hand. 1950 photo courtesy of the author.

One of the more recent Dune Scooters, now called Dune Buggies.

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He kept tinkering with the cars and moved up to Model A's, and eventually used using V-8 engines from Fords and other manufacturers in a variety of body styles. It was a real thrill ride! Because of the low center of gravity he could drive sideways on the steep slope of a dune. Riders felt for sure the car was going to roll over down the side of the hill and kill them all, but it never happened.

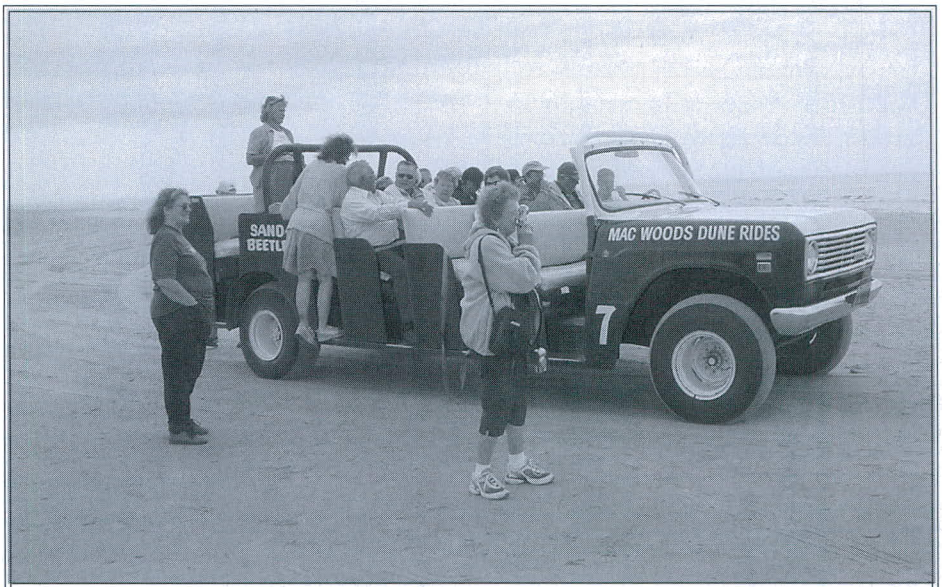
After WWII various dune-buggy types of vehicles started showing up. Most were not suited to the dunes at first, but now there are thousands of hot-rod drivers who converge on the dunes. It become so dangerous the state was forced to make the south end of the dunes available only to Mac's concession and the north section to all the newcomers. I've seen pictures of the roads leading to Silver Lake lined with vehicles waiting for the opening of the gate at the north dune-buggy section. A large section of the dunes is protected in its pristine state, and is not available to dune buggies. If someone were to camp out in the dunes as John and I used to – so we could get good sunrise pictures – they'd have to pick their spot carefully or risk being run over in their sleeping bags.

The winter of 1950-51 was an especially bad one, the kind that comes around every six or seven years. The snow was chest high on the level and obliterated all the fences. On snow shoes you could walk right over them. Where the snow drifted in back of our house, it was higher than the roof, and when we opened the back door, there was just a print of the door in the snow. Trying to time shoveling out the mailbox with the mailman's schedule, and factoring in the snow-plow trips, was really frustrating. John disliked the hard winters and we left Michigan in January 1951 and headed for Seattle where my sister lived. We eventually moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in California. John and I divorced in 1958, and the following year I married Ken Butcher.

In 1954, the Little Point Sable Lighthouse was automated and Hank was transferred to Big Point Sable Lighthouse at Ludington, Michigan. Hank retired from the lighthouse at Big Point Sable and they moved to Pinky's farm and started raising vegetables for sale. In winter they'd escape the cold and snow by coming to California to see us. Pinky's son Jerry also moved to California where he was an engineer for the California Highway system in Marysville. Pinky's other son, Jim, was a school teacher and then principal in Carson City, Nevada, close to the California border. After Hank developed heart problems and died in 1976, Pinky continued to come see us by herself.

Now, I'm sounding like what I am, an old lady of 80 who remembers "back in the good old days" with great nostalgia. Those years I spent in "lighthouse territory" are truly precious memories.

All of us are still interested in lighthouses. Pinky's son Jim is part owner of a restaurant on a lake – the Lighthouse Restaurant and Marina – which features a working lighthouse. The other son, Jerry, also has a working lighthouse he built at his place at the lake, and it's a replica of the Big Point Sable Lighthouse where his step-father ended his lighthouse career. I have my own working lighthouse our kids gave me for the yard, but I like it in my hall. We're all members of the U. S. Lighthouse Society — Ken and I are charter members.



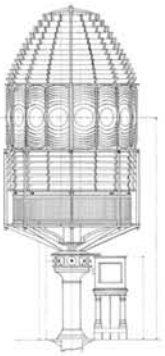
In 2003, forty-two Society members participated in an eight-day tour of the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. Beginning in Chicago, the group visited twenty lighthouses and explored the scenery around South Haven, Holland, Manistee, Traverse City and Beaver Island.

A highlight of the tour was visiting the Little Point Sable Lighthouse. When we arrived, the bus encountered a little problem jockeying around our parking space. A young state park ranger said there was room for the motor coach to park in the parking lot . . . what he didn't tell us was that it would be impossible for the bus to negotiate the sharp turn at the parking lot's exit. But our visit there was enhanced by an extremely low-flying military plane. If we knew it was coming it would have provided a spectacular photograph, as it seemed to fly directly over the lighthouse. However, we heard a roar, looked up very surprised and before anyone could point a camera, the jet was gone. The lighthouse tower looks lonely without its keeper's house, but it is a beautiful tower. The gallery around the lantern room is supported by some ornate cast-iron brackets and their black paint is a nice juxtaposition to the reddish-brown brick.

After we left the lighthouse, we boarded Mac Wood's Dune Rides. Over, around and up and down the dunes we went amidst beautiful views of Lake Michigan and Silver Lake. Entire forests had been covered by encroaching sand, and we were looking at leafy treetops sticking out of the sand. It was as fun as Margaret remembered.

For information on Little Sable Lighthouse, we recommend visiting Terry Pepper's excellent website: www.terrypepper.com, choose lighthouses of Lake Michigan from the menu, and then select Little Point Sable. For information on Michigan's Silver Lake State Park, write them at 9679 W. State Park Road, Mears MI 49436, or call them at (231) 873-3083. Information on Mac Wood's Dune Rides can be found on the web at: www.macwoodsdunerides.com. Write or call them at 629 N. 18th Ave., Mears, MI 49436, phone (231) 873-2817.

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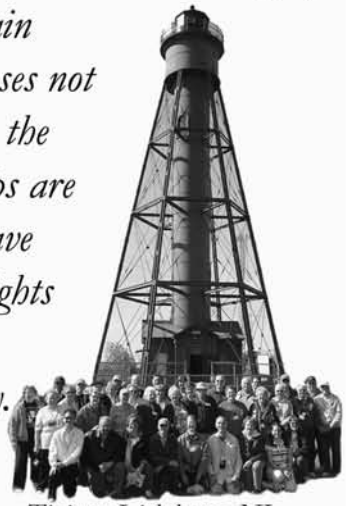
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