

Saving the lights of Lake Superior



Michigan's Crisp Point "lighthouse keepers"

Once beacons of safety, now stately relics, America's lighthouses are in danger of disappearing. Along the shores of the Great Lakes, some Midwesterners are coming to the rescue.

IF NELLIE AND DON ROSS hadn't gotten lost in the woods, they never would have found their life's mission. In 1987, the Cleveland-area couple had been camping on Michigan's Upper Peninsula (UP), exploring the region's many waterfalls. The deeper they drove into the state forest along Lake Superior's shore, the less passable the rutted roads became. The Rosses headed for the clearing.

There, they saw it: the Crisp Point Lighthouse—ravaged, abandoned, badly in need of a fresh coat of paint, yet ruggedly majestic through all the neglect. Standing sentinel above the waves that battered the shore, the tower bore witness to the savage splendor of Superior's "shipwreck coast" (which had claimed the fabled *Edmund Fitzgerald* ore freighter in 1975).

AN INSTANT ATTRACTION

"We just fell in love with Crisp Point," Nellie points out. "It grabbed us and wouldn't let go. This is such a beautiful, isolated spot, with amazing sunsets and crystal-clear water. And the lighthouse looked so needy."

Though more than 2,100 lighthouses were built in the U.S., less than 600 remain. Disrepair and vandalism threaten many of them. With 3,000 miles of Great Lakes shore, Michigan claims 116 lighthouses, more than any other state.

So the Rosses started asking some questions: Who takes care of these empty lighthouses?

What will become of them? How can we help to preserve them for all of the generations to come?

They found themselves joining with the thousands of other preservationists who are fighting to keep the lighthouses of America's maritime legacy from crumbling into the waves. The volunteers call themselves "lighthouse keepers," like the people who once lived in these isolated structures. They contribute everything from money through their annual dues to hands-on care.

But few go so far as the Rosses, who sold their Ohio home and moved to Paradise, Michigan, to be close to their beloved beacon. "We wanted to live right behind the lighthouse," says Don, a retired electrician. "But there's no electricity for 18 miles, and they don't plow the roads in winter."

NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED

On advice from the Coast Guard, the Rosses, who had no previous involvement with lighthouses or preservation, launched the Crisp Point Light Historical Society in 1992. That nonprofit group now includes more than 400 members—from as far away as Japan—and has raised about \$50,000 toward preserving the structure. It took the society 7 years to untangle government red tape, before persuading the county to lease the lighthouse to the group.

"Everything takes time," Nellie says, "but this lighthouse didn't have a lot of time."

Despite Don and Nellie's best efforts, the lighthouse remains in treacherous waters.

Lighthouse Digest, a monthly magazine devoted to such preservationist efforts, has called Crisp Point "the most endangered lighthouse in America." Erosion from winter storm waves, which demolished the structure's entrance building 5 years ago, remains the biggest threat.

DARKEST BEFORE THE DAWN

The society financed truckloads of sandbags and rock to help protect the base. Those reinforcements ensured the lighthouse's survival through another winter, but erosion remains a problem. Don estimates that additional safeguards could cost \$100,000.

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MIDWESTERNERS

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has looked bleakest, help always has arrived. To buy the last loads of rock and sand, a philanthropist from Maine sent \$16,000—out of the blue. Two Native American communities on the UP contributed almost that much from their casino profits. The American Lighthouse Foundation in Maine donated \$5,000. Contractor John Lechner, who lives near Sault Ste. Marie, did the work, while agreeing to wait for his payment until the society could afford his \$42,000 bill.

The beauty of Crisp Point continues to attract new recruits to the cause. "Money or the right people seem to show up at the most opportune times," Don says. Just as the Rosses did, when they got lost in the woods and found the lighthouse that changed their lives.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

The Crisp Point Light Historical Society will hold its fifth annual Lighthouse Conference on July 21. To join or attend, contact: Crisp Point Light Historical Soc., Box 229, Paradise, MI 49768 (906/492-3206).

Other sources of information about lighthouse preservation include: The Great Lakes Lighthouse Keepers Assoc., c/o Henry Ford Estate, 4901 Evergreen, Dearborn, MI 48128 (313/436-9150). *Lighthouse Digest*, Box 1690, Wells, ME 04090, publishes a "Doomsday List" of endangered lighthouses in every issue (800/758-1444). ■

By Don McLeese.