

# US Life-Saving Service

Sleeping Bear Dunes  
National Lakeshore  
Michigan



A Publication of  
**Friends of Sleeping Bear Dunes**

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P.O. Box 545, Empire, MI 49630  
[www.friendsofsleepingbear.org](http://www.friendsofsleepingbear.org)  
[info@friendsofsleepingbear.org](mailto:info@friendsofsleepingbear.org)

This booklet was compiled by Kerry Kelly with research assistance from Lois Veenstra, *Friends of Sleeping Bear Dunes* and edited by Autumn Kelly.

Information about the Life-Saving Service and its practices came primarily from the following two sources:

**The U.S. Life-Saving Service: Heroes, Rescues, and Architecture of the Early Coast Guard**, by Ralph Shanks, Wick York, and Lisa Woo Shanks, Costano Books, CA 1996.

**Wreck Ashore: U.S. Life-Saving Service Legendary Heroes of the Great Lakes**, by Frederick Stonehouse, Lake Superior Port Cities Inc., Duluth, MN, 1994.

Information about the Sleeping Bear Point Life-Saving station came from the following two U.S. Government reports:

**Sleeping Bear Dunes Glen Haven Coast Guard Station Historic Structure Report**, by Cornelia Wyma, John Albright, April, 1980.

**Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore Sleeping Bear Point Life-Saving Station Historic Furnishings Report**, by Katherine B. Menz, July 20, 1983

Information about the North Manitou Island USLSS Station came primarily from **Tending a Comfortable Wilderness: A History of Agricultural Landscapes on North Manitou Island**, by Eric MacDonald and Arnold R. Alanen, 2000.

Information about the South Manitou Island USLSS Station came primarily from **Coming Through with Rye: An Historic Agricultural Landscape Study of South Manitou Island**, Brenda Wheeler Williams, Arnold R. Alanen, William H. Tishler, 1996.

Information about the rescues came from **Wrecks, Strandings, and the Life-Saving Service/Coast Guard in the Manitou Passage Area** by Neal R. Bullington, Chief of Interpretation, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, March 1993.

Photos provided by the National Park Service, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore archives.

*It was 11 AM on October 13, 1894, and the crew of the United States Life-Saving Service (USLSS) on North Manitou Island was going through its normal routine when the Surfman on watch spotted a schooner lying broadside to the sea and nearly on her beam ends some 10 miles from the station. The 7-man crew was immediately mustered to the rescue. They launched their surfboat into the churning waves and blustery wind to row out to the ship to offer assistance. When they reached the **E.R Blake** after strenuous rowing and continuous bailing, they found her lying under the lee of the island with both anchors down, part of her deck load gone, and all sails blown away. But when they offered assistance, the Captain refused, so they rowed back toward the south end of the island, nearly reaching the shore after four hours of hard and dangerous work.*

*Before they were able to land on the shore, they sighted another schooner drifting helplessly before the gale, with sails blown from bolt ropes and swept by the seas so that her crew could barely anchor her. The USLSS crew changed directions and rowed out to the **Alva Bradley**. They got a line to her and in the midst of a raging sea, skillfully took off the benumbed crew of six men and one woman. They landed the surfboat safely on the south end of the island at 8 PM after struggling for 9 hours in the wild, frigid gale. Because of their protracted exertion, they remained at the south end of the island until morning and finally reached the station at noon on the 14<sup>th</sup>.*

The men of the USLSS were dedicated to saving the lives of crew and passengers of ships in distress. They routinely put their lives in harm's way and lived by their motto: "You have to go out, but you don't have to come back." This book provides a brief description of the history, procedures, and equipment of the USLSS and their role in the history of the Sleeping Bear Dunes area.

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore is unique in having three historic USLSS stations within its boundaries. The Sleeping Bear Point USLSS station near Glen Haven has been restored and developed as a Maritime Museum describing the USLSS, its equipment and facilities, and the lives of Surfmen who served in this service. The stations on North and South Manitou Islands have been restored and are used as ranger stations and for other purposes by the National Park Service.



Sleeping Bear Pt. USLSS Station - Maritime Museum

## Historical Background

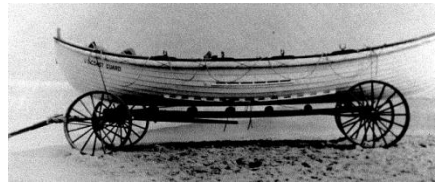
Life-saving organizations to rescue passengers and crew from ships in distress originated in China in the early 1700s. China's Chinkiang Association for the Saving of Life was established in 1708 and is the first known organization for this purpose. These associations proliferated throughout China as shipments of goods and passengers grew rapidly. They began as volunteer organizations, but soon were managed and organized by the government and funded by taxes.

The concept of life-saving organizations was picked up by the Dutch in 1767 and by the English in 1774. In 1824 England created the Royal National Lifeboat Institution with the Archbishop of Canterbury as the presiding chairman and King George IV, Prince Leopold, and various dukes as patrons.

Life-saving came to the United States in 1784 with Dr. Mayes, a British physician who immigrated to Boston and developed a society for restoring the apparently drowned back to life. The Massachusetts Humane Society was formed and laid the foundation for maritime rescue work when it built small huts to provide shelter for victims of shipwreck along the Atlantic coast. Sailors or passengers who made it to shore alive after a shipwreck could find temporary shelter in these little huts which were stocked with food, candles, a tinderbox for making a fire, kindling, and fuel. The huts were usually unattended and often were subject to theft or vandalism. Also, the huts had no boats to aid those trying to reach shore.

By 1807 the Society commissioned William Raymond of Nantucket to build the first American lifeboat. It was a 30-foot whaleboat rowed by 10 men. Additional boats and boathouses were placed along the Atlantic coast and staffed by volunteers through 1871.

The U.S. Congress passed a law in 1848 providing \$10,000 for "surfboats, rockets, line-throwing mortars, and other necessary apparatus for the better preservation of life and property from shipwrecks on the coast of New Jersey."



Typical surfboat used by the USLSS

This equipment was to be placed under the supervision of the Revenue Marine Corps (later the Revenue Cutter Service, and still later the US Coast Guard). Eight stations were established along the New Jersey shore. A great storm hit the New Jersey coast in January, 1850. Many ships were wrecked, and the life-saving stations proved valuable in saving over 200 people including many women and children.

Between 1850 and 1871 more stations were opened along the Atlantic coast. The stations were small, and staffed by volunteers. Many of the stations fell into disrepair, and boats and equipment were often taken for private use, so when an emergency arose, the boats or other equipment were missing and the staff was often not available.

The winter of 1870-1871 saw several well-publicized shipwrecks along the Atlantic coast and in the Great Lakes forcing Congress to create a real life-saving organization. The law appropriated \$200,000 for the Secretary of the Treasury to employ crews of paid Surfmen and to build stations wherever needed. In 1871 the Marine Revenue Bureau was established. It would consist of the Revenue Cutter Service and the USLSS. The USLSS was made a separate department in 1878.



### **USLSS Organization**

The USLSS was organized into districts. By 1914 the districts were as listed below:

1. Maine and New Hampshire, 15 stations
2. Massachusetts, 32 stations
3. Rhode Island & Fishers Island, NY, 10 stations
4. Long Island, NY, 30 stations
5. New Jersey, 41 stations
6. Delaware, Maryland and Virginia north of Chesapeake Bay, 19 stations
7. North Carolina and Virginia south of Chesapeake Bay, 34 stations
8. South Carolina and Eastern Florida, 1 station and 8 houses of refuge
9. Gulf Coast, 8 stations
10. Lakes Erie & Ontario and Louisville, KY, 12 stations
11. Lakes Huron and Superior, 19 stations
12. Lake Michigan, 31 stations
13. Pacific Coast, 19 stations

Sumner Increase Kimball was chosen to head the new Bureau. He was intelligent, honest, efficient, and well organized. He was also an effective communicator. His message to Congress and the public was that saving lives and property at sea was right and good and that to do so required a first-class, paid professional organization of well-managed life-savers. Kimball dedicated the rest of his career to the U. S. Life-Saving Service. In 1878 he would become the first and only General Superintendent of the USLSS. He was a dedicated public servant, eventually retiring at age 81 after 44 years of service.



Sumner Kimball

As **General Superintendent**, Sumner Kimball was located in Washington, DC. His office was responsible for organizing the service and all administrative matters, including an annual report to Congress. This report provided rich detail of the activities of the Service and many rescues conducted during the year. In 1889, Sumner Kimball was paid \$4,000/yr. He was aided by an Assistant General Superintendent paid \$2,500/yr.

An **Inspector**, equivalent to an officer grade of captain, was provided by the Revenue Cutter Service. He was stationed in New York City so that he could inspect the lifeboats, which were manufactured there. He was also responsible for inspecting the stations and crews. Each station was inspected at least quarterly (monthly during the active season), usually by an assistant Inspector. The inspections would include an inventory of the facility and equipment and an evaluation of their condition. It would also include a proficiency evaluation of the crew in all aspects of life-saving procedures.

A **District Superintendent** was assigned to each district. Great Lakes Superintendents were given a salary of \$1,000/yr. – significantly less than a District Superintendent in New Jersey, who was paid \$1,500/yr.



Sleeping Bear Point USLSS Keeper & Crew

the business of the station. They also had to be in good physical condition. Keepers over 55 years old were required to have an annual medical exam to ensure that they were capable of performing their duties. They usually got the job of Keeper after serving for several years as a Surfman to demonstrate their competence and leadership abilities. The Keeper was also the captain of the lifeboat and controlled the steering oar on all drills and rescue attempts.

Keepers were required to live at the station and to be responsible for maintenance of the facilities and equipment. No liquor was to be kept or sold at the station, and no one under the influence of alcohol was allowed at the station.

Keepers were under-paid. They actually receive less per month during the active season than the men who served under them. They also received considerably less than lighthouse Keepers, who were paid an average \$600 per year (Keepers of important lights received \$800-\$1,000/yr). The duties of the USLSS Keeper were much more dangerous than those of the lighthouse Keeper, who sat warm

and safe in his light, while the USLSS Keeper risked his life in a small lifeboat fighting angry seas to rescue desperate passengers and crew of distressed ships.

**Surfmen** made up the crew of the USLSS station. The number of Surfmen at each station was based on the number of oars required to pull the largest boat at the station. Because most of the Great Lakes stations had self-righting and self-bailing boats requiring 8 oars, the crew was usually 7 Surfmen and one Keeper. Surfmen were selected from the local area by the Keeper. They were generally experienced fishermen and boaters.

The qualifications for Surfmen were listed in a 1912 USLSS publication: “a Surfman must be sound in body, being subjected to a rigid physical examination by a surgeon of the Marine Hospital Service. Any Surfman over 55 years of age could not be reenlisted without a certificate from a medical officer specifically stating that he was qualified for his duties.”



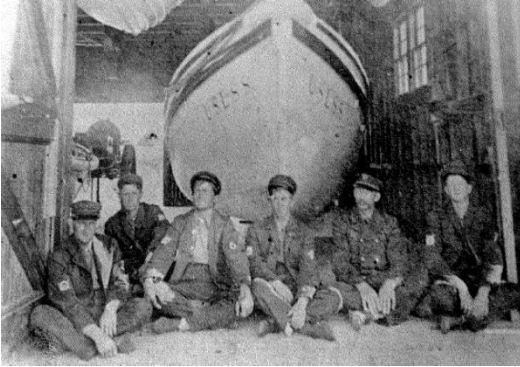
North Manitou Island Keeper & Crew

A Surfman could be dismissed immediately for being absent without a satisfactory explanation. Drunkenness, profanity, or any scandalous conduct showing lack of good morals were also grounds for immediate dismissal.

Normally Keepers would rehire the same crew from season to season. Surfmen transferred between stations and districts frequently, but approval was required all the way up to General Superintendent Kimball for such transfers. Surfmen were paid a wage of \$40/month from 1871 to 1882, when the rate went up to \$50/month. This did not include the cost of food and clothing. The Surfmen were required to pay the Keeper for their food and to pay for uniforms. Surfmen were required to live at the station while on duty.

Retention of Surfmen and Keepers was a continual problem because of the low pay. The USLSS pay scale was usually lower than these qualified men could make as sailors or even common laborers. For example, in 1880, USLSS Surfmen were paid \$1.33/day for the season (with \$0.40 deducted for food = \$0.93/day), while a sailor was paid \$2.00 per day for spring and summer and \$4.00/day during the fall. There was also no retirement benefit (pension) for USLSS employees. It wasn't until the USLSS merged with the Revenue-Cutter Service to form the Coast Guard in 1915 that retirement benefits were made available.

During the period of 1876 to 1901, the USLSS in the Great Lakes lost 40 crew members. The largest operational cause of death was capsizing boats and drowning. Life-saving was so dangerous that it was nearly impossible for a Surfman to buy life insurance. Disease killed more Surfmen than all shipwrecks combined. Most died after exposure during beach patrols or rescues.



South Manitou Island USLSS Keeper & Crew

Most Surfmen were seasonal employees, meaning that layoffs were common during the winter months when the shipping season was over. The Keeper would normally stay on duty during the winter to maintain the station and equipment. Family life was difficult in the USLSS. While the Keeper's family could live in the station, there was no provision for families of the

Surfmen. Single Surfmen lived in the station. Married Surfmen usually built or rented a small cottage near the station where their families lived. Surfmen were allowed time off during the daylight hours one day per week. The day off was rotated among the crew.

Many Surfmen had part time jobs as loggers in the winter or raised gardens or cattle to supplement their income. During good weather, work at the USLSS station was less stressful. In fact, it could be downright boring.

Uniforms for the Keeper and crew became available in 1889. This gave the service an air of professionalism. They were required to wear uniforms when on duty, and it is rare to find a photo of a USLSS Keeper and crew out of uniform. The Surfmen each had a number based on seniority and capability. Number 1 was the Keeper's assistant and Numbers 7 and 8 were the newest members of the crew. They wore their numbers on their sleeves.

The professionalism and training of the men of the USLSS is exemplified by this account of an off-duty rescue: *It was Christmas day of 1906 and Surfman Ward Bennett of Charlevoix USLSS and his brother Frank of Sleeping Bear Point USLSS were spending Christmas at Glen Lake, MI. The brothers were watching a group of children skating on the lake when they heard a scream and saw a boy struggling in the water and broken ice about 50 rods away. Without hesitating a moment Ward, calling to his brother to follow with a pole or rope, rushed to where the boy had gone down the third time, and throwing off his*



coat, dived in after the drowning boy. The water was some 12 feet deep, and after groping around for some time on the bottom, Surfman Bennett located the boy, caught him by the shoulders, and brought him to the surface. His brother meanwhile, having cut a rope from a shed nearby, was waiting for him, and with the assistance of bystanders, soon got the 2 out of the water. The 2 Life-Savers then applied the resuscitation techniques they had been taught, and in about ten minutes the lad (Harry Tobin) had sufficiently recovered to be removed to a near-by house and a little later to his home.

### Duties of the USLSS Crew

Lookout duty (also called watch duty) was maintained 24 hours/day every day. Day watch was kept from sunrise to sunset, usually by a Surfman stationed in the lookout tower. The lookout towers at the USLSS stations in Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore were generally detached from the USLSS dwelling and boathouse, but the North Manitou Island boathouse did have a lookout tower built on top of it as well as a detached tower. The Surfman on lookout literally “stood” watch. The USLSS believed that a man standing watch was more alert than one sitting. Falling asleep while on watch duty was grounds for immediate dismissal. Here is an excerpt from the South Manitou Island USLSS log book on November 14, 1906. *“I visited the lookout and found the watchman Surfman Harold H. Barnard asleep, lying on the floor, and for thirteen minutes I watched him, then woke him up and suspended him for neglect of watch duty. Pending the result, I have employed Benth Johnson to go on duty at midnight as temporary Surfman.”*

If the lookout could not see the patrol limits from the tower, he would walk the beaches at least three times to a point where he could see the patrol limits. As soon as there were telephones, the three watch towers in the Manitou Passage were connected by phone cables

strung across the bottom of Lake Michigan. The cable is still visible on South Manitou Island south of the Ranger Station near the site of the lookout tower.

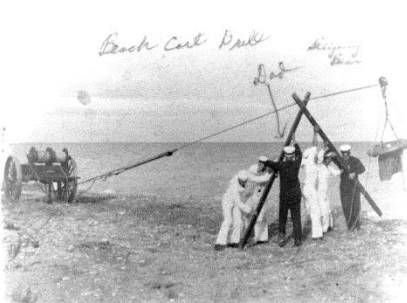


Sleeping Bear Point USLSS Lookout Tower ca. 1910

Beach patrols were always walked at night and during foggy or stormy weather when visibility was not good from the tower. Patrols were generally 2 miles in each direction from the station. If two stations were close enough together, the patrols from adjacent stations would meet half way. The three stations within Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore are isolated from each other, so the patrol would carry a patrol clock. When he got to the end of his patrol, a key

was located on a post that he would insert into the clock to make a mark on a paper dial indicating the time and proving that he had gone the whole distance.

Night patrols were divided into 4 watches: sunset to 8:00 PM, 8:00 PM to midnight, midnight to 4:00 AM, and 4:00 AM to sunrise. When time for their patrol arrived, the two Surfmen would set out from the station in opposite directions. Imagine walking 2 miles down the lonely beach on a cold, damp November night in the dark with the wind blowing through your coat as you watch for ships in distress. It was definitely a challenging job, but it was rewarding when lives were saved through their efforts.



Beach Apparatus Drill with Breeches Buoy

The weekly routine was standardized throughout the USLSS. Sunday was a day of rest and sometimes worship. But even on Sundays, the daily watch and beach patrols were conducted. On Monday and Thursday the crew practiced with the beach cart and rigging the breeches buoy. Occasionally drills with the lifecar would be done using a boat anchored off shore to simulate a sinking ship.

A special drill area was set up at each station so the crew could practice with the beach apparatus. A spar known as the “wreck pole” was erected to simulate a mast of a stranded ship. The crew would practice setting the sand anchor, setting up the breeches buoy, and making a rescue. Everything would be timed, and crews were always looking to improve on their best record. The more routine their actions became, the faster they would be able to act in a real rescue situation, which would likely be in stormy weather.

Capsize drills were performed at the discretion of the Keeper. The crew would purposely capsize and then right the surfboat to be prepared for an accidental capsize during a rescue operation.

Capsize drills were the most dangerous drills,

so they were usually done during calm, warm weather because they took such a toll on crew and equipment.



S.M.I. L.S.S. Crew on capsizing drill ca. 1910

Wednesdays were usually reserved for signal practice with two types of flag codes. The international code for signals was used with flags arranged to represent letters of the alphabet used to send a message to a passing ship. Wig-wag signal flags were practiced with two 3-foot square flags: one red and one white. The red flag represented a dash and the white flag a dot in Morse code, so that a message could be sent by raising the flags in sequence. To practice signaling, two Surfmen would walk some distance down the beach with the red and white flags. A third Surfman observed them through a telescope and dictated the message to a fourth Surfman who wrote it down.



Sleeping Bear Point Crew practicing techniques to restore the apparently drowned back to life.

Thursdays the crew repeated the beach apparatus drill, but this time they also practiced firing the Lyle Gun to get the rescue lines out to the sinking ships. This is described in more detail later. Fridays were used to practice restoring the apparently drowned back to life: techniques for restoring breathing and treating hypothermia along with basic first aid. Saturdays were spent cleaning the station and equipment. Maintenance and repair work was spread throughout the week.



Lyle gun firing demonstration

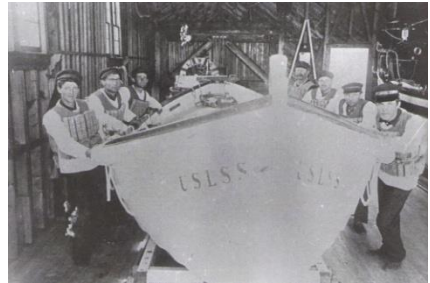
The public often came to watch the USLSS crews practice with the beach apparatus and the capsizes drills. They were also invited to festivals and fairs to demonstrate their skills. Firing the Lyle gun was a special attraction. To carry on the same tradition, the National Park Service presents a Life-Saving Drill each day during the summer and once a week the firing of the Lyle gun is demonstrated.

## USLSS Equipment

### Surfboats and Lifeboats

The names “surfboat” and “lifeboat” are often used interchangeably to refer to early rescue boats, but they actually refer to two different types of boats. A surfboat was shorter (23 – 27 feet long) and relatively light (700 – 1100 pounds) with a shallower draft (depth of the boat in the water) than lifeboats. They were more easily maneuvered in the surf because they bobbed around on the waves and were easier to turn. Because they were lighter, they were also easier to transport over land – usually on a boat carriage hauled by men or, in some cases, a horse. The smaller draft allowed them to be launched in shallow water. Surfboats were designed to be hand launched by the Surfmen from the beach. Later surfboat designs were self-bailing, but they were never self-righting. The Beebe-McLellan surfboat was self-bailing, and later designs were equipped with a water ballast system and centerboard to speed righting after capsizing.

Lifeboats were longer (over 30 feet) and heavier (2,000-11,000 pounds). The lifeboats designed after 1876 were self-bailing, self-righting, and in some cases self-ballasting. Because of their weight, these boats were usually mounted on carriages on rails that made it easier to launch the boat from the boathouse. The deeper draft taken by these boats required them to be launched in deeper water, but they could handle bigger waves and carry a larger number of people and more cargo from distressed ships.

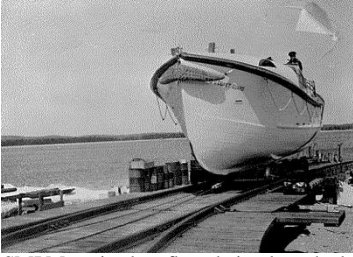


SMI crew ready to launch the surfboat

There were a variety of surfboat and lifeboat designs and materials used in construction. Both types of boats were outfitted with sails. One of the improvements in USLSS equipment was the introduction of motorized lifeboats. Initial experiments on motorized boats were conducted in Marquette, Michigan in 1899, demonstrating the superiority of motorized lifeboats to standard ones propelled by men at the oars.

The USLSS commissioned C.H. Peabody, President of the Board of Life-Saving Appliances and professor of naval architecture and marine engineering at Massachusetts Institute of Technology to fully evaluate the concept of a motorized lifeboat. A variety of designs and engine types were used as gasoline engine technology and boat design improved. In 1909, 44 of the 34-foot lifeboats and 6 of the 36-foot lifeboats were motorized, and by 1914, there were 147 motorized lifeboats and surfboats used in the USLSS. Lifeboats usually had

35-40 HP engines and surfboats had 12 HP engines. Motorized boats dramatically increased the range a USLSS crew could safely operate.



SMI Motorized surfboat being launched



SMI Motorized surfboat breaking ice

### Beach Apparatus and Carts

The term “beach apparatus” refers to the equipment carried on a 2-wheeled beach cart. The cart contained a Lyle gun and its associated equipment used to shoot a rescue rope to a stranded ship. It also contained a variety of ropes, sand anchors, picks and shovels. The cart, fully loaded weighed 1,700 pounds.



1893 NMI crew pulling beach cart

The cart was usually hauled by the crew (occasionally by a horse) over the rough, sandy beach to the location of the distressed ship. This was usually done in the worst weather. Whenever the situation didn't absolutely require the lifecar, it was left behind in the boathouse to save the additional 225 pounds. The breeches buoy (described later) was usually adequate for most Lake

Michigan rescues. If it was necessary to reduce the weight of the cart to make it possible to get the cart to the scene of the disaster, the heavy 4 ½-inch hawser (rope used to moor ships) was left behind as well.

### Coston Signals

Benjamin Franklin Coston engineered the hand-held, brightly burning colored flare used by the USLSS to signal ships that were on a dangerous course in the fog or bad weather. The flare burned about 2 minutes. Coston signals were carried by Surfmen on beach patrol. The following excerpt from the Sleeping Bear Point station log on October 3, 1905 demonstrates the typical use of the Coston signal. *“At 3:45 AM the station watch saw a steamer heading for the beach near the lookout. He immediately burned a Coston signal and there upon the steamer changed her course and stood out into the lake.”*

## Lyle Gun

When the USLSS was first formed, rescue crews used a variety of methods to get a line to a shipwreck. The simplest method was a heaving stick, which was a short stick with an oval weight at one end and a line tied to the other end. The Surfman would swing the stick and throw it to the ship. Obviously, the distance that a rope could be thrown with this method was limited.



Manby Mortar

In 1807, George William Manby, an English army officer, saw a ship grounded just 100 yards off shore. To his horror, 67 men, women, and children died because they could not get ashore. Manby dedicated himself to saving lives, and within a year he had developed a mortar to fire a line to a stranded ship to affect a rescue. Life-saving crews used these mortars into the mid-1800s. Another method of

throwing a line to a shipwreck was to use a rocket with a rope tied to it. The Cunningham line rockets were used for this purpose from 1849 to 1871.

One of the first actions of Superintendent Kimball was to find a better line-throwing device. Kimball realized he needed the best artillery expertise available, so he engaged the help of the Army Board of Ordnance, and in 1877 they assigned Lt. David A. Lyle to identify or develop a suitable line-throwing gun. Lyle developed 3 bronze, smooth-bore guns of different sizes, and the 2 ½-inch-bore gun became the USLSS standard.

Projectiles for the gun were made of cast iron with a wrought iron eye bolt screwed into the base as an attachment point for the shot line. The projectile for the 2 ½-inch gun was 15 ¾ inches long and weighed 19 pounds. It was placed into the 24 inch-long gun barrel so the eye bolt with the line attached was sticking out. After firing, the projectile rotated so that the eye bolt and line were trailing. The gun had a large recoil from firing. A standard charge of 1.5 ounces of gunpowder would knock the gun back 6 feet. A maximum rescue charge of 8 oz. would send the gun flying back even further. You wouldn't want to be standing behind it when it was fired!



Lyle gun and projectile



The type of gunpowder used was also critical. It was a variation of black powder of a uniform grain size, marketed as Hazard's Life-Saving Service Powder and DuPont Life-Saving Powder.



Faking rig for rope used with a Lyle gun

Shotlines were just as critical to the accurate operation of the gun. Hemp was too brittle, and braided linen was usable, but it was too heavy after it was fired once to be fired again before drying out. The best rope was waterproofed braided linen. It cut through the air best and provided improved range. New lines were too stiff and were difficult to properly fake (to wind in a pattern so the line could be shot without getting tangled),

so a new rope needed to be fired several times to make it more flexible for faking. One of the critical drills of the USLSS crew was faking the rope. If the first shot failed to go over the stranded ship, the rope would have to be hauled in, faked, and shot again. An efficient faking crew could minimize the time required to get ready for the second shot. On average, a crewman with two assistants could fake 600 yards of line in about 25 minutes.

### Breeches Buoy

The breeches buoy was a simple rescue device used to bring survivors to shore from a shipwreck one at a time. It consisted of a pair of canvas breeches (pants) attached to a cork life ring about 2.5 feet in diameter. The life ring was attached to a hook with four short ropes and the hook was rigged to a heavy rope that ran from the ship to shore where the rescue crew was stationed. Once a survivor was sitting in the breeches buoy, they would pull the survivor to shore with another long rope rigged to the hook. Although rescue with a breeches buoy seems simple, the procedure was a complicated one and was practiced by the crew every week. This drill was one of the favorites of local citizens and was often demonstrated during public events.



Pt. Betsie USLSS Keeper's daughter rides the breeches buoy during a drill.

## Lifecars

The lifecar was designed by Joseph Francis in 1838. It was made of galvanized iron and looked like a little submarine that was hauled between the shipwreck and shore by a rope attached to rings mounted on each end of the lifecar. It had small raised air holes on the top, which kept most of the water out but allowed some air to enter the car. A small hatch allowed two to four people to enter and lie in the bottom of the lifecar. Once the hatch was closed, it was pulled ashore.

Lifecars were used until about 1900, when the breeches buoy became more commonly used because of its lighter weight, ease of use, and lower cost. However the lifecar was still used in USLSS drills until 1940.



Lifecar on display in the boathouse at the Maritime Museum (formerly Sleeping Bear Point USLSS)

## **North Manitou Island USLSS Station**

The life-saving station on North Manitou Island was the first of the three stations to be built in the Manitou Passage. Nicholas Pickard, who owned the main dock on the island recognized the need for a life-saving crew in the Manitou Passage. He settled on North Manitou Island in the mid-1840s to operate a cord wood business to provide fuel for the steamships traveling from Buffalo to Chicago and Milwaukee. As the shipping traffic grew, the Manitou Passage became a busy channel because it provided a shorter route, and was a haven from a storm, but it was also a dangerous passage with hazardous shallow shoals that could easily ground a ship that drifted out of the channel in a storm or fog. In 1854, the Department of Treasury selected Nicholas Pickard to receive one of the first 19 surfboats authorized by Congress to be used for rescue assistance on the Great Lakes. Pickard built a boathouse that housed the new rescue boat and equipment, and it became a volunteer Life-Saving Station.

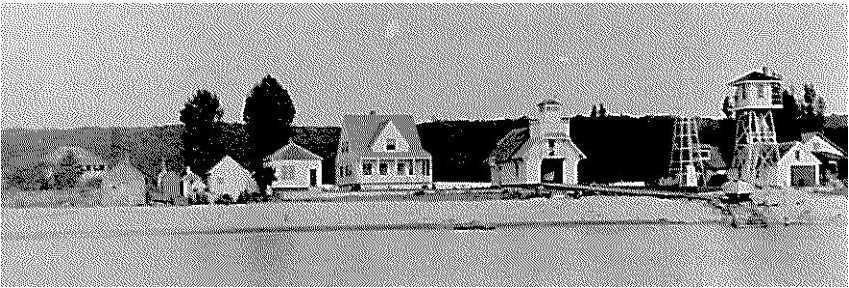
The 1854 Volunteer Rescue Station is the only structure of its kind remaining from the 1854 federal appropriation to place volunteer rescue stations along the Atlantic Seaboard and Great Lakes. Nicholas Pickard and his lumber crew built this structure according to written specifications provided by the Treasury Department. The 1 ½ story front-gabled building has a heavy timber frame and walls sheathed with cedar boards.

Twenty years later, in 1874, an official U.S. Life-Saving Service Station was established on a small tract that Nicholas Pickard leased to the government for \$1.00/year. A lifeboat station was constructed in 1877 and placed into service



that same year with an all-volunteer crew. Daniel Buss, a resident on the island, was appointed Keeper of the station. Beginning in 1878, the station was staffed by a paid 6-man crew. Members of the crew received room and board from the Keeper, or from one of the other residents of the North Manitou Island village.

The lifeboat building was designed by Francis Chandler, architect for the Treasury Department. The structure is a one-story boathouse with a clipped gable roof and a watch tower on the roof. A new watch tower was built next to the boathouse, and for some time both watch towers existed. The building was later renovated by the Manitou Island Association (MIA), which owned most of the island in the 1930s through 1950s. They removed the boat door and added a new door and windows and also removed the watch tower from the roof.



North Manitou Island USLSS station. Note the watch tower on boathouse and the separate watch tower closer to beach. The lifecar is on the beach by the tower and the rails from the boathouse.

The USLSS dwelling, built in 1877, served as residence for the Keeper, his family and the crew. It was designed by Albert Bibb, architect for the Treasury Department. The design is believed to be unique in the nation. The 2-story structure is roughly square with a steep gabled roof and large central cross gable. The US Coast Guard remodeled the dwelling in 1932, and the MIA further altered it during the 1940s and 1950s to serve as quarters for its employees and a lodge for island guests.

Some crew members built simple houses for their families near the station. These buildings were mobile and tended to change position over the years. Hans Halseth, one of the Surfmen, built a house just north of the Volunteer Rescue Station Boathouse in 1890. This simple wood-framed, side-gabled house exemplifies the modest dwellings of a USLSS crew member and his family.



Surfman on watch in NMI Boathouse watch tower

In 1915, the North Manitou Island USLSS station became part of the US Coast Guard. The station operated at full staffing until 1933, when the crew was reduced to a skeleton force. The US Coast Guard closed the station in 1938 and sold the buildings and associated property to the MIA, which adapted the buildings to support its various ventures and provide employee housing. After the MIA lodge was destroyed by fire in 1953, they remodeled the USLSS dwelling building to serve as a new lodge where paying guests received room and board. The Angell Foundation assumed control of the MIA in 1950 and abandoned the island in 1979 in anticipation of the National Park Service (NPS) acquisition. The NPS assumed ownership of the island in 1984 and has since been rehabilitating the buildings of the USLSS complex to serve administrative functions including a ranger station and employee housing.

### **South Manitou Island USLSS Station**

The original dock on South Manitou Island was near the center of the crescent-shaped bay on the east side of the island. The small village of Burton's Harbor was located near the dock. It included a general store, blacksmith shop, barn, house, and a few other buildings. This location was ideal for supplying the steamships with cord wood for fuel, but it was too far from the dangerous areas of the Manitou Passage shipping channel to build a USLSS station. In 1839, a lighthouse was built about 2 miles south of the village on the southeastern shore of the island facing the channel, but it wasn't until 1902 that the USLSS station was built near the lighthouse. The station was located on the south end of the bay to provide a protected harbor for easy launching of the rescue boats close to the channel. The USLSS station buildings were built with the same design and by the same builder as the Sleeping Bear Point USLSS, which was built at the same time. A watchtower was built south of the dwelling close to the shore with a good view of the Manitou Passage. Photographs in later years show the watchtower was moved near the lighthouse.



South Manitou Island USLSS

Some of the USLSS crew members built small houses near the station for their families, and as the logging operations on the island slowed and ships no longer stopped at the island, the old dock became expensive and difficult to maintain. A new dock at the USLSS station was built that provided an alternative to the village dock. Eventually, residents moved to the developing village near the USLSS station, which became the social hub of the island.

Many of the village residents were second and third generation islanders who moved to the village to work for the USLSS and Coast Guard. They were often related to island farmers. The first Keeper of the South Manitou Island USLSS station was Gus Lofberg, who arrived in February 1902. The first crew consisted of 3 islanders (George I. Haas, Martin Furst, and David Furst) and 3 members recruited from other stations (Jacob Jacobsen, Thorwald Jespersen, and John Hanneson).



SMI USLSS crew in summer white uniforms

Islanders frequently filled crew positions. George Haas and Martin Furst were permanent members of the crew and became Surfman #1 and #2 respectively. Other islanders who were on the crew at one time or another included Lawrence Haas, Andrew Burdick, Theodore Thompson, Benth Johnson, Harrison Haas, and Harold Tobin.

Today, the dwelling building serves as the ranger station and the main boathouse is the visitor orientation building. Other USLSS buildings are used for storage.

### **Sleeping Bear Point USLSS Station**

By 1877 the dangerous Manitou Passage was protected by only one lighthouse (South Manitou Island) and one USLSS station (North Manitou Island). The 1877 USLSS Annual Report noted that a station would be placed at Sleeping Bear Point, but that it had not been built. The situation remained the same through the 1880s and 1890s as shipping increased on Lake Michigan. From time to time a letter would come in to the USLSS office in Washington from D.H. Day of Glen Haven requesting that a station be built on the land already set aside for it, but no station was built.

In 1894, land was formally set aside and a proposed site was established. The station would be built at the point where the Manitou Passage to the north and the Lake Michigan shoreline to the south could be observed. By August 1899, no station had been built and D.H. Day again wrote to remind Kimball in a letter dated August 4, 1899 of the need for a station at Sleeping Bear Point. He reported that the steam barge *Toltec* and her consort *Mixtec* had recently

grounded at Sleeping Bear Point “exactly abreast of the proposed station” and needed help to get free from the sand.

Day continued: “I sincerely hope the station will be built this fall for this is a very bad point catching a number of boats each year, and it is a mystery to me that there has not been more loss of life, and I am daily in fear that it will not always turn out that way, hence my anxiety to see the station built.”

Finally, sealed bids were taken on April 23, 1901 for the construction of a life-saving station at Sleeping Bear Point and one at South Manitou Island. The contract was awarded to Robert Newcombe of Manistee, MI with a completion date of November 1, 1901. He was to build two identical stations using the design of the Marquette, MI USLSS. Each station was to have a dwelling, out-building, and boathouse with incline (ramp to the lake).

The dwelling was a 1 ½ story frame structure designed for a 7-man crew to live in and store their personal gear. It would also serve as headquarters. The crew’s quarters had no shelving and the only lighting was from a lantern on a small table by the door. Each man had an iron bed. There was no wash stand. Washing took place either in the kitchen or out in the laundry room. There were no curtains, but there were green shades.

Each bed had a closet with a number over the door to identify which crewman it belonged to. The closets contained spare sheets and blankets, a swimming suit, and each man’s regulation clothing. A summer uniform in 1925 included a white hat, white uniform, black tie, shirt, black shoes, and socks. A winter uniform included a pea coat, pull-over sweater,



Crew quarters upstairs in the dwelling

black serge jacket and trousers, heavy and light wool socks, black and white cotton socks, and a dress coat on a hanger with a white cloth dust cover over it.

Closets also contained a case of wooden matches in small wooden boxes, a jack knife, and towels. All items were folded neatly on the closet shelves except for the dress coat which hung on the door. Each man also had a book of regulations.

The out-building was a 1-story wood structure 17’ X 12’ and would house a 2-hole privy, oil and paint closet, and a large storage bin for coal and wood. The privy was similar to what was called an “earth closet”. A box was slid under the privy seats by lifting a hinged ventilator cut into the wall at ground level. The box, filled with soil was removed and the soil changed as needed.



Boathouse with tracks leading to the beach

The boathouse design was functional, but its appearance was softened by a gently flaring roof and cupola whose conical roof flares to match the main roof. The building would house two boats on carriages ready to roll out for launching or to be carried over the beach where needed. Large double doors would swing out toward the ramp leading to the beach.

William Walker, a Surfman from Grand Haven Life-Saving Station was assigned to be the first Keeper of the Sleeping Bear Point USLSS station on February 12, 1902. His crew of 6 Surfmen did not join him until August 20, 1902. The 7<sup>th</sup> Surfman joined on May 20, 1904. The initial crew included the following men:

<u>Title</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Married?</u>	<u>Previous Occupation</u>
Keeper	William Walker	Single	Surfman, Grand Haven
No. 1	William Robinson	Married	Surfman, Grand Haven
No. 2	John Dwiggans	Married	Surfman, Grand Haven
No. 3	George W. Mastain	Divorced	Surfman, Little Au Sable
No. 4	Jesse L. Bell	Single	Temporary Surfman, Muskegon
No. 5	Robert C. Smith	Single	Temporary Surfman, South Haven
No. 6	Herman W. Allers	Married	Sailor
No. 7	James F. Smith		Fisherman

By mid-1902, a second boathouse was ordered for both Sleeping Bear Point and South Manitou Island. The boathouse for Sleeping Bear Point was built close to the Glen Haven dock (about 1 mile east of the rest of the station).

Letters discussing the need of a 7<sup>th</sup> crewman confirmed the existence of a telephone at the site by 1904. A watch tower was built in front and to the west of the dwelling. Photos show the tower was built higher sometime after 1910.

By 1931, the routine effort of removing sand and leveling the ground to counteract the action of the wind and water combined with the frequent rough water on the point making it difficult to launch the power surfboat prompted the US Coast Guard to move the station near the location of the second boathouse. The buildings were moved along the shore to their present location in the late summer of 1931. The second boathouse was moved from its position nearby to the new site, but its doors now faced inland and the building became a garage. The dwelling was placed onto a cement foundation over a full basement.

The new location was about a mile east of Sleeping Bear Point and somewhat protected from rough waves by Sleeping Bear Bay. Moving the station cut off visibility to the south, so a wooden lookout was placed on top of the dune at Sleeping Bear Point.

The station operated through 1942. Sometime during World War II the station closed, probably early in the war when the Coast Guard took on the extra demands of wartime duty. By February 8, 1956, the land and buildings had been returned to the public domain and the Bureau of Land Management took responsibility for it. From 1956 until 1970 when Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore was formed, the station remained empty and unused.

## **Rescues**

Stranded or wrecked vessels were a common occurrence in the Manitou Passage before the 1920s. From 1835 to 1960, there were 379 instances documented, and many more probably went undocumented. Sometimes the same ship needed assistance several times during its use on Lake Michigan.

Besides life-saving, the USLSS crew was often involved in missions to save property (ships or their cargo). Most often this involved getting stranded ships afloat again or retrieving them from dangerous conditions and sometimes piloting them through dangerous seas that their captains were unprepared to navigate. They often were involved in pumping out ships that had taken on water and removing cargo by either throwing it into the lake or transferring it to another ship.

The following excerpts from the USLSS Annual Reports are just a few examples of activities of the USLSS crews in the Manitou Passage.

### **April 10, 1880 – North Manitou Island Station**

The schooner *Ida Keith*, of Chicago, Illinois, with a crew of nine men, and a cargo of corn, bound from Chicago to Buffalo, during a strong northeast gale and snowstorm, stranded four and a half miles south of the station. At 8 AM the Life-Saving crew went to the shore abreast of her to see what was needed, and afterwards took the surfboat and other apparatus to the place. The captain of the vessel sent word ashore on a shingle that he did not wish to land, but desired a boat to be sent out to him. Two shots were fired, the second being successful, and the boat was pulled part way out by the line, when the latter parted and the boat drifted back to the shore. It was by this time too dark to fire another shot; the Life-Saving crew, therefore, built a fire and patrolled the beach until morning. They then prepared to fire another shot, but a shingle message from the captain of the schooner requested them to await the going down of the sea.

At 10 AM the storm lulled, and soon after the Life-Saving crew rowed out and landed the ship's crew. The vessel was subsequently got off.

#### **August 15, 1888 – North Manitou Island Station**

Shortly after 4:00 PM a seaman of the steamer *Alaska* of Erie, Pennsylvania arrived at the North Manitou Island station reporting that vessel ashore about four miles to the southward and requesting the help of the life-saving crew. The steamer had just stranded, having got out of her course in the fog which prevailed at that time and which prevented her being seen from the station. The Keeper took charge of the work and directed the cargo, as far as practicable, be shifted aft. The surfmen ran an anchor out astern and made an unsuccessful attempt to heave her afloat. They then dropped the bowers and let the chain-cables run out of the lockers to lighten the bow, after which by again heaving on the kedge and working the engines they got her off. It was now near midnight, and after the station crew had aided in recovering and stowing the ground-tackle again, the steamer resumed her voyage. She was on her regular trip from Buffalo, New York, to Chicago, Illinois, with a valuable freight of general merchandise and a crew of twenty-four men.

#### **October 7, 1888 – North Manitou Island Station**

Shortly before 5:00 AM, the steamer *Enterprise* towing the schooner *Albatross* ran ashore about five miles south of North Manitou Island Station. The steamer's lights as she approached the island were seen by the Surfman on watch, who observing that the lights soon ceased to move, reported to the Keeper his belief that she had met with an accident. The surfboat was at once launched and the life-saving crew, leaving one man on watch at the station, pulled to the southern point of the island and alongside the stranded vessels. Both were laden with corn from Chicago, Illinois, and bound to Buffalo, New York. The steamer's crew numbered fifteen, and that of her consort eight. The station men boarded the schooner and made an effort to heave her off by means of the tow-line, but the attempt failed. They then ran out an anchor and made a second attempt, but this too was unsuccessful and they next went on board the steamer and helped her crew to throw overboard corn to lighten her. After about two hours of this work, during which the engines were kept going, she backed off the shoal. The station crew ran the hawser between the two vessels. At the first trial the steamer parted the line, but this soon being spliced a renewed effort brought the schooner afloat.

#### **November 21, 1892 – North Manitou Island Station**

The schooner *Annie Vought* was totally wrecked on South Manitou Island, ten miles from station in a severe gale. On receiving notice of disaster from revenue cutter Johnson, the Life-Saving crew put the beach apparatus on board that vessel and accompanied her to place of wreck. On their arrival, they found the latter breaking up in heavy seas and boarded her. They set up the beach apparatus on shore and rescued entire crew of seven men and one woman with breeches buoy.

### **September 18, 1893 – North Manitou Island Station**

The schooner *C.L. Fick* grounded on rocks 9 miles from the station. The crew abandoned her, believing that she would become a total loss. The life-saving crew boarded her, hove her afloat, and sailed her to station, where they brought her to anchor and pumped her out. On the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> the captain, who had been severely injured by falling into the hold when the craft stranded, arrived at the station with his crew. He was treated with remedies from the medicine chest and carried aboard and put into bed. They then got the vessel underway for the crew and put her on the course for Frankfort, Michigan.

### **August 31, 1902 – Sleeping Bear Point Station**

Even in the first month of the station's operation, the crew managed a rescue. The schooner *Rob Roy* was in difficulty as she was dragging anchor in Sleeping Bear Bay 4 miles NE from the station during a strong SW wind. The life-saving crew boarded her using a surfboat and found her leaking and in danger of shipwreck on the beach. A tug arrived and towed her to a safe anchorage. The Surfmen assisted in heaving up anchors and pumping water out of her holds.

### **June 27, 1903 – Sleeping Bear Point Station**

The schooner *L.B. Coates* becalmed and dangerously near shore at 7:40 AM and station crew manned surfboat and towed her to a safe offing.

### **November 17, 1903 – North Manitou Island Station**

The steamer *Charles Stewart Parnell* was seeking shelter under the island, at 12:15 PM, and became stranded on Vessel Point. The Life-Saving crew immediately launched the surfboat, proceeded to her, sounded the water in the vicinity, and then went on board of her and stood by. At midnight the crew began to throw overboard the cargo of grain but was soon stopped by the sea washing over the bulwarks into the hatches. At 8:30 AM the master and ten of the crew were landed and taken to the station for shelter, five remaining on board. On the 19<sup>th</sup> a Surfman was sent to Leland to telegraph for a wrecking outfit, which arrived the next morning. The life-savers assisted until 8:45 AM of the 21<sup>st</sup>, when the steamer was floated.

### **May 1, 1906 – Sleeping Bear Point Station**

At 3:10 AM the lookout at this station discovered a schooner on the beach about 2,000 feet west of Sleeping Bear Point Station 12<sup>th</sup> Dist. The surfboat was immediately launched and reached the schooner about 10 minutes later, ran anchor and unloaded 4 to 5 cords of edgings wood and backed foresail, and she swung out into deep water and went on her way.