



Our Guiding Light:

The Wisdom of the Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter

By Therese Langer Woelfel

Author's mother, Vivian, the daughter of Keeper Charles (Charlie) A. and Esther Linsmeier. All photographs from the Therese Langer Woelfel Collection.

As the daughter of a Great Lakes lighthouse keeper in Wisconsin in the early 1900s, my mother, Vivian, witnessed her father's dedication to keeping people safe. From his sailing days, my grandfather, Charles (Charlie) A. Linsmeier, understood the importance of the lights, the foghorn, and the radio beacons.

On November 6, 1913, Charlie was sailing on a tugboat on Lake Erie en route from Detroit, Michigan, to Buffalo, New York, when the deadliest freshwater storm in history hit the Great Lakes. Even the most seasoned captains were caught off guard as two major storm fronts collided and rapidly intensified, producing hurricane-force winds and blinding snow squalls. Freezing rain pelted the crews as thirty-five-foot waves came crashing overboard in quick succession. The accumulation of ice weighed down ships, and whiteout conditions turned a dangerous situation into a deadly battle as captains failed to outrun the storm.

Charlie's tug was towing a barge loaded with lumber, which was seldom visible in the surging waters of Lake Erie. For three days, the captain had a man stationed at all times with an axe ready to chop the barge free if he saw the

line go down, which would mean the barge was sinking and would quickly drag them to their death. After several treacherous days on Lake Erie, the crew caught sight of the United States lightship *Buffalo*, stationed to help guide vessels toward the harbor. The next day, as Charlie's ship approached the harbor, the *Buffalo* floated by, inverted. It had broken loose from its anchorage thirteen miles away in the rocky shallows of the Point Abino Light Tower in Canada and went down in the storm, taking the crew of six with it.

Dozens of ships were demolished, and hundreds of lives were lost. In the days and weeks following the storm, many deceased sailors floated ashore wearing life jackets bearing the names of ships that had sunk. There were four men, including Charlie, huddled together on board his ship when the storm was over. They were covered with ice, almost frozen, but alive.

Throughout my childhood, Vivian told stories about Charlie's adventures. She was proud of her father, and as the layers of his life unfolded, I began to understand why.

In 1920, he joined the U.S. Lighthouse Service and was assigned to the isolated North Manitou Island Light in the northern part of Lake Michigan. It was operational until 1935 to mark the Manitou Passage. My grandparents boarded a car ferry to reach the island. This trip, which normally took four hours, took seventeen days because the boat became stuck in the ice. When the captain finally approached the island, he realized he would have to drop them off farther out than he had hoped. Grandma Esther sat on one of the trunks while Charlie walked to shore to find a farmer

whose horse could haul their trunks ashore. One of Esther's first sights of the island was of cattle starved and frozen in the ice.

Charlie joined the routine of maintaining the station, standing watch, and tending to the light, which was powered by pressurized kerosene in the summer and acetylene in the winter. The job of a keeper was physically demanding. The Journal of Light Station at



Map of Great Lakes Lights where Keeper Linsmeier served.

North Manitou keeper entries indicate continual duties of polishing brass, washing windows, varnishing floors, cleaning tools, sounding fog signals, repairing the motor boat, making trips for mail and provisions, and hauling coal from supply ships.

The keepers established and maintained aids to navigation, including light stations, light vessels, fog signals, and buoys. Each year, the tower was scrubbed and painted because the fog signal burned coal, and the wind would blow the black smoke against the tower. When Charlie wasn't on watch or maintaining the light, he painted the lantern room, tower, and barn, and whitewashed the oil house. The keepers and their families raised chickens, planted corn and potatoes, picked blackberries, and hunted foxes.



Cana Island Lighthouse 1913, one of Keeper Linsmeier's duty stations.

Charlie's lighthouse career would take him to Cana Island in Door County, Wisconsin, then to Calumet Harbor and Indiana Harbor, both in Indiana, before he was assigned to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Four keepers rotated in forty-eight-hour shifts between three lighthouses. One keeper was stationed at North Point

Lighthouse on the bluff at Lake Park on Milwaukee's east side. The eight-sided, seventy-foot-tall, cast-iron lighthouse stood 154 feet above Lake Michigan. Its powerful beam was visible for thirty-seven miles. Another keeper was stationed at the pierhead light, where the Milwaukee River flows into Lake Michigan. And two were stationed at the newly constructed breakwater light, a fifty-three-foot-tall structure on the four-mile-long breakwater off the shore.

In her journal, Vivian wrote:

As a little girl, I witnessed Dad endlessly polishing brass and washing windows on the lantern deck. During a terrible ice storm, I saw my father hanging over one hundred feet in the air, outside the lantern room window. He had tied a rope around his waist and secured it to the outside rail of the lighthouse so he could scrape ice from the windows. There was a sacred trust between mariners and the lighthouse keepers who guided them to safety. Dad was worried about the boats weathering this storm, as he knew they needed his light to navigate.

On October 22, 1929, Charlie watched the SS *Milwaukee* through his binoculars from the lantern room. The 338-foot steel-hulled car ferry left *Milwaukee* in a heavy gale for the return trip to Grand Haven, Michigan. With fifty-two crew members and twenty-seven freight boxcars on board, the ship headed into one of the most violent storms seen on Lake Michigan. In the following days, wreckage of the ship and bodies wearing "*Milwaukee*" life preservers were found. Sadly, there were no survivors. This voyage ended disastrously, but many ships, large and small, had safe journeys because of the dedicated people in the Lighthouse Service.

Years later, Charlie was transferred to the Harbor Light Station in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. The station



Twin River aka Rawley Point Light Station, one of Keeper Linsmeier's duty stations.

had two lights, one on each breakwater, and a fog signal. Shortly after, Esther was having difficulty breathing due to heart disease and an inflamed thyroid. Late at night, she went for a walk on the pier. Tragically, a boat mast swung in the wind, knocking her into the river. Charlie later found her floating in the water near the dock by the keeper's house. She had drowned. Vivian and her younger brother Chuck woke up to the sound of emergency sirens.

In her journal, Vivian wrote:

While it wouldn't have been uncommon during this time for a father to send his children to live with relatives, my father chose to keep our family together. I admired him for this and thought he was the kindest person I had ever known. Dad spent many evenings teaching us about stars and constellations. As a sailor, he understood the importance of the North Star to guide the way. As our father, he knew the heavens would temporarily put our sadness on hold as our minds and souls filled with wonder. Each night, the lighthouse keepers and their families gathered together in their quarters. The men would keep us spellbound with stories of their sailing and lighthouse days.



Twin River aka Rawley Point Light Station, one of Keeper Linsmeier's duty stations.

In 1941, Charlie was assigned to Twin River Point Light Station, commonly known as Rawley Point Lighthouse, just north of Two Rivers, Wisconsin. It was a shore station, relatively isolated, on a point reaching seven miles into Lake Michigan. At least twenty-six ships were either stranded or capsized off the point before the light station was established. Rawley Point was beautiful and isolated, and, according to Charlie, "It was God's Acres."

In her journal, Vivian wrote:

Keeping the lantern room clean and painting the tower were of prime importance. The men first built a stanchion, a platform of boards which they raised and lowered with ropes. When my dad became Officer in Charge, and even later in his early sixties, he reserved for himself the most dangerous job of painting the lantern room roof.

Even in good weather, Dad's thoughts were with those who sailed. Some of his shipmates, after many years, had become captains, mates, or chief engineers, and he knew which boat each of them presently sailed. Often, as a car ferry or freighter passed the

point, he would give them a “highball” as he raised and lowered the flag in salute. Then, far out in the lake, he would see a puff of steam and then the sound of their horn in answer.

Once every three hours, the man on watch went down to the fog signal and checked up on all the light station radio beacons on Lake Michigan. Ours was the only radio beacon monitoring station working on Lake Michigan. Each station would broadcast its signal at exactly the correct time. A boat on the lake could plot its course by intercepting these signals. This was a very important means of navigation for that time. To make sure that our clocks were correct, there was a radio receiver at Twin River Point that received time signals directly from the Bureau of Standards in Washington, DC. If any station’s signal was broadcasting at an incorrect time or was not operating, the man on watch would telephone the station and alert them of the problem.



Calumet Harbor Lighthouse, one of Keeper Linsmeier’s duty stations.

A few months after moving to Twin River Point Light Station, Charlie remarried. After living together as a family for one year, his wife made it clear that she was unhappy. Although Vivian was only fifteen and her brother, Chuck, was thirteen, her stepmother asked them both to move out. Later in life, Vivian told me: As children, Chuck and I were separated from each other, boarding with different families in Two Rivers during the week, returning to the lighthouse most weekends. In exchange for housing, I became the caregiver for the children of a local family. Chuck was only thirteen



Indiana Harbor Light 1924, one of Keeper Linsmeier’s duty stations.



North Point Light near Milwaukee, Wisconsin, one of Keeper Linsmeier’s duty stations.



Sheboygan Lighthouse where the author’s grandfather served as keeper and site of her grandmother’s drowning.



Keeper Charles “Charlie” Linsmeier, the author’s grandfather.



Principal Keeper Charlie Linsmeier at Sheboygan Lighthouse c. 1930s.

when he had to find several jobs to pay for his room and board.

Although my mother experienced significant trauma when her mother drowned and again when she was separated from her father and brother, my mother chose to rise above her circumstances. From her parents and the other lighthouse keepers they knew, she had learned some of the most valuable lessons: honesty and service to others. As she navigated her life, living through the Great Depression and World War II, standing up to social injustice, and raising eight children, she emulated the values of a lighthouse keeper. In turn, she was able to be a steady beacon of light and hope for those who encountered life storms.

Yet somehow, her profound wisdom was hidden in plain sight. It would take a standing ovation at her funeral, followed by several miracles, before I began searching for her way of understanding the world and the quiet, yet profound inspiration that she shared with everyone who knew her.

Therese Langer Woelfel is author of Our Guiding Light: Wisdom from the Lighthouse Keeper’s Daughter about her discovery of her mother Vivian’s secret to living a peaceful and purposeful life.

