

Saved from sand and shoreline erosion,
Big Sable Point Lighthouse volunteers
celebrate 150-year anniversary.

Light Guiding

BY MARLA R. MILLER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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Peering out her south-facing, second-floor bedroom window in Big Sable Point Lighthouse, Susan Hamminga of Weldon Spring, Missouri, leaned closer and looked out across Lake Michigan at the quickly changing landscape. The sky turned from cloudy to blue to drizzle and fog, with the wind howling and waves white capping, in a matter of an hour.

"We have the best room in the house. It's the only one where you can lay in bed and see the water and the beach," she said. "It's just gorgeous. Look at this. Who needs a TV?"

As first-time volunteer keepers, Susan and husband Lee visited this spring to help ready the lighthouse for the busy tourist season. The work involved cleaning every room of the keepers' quarters, helping to tag and stock merchandise in the gift shop and other miscellaneous projects.

"It's a lot more work than we thought, but it's been fun and satisfying," Lee said. "We feel privileged to spend a couple of weeks and do this and be on Lake Michigan."

"At the end of the day, we sit around the table and say, 'It was a good day' and reflect



Above: Susan Hamminga peeks out a window at Big Sable Point Lighthouse and enjoys the view. Left: This small structure houses the diaphone horn.



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Lee Hamminga finishes the spiral staircase climb to the top of the 112-foot tower. Below: Lee and Susan enjoy some relaxed time in the lighthouse keeper's quarters.



on how much we got done,” Susan added.

For more than a decade, volunteer keepers have manned and maintained the lighthouse and welcomed visitors during the summer, but it’s a passion for preservation that started in 1986 when a group of concerned local citizens banded together to keep the lighthouse from falling into Lake Michigan.

“Big Sable Point Lighthouse is one of the premier lighthouses in the state of Michigan; it’s the second oldest on Lake Michigan,” said Peter Manting, executive director of Sable Points Lighthouse Keepers Association, the nonprofit that operates Big Sable and three other lighthouses near Ludington. “It’s gone through many changes, and I just think the story is so unique in the local people saving it and the volunteers now who want to come in from throughout the country.”

Celebrating its 150th anniversary this year, Big Sable Point Lighthouse has played an important role in Lake Michigan maritime history and, today, attracts thousands of visitors to Ludington State Park. Although the light was automated in 1968, it has continued to shine since 1867 and still serves as a beacon to sailors navigating around Big Sable Point.

Big Sable’s tower, encased in steel cladding and given its distinct wide black band between 1900-05, also serves as a popular tourist attraction for lighthouse lovers. Infatuated with its history, young and old make the 1.8-mile trek to climb the 112-foot tower, offering a 360-degree aerial view of the surrounding dunes and Lake Michigan.

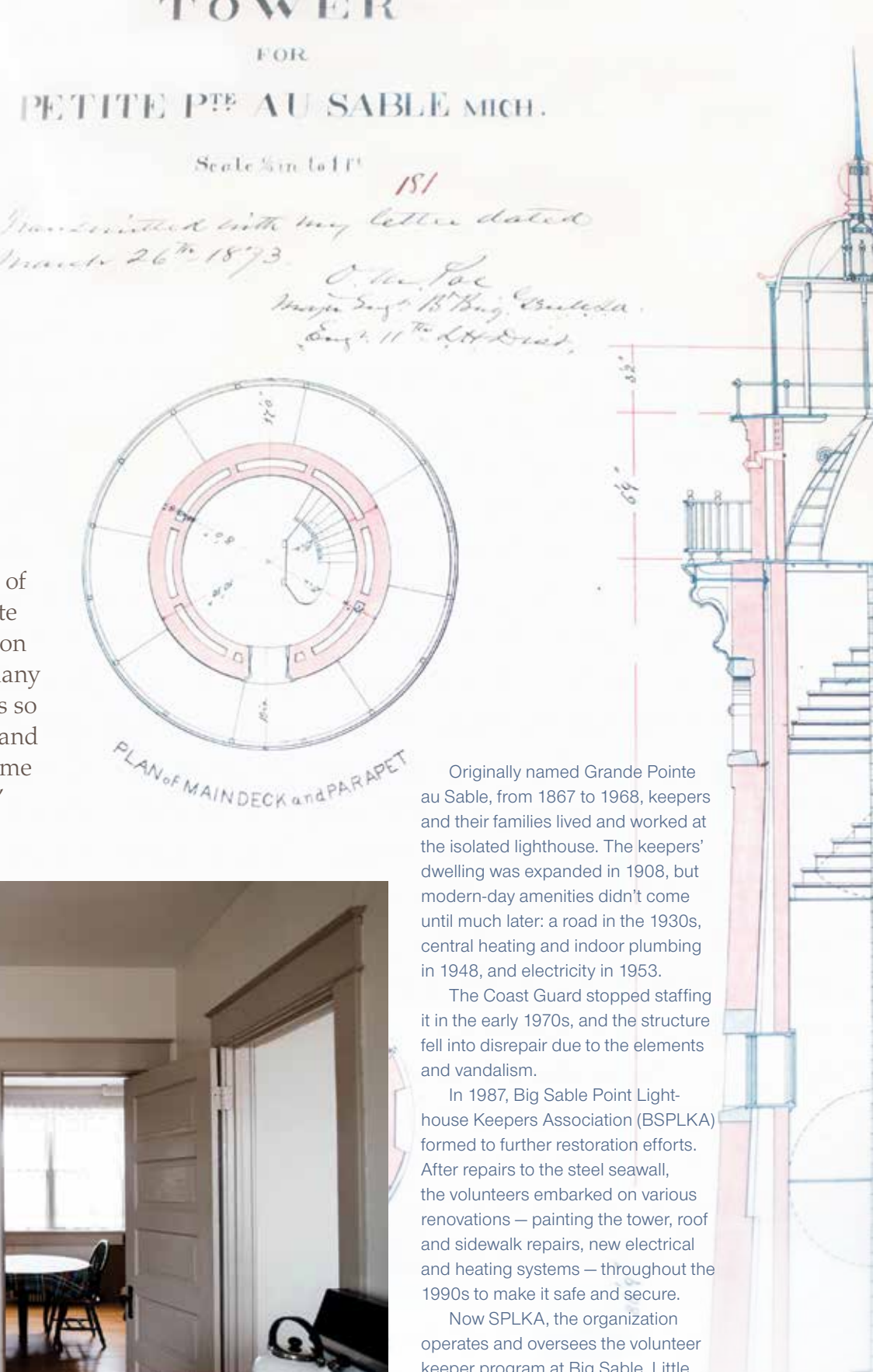
“I think what’s unique about Big Sable Point Lighthouse is the accessibility to it,” said Marge Ellenberger of Onaway, who produces the Michigan Lighthouse Guide and organizes the Michigan Lighthouse Festival. “Once you get out there, people are just in awe of this beautiful lighthouse where you can stay overnight.”

Michigan has the most lighthouses of any state, and it’s a major tourist draw for



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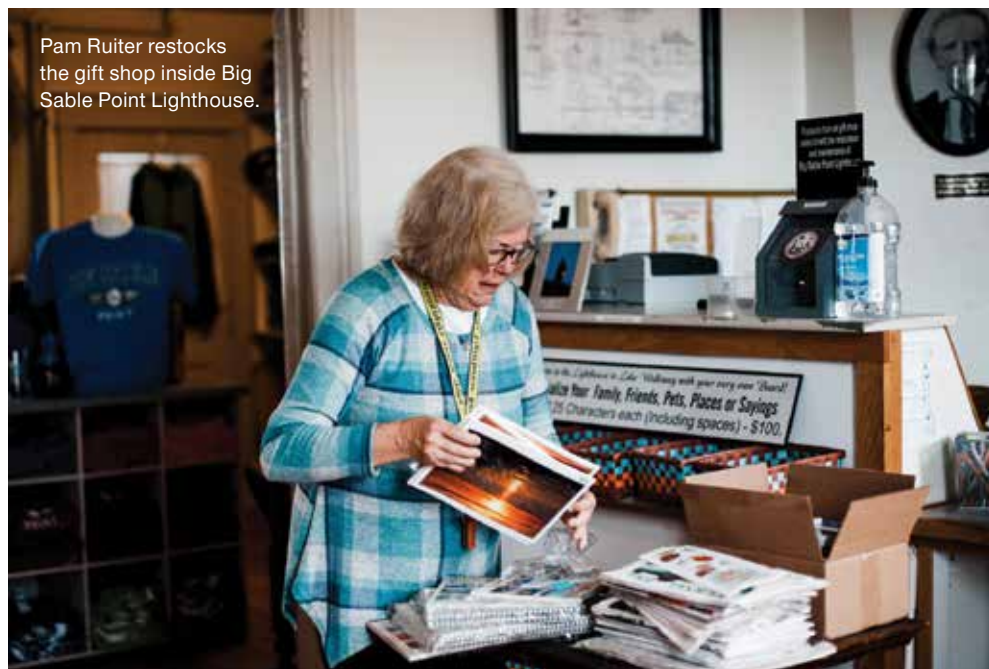
Originally named Grande Pointe au Sable, from 1867 to 1968, keepers and their families lived and worked at the isolated lighthouse. The keepers’ dwelling was expanded in 1908, but modern-day amenities didn’t come until much later: a road in the 1930s, central heating and indoor plumbing in 1948, and electricity in 1953.

The Coast Guard stopped staffing it in the early 1970s, and the structure fell into disrepair due to the elements and vandalism.

In 1987, Big Sable Point Lighthouse Keepers Association (BSPLKA) formed to further restoration efforts. After repairs to the steel seawall, the volunteers embarked on various renovations — painting the tower, roof and sidewalk repairs, new electrical and heating systems — throughout the 1990s to make it safe and secure.

Now SPLKA, the organization operates and oversees the volunteer keeper program at Big Sable, Little Sable Point Lighthouse, North Breakwater and White River Light Station. In 2002, SPLKA signed a 25-year lease with the state park to restore Big Sable and open it for public tours.

Pam Ruiter restocks the gift shop inside Big Sable Point Lighthouse.



"I've always loved lighthouses and the history of the lighthouses. I was just fascinated with them and thinking of the people who lived in the lighthouses and the type of life they had."

— Pam Ruiter

During peak summer, there's always work to be done, and volunteers put in a full day cleaning the bathrooms, weeding and watering flowers, sweeping sand and taking care of visitors. The Baltzers' group also tackles bigger projects like building benches, painting and restoration work, but it's not a requirement. And Bob credits SPLKA's small staff for working behind-the-scenes to make it all happen.

"The volunteer program wouldn't be successful without their experience and their passion to make this lighthouse experience a great experience," he said. Despite the long days, the keepers still take time for beach walks and sunsets from atop the tower.

"I enjoy the people that come," Becki said. "I enjoy waking up every morning on the shores of Lake Michigan. It's not to just go and sit on the beach because we do work very hard and we're tired at night. We always say we get paid in sunsets. We're well paid." Another saying the lighthouse keepers have: If you're lucky enough to live in a lighthouse, you're lucky enough.

As newbies, the Hammingas can attest to the work as well as the payoff: passing freighters, beach walks and stunning scenery from every window. They vacation in Ludington every summer and returned this month to volunteer for a week at Little Sable.

"We used to walk out there when we were kids and it wasn't open," Lee said of Big Sable. "We enjoy coming out to the lighthouse. We enjoy the view and want to see these things preserved."

The Hammingas shared the lighthouse with veteran keeper Pam Ruiter, who lives in Holland and has returned for 13 years. She volunteers at other locations and said every tour is an adventure.

"I've always loved lighthouses and the history of the lighthouses," Ruiter said. "I was just fascinated with them and thinking of the people who lived in the lighthouses and the type of life they had." ≈

Marla R. Miller is an award-winning journalist who lives in Norton Shores.

many lakeshore communities. Ellenberger decided to hold the festival Aug. 25-27 in Ludington to commemorate Big Sable's 150th anniversary and plans to make it an annual event that visits different cities.

Big Sable is listed on both the state and national registers of historic places, and volunteer keepers can apply for two-week sessions from mid-April to early November. They run the gift shop, greet visitors, talk about history and past keepers, stand guard at the top of the tower, keep the living quarters clean and do larger maintenance projects throughout the season.

Although many keepers have ties to the area, they come from across the country and even some from overseas. For \$150, a couple can stay for two weeks and help preserve a piece of history. Bob and Becki Baltzer of Beavercreek, Ohio, are longtime volunteers who spend Fourth of July at the lighthouse. They've met up with the same group for the past 10 years, decorating the lighthouse for Independence Day and climbing the tower to watch area fireworks from the outdoor deck.

"We have met a lot of really great volunteers from a lot of different states," Becki said. "They've got the right attitude. It's all about taking care of the lighthouse and taking care of the people."

Bob's parents were from Ludington but moved to Ohio, and he grew up vacationing there with his family and continued the tradition with his own children. The Baltzers give credit to the volunteers before them and got hooked after they ran into Robert Sperling, an active volunteer and charter member of SPLKA, while on an outing to the lighthouse.

If You Go:

**Big Sable Point Lighthouse
Ludington State Park**

(231) 845-7417 / splka.org

10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily

Admission \$5 adults,

\$2 children under 12

Open through Nov. 4, special anniversary celebration Nov. 1

Michigan Lighthouse Festival

Aug. 25-27 / Ludington

michiganlighthousefestival.com

Weekend festivities include dinner and "Ladies of the Lights" program by author Patricia Majher, plus photography presentation by Todd & Brad Reed, Aug. 25; Big Sable bus day and live music by Oceania Drive at the lighthouse, Aug. 26, concert featuring Ric Mixer, Aug. 26; craft and maritime vendors in Rotary Park, Aug. 26-27; and tours aboard a tall ship.