

Big Sable Point Boat Accident - Prepared for SPLKA Education Committee by Bill Mitchell, 20211012

[During 2021 I have searched for communications stories involving boats on Lake Michigan in the area around Big Sable Point. Recently I was a volunteer lighthouse keeper at Big Sable Point Lighthouse and heard this story from fellow keeper, Maxine Braasch. Her story began on August 16, 2012.]

“It was a very stormy, windy, rainy day and we had very few people come into the lighthouse. The tower we kept closed because it was too windy to let anyone go up. One of the gentlemen kept checking the portholes to see...just checking outside. He’d go up and check the wind velocity, and it was just too bad to open the tower at all. I think we did later-on in the day, if I remember correctly. That night when we were eating dinner some Coast Guard or Park Rangers...came to the door wanting to go up in the tower and see if they could see anything. (They) asked if we had noticed anything throughout the day, Bill had mentioned. He was the gentleman that kept going up into the tower to check on things. Bill Niehoff,

N-I-E-H-O-F-F. And he said he remembered seeing a boat go up north of the lighthouse and thought it strange that this boat was out in such horrible weather. And he remembered seeing it go out while in the morning. I remember helicopters all night searching through the lights of the helicopters coming through the bedroom. We didn't know what had happened until the next morning. So, I am going to read a little bit of what Bill wrote in the journal that day. This was on Thursday the 16th of August, 2012, and Bill wrote:

'About 5:30 pm the Coast Guard and Park Ranger asked to go up in the tower. They indicated that a fishing boat had not returned and they wanted to search with binoculars. Shortly thereafter a Coast Guard cutter was sighted coming from the north and a helicopter flew over. Both, and an all-terrain vehicle, kept us wondering about the outcome of their search. We learned the next morning that the boat had capsized or crashed and two men lost their lives. Location was a few miles south of Manistee. Keeper Bill.'"

[I then did an on-line search of editions of the Ludington Daily News from that time. The following is a summary of reporting from August 17-18, 2012:

Fishing friends Ray Finholm of Ludington, MI and Bill Sorokin of Plains, PA left Ludington in Bill's 26 foot boat in rough weather around 6 am, Thursday August 16, 2012. They intended to fish for salmon off Big Sable Point. When they did not return as scheduled, the Coast Guard began a search. They pulled Sorokin's body from the lake around 6:30 pm Thursday and found Finholm's body on the shore north of the point around 8:30 am Friday. Coast Guard Chief Sean Cross said that rough weather, severe wind and waves, probably caused the boat to sink. He said the case was closed and that the Coast Guard planned no boat recovery.]