

## **Lake Michigan SOS Rescue - Prepared for SPLKA Education Committee by Bill Mitchell, 20210529**

[I had hoped to write a story about Morse code communications that lighthouse keepers at Big Sable had with boats that passed the lighthouse. Marconi invented the radio around 1900. Big Sable's tower would have made a wonderful attachment for an antenna.

I researched Thomas Tag's book about Big Sable Lighthouse and Grace and Steve Truman's book about Big Sable Life Saving Station. Sadly, I found nothing to support the use of Morse code and radios years ago. The lighthouse did not even have a traditional, poles-and-wire telephone until 1920. Interestingly, today just about anybody who visits Big Sable does have a cell phone.

Then I remembered a story my cousins John and Lisa Mitchell told me from years ago of assistance that they gave to a boat in distress on Lake Michigan. They were at their cottage which sits on a sand dune about two

hundred feet above the lake and is two miles south of the Ludington harbor entrance. What follows is a transcript of an interview I did with them on May 29, 2021. Bill Mitchell]

“Hi, I’m John Mitchell. And I’m Lisa Mitchell. Well, it was probably in the '90s, more than twenty years ago. Lisa and I both live in Grand Rapids, but we have a family cottage in the Ludington area, south of Ludington, about two miles south of the harbor. The property has been in the family at least since the mid '50s. The family has been using it all that time, but this particular story took place sometime in the 1990s.

We had this piece of property, and there’s a cabin on it and a carport and an attached guest room where Lisa and I happened to be staying with our two cats. They weren’t allowed inside the cabin, not at night anyway. My Mom was in the cabin proper, so she was removed from the particulars of the story. It’s a summer night about July or August, we’re guessing. All the windows are open. It’s not particularly windy, so we could hear what was going on around us. We were trying to get to

sleep. Wasn't it around midnight? Probably somewhere in there. Lisa, what are your recollections at this point?

As we were trying to fall asleep, we heard a sound, and it sounded like a boat horn. That's not unusual, because we can hear them. We're on a bluff about two hundred feet up, so the sound carries, and it was a real quiet night. So it wasn't like it was surprising to hear that, except that it just was persistent. Or kept continuing, this sound. And all of a sudden, I just said to John, I said, listen to that. It sounds like it had a pattern to me, and it went on for a while before I even picked up on that there even was a pattern. And then John said to me.

Well, I listened to it for a while, and then I harkened back to my Boy Scout training, my Morse code training. It was clearly an SOS. It was beep-beep-beep, beeeep-beeeep-beeeep, beep-beep-beep, and it just kept repeating, repeating, repeating. Even if you didn't know it was Morse code you could, as Lisa was saying, you could pick up on there was some sort of pattern involved.

So then we got up together and went to the bank, the edge of the bank, to look out, and we saw a boat. We saw a light. It was really dark, but it was a tiny little light from the boat. There was a sound, and it was pretty much straight out west from us. I don't know how far out . It's hard to tell in the dark...1000 feet, 2000 feet, 3000 feet...I don't know, but it was out a ways. It was still enough at night that we could hear the horn that was honking.

I think I went into the cabin at that point and got a flashlight and started mimicking what they were doing with the horn. And they responded with lights of their own. At that point I think we went into the cabin, my Mom woke up. We called the Coast Guard and told them that we thought there was a boat in distress, pretty much straight out from us that would have been about two miles south of the harbor. They might want to check it out.

Probably within less than ten minutes, we could see the Coast Guard, because they had their blinking lights on their boat. We could see them headed out and they

headed south towards us. It was still too dark to tell, but they came. They approached the boat and did whatever they had to do . And as it turned out, we found out later, that it was a boat where the engine was disabled. I think they had a couple and a dog on board. They were just kind of dead in the water, I think. I don't know if they were taking on water, this is so long ago, I don't remember the particular details.

At any rate they got towed back into Ludington and everything was fine. This must have been on a Saturday night, because on Sunday, after we had been to the beach or out for a bike ride, when we came back my Mom told us that the Coast Guard had called. They wanted us to know that the couple was expressing their gratitude for us paying attention to their distress call, they were really grateful, and "thank you very much". It was a nice ending to a successful story. Yeah, it was great. It pays to know Morse code."