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Beacon restoration a DeTour Delight

By Dave Wobser

Why would anyone want to tackle the restoration of a rundown, 1930s lighthouse located more than a mile from land, a structure that lacks even a surrounding island to make it more attractive?

Just ask Chuck Feltner.

"A lighthouse needs a constituency. A lot of people want to see this light saved," says Feltner, president of the DeTour Reef Light Preservation Society.

Fortunately the drawbacks didn't deter the group's founders, who now hold a long-term lease on the Art Deco-style landmark. Restoration of the DeTour Reef Light, which marks the Lake Huron end of the St. Marys River, began June 2. The difficult-to-reach but otherwise lovely light is receiving nearly \$1 million worth of restoration and preservation work this year and next, with funds skillfully raised from federal, state and local sources. The ultimate goal is even more ambitious. The group wants to make the light station accessible to visitors, tourists and lighthouse enthusiasts for the 2005 season.

Why is this particular light so important?

"DeTour Reef is a guiding light to commercial vessels, pleasure craft, fishermen and divers, and is a point of pride for residents of both Drummond Island and DeTour Village," Feltner says.

The DeTour Reef Light has been showing vessels the way into the St. Marys River since 1931. Often called the "Gateway to Lake Superior," this important structure is a welcome beacon to commercial and pleasure craft seeking passage between Lake

DeTour Reef Light restoration
is a shining example
of skillful fund-raising
and local commitment

Huron and Lake Superior via the Soo Locks. Automated in 1974, the light was declared excess property by the Federal government in 1997.

Building a gateway

Before the light was erected,

early sailing vessels were guided from Lake Huron into the mouth of the St. Marys River by beacons located on shore. The first light was lit on the Upper Michigan mainland near DeTour Village in 1848, on a spit of land known as DeTour Point. This was seven years before the State Lock opened at Sault Ste. Marie.

Following the opening of the first U.S. lock in 1855, marine traffic increased at a rapid rate. The 1848 light was replaced in 1861 by a skeletal tower light similar to the Manitou Island Light and the Whitefish Point Light. This second light was also located ashore on DeTour Point.

As commercial traffic continued to pick up (an average of 77 vessels per day passed DeTour by 1919) and vessels of deeper draft became more com-

mon, the area of shallow water known as Detour Reef, located about a mile off DeTour Point and covered by just 20 feet of water, became a concern to vessel masters. A new lighthouse was clearly needed to mark the shoal and the entrance to the St. Marys River.

Construction of the DeTour Reef Light's concrete foundation was very similar to that of the Martin Reef Light, located about 10 miles to the west of DeTour, and Poe Reef Light located near Cheboygan, Mich. All three stations were built by the same crew at about the same time. The light was constructed



DeTour Reef Light. (Roger LeLievre)

by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers after commercial bids received by the U.S. Lighthouse Service were determined to be unsatisfactory. The Corps completed the structure in 327 working days with a budget of \$141,000.

The concrete foundation is 60-feet square and 20-feet above the water. The first story of the light station is a steel framed structure measuring 31-feet square. The tower portion is 12-feet square and supports a 10-sided watch room and lantern room. The total height is 63-feet to the top of the ventilator ball. The spiral staircase, lantern room and lens were relocated from the 1861 light to the present structure during construction in 1931.

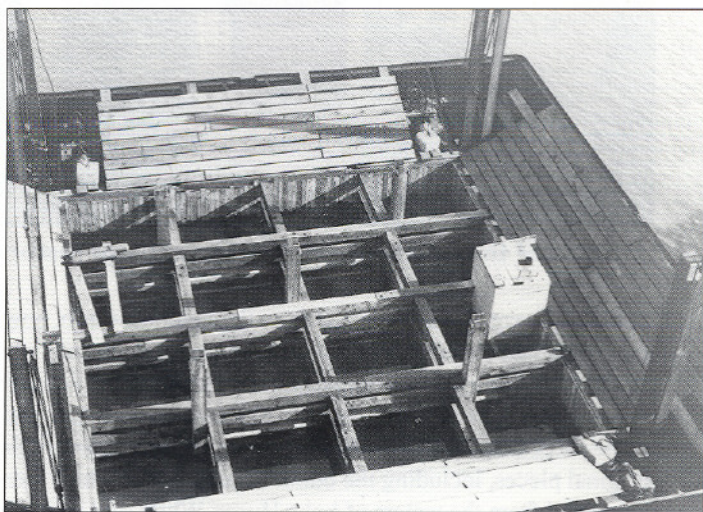
The original Third-and-a-half Order Fresnel lens with four flash panels, made in 1908 by Barbier, Benard & Turenne of Paris, is displayed in the DeTour Passage Historical Museum near the Drummond Island ferry dock in DeTour. The lens rotated every 40 seconds and produced a 10 second interval between flashes. The light was visible up to 17 miles away. Part of the original clockwork mechanism remains in the lighthouse.

The original foghorn, recovered and restored by Jeff Laser of Bellville, Ohio, is on display for now in the Drummond Island Historical Museum. The diaphone relic was in a storage warehouse owned by the Great Lakes Historical Society in Vermilion, Ohio. Laser used his own funds and vacation time to work on the DeTour project. He was also the moving force in getting the diaphone foghorn restored and reactivated in Duluth, Minn.

Laser, who has done extensive research and recording of foghorns, was recently named Keeper of the Quarter by the United States Lighthouse Society. The foghorn is currently displayed in the Drummond Island Historical Museum.

Another important find took place in the water adjacent to the DeTour Reef Light.

When the U.S. Coast Guard automated the light, its two deck



Crib base on July 24, 1930, before it was towed to its final location. (Courtesy Woodward Lighthouse History Collection)



Alfred Lemieux is believed to be the last surviving member of the construction crew.



Workers pose for a picture. (Courtesy: Curtis Anderson)



Interior of the lighthouse before the start of restoration. (Dick Moehl)

cranes were cut up and removed from the lighthouse crib, however many parts were simply dumped into the water. Feltner, who is a former scuba diver, recruited divers, including the Feltner's friend Mike Spears, who were able to locate many of the deck crane parts. One deck crane has been restored using many of the original pieces, including the builder's plate, all of which were recovered from the waters of Lake Huron. While salvaging the crane parts, the divers also made an engineering video of the underwater pier deck for the U.S. Coast Guard. The video documents the stability of the light's foundation.

DRLPS launched

Feltner gives much of the credit for the start of the restoration effort to long-time friend Dick Moehl, president of the Great Lakes Lighthouse Keepers Association. "In August 1997, after it became known the DeTour Reef Light would be put on the government's excess property list, Moehl came to DeTour and got four people from DeTour Village and Drummond Island together, including my wife Jeri, and started the DRLPS," Feltner recalls. In addition to Moehl, DRLPS' original incorporators were Jeri Feltner, Jim Charles, Barb Snider and the late Bob Jones.

DRLPS is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization the purpose of which is "to establish, support and promote efforts in the preservation and restoration of the DeTour Reef Light; to achieve the safe keeping of the building, artifacts and records; to educate and inform the public on its history; and to raise awareness about the importance of volunteers in maintaining and preserving DeTour Reef Light for all present and future generations."

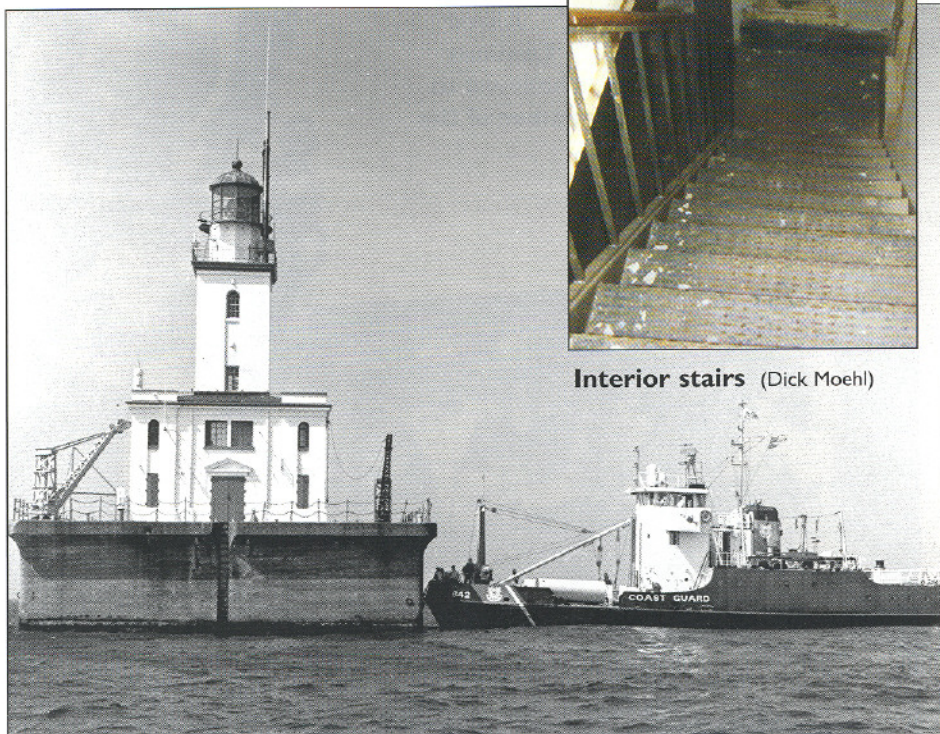
Jones, who died in March 2002, was the first president of the DRLPS. He's described by Feltner as "the guiding light for DRLPS and the person who had

Bailey, owner of the Drummond Island Yacht Club and president of the Drummond Island Tourist Association, was joined by local residents Dave and Paula Bardsley, Clif Haley, Bruce Glupker, Mary Rogers, Sheryl LaMotte and Dotty Witten. The Feltners credit much of the organization's success to date to the strength and dedication of this core team.

High school students from DeTour Village and Drummond Island (all of whom attend the high school in DeTour Village) have also been involved with the restoration program for the past several years. Teachers Brian Nettleton and Russ



Interior stairs (Dick Moehl)



U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Buckthorn* calls at the DeTour Reef Light in the early 1970s. (Roger LeLievre)

Norris and students have recreated some of the original lighthouse design drawings, using special software, and were able to provide DRLPS with accurate renditions of the deck crane. Next year they will be recreating original cabinets and furniture.

"They are the future lighthouse keepers," says Jeri.

Taking it to the bank

Clif Haley, a retired attorney and former CEO of Budget Rent-A-Car, became a member of the DRLPS Board of Directors in 2000. He brought additional expertise to the all-important grant-writing process. Haley believes that DRLPS "is a wonderful opportunity to preserve for future humanity an important symbol of the history of mankind."

Haley and Jeri Feltner became designated grant writers; in fact it is grant funding that is making the restoration possible. Writing – grants or otherwise – is not new to Jeri. She and Chuck have co-authored two books on Great Lakes maritime history. Their "Shipwrecks of the Straits of Mackinac" includes stories of 41 discovered shipwrecks and 43 known, but as yet undiscovered, wrecks. Their Drummond Island home has a view of the DeTour Reef Light and one room has been turned into headquarters for the DRLPS.

Board members and other volunteers have organized a variety of fund-raising events, including raffles, benefit dinners and the sale of DeTour Reef Light memorabilia. The organization sells its merchandise at local gift shops and through its website, www.DRLPS.com. One of the group's most popular events is an annual Father's Day cruise to see the light station up close, followed by a narrated trip up the St. Marys River and through the Soo Locks.

DRLPS membership now totals 370 from 16 different states. The group has received a 20-year lease on the lighthouse from the U.S. Coast Guard, with a 20-year extension option. The organization received national recognition when the National Trust for Historic Preservation named Michigan's historic lighthouses, exemplified by DeTour Reef Light, to its 1998 List of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places, the first time a lighthouse was included on the annual list.

The light station is also eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places, which helps in obtaining grant funding. It was featured in the national TV program "Legendary Lighthouses," shown on the History Channel in 2001.

To aid the restoration effort, noted lighthouse preservationist Cullen Chambers, of Tybee Island, Ga., donated his services in 2000. Chambers conducted a conditions survey, prepared a 186-page report that outlines recommendations for restoration and preservation, and helps facilitate restoration plans and restoration grant applications.

The first grant application, filed in 1999, was earmarked for production of a museum display, an oral history video and a color brochure. The application was approved by the Michigan Coastal Management Program (MCMP) for \$10,000 and DRLPS matched the grant with \$10,000 worth of volunteer labor.

Part of this grant produced 120 interpretive panels explaining the history of the lighthouse. The panels, with pictures and drawings, are on display in the Drummond Island Museum. The oral history includes an interview with DeTour resident Alfred Lemieux, who is believed to be the last surviving



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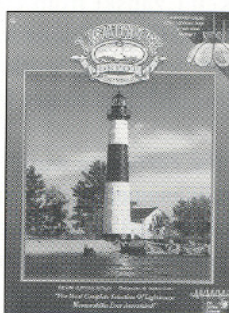
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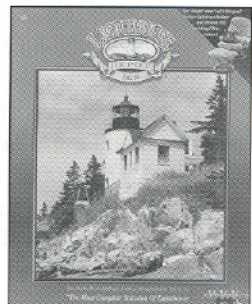
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member of the DeTour Reef Light construction crew.

Jeri Feltner then wrote a successful grant application to the Michigan Lighthouse Assistance Program in 1999. A \$20,000 grant was awarded and matched by DRLPS with \$10,000 in cash and another \$10,000 in volunteer labor.

A second \$8,500 matching MCMP grant in 2001 provided funds to copy the original DeTour Light log books, located in the National Archives but eventually bound for the DeTour Village Public Library. The Feltners also managed to acquire 150 original construction drawings of the lighthouse, which will prove invaluable for future restoration projects. Mike Spears and Chris Pemberton have also been major contributors of time and talent to the grant projects.

Since its inception, DRLPS has applied for \$1,373,416 in grant funding from various sources. The organization has been awarded \$1,007,208 which the group has matched with \$28,500 in donated labor and \$22,208 in cash from the organization's memberships and fund-raising efforts.

Enjoying 'the elephant'

The early grants and projects were important in getting the preservation moving, but are small in comparison to the actual restoration work and the funding that's still required. Matching federal and state grants are a way of life for agencies that fund projects such as lighthouse restorations.

Haley and Jeri Feltner were responsible for the actual writing of the grant applications, while Ken Czapski from U.P. Architects and Engineers of Marquette helped Chuck Feltner and Dave Bardsley assemble the restoration details and worked along with Chuck and state and federal officials to get the required approvals.

A veteran of more than 30 years in the corporate world at the Ford Motor Co., Chuck Feltner expresses exasperation at dealing with some government bureaucracies and the red tape involved in grant funding and contract approval. At the same time, the Feltners credit much of their success with grant funding to developing a good relationship with the granting agencies during earlier grant proposals.

Together, the restoration grant applications are contained in two weighty volumes. Two grant applications filed in 2000 provide the prime funding for the restoration projects that should be underway this year. A Clean Michigan Initiative (CMI), Waterfront Redevelopment Grant for Michigan Lighthouses, matched with a Michigan Department of Transportation Equity Act (TEA) grant, total \$946,500.

Local government entities assisted with the grant process. The CMI grant was sponsored by the Drummond Island Township and

"Rather than being overwhelmed by the work ahead, we must remember to enjoy this elephant – each and every bite at a time."

– David Bardsley

the TEA grant was sponsored by the Village of DeTour. The cooperation of the local governments was a key to the success of the grant funding, as state and federal governments prefer to deal with other government subdivisions.

Another grant has been approved to make a video of the history of the light station and actual scenes of the restoration. This part of the project is headed by Dave Bardsley, another retired Ford Motor Co. executive, who

lives on nearby James Island. Bardsley has also been involved preparing the work plan and details of the restoration project.

Bardsley takes a philosophical approach to the size of the restoration effort. He says in working on the restoration of the DeTour Reef Light, it's easy to get focused on completion of the task and not appreciate the fun that happens along the way. "It's something like college, where we worked so hard ... that we didn't take sufficient time to enjoy the experience we were having.

"Rather than being overwhelmed by the work ahead, we must remember to enjoy this elephant – each and every bite at a time," he advises.

Public tours ultimate goal

The real work of restoration and preservation began this year. Phase I is a \$412,000 project that concentrates on the building's exterior, replacing windows and doors, painting and installing a new roof. Replacement of ornamental ironwork, the chain rails around the deck, and repairs to the concrete deck are included. The work will weather-proof the structure and provide a solid base for Phase II.

The second phase concentrates on restoration of the lighthouse's interior. The U.S. Coast Guard previously provided funds to remove asbestos and lead paint from the structure, which left the interior pretty much a bare shell. Included in the work is restoration of the second-floor keeper's quarters, reinstallation of the original diaphone fog horn and a compressor to operate the horn for demonstrations. The overall goal is to restore the interior, including period furnishings and equipment, and to make the light station accessible to visitors.

Completion of Phase I is scheduled for mid-July.

Phase II work is set to begin on the interior upon completion of the Phase I (exterior) contract. There's a chance that the interior work could be completed by the end of the 2003 construction season, but early summer 2004 is probably more realistic.

Another part of Phase II is to establish an on-shore visitor/viewing site and educational center, which would include photos, drawings, correspondence, artifacts, log

Here's how to join up

DRLPS is a nonprofit organization and donations are tax deductible. Memberships can be obtained for as little as \$20, which includes the group's newsletter.

Applications are available on-line at www.DRLPS.com or by writing to P.O. Box 519, DeTour Village, MI 49725. You can help with this worthy project and a membership will get you information about the organization's activities and progress.

books and other collected materials that tell the history of the DeTour Reef Light. The proposed site is located on DeTour Point, the location of the first two DeTour lighthouses and the closest mainland site to the lighthouse. The hope is that the privately-owned land can be acquired by the organization.

The DRLPS' ultimate goal is to be able to take visitors on tours of the lighthouse. The original access is via an iron ladder set in the concrete foundation. Stepping from a bobbing boat to the ladder could only be described as a risky proposition, especially for members of the public.

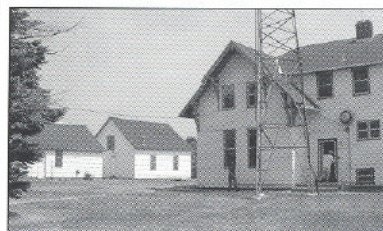
Chuck Feltner has a plan to build a floating lift basket capable of safely hoisting two adults from the deck of a small craft to the lighthouse deck using the restored deck crane. In this manner, it could be possible to conduct tours with groups of six-eight people at a time.

The lift basket could be also used by charter boat captains to provide access to the light station. He's confident visits could begin with the 2005 tourist season.

When it's finished, the DeTour Reef Light promises to be a top-notch attraction for visitors. And, as an added bonus, the shore-side viewing platform, as well as the light station itself, are great locations for ship photographers. A visit will truly be a DeTour worth taking.

Author's note: While most non-sailors refer to the DeTour Reef type of navigation aid as a "lighthouse," the technically correct name is "light," hence DeTour is referred to as a light, not a lighthouse. The "light" part of a lighthouse is the only part that is important to mariners.

Coast Guard Station



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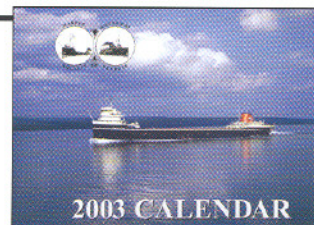
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