AN HISTORICAL CAREER IN LIFESAVING:
HEROES OF THE GREAT LAKES

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One of the United States’ biggest natural resources is the Great Lakes.
Shipping is a major way that we exchange goods with other countries.
MAJOR PRODUCTS SHIPPED TODAY ARE:

- Ire ore
- Limestone
- Coal
- Salt
- Grain
- Sand & Gravel
Since humans began to sail the world’s seas, death by shipwreck has been common.

Causes of Shipwrecks:
- Running into icebergs
- Bad weather
- Running into islands, shallow water, or rocky shoals or shores
Government response to loss of lives:

- Add lighthouses to warn of shorelines
- Create Life-Saving Service on shore for rescues.
United States Life Saving Service began in 1871.
U.S. Lifesaving Crew

Also know as:
- Storm Warriors
- Life Savers
- Surfmen
- Heroes of the Great Lakes!
Salary – $10 per Month

Duties:
- 24-hour visual surveillance of the lake from their watchtower.
- Shoreline surveillance by walking the beach looking for signs of wreckage or ships in distress.
- Boat drills to practice hauling equipment and rowing under difficult circumstances. This included flipping the boat and then righting it.
- Living with the crew in the boat station full time with short visits to see family.
- Responding to every shipwreck or call for help. If the supervisor said you were attempting the rescue, you went out.
Keeper and Crew

- Each Life Saving Station was equipped with one Keeper and a crew of 7 men.
- Each had a number assigned which signified rank. The higher your rank the more responsibility and respect you had.
- The Keeper’s job was to:
  - keep the men from fighting,
  - facilitate the performance of the regular routines and beach searches,
  - engage in regular trainings to make sure they were ready to go in any emergency
  - command and oversee rescues.
The following slides show tools of the trade. These are the necessary tools and equipment used in the career of Life Saving in the mid 1800’s to early 1900’s.
This is a Life-Saving *Station*.
Each station had life boats, beach apparatus, a tower, a crew of 8, and crew quarters where the crew lived.
All Surfmen were required to wear a life jacket during drills and rescues. Early life vests were made of cork.
Onboard gear was always stored to be ready for action at a moment’s notice. Notice the life preservers, oars and extra life preservers stuffed under seats for rescued survivors.
The Breeches Buoy is a simple lifesaving device that involves a tripod that is set up on the beach. A rope is shot to the shipwreck and attached to the mast. A safety harness that looks like a pair of “Breeches” is sent along the rope with people to the beach to safety.
The Manby Mortar was used to fire a safety line from the life saving crew to the ship wreck so that a pulley and life car or rescue device could be pulled back and forth to save people. This weighed about 360 pounds and when shot kicked back several feet. This was invented in 1807 by Captain G.W. Manby.
The Lyle Gun was invented to be much more versatile, lighter and easier to handle and fire. Invented by Colonel David Lyle in 1877, it weighed 108 pounds, plus 58 pounds for the carriage it is mounted to, making it manageable for one man to handle. This replaced the Manby Mortar to fire the safety line.
The Francis Lifecar was sent back and forth, much like the Breeches Buoy. The ride was said to be quite terrifying. Passengers were stuffed in like sardines, often lying on top of one another. There were no windows, and it was completely black and without ventilation. The sound of the waves and wind were very scary. Designed by Joseph Francis in 1841.
The Crew of the Life Saving Stations often had a lot of extra time on their hands. To keep them content during down time a library box containing a variety of books was passed from station to station. If the men got too restless, it often led to fighting and discontent.
A beach lantern was necessary to do the beach patrols. A surfman was required to patrol the beach between life saving stations. The men would look for signs of wreckage floating ashore or a ship that looked like it was in trouble. There was also always a surfman in the patrol tower at all times.
The Beach Cart was a two-wheeled cart pulled by the life saving crew that held the needed gear for a beach rescue. It had the shot line and Manby Mortar or Lyle gun, a hawser reel a tally board, all the gun powder, the breeches buoy, the sand anchor and picks and shovels for setting up the rescue device. This weighed over 550 pounds!
The Hawser Cutter was used to send out and cut the safety line when the rescue was complete. The rope was very sturdy and expensive and reused whenever possible.

Here is the famous Fredrick Stonehouse, author of many books about maritime history including the one that we read for this lesson, “Wreck Ashore.”
An amazing invention was the Shot Line or Faking Box which held the shot line in a way that it could be transported without tangling and could easily be unloaded on the beach to be shot to a wreck without getting caught up on anything.
Legendary Heroes
Lives Saved!

- Thousands of lives were saved by the creation of the U.S. Life Saving Service. In the Great Lakes in 1914 alone, over 600 persons were helped by the Life Saving Service.
- The Life Saving Service was merged and transitioned to the U.S. Coast Guard. Although the stations are no longer needed, rescues are still done today using life-saving vessels and aircraft.
- The modern navigation equipment aboard ships and the improvements in technology especially in regards to communication has made shipping a much safer mode of transportation.
The slide show presentation relied heavily on the work of Frederick Stonehouse and was used by permission for the purpose of this lesson. Photos were scanned and information was gathered from the book entitled, “Wreck Ashore” by Fredrick Stonehouse, Lake Superior Port Cities Inc.; Duluth Minnesota, 1994.

Photos from my personal collection were also added and taken at Whitefish Point, MI, 2010 during the Great Lakes Maritime Research Institute’s workshop (coordinated by Michigan Technology University www.mtu.edu and funded by Great Lakes Maritime Research Institute www(glmri.org ).