

Citizens: Capt. Charles A. Lysaght – U.S.L.S.S.

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White Lake Area Historical Society



CAPT. CHAS. LYSAGHT

The Lifesaver's motto was, "You have to go out, but you don't have to come back."

Captain Charles Andrew Lysaght was the first person appointed as keeper in charge of the White River Life Saving Station on 11 January 1887. He moved his family from St. Joseph in April 1887. During the next several months, he made improvements to the station by setting out trees and sowing grass.

Lysaght was born in St. Joseph, Michigan, on 5 March 1855, one of thirteen children of Richard and Catherine (ne Yore) Lysaght. He married Mary Ellen Flynn on 27 August 1878 in St. Joseph, Berrien County. They had 9 children: Charles Jr (1879-1910); Catherine (1881-?); James P. (1884-1972); Agnes M. (1886-1982); Fanny (1889-1891); Baby (1890-1891); Richard (1891-1971); twins Mary J. (Sr. Mary Fides) (1894-1951) and Frances M. (Sr. Mary Caritas) (1894-1977). His wife Mary Ellen died at the Life Saving Station on 15 September 1898, at the age of 41 years.

Will Murray, Charles Pickett and Lafe Pugh joined the Life Saving crew at the White River Station in March 1892. There were other members of the crew who joined later, but there was no mention of them by name.

In April 1892 Capt. Lysaght bought a horse and road cart to ride to and from the lifesaving station.

On a Saturday afternoon in early August 1893, the watch at the lifesaving station noticed a signal of distress from a large three-master off the harbor. A boat was sent out and it found the Bark Col. Elsworth. It appeared one of the heavy blocks used in the rigging aloft worked loose and fell, striking the

captain on the head and breaking his skull. With the assistance of the life savers, the boat was sailed into the harbor and the unconscious man was taken to the station while a doctor was summoned. The skull was found to be badly fractured. Everything was done for the sufferer and on Monday he was taken on the steamer Cayuga to Muskegon where he was placed on a boat for Chicago, his home. There did not appear to be any further report of the incident or outcome in the local newspapers.

Captain Lysaght had an addition built on the west side of the station in November 1894, to be used for sleeping rooms.

In December 1894, Charles Nickett and James Fitzgerald tendered their resignations for the next season. When the Life Saving Station opened on 1 April 1895 the following men made up the crew: J. W. Whelan, Lafayette Pugh, Joseph Edlund, William Murry, J. F. Yore, Charles E. Paget and Frank B. Reeder.

The life of a life saver was not such a happy-go-lucky one as some might believe. He had long tiresome watches to stand, night trips along the beach to make, several practice drills to go through and an endless amount of cleaning, painting, and scouring about the station, boats and tackle.

Standing watch was not as agreeable as it appeared. Although it required practically no physical effort it is very weary, lonesome work. The watches were of 2-hour durations each, and they continued day and night, without stopping, from the time the station opened in the Spring until it closed in the Fall.

The most uninviting thing to the men were the trips along the beach. Two trips were made in each direction from the station every night. Originally, the patrol distances were set up so that the beach patrol would meet the patrol from its neighboring station, thus providing good coverage for isolated shorelines. As more and more of the coast came under the watchful eye of the Service, it became impossible to provide such coverage. In the areas where overlapping patrols could not be maintained, the surfmen patrolled for five miles or more.

Patrolmen go both north and south along the water's edge to the posts at the end of the beat early in the evening and again in the morning. In summer weather these journeys are not so bad, but during the fall when the northwest gale is blowing, and the air is bitter cold these trips are not so pleasant. In the posts at the end of each beat, are keys which fit the clocks carried by the patrolmen. Within the clocks were paper dials which show whether the person on the beat has faithfully performed his duty – which he always did at the White Lake station.

Then there are the various drills for the men to go through. The beach drill with the gun and lines, the pull with the surf boat and the capsizing drill with the large self-righting lifeboat. Besides drilling, the boys were required to keep the station in first class order. All brass work was scoured and polished until it shines. The woodwork, wagons and boats were kept freshly painted and the ropes and tackle were all arranged in an orderly manner.

Although the station crew had many routine duties their real trials began with the sound of alarm. Then no matter what the time of day or night or how severe a storm was raging they must be ready to man a boat or start with the beach gun and line to the aid of those in distress. They may be called upon to work both day and night without rest at the hardest kind of physical labor or to stand exposed for hours at a time. But despite these severe and numerous hardships which constantly loomed up before them, it is to be said that they never shrink, if their assistance is needed, from facing the most terrible storm that rolls over the surface of Lake Michigan.

In October 1897 Captain Lysaght bought a farm in Claybanks but seemed to have trouble as his tenant refused to deliver up on his share of the crops or to leave the place. A judgement resulted in Lysaght finally getting possession of the property.

In May 1899 a telephone was installed in the Lifesaving station.

After the passing of his first wife in 1898, Lysaght married Mary A. Murray, daughter of John and Hannah (ne Sullivan) Murray on 29 November 1899 in Montague. They had no children.

The crew that finished out the season on December 1, 1900, were John P. Whelan, Lafe Pugh, Charles Deneau, John F. Yore, Curtis E. Strengam, James Edlund and Charles Paget.

The names of the 1902 crew were John P. Whelan, Lafe Pugh, Joseph Edlund, Charles F. Paget, Charles A. Deneau, and Curtis E. Strengam.

In April 1903, Curtis E. Strengam had left the crew and he was replaced by Wilbur Sill.

While serving at the Life Saving Station, Capt. Lysaght also owned and operated two boat liverys. One was located on White Lake and the other on Stony Lake. There were 25 row boats and sail boats at each livery all well-equipped and in good condition. Having had the businesses for 10 years, they were well established. In February 1904, he sold the businesses when he knew he was going to be transferred.

On 1 March 1904, after 17 years at the White River Life Saving Station, Capt. Lysaght was transferred to the Grand Point Au Sable station. Capt. Berndt Jackson was appointed keeper here to replace Lysaght. He served this station from 1904 to 1906. Then Capt. Edwin E. Bedford served from 1906-08, followed by Capt. Henry Curran from 1908-17, and Capt. John Barnard from 1917-1930.

Captain Lysaght suffered a stroke at his home in Ludington where he died on 13 June 1917. He and his first wife are buried in Saint Joseph City Cemetery in Saint Joseph, Berrian, Michigan, along with his parents and several siblings. His second wife died at Saint Ann's Home in Grand Rapids, on 7 April 1970. She is buried in Mount Calvary Cemetery in Montague.