

Lights on the Muskoka Lakes

Beginning in the mid-1800s, the Muskoka district began to open up due to widespread lumbering and the Free Land Grant program that encouraged settlers to move here. With a number of small settlements developing on the shores of the three adjoining lakes of Muskoka, Rosseau and Joseph, A.P. Cockburn saw the need for a steamship service to supply these communities with mail, equipment and other provisions. He also promoted Muskoka as a grand place to vacation; consequently, the development of the region was accompanied by the growth of Cockburn's fleet of ships.

As the freight and passenger demands increased, the need to light the lakes for the safety of boats became urgent. The first forms of navigational aids were bonfires, then came pine-pitch pots, oil lanterns and spider pots, coal oil lamps and eventually electric lanterns. The early oil lamps were fuelled by whale oil until a Canadian, Dr. Abraham Gesner from New Brunswick, developed a new fuel called kerosene in 1848. It was cheaper and burned much brighter and cleaner than its predecessor, and it became the standard fuel until electric and battery-powered lights became cheaper and more efficient.

It was never clear sailing on the Muskoka lakes because of the countless number of narrows, shoals, rapids and downright nasty rocks just below the water's surface. By the 1880s, all levels of government had been petitioned to place navigational aids and lighthouses on the lakes in addition to the private ones that were already in operation. When Cockburn first decided to start his navigation company in the 1860s, the governments had promised to provide these, but just as "the wheels of government turn slowly" so the Muskoka Lakes Navigation Company had to supply its own aids for the safety and ease of navigation. Cockburn figured that if the lakes were lit, the steamships could conceivably run

around the clock, so the steamship company distributed lanterns to residents and asked them to light them at night, marking the entrance to narrows and channels.

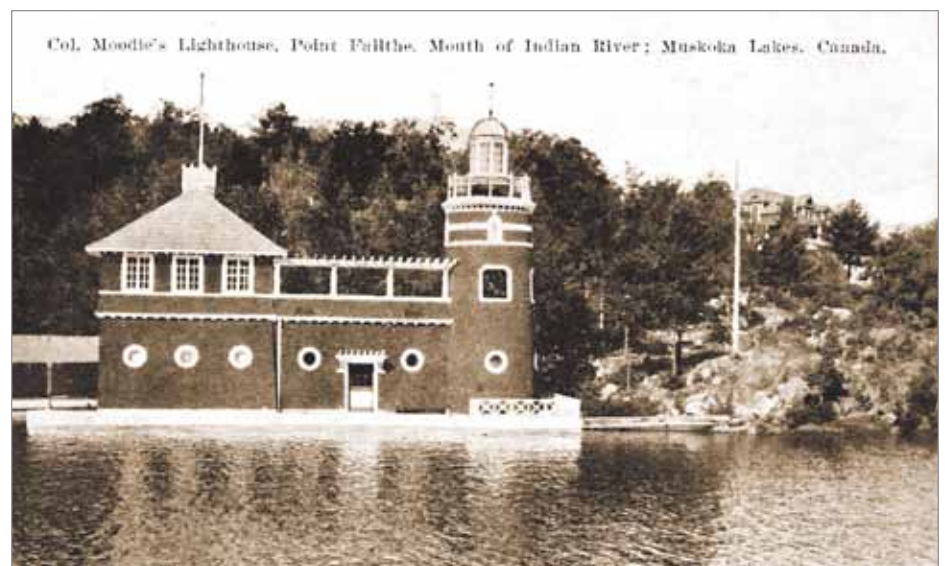
A number of private individuals and resorts helped light the three lakes in the early years. For example, a lantern light was placed in the cottage of Justice W.E. Middleton in Lake Rosseau due east of the Port Sandfield cut. The navigation company gave him two Mississippi-style lanterns, one to be used and the other as backup. Another was Colonel John Moodie, who built a lighthouse attached to his boathouse on Point Failthe at the entrance to the Indian River from Lake Rosseau. Unfortunately, the structure burned down in 1939 and the Colonel never rebuilt it. There was also a private light on Mazengah Island, where a tripod-style tower with a large ship lantern at the top was erected on the dock at the south end of the island. Many of the resorts would put pole lights at the end of their piers and on nearby points to help guide the steamships plying the lakes at night.

One of the desired lighthouse sites was at the Gravenhurst Narrows, where the channel is only about 80 feet wide, 20 feet deep, has number of rock outcroppings, and is a



Beacon on Puddling Rock*

dangerous and difficult channel to enter. In 1883 the government finally responded by placing an ad in the *Warton Echo* asking for tenders for the building of a light there. This was followed by another in the *Northern Advance* newspaper to have a mast light and shelter shed built at the Narrows. The site was surveyed by R.T. Pope at a cost of \$18.50 and C.F. Dennis bought Island "A" for \$50. The contract to build the shed and install the pole light was awarded to Mr. Henry Castle of Gravenhurst in 1885 for the sum of \$427. The first keeper of the light was David Schell (1884–1894). His salary was \$100 per year and he was responsible for keeping the lantern lit and free of soot, ordering the approved supplies, and rowing out in the evening to



Colonel Moodie's Lighthouse

light the lantern and back again in the morning to extinguish it. The second keeper was William Readman (1894–1904). While Readman was captaining the *Dauntless*, his son Charles took over the duties.

Although this light served the area for a number of years, it was inadequate for the substantial steamship traffic. By 1905, tenders were again called for to replace the Narrows Light. The contract for a white, wooden, pyramidal tower on a masonry foundation, with a square wooden lantern to be raised 28 feet above the water level, constructed on Denison Island (formerly Island “A” and now Lighthouse Island), was awarded to George Brown of Bracebridge for \$650. The light’s illuminate was a fixed, red catoptric light with a visibility on a clear night of 8 miles. It also had a hand-operated fog signal. During the forty-four year tenure of keeper Isaac Barnes, who was paid eighty dollars a year in 1906, it is said that it was mostly his daughters and sons, and then his grandson, who tended the light for him. It is believed that his grandson would row over in the morning and extinguish the light before he left for school.

In 1890 another contract was let to build a lighthouse, from what was believed to be a design of William Ditchburn, on Rosseau Shoal (or Ditchburn’s Shoal) at the northern end of Lake Rosseau. This lighthouse was 26 feet in height and stood on a cribwork affixed to the rocky shoal. The construction was done by John Haw, a local contractor from Bracebridge, for the sum of \$475. It has had a few close calls over the years, nearly being toppled off its foundation by ice pushes. Its first official keeper was Joseph G. Dixon, who began in 1890 and served for 27 years. His daughter, Florence Wilson, took over in 1917 when her father was transferred to be keeper at Jones Island near Parry Sound. Other keepers of this light were Elizabeth Crowder and later John Wilson, Sr., who became the temporary keeper in 1922, and permanent keeper in 1923.

Prior to the construction of the lighthouse, the only navigational aid in that area was a light placed in the attic of Benjamin Beley’s Ferncliffe House. Benjamin would climb to his attic every evening to set the



Gravenhurst Lighthouse*

lantern in one of the windows that faced SSE, which lined up perfectly with the shoal, warning up-bound captains to sail to the port or starboard side of the light for good water. After construction of the light on the shoal, the keepers had the duty of rowing out in the evening to light the lamps and then rowing back in the morning to extinguish them, as well as cleaning necessary equipment to ready it again for the next evening. On April 29, 1930, this light was automated using the AGA method and a keeper was no longer needed. There are indications that the design of the lantern room was also altered at that time. It was not until 1969 that the Canadian Coast Guard (Transport Canada) took over the maintenance and operation of this light.

The importance of the lights is reflected in the following story told by Captain Wesley Hill, who commanded the *Alporto*. During one trip to the head of Lake Rosseau on a dark, stormy night, unable to see through the driving rain, the captain decided to set his course by the Rosseau Lighthouse, which stands atop the shoal at the entrance to the harbour. However, the lighthouse keeper had neglected to set the lanterns that night, so the captain mistook the adjacent light at Kawandag (the Eaton estate) for the safety of the beacon. Unfortunately, this took him straight towards the lighthouse and the

shoal. Just as he was on the verge of piling his vessel on the rocks, a flash of lightning lit the skies; Hill was shocked to behold the tower, without a light, directly in his path. The captain had just enough time to swing his wheel and avoid the shoal. No action was taken against the keeper, but the light was never neglected again.

At the mouth of the Muskoka River, there were 8 boat-type floating lights and 7 land lights to guide vessels into the river. In the 1920s, the caretaker was W.R. Johnston, followed by Oscar Smith in 1936. At the end of Smith’s contract, his replacement was F. Brodie. Although these lights show up on the official records in 1911, there is no record of who maintained them prior to 1920.

A few other important lights, but not true lighthouses, were located at Meldrum Bay, Fred Rock, Bala Park, the Kettles, One Tree Islands and Bells Rock.

As in all cases, with the development of technology, came the end of an era. The steamboats were replaced by trains and trucks; the lightkeepers were replaced with solar panels and automated switches. However, *RMS Segwun* has defied this trend and continues to sail today. **M**

—Larry Wright, Archives Volunteer
*Photos by Larry Wright