

The weather conditions of last Thursday night were how lighthouse keepers of old “*earned their stripes*”: heavy seas...winds in excess of 60 mph...12 inches of rain in only a couple of hours...a probable tornado just north of the point...and a lightning and thunder display to rival anything on the 4th of July. For the seven modern-day volunteer light keepers who were holed-up at Big Sable Point Lighthouse, conditions were simply “*awesome*” and the rock-solid tower and keepers’ quarters demonstrated once again why the light station has endured 141 years of Lake Michigan storms and gales.

Unfortunately, officials at Ludington State Park could not place the same degree of confidence in the man-made structures at the nearby Sable River which guard the entry-way to the park, campgrounds, and lighthouse. The torrential rains created flood conditions behind the Hamlin Lake Dam and there were fears that the cresting waters might breach the dam and also weaken the downstream bridge. In the interests of public safety, the State Park issued an order on Friday morning to evacuate hundreds of summer campers and immediately close the State Park.

The evacuation order included the lighthouse keepers residing at Big Sable Point Lighthouse as well as the keepers for the Ludington North Breakwater Lighthouse who are housed at the state park residence by the Pines Campground. Although the lighthouse was outside the potential flood plain, the keepers (and their vehicles) would have been totally stranded had the dam broken and the bridge swept away. It was only with great reluctance the keepers were forced to pack up and move out. Veteran keepers John Topping, Ed Crabtree, and Bill Steib were heard to grumble something about “*they wouldn’t make REAL lighthouse keepers abandon their posts.*” They were particularly troubled about the need to postpone their planned salvage operation on a vessel washed up on the beach north of the lighthouse. (In truth, the stranded “*ship*” was a kayak that had been swept over the dam, down the river, into the Lake, and around the Point during the storm. It did conjure up images of those brave lake rescues of by-gone years!)

Then decisions had to be made about resolving the homeless state of our twelve displaced lighthouse keepers. The five Breakwater keepers were sent home since their week-long tour was scheduled to end on Sunday night anyway. Things were a bit trickier for the two-week Big Sable keepers because most came from out-of-state (Virginia, Ohio, and Chicago.) Not knowing whether the State Park would be closed two days or two months, the Association put the keepers up for a night at a local motel and then moved them into the house at Little Sable Point at Silver Lake State Park over the weekend. By Monday, the waters at Hamlin Dam and Sable River had started to recede and M-DOT inspections showed the bridge was structurally sound. The keepers were allowed to return to Big Sable later Monday when the Park was officially re-opened.

Ludington and points northward sustained significant water-related damage and inconvenience from the storm. Roads were washed out, basements were flooded, power was disrupted, but fortunately there was no loss of life. The Association was impressed and pleased at the crisis-response by Ludington State Park Manager Dan Flaherty and State Park officials who were highly sensitive to the needs of our keepers. They went out of their way to keep us abreast of developments and decisions. Thanks, too, are extended to our lighthouse keepers who remained cool, calm, and collected despite the uncertainties posed by the storm and evacuation. It reminds us how blessed we are to have volunteers who love a good adventure and are flexible and cooperative with the subsequent decisions and inconveniences.