Jerry Harkenrider
Knoxville, TN 3791

I met Jerry and Lois Harkenrider June 13, 2011 in the parking lot of Little Sable Point Light located on the shores of Lake MI near Silver Lake, Oceana County.

We greeted each other and Jerry pointed to LSPL and said, my mother Pinky and step father Henry Varina was the last keeper of this light and I lived in this lighthouse until it was closed down in 1955. Henry Varina was head keeper of LSPL Aug 1948-Jan-1955, Jim Bellows was the assistant keeper and when they closed LSPL my step father took the position of Keeper of Big Sable Point Lighthouse Jan 1- 1955-Sept 30-1965 to retire.

I was completely ECSTATIC! They just completed a long drive from Knoxville, TN Jerry with 4 large boxes of artifacts in his car which he is donating to the Oceana County Historical Society tomorrow. I am meeting Mort Wiegand, one of my classmates from the early 1950’s from the one room Willson Schoolhouse of Oceana County.

Mort Wiegand, secretary of SPLKA and Jerry Harkenrider went to school together as they attended and one room schoolhouse near Mears, Michigan and the two of them shared a lot of memories and photos and chuckles of their past.

Later in the evening, my husband and I took Jerry and Lois up to BSPL and so enjoyed walking down memory lane with Jerry’s unfolding memories. Jerry graduated from Ludington High School in June of 1960 and was accepted at Michigan College of Mining and Technology at Houghton and received a full tuition scholarship for 4 years and remained at Houghton until graduation in the summer of 1964 Jerry lived at BSPL from January 1955 thru 1959. In the following pages you will read Jerry Harkenrider’s story of reflections on his childhood and Lighthouse Years at Little Point and Big Point Sable Lighthouses from 1949-1964 and view many photos of keeper Henry Vavrina of Little Point Sable dated: 1948-1955 and Big Sable Point dated: 1955 -1965 which is very interesting.
Artifacts Donated by Jerry Harkenrider

Stainless steel vacuum coffee pot used at Little and Big Sable Point Lighthouses

Table lamp from Little Sable Point Lighthouse with US Lighthouse name plate

Fire extinguishers from Little Sable Point Lighthouse
Tea kettle used at both lighthouses usually placed on the radiator in the kitchen of Big Sable to add moisture to the air in winter months.

Flat iron used for ironing at Little Point.

Funnel used to strain fuel for the lanterns at Little Point.

Aladdin wick used in kerosene lamps.

Box of Aladdin Wicks for lanterns at Little Point.

Box of mantles for lanterns at Little Point.

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The Old North Breakwall...

The old north breakwall off Ludington was once made of heavy planking as this photo owned by Russ Grimes Ludington shows have changed.

Pinky's fishing license. She was one of the first women in Michigan to have one. She and Hank would set nets off the beach of Big Sable to get food for the table.

They guard the shoreline.

Lighthouses stand the test of time.

Jerry making pottery at a street fair in Marysville California in 1970.

Big Point Sauble Light Reveals Heroine Role

The Big Point Sauble Lighthouse is sentry for mariners for almost 111 years. Provided safe harbor to the shipping industry throughout the Great Lakes. The lighthouse is one of the few that are surrounded by water on all sides. It was light in winter but had to be guarded. The searchlight was turned on to mark the passage.

Article from Pinky's scrapbook.

Article from Pinky's scrapbook.

Article from Pinky's scrapbook.

Article on North Breakwater at Ludington from Pinky's scrapbook.
Reflections on my childhood and Lighthouse Years at Little Point and Big Point Sable Lighthouses

1942-1964

These are my reflections of my memories as a child from early on until I left Big Point Sable Lighthouse after graduating from Michigan Tech in 1964. These early recollections are mainly from discussions with my Mom...Elizabeth “Pinky” Corder Harkenrider Vavrina Cousineau..... She has related to Jim, my brother, and me the history of our move to Michigan as follows.....

We were both born in Chicago, Illinois in an area known as the “East Side” near the Indiana border around 100th and Ewing Ave. My parents, Elizabeth (Pinky) and John Harkenrider were married in 1937 and had their first child, James John on May 19, 1940 and I was born on August 30, 1942. My father, who had a hearing disability, never was in the military but worked in the steel mills in South Chicago as did most of the male family members who lived in the area. My mother worked at American Maze, a corn processing plant. One uncle had a summer cabin at Silver Lake and many of the family members would use it in the summers for vacations. Near the end of the summer of 1945 while we were returning from the Silver Lake cabin my mother saw that a farm was for sale near Mears, it was known as the Insing Farm and was located one mile west of Mears. So they stopped and asked about the property which comprised of 40 acres, a three bedroom home, 2 barns, a chicken coop and a two car garage. The price quoted was $4,500. Mom, who wanted to move from Chicago, convinced my Father to make the offer on the place, putting a down payment of $5.00. That was all they could spare after a week at the cabin. They told the Insing’s they would be back the next summer to finally purchase the property.

During the winter of 1945-46 my parents received a call from Mrs. Insing saying that she had another offer on the property and that if my folks really wanted it they needed to finalize the deal soon. This prompted a discussion with Mom’s Aunt Mi Mi for a loan and the final decision to move to Michigan in early 1946 to the Mears location...and that is what we did in early February of 1946. I was 3 and my brother Jim was 5 at the time. Jim went to school in Mears, as did I when I got old enough in 1947-48 school year. My father got a job in Muskegon at a foundry without much problem and the family settled into farm life. This was quite a change for my parents and resulted in many arguments about staying in Michigan or moving back to Chicago, because my father did not really want to be that far from his relatives. Such as it was things deteriorated considerably in their relationship which resulted in a splitting of their ways and my parents then divorced in the summer of 1948, my father moving back to Chicago and us leaving, but not selling the farm, and moving into Hart. The farm was rented to friends, John and Peggy Dinges.

My mother got a job in Hart as a waitress and we lived in a rental apartment on Wood Street during the time the divorce was final. During and following that time Mom became acquainted with Henry “Hank” Vavrina who was the Assistant Lighthouse Keeper at Little Point Sable Lighthouse at the time. He would stop in at the restaurant and they became friendly and eventually they started “dating as it were at the time” and eventually decided to marry. Hank had been a widower for 5 years and had two daughters, Shirley (1/30/33-8/3/99-Hart Cemetery) and Henrietta “Etta” (5/6/35-10/24/92-Mears Cemetery). Hank and Mom married in August of 1949 at a Justice of the Peace in Hart and had their reception at Flor-A-
dale Resort at Silver Lake. Mom revealed that on one of their “dates” where she was invited with us to a Sunday dinner at the “Light”. A Jeep trip ensued down the beach, across the channel from Silver Lake and continuing down the beach. On their return the Jeep got stuck in the channel and it took much effort and wading in the creek to get them out. Mom, who came dressed in new blue jeans and top, upon leaving the channel, was blue from the waist down because of fading of the new jeans, and of course not revealing this to Hank, his girls or us at the time.

After their marriage we then moved to the Lighthouse and things changed considerably as to our lifestyle. We, having lived in the “luxury” of most conveniences at the “farm” we were thrust into a more primitive lifestyle, not having running water, toilets or regular electricity. There were two hand pumps on our side of the house, one at the kitchen sink and one outside the entrance door. The house was split down the middle to accommodate two families, each with equal quarters. Soon after we moved to the Lighthouse, Hank was promoted to being the head keeper. The Assistant Keeper was a young Coast Guard person with a small family after that. There was a 2-holer outhouse for each family, a small chicken coop and a barn which had been converted to a 2-car garage. We also had a set of rabbit hutches for both families to use. The cooking stoves and refrigerators were all powered by propane and there was a large wood-fired cook stove in the kitchen which was used only in the winter, a coal fired potbellied stove in the living room to heat that floor, which was up a ½ flight of stairs up from the kitchen and a fuel oil heater in one of the 2nd floor bedrooms. There was also a basement ½ stories below the kitchen part of the house. There was a “you flush with a bucket” toilet in the basement which we were only allowed to use in the winter and then only during stormy weather. Baths were taken usually once a week in a large wash tub either in the kitchen or in the basement depending age and sex – my brother and I were always in the kitchen – and the parents and girls used the basement. Lighting consisted of kerosene lanterns and our radio was powered by a 12 volt car battery. There was a small generator which was used to periodically recharge the radio battery and for an overhead light in the kitchen when we had company. It was also used to run Mom’s Sears wringer washing machine. Laundry was done and hung in the basement during the winters. In the summer it was done out on the sidewalk, which surrounded the lighthouse, and then line dried outdoors.

The girls attended Hart High School and we were enrolled at Wilson School. Since there was no bussing at that time we were driven to school every day by either Hank or Mom depending on Hank’s 24 hour on/24 hour off shift. Mom and Hank were both hunters and fishermen and in late fall they sometimes would leave the area to go deer hunting.
hunting for a week. Since there was no one to drive us to school, we 4 kids stayed at home....enjoying not having the parents there and also not having to go to school. It was quite a treat for us and for our parents too, I am sure. Needless to say we often got into situations which were not reported to the parents on their return....but the “larder” was always empty of the “good food”!

Living at the Lighthouse was both very enjoyable and lonely at times.... In the winter we manly stayed inside because of the cold and such.... but walks down the beach on clear days were very enjoyable. Many times we would take our toboggan up the hills behind the Light on the hill we called Saddleback and spend the day sledding down it. We of course read a lot, did our home work, played card games and listened to the radio a lot during this time. In the summer we split our time between the farm and the Light, but we stayed mostly at the farm because we had a garden there. There were a lot of tourists who would visit the Light by walking down the beach because the road to it was closed to them. Many times we would be having lunch or dinner at our kitchen table, which was located in the porch area adjacent to the kitchen, and they would knock on the door or windows and ask if they could climb the tower. On Thursday Mac Woods from Flor-A-Dale Resort would sometimes “Scooter” people to the light for tours as that was the only day it was allowed for the public to climb the tower. During our time at the “Farm” we of course enjoyed the modern conveniences again. It was also a time away from school and a chance to earn some money. We had chickens at both the Light and the Farm. One summer Jim raised turkeys for his 4-H project at the Farm. Silver Hills Farm was right next door to us and we were always able to get a job picking cherries there also. Mom knew the foreman of the place, Clarence Peterson and his wife, as well as Mike Cousineau who worked there. She, in the summer, would work there cleaning the main house at Silver Hills before the owners, Paul Weiner, his wife and son, would come for their week or two stay in the summer. She also worked in the Cherry Processing Plant in Mears. Jim, some friends in the area and I would sometimes venture on our bikes as far as Hart to treat ourselves to a Frosty located on the corner of Fair Grounds Road and Main Street... that was quite a treat for us and a long bike trip too.

On Friday nights there was usually a drive -in- show in Mears, which consisted of a bed sheet strung between poles in an open area around the corner from the blinking light. We would ride our bikes there with a drink and a chunk or rope which we lit to keep the bugs off. A hat was past to cover the costs, which for us was usually 10 cents if that. In the summer of 1953, while we were staying at the farm, I was earning some money by working at the Weiner farm picking cherries. I had taken a break while my bucket of cherries was being weighed and was petting the farm dog, a Dalmatian who I had played with often before this, when it turned on me and bit me in the face. It happened so quickly I did not realize how bad I was bitten. Mike Cousineau was there and he immediately covered my wound with a clean cloth and proceeded to rush me to the Hart Hospital which at the time was located across the side street from the Post Office. Mom, who was working at the Cherry plant, was notified and met us at hospital. Mom told me after that when she saw the damage she could see my back teeth exposed
through the tear in my cheek and felt maybe I would have to be transferred to Hackley Hospital in Muskegon. Dr. Robinson, our family Dr., was summoned and he said he could repair the damage. As it turned out he did a fantastic job and was able to repair and reconstruct my lip as well as sewing up my cheek....I think it was said I had over 60 stitches maybe even more. After being released from the hospital and having all the stitches removed I was told by Dr. Robinson to keep the scar moistened with lard during the healing process. I did this for at least two months and the results were that I had very little scaring, mainly on my upper lip only, which in later years I have hidden with a mustache. I did not require any plastic surgery. Mr. Weiner covered all the bills and the dog was not put down at Mom’s request. Mom was asked often why she never sued Mr. Weiner and she said it was not his fault and he was gracious enough to cover my bills and besides he was a good friend and neighbor.

While at Willson School we of course had a school house of friends, since it was one room and 9 grades with an enrollment of probably 30 plus kids. Mrs. Peterson is the first teacher I remember. A white haired, friendly soul who would arrive early to stoke up the furnace in the basement. She would come out from there with a coverlet on her head which kept the coal dust off her snow white hair, before starting classes. As I recall she lived in Mears in a white house around the corner from the blinking light towards Hart. This was early on and then she was replaced with Mrs. Coleson, who lived on a farm a couple of miles from the school, and had a couple of kids going there also. We at times would spend the night with them. Quite a treat as we would be able to play in their barn and romp around not in sand but in the fields and on solid ground. I remember one time playing hide-and-seek in the barn with the lights off, not remembering I was up a flight and ran full speed off that level, ending up in a hay mound one floor below, laughing all the way down and not injured. Why or how we survived our childhood sometime I will never know.

I vividly remember one incident when Jim and I rode our bikes down to the “termite bridge”, the one Mac Woods used to access the dunes, to do some fishing. We had our black lab mix dog with us named Ike. When we got there, there was a vehicle parked nearby but no one in the area. As we began fishing off the bridge, Jim started throwing sticks in the water for Ike to swim to and retrieve. There was a turtle, we thought, in the water and Jim would throw sticks at it but it wouldn’t move and when Ike got near it he would shy away. Then all of a sudden Jim called to me and said we have to go home and he hopped onto his bike and off he went. Not knowing what was going on I didn’t think a thing about it and got on my bike and followed him home with Ike at a leisurely pace. When I got there Mom was on the phone, an old crank type wall mount. I remember our number was one long and two short and she was talking with the police in Shelby, as that was where the phone was connected to. She kept asking me if there was a body in the channel and I said I didn’t see one but Jim insisted that when Ike swam past the “turtle” the ripples moved the thing and Jim saw an ear. The Shelby police contacted the Hart police and they came out to the channel where we met them and sure enough there was a fellow they surmised who had a heart attack and fell off the bridge into the water. That was the fastest I have ever seen Jim ride his bike home as I usually beat him all the time.

During the summer my parents would have friends over to the “Light” and had many beach parties. A few of those consisted of a large gathering where a Keg of Beer was required to satisfy the thirsts of the adults present. The duty to transport the pitchers of beer to the beech as the Keg was kept in the garage
on ice was Jim’s and mine. Needless to say there was a lot of sipping of the foam on our walks to the beach with full pitchers. With the warm summer evenings and a few “sips” we became drunk and very sick....we did not do this too often as the remembrances of past experiences was vivid in our minds and we did not enjoy the aftermath of our encounters with the suds. I must admit it did not sour me in later years from enjoying beer though.

Jim and I were, by no mean, without our faults and we fought often, both in and out of school. I remember many instances where we tangled during recess and came back in the school still cursing each other and Ms. Coleson would direct one of us to go out and get a willow switch and she would take each of us over her lap and use it on us in front of everyone. We of course “never” reported this to our parents as that would result in even more severe punishment. I also remember one time during the summer when Jim and I were “playing” in the yard at the farm. One thing led to another and we ended up kicking some of the spokes out of each other’s bike wheels. I got so upset that I told him I never wanted to see him again and begin walking toward Mears. 

He took off in the other direction and I got scared and decided to hide under the pump house across from the Church next door and promptly fell asleep. It was dark by the time I woke up and headed back home. By this time the folks had reported me missing and the police and Mom were out looking for me. I knew I was in big trouble and crawled up onto the front porch and was crying when Hank heard me and came out. He was so glad to see me I never got punished, but Jim did for causing the fight in the first place..... I never pulled that stunt again.

In the summer of 1954 we were informed by the Coast Guard that Little Point was to be abandoned as a manned facility, electrified and the dwelling torn down. We were told that by the first of the year power was to be delivered to the facility and that Hank was to be transferred to Big Point Lighthouse north of Ludington as the head keeper. By this time Shirley and Etta had already graduated from Hart High and Jim was attending there, I being the only one still going to Wilson School. Shirley had moved to Chicago to live with an Aunt and work there and Etta had moved out and was working and living in Fremont, where she had met a beau. Etta became engaged and was to be married in February of 1955 so it was decided that Hank would go onto Ludington and Mom, Jim and I would stay at the farm until after Etta and Richard “Dick” Nielsen’s wedding in early February as the reception was to be at the farm. Things progressed as planned and they did get the electrification done on time and we were “evicted” from Little Point right after Christmas of 1954.

Moving to Big Point was uneventful as far as I remember, but starting school in the middle of the school year sure was not. Talk about the country boy coming from a one room school going to a big city school, I was sure the perfect example. The first day I left every book that was given to me in the desk of the room I was in, not realizing that you took them with you and put them in your locker....which I also kept forgetting the combination too. I eventually got adjusted to the big city school in Ludington and to riding a bus to school, also. Jim, of course, adjusted much better that I as he had already been going
to high school in Hart. We also had neighbors our own age at the Light which was a big, positive, change. At Big Point, there were three families in residence. The 1st Assistant Keeper was Homer Meverden and his wife Gertie along with their two kids, Beverly (Billie) and Leon (Weggie) who were still at the Light. Their oldest son Leslie had already moved out by the time we arrived. Billie was my age and Weggie was Jim’s so they helped us get adjusted to the new schools quickly. Homer was from the “old guard” as was Hank. They both came from the old Lighthouse Service instead of the Coast Guard which was then running Lighthouses. The father of the third family was the 2nd Assistant Keeper, a young Coast Guardsman who was married and they had a small child.

Having electricity and indoor plumbing again was great and it did not take long to get used too, however, having a fog horn did. I still remember vividly my first encounter with it....we had been at the Lighthouse about a week when a snow storm occurred in the middle of the night, requiring the fog horn to be operational. My bedroom was on the second floor facing the lake, and when the horn blew I was awakened promptly and did not get any more sleep that night. It took awhile but I eventually got use to the sound. I remember a few years later I answered the phone and it was a call from the Coast Guard Station in Ludington and they were asking whether we had the fog horn on....I answered that I did not know but told them to wait a minute....the fog horn went off and I answered yes....so I guess it just goes to show you that you can get used to anything after awhile.

We became close friends with the Meverdens....especially Mom and Gertie. In the winter when Hamlin Lake would freeze over it was time for spear ice fishing. Homer and Hank would haul the gals fishing shanties out onto the lake. Usually at least 3 days a week Pinky and Gertie would drive us in the morning to get the bus at the entrance to the State Park, drop us off, and then they would go and spend the balance of the day in their shanties and then pick us up when the bus dropped us off around 5 o’clock. They also hunted together often, went to the bars and had a number of parties. There were a lot of new things to get use to and explore at Big Point. With the State park within a couple of miles of the Light, the summers were filled with new temporary friends, riding our bikes, swimming and exploring the beach to see what nature had washed up from the previous night’s storm. During the summers of 1957-60 I had a job working at the Beach Store at the State Park. It was located in the basement of the Beach House at the entrance to the State Park. I swept floors and worked behind the counter for the large sum of 50 cents an hour. The people who leased the store opened a small concession near the beach on Hamlin Lake where they rented aluminum fishing boats and also had a small store there too, mainly selling candy, pop and cigarettes. I worked there one summer and Billie then worked at the Beach House store. To make extra money in the summer we would recycle pop bottles, scavengering them from trash cans, the beach and even from the river from Hamlin Lake. Some of them were in pretty bad shape which required a lot of scrubbing to clean them up before we could get our deposit of 2- 5 cents for each of them.

One winter Jim and I got a job at one of the two bowling alleys down town Ludington setting pins....this was before automatic setters....which required a lot of coordination and energy....and that job taught me that my summer job was a whole lot easier than that one. Jim got a job working as a stock boy after he turned 16 in the summer of 1956. He saved his money and bought a used 1952 Ford car. This was his pride and joy but it eventually created a lot of tension in the family, especially with Hank. Jim’s thinking...
was that he was free to do whatever and whenever he wanted to as long as he stayed in school did not set well with Hank and one night in the spring of 1957 they had “words” and Jim left home. He went and stayed with a high school buddy in Ludington. Mom of course, was very upset but she did get Jim to promise he would finish High School. He kept his word even though he did not like school at all but did graduate in June of 1958 and then soon after joined the Navy. He did his basic training at the Great Lakes Navel Training Station and then went to San Diego. His car was kept at home and I was allowed to use it, to my great joy, but with a lot of stipulations of course. The Navy was good for Jim.... and eventually he realized Hank was not such a bad guy and things were patched up between them. It made life at home much better after that.

Mom started working in Ludington as a waitress at a dinner restaurant on Ludington Blvd. after Jim moved out. She always encouraged me to get a college education and therefore she knew extra funds would be needed to pay for it. After that job she landed a job as a bar tender at a bar on James Ave. near the Lode Theater, but across the street. She was always a people person so did well at both places.

I researched a number of colleges to attend and applied at three, being accepted at Michigan College of Mining and Technology at Houghton. I was able to secure a full tuition scholarship for 4 years which helped out considerably. I graduated from Ludington Sr. High in June of 1960 and enjoyed my last summer home, free from school, but still working part time at a couple of different places. In September we loaded up the Chevy Station Wagon and headed up to Houghton. Got my room assignment and moved my stuff into Wadsworth Hall. My folks, before continuing on with a trip to Washington State, said they would not be back to Houghton until the summer of 1964 for my graduation. I took that as my direction, I had better get my degree in 4 years or I’d be in deep do-do, and this I did. There were 5 of us from my graduating class that went up to Tech that summer, all in different majors, mine being Civil Engineering. I was not allowed to have a car at Tech, so I hoofed it wherever I needed to go, I lost weight and studied hard. The first summer I had to attend summer school to get my surveying courses completed as that was the only quarter they were offered. Getting that completed gave me a background so that the following 2 summers I landed a job with the State of Michigan on the US 31 freeway construction project near Whitehall. I lived at the Light during those summers and drove back and forth to Whitehall. I was able to save money to use for school, so that made it easier on my parents. I had to hitch rides home, for a fee, during quarter breaks and for the summer....400+ miles and no freeways.....usually took at least 8 to 10 hours if the weather held. The last quarter of my Sr. year the folks let me take the Ford Falcon they had purchased a couple of years before up to school.....big mistake....my grades took a nose dive but I was able by the skin of my teeth to graduate in June of 1964.

I had interviewed with a number of different firms and had 3 job offers all with highway departments, Michigan, Washington and California. I took the one in California as Jim was living and going to college near where my job offer was located. My folks gave the Ford Falcon as a graduation gift and I packed up and left in mid June 1964 for Marysville, California. I started to work for the California Division of Highways on July 1. Jim amazed us all by entering college after being discharged from the Navy in 1962 to pursue a teaching degree. As it turned out he transferred schools in the fall of 1964 after I started to work in Marysville and finished his schooling in northern Minnesota.

That about covers the high-lights of my youth before I ventured out on my own.       Jerry Harkenrider

Hank's Photo for an article in Wonderland Sunday Press
September 16, 1973

Hank Vavrina in Navy Uniform late 1930's early 1940's

Hank Vavrina photo for article in Wonderland
Sunday Press Magazine, Sept 16, 1973

Homer & Hank at the site of boat motor wash up in 1962

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