Mae Biemeret
Interview: October 19, 2011

October 19, 2011, Big Sable Point Lighthouse received a call from Mae Biemeret, former wife of Charles or (Chuck) Hawley who worked for the U.S. Coast Guard and they lived at the Big Sable Point Light from 1963-1966 with their 2 daughters.

Mae stated that she has never returned for a visit in over 40 years and was going to be in the Ludington area on October 23rd and was wondering if she could make a visit to view the lighthouse and the living quarters where she once live and asked if that was possible.

Needless to say, we were elated and very excited to be able to meet Mae and her husband, Gabe Biemeret and hear of her past memories from the 60’s.

Executive Director of SPLKA, Cindy Beth Davis-Dykema, quickly informed the Ludington Daily News of the up-coming surprise visitor for photos and coverage and sent off an e-mail to me, Gerry Thornton.

I telephoned Mae Biemeret October 19, 2011. Mae was very busy packing to make the trip to Ludington, but did give me briefly some memories from her years 1963-1966 spent at BSPL.

You will be able to read these memories in the following pages from the Ludington Daily News articles and the Interview conducted at the lighthouse on October 23, 2011, written by the volunteers, Gloria Kett, Sue McCullough and Executive Director, Cindy Beth Davis-Dykema.
Remembering
Life at the lighthouse

Former lighthouse keeper returns after 45 years

BY KEVIN BRACIENSEKI
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

HANLIN TWP. — Mae Biemeret found the Big Sable Point Lighthouse living quarters were similar but changed since she lived there more than 40 years ago, but she found the grounds around the building were not at all like she remembered.

"It has really changed outside, there are so many sand dunes that weren't here when we were here," said Biemeret, who lived at the lighthouse from 1963 to 1966 with her husband of that time, Charlie Hawley. "The outside has changed a lot, but the inside looks just the same.

Charlie Hawley washes a dog in the sink at the quarters for lighthouse keepers at the Big Sable Point Lighthouse. The photo was taken when Hawley worked for the U.S. Coast Guard and lived at the lighthouse in the 1960s with his wife, Mae, and their two daughters.

She also remembered a two-car garage at the site and said it stood near a huge cottonwood tree that was cut down about 10 years ago, leaving a 40-foot stump behind.

"It was wonderful, we loved it, this whole area where the sand dunes are was all beach. We'd have bonfires down there on the beach," Biemeret said about life at the lighthouse in the early 1960s.

"It was really interesting here in the winter," she added.

Biemeret visited the lighthouse Sunday for the first time since ending her role as a lighthouse keeper in 1966. She came to Ludington with her current husband, Gabe Biemeret, and visited with Sauble Points Lighthouse Keepers Association Executive Director Cindy Beth Davis-Dyken and current lighthouse keepers Sue McCullough of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Gloria Kel of Benton Harbor.

Gabe and Mae Biemeret of Watersmeet visited the Big Sable Point Lighthouse Sunday, the first time Mae visited the site since she lived there from 1963 to 1966.
Visiting historians

Dave and Gloria Kett of Benton Harbor came to Mason County to spend the past two weeks at the Big Sable Point Lighthouse teaching others about the building's history.

"We like history so we enjoy telling people about the history of this lighthouse," Gloria said. "We enjoy interpreting history."

Dave said they used to notice the lighthouse while boating on Lake Michigan.

"And from the water, this lighthouse is just beautiful," Gloria said.

Then one year, they stayed at Ludington Municipal Marina and caught a ride out to the lighthouse and learned about the lighthousekeepers program.

"And we've been coming here ever since," Dave said, adding that they've stayed four times in the past six years.

"It's a nice getaway, to get away from cell phones that don't work here and there's no Internet — it's almost like camping and it's such a glorious area," Dave said. "We particularly like it this time of year, we like the fall."

— Kevin Braciszewski

Mae Biemert, left, who lived at Big Point Sable Lighthouse from 1963 to 1968, talks about her experiences with Lighthouse Keepers Association Executive Director Cindy Beth Davis-Dykema Sunday.

Lighthouses: Memories from life at the point

FROM PAGE 1

She told about living at the point and only going to town about once every two weeks for groceries.

Mae also remembered the time her husband and another U.S. Coast Guard employee stationed at the lighthouse recovered the body of a person she said had jumped off a car ferry and then washed up at Big Point Sable.

Her oldest daughter was born before the family moved into the lighthouse, Mae said, and the youngest was born in Ludington during that time.

She remembers being upset after learning President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963, and remembers that the first piece of furniture she bought was a chest freezer she used to store black sweet cherries that cost 10 cents a quart back in the 1960s.

Gabe Biemeret enjoyed his time at the lighthouse Sunday too.

"It's a piece of her history so it was nice," he said about the visit. "There were some stories I hadn't heard yet."

"It meant so much for me living here and it was nice to share it with my second husband," Mae said.
Remembering life at the lighthouse  Former lighthouse keeper returns after 45 years

KEVIN BRACiszESKI - DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER
Monday, October 24, 2011
Former lighthouse keeper returns after 45 years

BY KEVIN BRACiszESKI

DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

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“The outside has changed a lot, but the inside looks just the same.

She also remembered a two-car garage at the site and said it stood near a huge cottonwood tree that was cut down about 10 years ago, leaving a waist-high stump behind.

“It was wonderful, we loved it, this whole area where the sand dunes are was all beach. We’d have bonfires down there on the beach,” Biemeret said about life at the lighthouse in the early 1960s.

“It was really interesting here in the winter,” she added.

Biemeret visited the lighthouse Sunday for the first time since ending her role as a lighthouse keeper in 1966. She came to Ludington with her current husband, Gabe Biemeret, and visited with Sable Points Lighthouse Keepers Association Executive Director Cindy Beth Davis-Dykema and current lighthouse keepers Sue McCullough of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Gloria Kett of Benton Harbor.

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LIGHTHOUSE

From page A1
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Sunday, October 23, 2011

Mae Biemeret, wife of former Lighthouse Keeper and Coast Guardsman Charlie (Chuck) Hawley (1963-1966), visited BSPL with her current husband Gabe Biemeret. This was her 1st visit since ending the tour of duty 45 years ago. She was surprised to see the large dunes along the shoreline near the lighthouse and remarked about this several times. In the 1960's these dunes did not exist and the large flat beach was a place to play and swim.

The head Lighthouse Keeper, Henry (Hank) Vavrina, had a “shack” just north of the lighthouse where they often picnicked together during the summer months. She loved the summers here. She remembered picking black cherries for 10c a quart and freezing them in their chest freezer which was the only piece of furniture they brought with them.
The inside of the living quarters looked very much the same to Mae. She and Chuck along with their two daughters Bonnie and Cheryl occupied the upstairs east rear apartment. The kitchen (now the volunteer Keeper’s kitchen) had not changed much. She had a picture of Chuck giving their dog a bath in the sink – it could have been taken today. The present doorway entering the west living room was a solid wall in the 60’s, separating the east kitchen from the west apartment bed rooms occupied by Henry Vavrina’s family. Mae’s living room was the present east living room, much the same as it is today. Part of it in the southwest corner was made into a sleeping area for their 3 year old daughter Bonnie. The large closet became a playroom for Bonnie. She had a picture showing a sparsely furnished room with a small TV. The antenna was mounted to the roof.

Mae did not socialize with the other keeper’s wives; “Pinky”, wife of Henry Vavrina and “Gertie”, wife of Homer Meverden. They were older than Mae and had no children in the lighthouse.

The keepers worked 8 hour shifts when Mae first moved into the lighthouse. This proved to be very hectic for everyone so they changed to 24 hour shifts enabling each to have 2 days off, a much better schedule.

Mae did not know details of the Keeper’s duties as she was a busy mother of two young daughters and being a housekeeper. She recalls climbing the tower only once or twice during her stay at BSPL.

The winters were long and brutal, often very windy and at times quite scary. The Keepers kept busy with maintenance duties but Mae found the days to be very boring and lonely.

She recalls one winter story when they were ice fishing with friends on Hamlin Lake. They had a VW bus and were encouraged by their friend to drive on the ice to
the fishing shanty. They were skeptical but they went out anyway. Later, almost immediately after returning home, they received a phone call stating that 5 cars had fallen through the ice. She did not recall any loss of life but she sure remembered the event vividly. It was later reported in Outdoor Life magazine.

Chuck built a toboggan for the girls and pulled them behind the truck. He also built a canoe in the garage located on the south side of the lighthouse.

Mae met Chuck at a USO event in Baltimore, MD where she grew up. Later when Chuck was assigned to the BSP lighthouse, she traveled by train with their daughter to Grand Rapids where Chuck picked them up. Their second daughter was born in Ludington Hospital. Mae was happy to leave ‘city life’ for the lighthouse life. Her parents visited occasionally from Baltimore and enjoyed their visits. Mae returned to Baltimore one Christmas but otherwise celebrated all holidays at the lighthouse.

Mae told a story about an ugly duck that had been spotted by the keepers. Very often flocks of ducks would be seen overhead and one duck in particular was considered very ugly. Chuck decided one day to hunt the flock down and shoot the ‘ugly duckling’. While he was away another keeper notified Mae that the ugly duck was outside standing on the grounds. Quickly she grabbed Chuck’s 22 and shot the duck (she had never shot a gun before). She was sure Chuck would be pleased but he was not happy! Mae cooked the duck and invited the other keepers for dinner, however, the duck was very tough and dry. Not a good day! To make matters worse the Coast Guard called during the dinner requesting that the keepers retrieve a corpse on the beach. When they picked up the body, the head fell off, and we didn’t know for sure if this was the person who jumped off of the ferry.

The outside of the living quarters all looks the same as when I lived there. The kitchen sink and cabinets are the same. I was totally shocked at the outside, surrounding area. First of all the road from the park is more narrow. The whole area riding to the lighthouse was more open. The dunes are really closing in the whole area. I think I would have to say, that the highlight, was rounding the corner and seeing the structure as it was 46 years ago! I loved touring the whole place. I had never been upstairs above the gift shop. I climbed the lighthouse, although I had forgotten there were 2 narrow hatches at the top.

She remembers an article in the BSPL Newsletter dated September 23, 2000. Hank and Carol Jones, US Coast Guard staff stationed at Big Sable in the 1960s when they presented the association with an antique metal wick box once used at the light station of BSPL. Carol and hank lived in the apartment before we did. Their daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter accompanied them on their nostalgic visit to the lighthouse and enjoyed seeing the second
assistant keeper’s quarters where Hank and Carol lived during their two years at Big Sable Point.

The lighthouse keepers and Cindy couldn’t have made us feel more at home. I was totally surprised that there is no TV reception. Yes, we actually had TV reception in the 1960’s.

Mae was so happy to be able to visit BSPL, share her memories with current volunteer keepers, taking pictures, purchasing souvenirs, and able to show her husband something of her life almost 50 years ago. We spent 3 wonderful hours at Sable Point Lighthouse. While we were being driven back to the parking lot, I broke into tears. It was an awesome experience!

When you are a volunteer for SPLKA, at the end of each day at each Lighthouse facility, you are required to jot down your highlights of the day. This written Interview was taken from documentations from the volunteers on October 23, 2011. Below are Mae’s final remarks after visiting BSPL.

My visit to the lighthouse was a one in a million experiences!! The lighthouse keepers were wonderful. They took photos, and one of them interviewed me with her phone. The newspaper reporter also took photos and interviewed me. They made us feel completely welcome along with coffee and muffins. We were there for 4 hours. The article was in the Ludington Daily News paper Monday and Tuesday, October 24 and 25, 2011.

Mae and I kept in touch over the winter months and I so enjoyed writing this Interview and would dearly love to meet Mae Biemeret of Watersmeet, MI.

Below is a news paper clipping dated October 10, 1965.
Body Found On Beach North Of Ludington

Oct. 10, 1965

Man's Identity Unknown, Plan Autopsy Today

By ROSS MILLER JR.

The decomposed body of a middle-aged man was found washed up on the Lake Michigan shore at mile marker 19 of Ludington Sunday afternoon. Identity of the man or cause of death is not yet known.

Manistee County sheriff officers and Ass. John Pieper, state medical examiner, report that the body was found at 2:15 p.m., by four hunters as they were hunting along the beach near the end of Holland Drive near the Bayshore Shopping Center.

The body was found in the sand, the conduct's clothes, jewelry, and even the strand's identity were washed away years ago when there were buried seawater. The sheriff's office and the medical examiner's office were notified of the discovery.

Dr. Herbert Spenko, the medical examiner, believes the body was kept in the water for some time, possibly years, and his age. He added that the body is probably that of a man who had been dumped into a cistern and thrown into the water.

The cause of death is unknown, but most of the victim's clothes, shoes, and a portion of his skull were found. Tests to determine the victim's cause of death will be performed by Dr. Spenko.

The body was delivered to the Manistee County Medical Examiner's office. The cause of death will be determined by the medical examiner.