

A Nautical Heritage Discovered

-by Sherrie Eldridge

“How many women your age can claim that their great grandfather and grandfather were lighthouse keepers on the Great Lakes from the 1850’s to the 1950’s?” my uncle Dave asked as I stood weeping by the gravestone of the grandparents I never knew. “They would have loved you so much,” he said repeatedly. “They would have been so proud of you, Sherrie”

In 1945, Uncle Dave’s sister gave up a baby for adoption. That baby was me. No one in the family knew about me until one of his relatives mentioned that I had written a book on adoption. Within days Uncle Dave contacted me via phone and two weeks later my husband and I drove to southern Indiana to meet him and his wife for a reunion.

They lavished us with love, memories, and old family photographs. I learned that my grand father was a lighthouse keeper for 30 years, with his last assignment being the Indiana Harbor light. My great grandfather manned a total of ten lights on the Great Lakes over a 25 year span.

Sometimes I wonder what it was about the Great Lakes that wooed them into service for so many years. Was it the splendor of the waters or a love of adventure? I thought back over my life, realizing that I had that same love for the Great Lakes. Nothing has ever been more invigorating than walking barefoot on the shores of Lake Michigan.

In my naiveté, I thought a lighthouse keeper was just somebody who walked the spiral staircase and lit the light each night. But when Uncle Dave told me about accounts of ships going under, with light house keepers making heroic efforts to save the lives of men, I was astounded. My grandfathers must have been very brave men and my heart swelled with pride for being their granddaughter.

I also learned that my grandfather was a remarkably creative man who passed some of the long, lonely hours on the lights that separated him from his wife and children by building wooden replicas of Spanish sailing ships. It took him nearly four years to complete each one because he was such a stickler for details.

Automobile manufacturer, Henry Ford, learned of my grandfather’s creations and made a personal trip to Cheboygan, my grandfather’s hometown, to purchase one. Uncle Dave’s notes say that Mr. Ford took it home in a specially-constructed box that was bolted to the rear of his car. This ship later was placed in the Fairlane Manner Museum in Dearborn, Michigan and remains there until this day.

Two years ago, Uncle Dave and Aunt Marge invited us to accompany them on a Michigan Lighthouse Tour, visiting all the lights where our ancestors once worked. Uncle Dave lived at Middle Island, near Alpena, Pt. Iroquois, near Brimley for nine years as an elementary school child, and the Marquette Harbor Lighthouse for five years.

When we visited Pt. Iroquois, near Brimley in the Upper Peninsula, we climbed the narrow, steel-meshed staircase to the top. Each step seemed sacred, knowing that my grandfathers had walked the same steps decades ago. When we reached the top, I looked over majestic Lake Superior and saw the shores of Canada, lined with multi-colored leaves. When we returned from the top, we visited the room where Uncle Dave once lived and I listened with pride as he shared details of how daily life unfolded years ago at this light.

I had the privilege of knowing my Uncle Dave for two short years because he passed away peacefully just a few weeks ago. One moment he was sitting at his computer desk and the next, looking into the eyes of the Lord he loved. Prior to his death, he had become like a father to me, and it is difficult to imagine life without him.

As I reflect on those two precious years, I realize that Uncle Dave not only gave me the amazing details of my birth history, but also a sense of belonging in my birth family that adoptees don't often possess. I think often of when we were first reunited and he wrapped his arms around, saying, "Sherrie, you're a Clark now and you can't disown us!"

That's just the kind of guy Uncle Dave was! Always loving. Always reaching out to his family and friends.

Just weeks prior to his death, he contacted the editor of this publication to discuss writing an article about his life on the Lakes. A month ago he sent me a box with the family's history and photos. I believe he knew his life was drawing to an end.

"You make something out of these details," he said in the enclosed note, and then added, "Sherrie, I want you to be the family spokesperson."

What a privilege!

Sherrie Eldridge is the author of *Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew*, *Twenty Life-Transforming Choices Adoptees Need to Make*, and President of a non-profit adoption educational organization, Jewel Among Jewels Adoption Network, Inc. (www.adoptionjewels.org)

