

# LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER

## SARAH UNWIN SHERIDAN

1887–1967

She Kept the Light...

*A mother's struggle to keep her family together through hard times*

In June 1909, Sarah Sheridan arrived at a remote Saugatuck beach to join her husband George, the newly-posted keeper of the Kalamazoo Lighthouse. The couple brought with them two young sons. A third son would be born at the lighthouse in 1911.

Summers were filled with fun and visiting family but the winters were lonely and desolate. And the constant vigilance required of a lighthouse keeper was taking its toll on George's mental health. Increasingly, he suffered from what was then called "bouts of melancholy."

In the summer of 1914, the family received orders that the Kalamazoo light would be closed in October and George would be transferred to the lighthouse in St. Joseph, Michigan. Sarah was made Keeper by Temporary Appointment and took over the light-keeping duties so George could seek treatment for his depression at a sanatorium. While keeping the light, Sarah also made arrangements to rent lodging in Saugatuck until the family could move to St. Joe. On October 6, 1914 Sarah lit the Kalamazoo light for the last time. That same day an automated navigational light on a tower at the new channel entered service.

Relieved of duty, the family spent that winter in Saugatuck but George's depression only deepened. In March 1915, George left again to seek treatment. A few days later Sarah received word that George had committed suicide.

Suddenly Sarah was a widow—responsible for three children aged nine, six and four—and unprepared to do any sort of skilled work. A newspaper account of George's death concluded that "their case presents another argument for a pension for government employees who have given the best years of their life in service to their country." Sarah's childless sister in South Chicago pressured Sarah to give her boys up, declaring a widow with three little children could never survive.

But Sarah did survive. According to the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, "after a long conference with [her son] 10-year-old Joseph ... [Sarah] decided to make every effort to hold her fatherless family together."

To earn an income, she took in washing, much to the dismay of her Chicago family. Later she worked as a maid at the Hotel Butler. She scrimped and saved to purchase a house at 241 Culver. In the summers she moved her family to a tent in Cook park so she could rent out the family house for additional income. And all the while she nurtured her three sons and somehow found time to be a life member of the Saugatuck Women's Club, the Saugatuck Congregational Church and a twice worthy matron [presiding officer] of the Order of the Eastern Star, an axillary of the Masons. She cared for her community as well as her children.

A woman of grit and gentle persistence, Sarah Sheridan crocheted her final afghan square in 1967 at age 88. Although she is known as the Kalamazoo Lighthouse's last keeper, the flame she kept alive was that of the Sheridan family who are to this day an integral part of the community.

Sarah Unwin Sheridan researched by fellow  
Team HerStorian, Sally Winters based on work  
by Stephen and Jack Sheridan

*Sally Winters*



The lighthouse, perched on low, rolling dunes at the mouth of the Kalamazoo River was windswept, remote and had no electricity or indoor plumbing.



Sarah Sheridan fishing from the lighthouse dock, circa 1910. Fresh food was at a premium. The only milk served at the lighthouse was powdered.



Sarah and her father Joe Unwin camping at Cook park in 1924. The boy with crutches is Sarah's second son James who was recovering from a high-jump mishap.



Sarah Sheridan, 1965. The water behind her, where the Kalamazoo Lighthouse once stood watch, is often called the Ox-Bow lagoon but to the Sheridan family it will forever be the Old Harbor.



When the river view from Sarah's Culver Street home was blocked by Saugatuck's first condo development in 1978, the Sheridan family built a retail space in the front yard, complete with a replica light on the roof, for a boutique named "The Lighthouse Keeper." The light remains today as the beacon for Kindle & Co.