

Children of the Light

Books based on stories from William Curtis and Emily (Rohn) Betts of Rock Island, Wisconsin

By Mary I. Schmal

When I was a middle school child, reading one of Enid Blyton's "Famous Five" novels, *Five Go to Smuggler's Top*, propelled my instant love for lighthouses. For my entire life, the enchantment has stayed with me. Now I have my own series, the books set in the late 1800s at a remote island lighthouse in Door County, Wisconsin.

From Book 1 (Prologue): *The Wandering Pirate Ship*:

With quick feverish strokes, Lillian swam toward the small boat. Her long skirt and high cloth boots slowed her down, but she had neither time nor strength to remove them. At the very least, they kept her warm in the chilled waters of Lake Michigan. *Will I make it? Swim faster, faster!* Through blurred vision, Lillian

forced her eyes to close and her body to push ahead.

Her conscience tormented her. *It's all your fault, Lillian. This horrible situation is because of you!* "Hold on!" she shouted although no one heard.

One more stroke. Lillian's thoughts raced faster than her arms could propel her forward. *Then one more. A few more and I'll be there!* Finding herself far from land in the middle of Lake Michigan, she felt destined to finish what she had begun. *I have to do this!* The vessel from which she had jumped lagged in the distance as she swam closer to the rowboat. If her rescue failed, no one could save her, but she didn't care. Her body felt numb as she struggled to fight against the cold. Then suddenly, her shivering limbs relaxed.

Warm water, its color looking distinctly red, seemed to surround her as she felt an instant thaw. Lifting herself from the mysterious surrounding warmth, the contrasting cool air blowing against her body, she shivered without losing a second of focus.

She threw one arm, then another over the weathered sides of the tiny craft, her momentary joy turning to rage.

"Leave him alone, you monster! Pick on someone your own size, you big brute!" Then without warning, long hateful

arms grabbed Lillian's chilled flesh, pulled her upward, and slammed her to the floor of the rocking boat.

Six books in my *Children of the Light* series take readers into history from 1884-1886 to a lighthouse whose keeper at the time was William Curtis Betts. Because Betts is the great-grandfather of my sister-in-law, Lorraine "Lori" Betts Lawrenz, I was able to secure family letters, newspaper clippings, and stories passed down through the years. The couple, who had nine children, served for sixteen years as keeper and assistant keeper at Pottawatomie Lighthouse on Rock Island, Wisconsin. Reading entries in Bett's official lighthouse logbook urged me to write this history, turning many actual occurrences into historical fiction adventure/mystery stories. Enhancing each book are clever pen-and-ink drawings by artist Leanne R. Ross.

The books revolve around nine children, seven in one family and two cousins from a neighboring lighthouse. They find adventure and grow spiritually. Each is associated with one of the nine fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, kindness, self-control, and faithfulness. The children either demonstrate traits of a particular fruit or their need to attain it. Three mysterious women wearing glittering ruby, garnet, and tourmaline jewelry become their friends and mentors. This is the fiction that I interweave with actual tidbits of Betts' history. At the end of each book, an "Historical Note from the Author" tells readers what is true about the story. In many cases, the truth is stranger than the fiction—all of it gleaned from keeper Betts' lighthouse logbook or the family scrapbook! The series features not only the lighthouse in which Betts served, but also the original limestone tower built on Rock Island in 1836.

As readers note the day in which the action takes place, they step into history to



Pottawatomie Lighthouse near Green Bay, Wisconsin, as it appeared when William Curtis Betts served there as the lighthouse keeper from 1879 to 1886.

experience the authentic weather. When I write about a storm, it happened. Snow in May? It happened. A mysterious sighting on the frozen lake? That happened, too. All weather information comes from William Betts' official lighthouse logbook!

Life was different before televisions, radios, cell phones, and computers. Lighthouse living was hard, but good, and children enjoyed themselves. Professor Jonathan Roux, from the education department at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, writes in his review, "Events, thoughts, and attitudes from [the children's] lives back in the 1800s have

a striking similarity to many events in the world of 2021 as well." Originally intended for middle school to young adult readers, reviewer Leola Abraham admits that adults will enjoy the stories as well. She writes, "These are the kinds of books to read in front of the fireplace on a cold night. I enjoyed all of them, and I am well into my golden years."

For more information, visit www.childrenofthelightbooks.com

Editor's Note: Mary I. Schmal, a retired teacher of 40 years, has taught students from grades K through college, her last eighteen years as a writing and literature instructor at Wisconsin Lutheran High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

