

## Near Death Off Racine Reef

*This article appeared in the December 8, 1908 issue of the Racine Journal:*

### SKELLING TELLS OF NIGHT ON LAKE

FELT HIMSELF FREEZING WHILE  
LIGHTS OF SEARCHING TUG  
WERE IN SIGHT.

WAS OUT FOR NINE HOURS

Temporary Break in Engine Caused Gasoline to Freeze and Young Man Was Buffeted About Water Helpless—Feet and Arms Are Badly Swollen as Result of Trip.

Adrift and at the mercy of a forty mile gale and in zero weather for nine hours in a disabled naphtha launch was the terrible ordeal passed through by Edward Skelling, assistant keeper of the Racine Reef lighthouse, who went adrift Tuesday evening, the story of which was told in these columns last night. Young Skelling, with the launch, arrived here on the Goodrich steamer at 1:30 o'clock this morning. He immediately went to the home of Martin Knudson at the North Pier lighthouse and remained there all night and today. His feet and legs are swollen from the exposure to the elements and he is sore all over his body, besides having a sprained wrist, received while making a desperate attempt to start the engine of the launch when drifting in the lake.

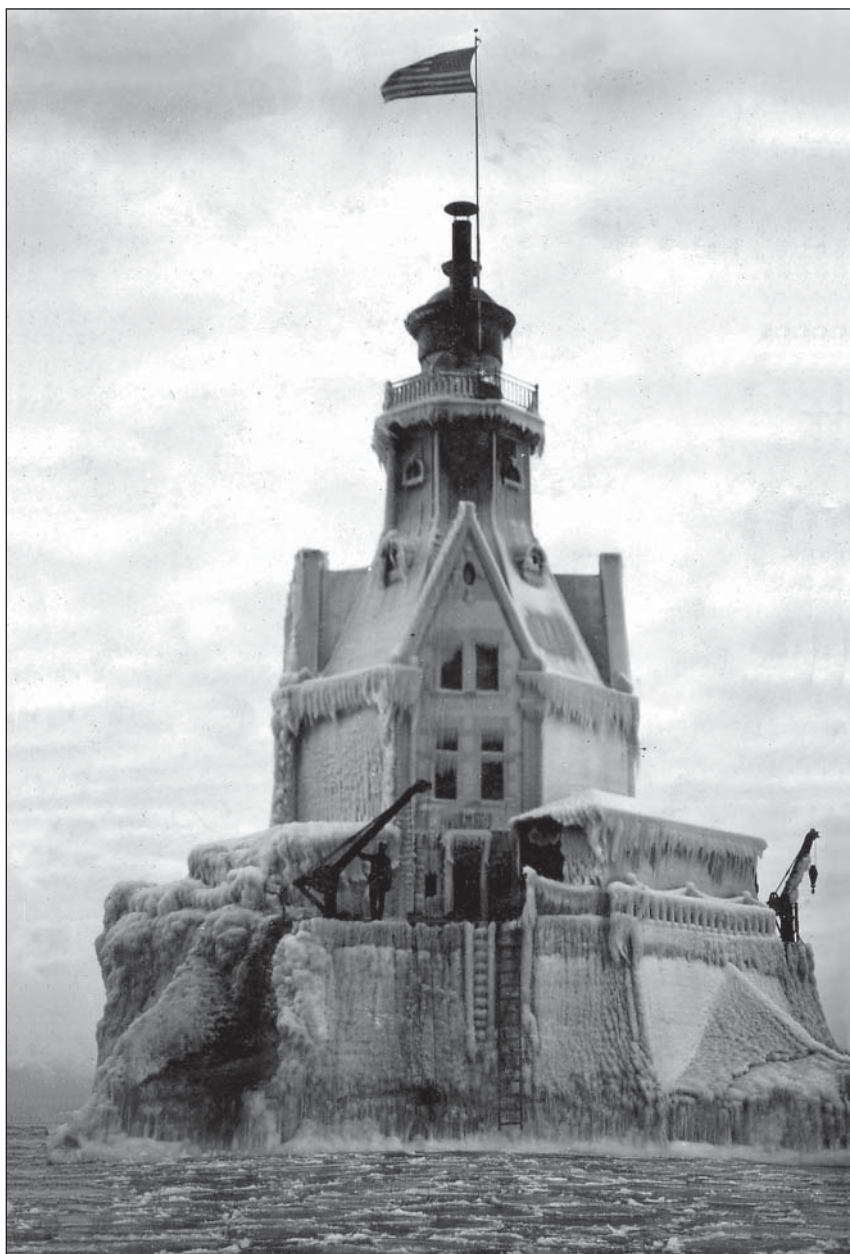
### Was A Desperate Battle

This morning, young Skelling was interviewed at the lighthouse and while he admitted his escape from death was what might be termed a miracle and his sufferings more than he could tell, he did not force his story at all, rather permitting the newspaper men to get it by questions. In brief, it was a fight for life on one of the coldest nights of the winter. Skelling

said that he had been assistant keeper of the reef lighthouse for a long time. It was his custom, as others, to come ashore at intervals in the naphtha launch furnished by the government. Tuesday was his day and he steamed in early in the afternoon and stayed in the city until about 4:30 when he boarded the launch, started up the engine, and departed lakeward for the crib light.

### Wire Comes Off

When he had reached a point close to the reef house, one of the wires became detached from the engine and it stopped dead. With some difficulty, he repaired or adjusted the wire, but upon attempting to start the engine, found that the gasoline was frozen, and do what he might, it was impossible to get the engine going. Then he knew he was adrift in a disabled



Kari Gordon, family collection

*Due to its location between Milwaukee and Chicago, the Racine Reef light was active all year. While located but a short distance from shore, there are numerous accounts of keepers getting into serious trouble as they made their way to and from the station.*

boat and that his only hope was making the crib or having a harbor tug come out and pick him up. He managed to guide the boat close to the lighthouse crib, and yelled that the engine was dead and that he could not start it.

### Threw A Line

Captain Corness and Joseph Craam, the two men on the crib, got busy and Craam threw a line toward the launch, but it did not go quite far enough; again he threw the line and Skelling made desperate efforts to get hold of it, but failed. Frantically, he cranked the engine and tried to start it, but he sprained his wrist and had to give up. Then he kept the boat headed in the wind and seas. The men on the crib sent up signals of distress and watched their comrade disappear in the distance, and they realized that he would perish unless help came from the shore.

### Darkness Came On

As the sun disappeared in the west and darkness came on, Skelling lost heart and gave himself up for lost. Water was being washed over the sides of the boat and wet his clothing, and although he was warmly dressed, he commenced to get numb. The boat was half filled with water and he bailed it as best he could. His overcoat froze stiff; his feet and hands commenced swelling and he could feel himself slowly freezing and knew that he could never survive the night on the rough lake and in the extreme cold. He strained his eyes for a boat or a tug, but none came and he thought of home and friends and how long he could stand the cold and pain that racked his body.

### Saw The Tug Dixon

Suddenly, far to the north, he saw a light flashing and a tug running about the lake and blowing its whistle. He knew it was the tug *S. O. Dixon* and Captain Maginn and others out looking for him. He had no means of signaling them and the tug remained too far to the north. For more than an hour he saw the flickering lights and hope revived in breast, and he believed that in a few short moments he

would be rescued. But in a short time, he lost sight of the tug and lights. Eagerly he watched, but the *Dixon* had returned to port for a supply of coal and rapidly the launch and the young man drifted to the southeast.

### Gave Up All Hope

The wind roared, the seas increased, and the only part of Skelling's body that

kept warm was his head and ears, for he had on a warm fur cap. He felt that his feet and legs were terribly swollen, and also his hands and arms. But he watched and hoped. The dreary hours wore on. He knew that he had been out nearly six hours, and it was only a matter of a short period before he would lose consciousness and succumb. He lay down in the bottom of the boat and

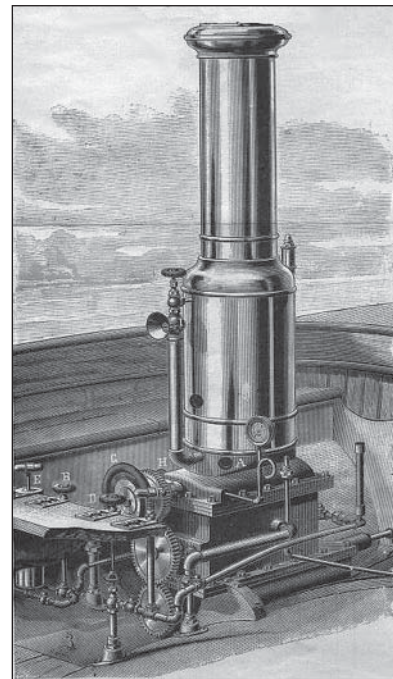
### What was a naphtha launch?

Naphtha is a volatile and highly flammable liquid which was an early derivative of the gasoline refining process. Patented in 1883, the naphtha engine was in reality a steam engine which used naphtha as both the fuel which fired the boiler and as the fluid within the boiler which was vaporized to activate pistons, and thence turn a flywheel.

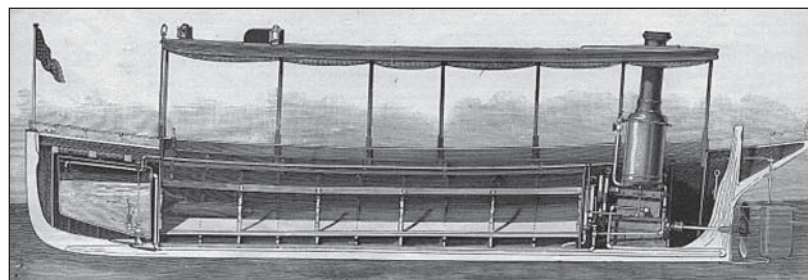
After their introduction in the 1890's, Naphtha launches quickly replaced steam launches as the self-propelled pleasure boat of choice for three primary reasons: First, they were relatively easy to operate. Second, they eliminated the "dirty" job of feeding coal into the boiler, and third, they circumvented the Steamboat Inspection Act of 1871, which required that all operators of conventional steam-powered vessels be professional steam engineers.

While a sealed container filled with a highly flammable liquid over a roaring flame represented a unique opportunity for some devastating fires, and there were indeed some

devastating conflagrations, the naphtha powered launch proved to be a relatively safe vessel, and only disappeared from favor after the introduction of safe internal combustion engines in marine applications in the early 1900's.



*A naphtha engine of the type which powered lighthouse service launches.*



*A cross-section drawing of a typical mid 1890's naphtha launch*



*Built in St. Clair, Michigan in 1884, the Kalkaska was a typical Great Lakes “Lumber Hooker,” and was used to transport lumber from around the western lakes to the Pilsen Lumber Company yards in Chicago.*

awaited the final summons. Who can imagine the sufferings of that strong and healthy young man, just in his prime, dying in a storm on the lake and the port of Racine only a few miles away, and a tug on the water searching for him, but not able to find the boat. Up to this time it was clear, with the moon shining. Then a fog commenced to gather and that meant all hope of rescue gone.

### Hope Is Revived

Gazing out on the water, Skelling thought he saw the light of a boat. At first he believed it was his imagination, but it was not. The light came toward him and the launch. With a mighty effort, he aroused himself and shouted with all his remaining strength. Nearer and nearer came the lights and louder Skelling called. His cries were heard, the boat slacked speed, circled around and he fell to the bottom of the boat almost totally exhausted. The crew of the ship instructed him to catch a line. With his feet swollen almost double their size, hands benumbed, he called he would do the best he could. He got the line, and tied it to the launch. The launch was hauled close to the steamer, another rope was tossed to Skelling, and he was hauled on

board – he was saved, snatched from the jaws of death.

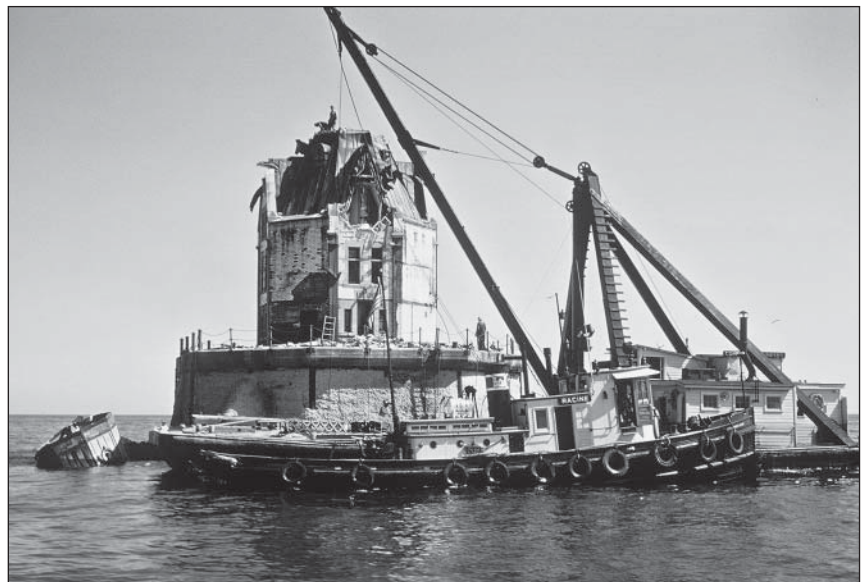
### It Was The Kalkaska

It was the lumber-laden barge *Kalkaska*, in command of Captain Gunderson, bound for Chicago that discovered the launch and its occupant. Although the seas were heavy and wind blowing, the weather bitter cold, Captain Gunderson

gave his orders and bravely stood by and saved a human being from death. Once on board the ship, everything possible was done for Skelling. His feet, hands and body were rubbed and he was given stimulants and soon revived and told his story. He had been adrift and exposed for nine hours. He said that he thought he was four miles west of the reef light and way to the southeast when picked up. Soon he was in a warm and comfortable bed and arrived in Chicago about 5:30 in the morning and immediately phoned to Racine that he was saved.

### Launch On Steamer

Although his feet and hands were still swollen, and he suffered from his sprained wrist, he saw that the naphtha launch which had been saved also, was placed on the Goodrich boat. Then he went to Chicago lighthouse station and remained there all day, attending to his feet and hands. He arrived here at 1:30 this morning and, as above stated, is at the Knudson home. Skelling said that he would fix up the launch today and possibly return to the lighthouse sometime this afternoon. He is loud in his praises of Captain Gunderson and the crew of the steamer that saved him, and says that a braver commander does not live.



*Determined to be no longer necessary, and serving as an “attractive nuisance,” the Army Corps of Engineers was contracted to demolish the lighthouse in 1961.*