

Horton's

Michigan Notebook

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Enjoying the outdoors in Michigan during the recent Presidents' Day Weekend

By Steve Horton

This ribbon of highway that curves and twists through the middle of the Old Mission Peninsula provides a host of scenic vistas to feast your eyes on. Driving along it on the Sunday morning of the recent Presidents' Day weekend proved no exception. We had left Traverse City after a bountiful breakfast and were enjoying the sightseeing as we headed north to the lighthouse.

We were not alone either. While the holiday is observed ostensibly to celebrate past Presidents of our nation, most folks, us included, use the three-day weekend as an opportunity to enjoy a mini-vacation. The hotel where we booked our lodging was packed with young families, the restaurants had waiting lines, and finding a parking spot in Downtown Traverse City that Saturday night was near impossible.

So, it was hardly a surprise—once we reached our destination—that the parking lot next to the lighthouse had a goodly number of vehicles. The Mission Point Lighthouse is part of a park; an expanse of land that includes surrounding woods with trails for hiking in the warm weather and cross-country



Mission Point Lighthouse

skiing in the winter as well as a respectable length of sandy beach that fronts the eastern shore of Grand Traverse Bay.

In past Presidents' Day weekend visits to this locale, we had gone snowshoeing. This time around, we opted to take a stroll on the beach. Many others had made the same choice. The bay was frozen from shoreline to shoreline further south, but here only a few yards of water—the shallow area bordering

the shore, had frozen. At the north end of the park frozen shards of ice, resembling broken glass, had piled up onto the sand, pushed there by the northern winds blowing across Lake Michigan. The ice had a bluish tinge

Forbidding. But also picturesque. A combination that's alluring to "we" human butterflies as we flutter ever closer to the flame of the candle. A few daredevils were climbing up onto the ice formations, the dangerous sea just a few feet away. The main purpose was not adventure, but rather to take a selfie or a group photo, using the formations and open water as backdrop.

In fact, nearly everyone strolling on the beach had their phone out, using it as a camera or unable, even amid this out-of-doors splendor, to entirely abandon social media and the virtual world. I took one selfie, looked at the result, and promptly erased the image.

There's a sign in front of the lighthouse that informs visitors that they are standing at the 45th Parallel—halfway between the equator and the North Pole. I've always had the sense that northern Michigan—all of Michigan, in fact—was closer to the harsh elements of the pole than it was to the languid tropics. Perhaps we are when it comes to overall climate and our prevailing (human) temperament, but distance-wise we're a happy medium. Part of the temperate belt.

The waters of the bay to the west and of Lake Michigan to the north and northwest have a slight chop due to a slight breeze. And they look plenty cold. Otherwise, they seem calm enough. Still, the least little storm can get them roiled up. The purpose of this facility, when it was manned and in operation years ago, was to warn ship captains and

crews, via a beacon of revolving light, to steer clear to the rocky shoals and shallows near this sliver of land that protrudes out into this great lake.

This artifact from a bygone time—pre-electric and pre-autonomous—and dozens of others like it that grace the coastlines of our five inland seas have become tourist attractions. In better weather, this one is open to the public.

Visitors (for a small fee) can take self-guided tours through the building and even climb all the way up to the tower, learn about its history from its opening on Sept. 10, 1870 until it was decommissioned in 1933, and find out what life was like for the lighthouse keeper and his family during the late 19th and early 20th centuries when this neck of the Michigan woods was much more remote. The building includes small museums on the first and second floor, along with a gift shop.



A few of the fishermen trying their luck at the West Bay in Traverse City

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, back in Traverse City, we park near the marina and walked over to the beach. No one is

sunbathing on this February afternoon and only a couple of people are strolling along the sands—unlike what was happening 20 miles to the north. Still, it's a busy place. This area of the West Bay had frozen over, and a few dozen fishermen are scattered about. I also noticed a few ice skaters, plus several people just walking about. I join the crowd.

"How thick is the ice?" I asked the first fisherman I came across.

"About six inches," he said.

"What are you fishing for?"

"Well, most of us are after perch," he answered.

"Hope you catch a few," I offered as I departed.

Wandering about, I noticed that most of the anglers are sitting on buckets; however, there are quite a few who have brought portable shanties, attached to sleds and featuring a bench to sit on. Ah, American ingenuity. Nearly all the augers, used to drill holes, were gas-powered. No hand-operated relics for

these modern sportsmen. As I walked, I kept an eye out for any of those holes. But mostly I took short, cautious steps, not wishing to slip and fall.

If you like being outdoors in the winter, and on a frozen lake, then this setting and day offered near perfect conditions. A bright sun, a decent temperature, and only a slight breeze.

True, they and I missed an opportunity to learn more about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln—whose February birthdays were the precursor for this holiday and our two most influential chief executives. And I doubt too much thought was expended on the other men, well known and more obscure, who have led our nation.

But I doubt that too many of us felt any guilt on that Sunday, enjoying as we were a respite from the rigors of normal routine and the challenges of winter drives on slippery streets and digging out snowbound driveways.