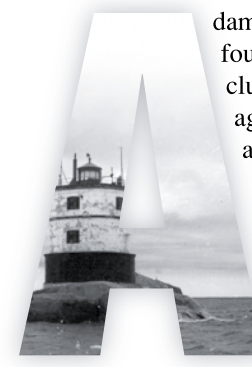


ESCAPE FROM RED ROCK

BY ANDREW HIND

Photos courtesy Dave Thomas Collection,
West Parry Sound District Museum

ADAM BROWN'S ICY-WHITE CHRISTMAS MIRACLE AT RED ROCK



Adam Brown had to admit things looked pretty bad. The weather was foul, as foul as he had seen in his thirty years upon Georgian Bay. Ice clung in sheaths from the lighthouse he tended, angry waters crashed against the sides of the tiny island, and dark, grey clouds hung low and ominous in the sky.

It was Christmas Eve. He was alone in the lighthouse on Red Rock Island, three weeks after he was due to be taken off the God-forsaken rock. But the prospect of spending the holiday season alone was not what was playing most heavily on his mind. Instead, Adam was more concerned with remaining alive. Would he live to see the New Year, or would he be one more victim claimed by Georgian Bay?

Brown was originally a fisherman operating from the nearby Mink Islands. As such, he was a veteran mariner, well acquainted with the tempers of Lake Huron and hardened to her oft-times harsh climate. With the demise of the local fishing industry in the late 1890s, he took up the job as light-keeper at Red Rock, existing alone on the rock from the time the break-up of the ice signaled the start of the navigation season in the spring until late November, when winter once again closed the lake to shipping.

The first five years were uneventful, but 1903 promised to close out with drama to spare. Brown was supposed to have left the lighthouse for winter quarters in late November, but the ship that was supposed to pick him up didn't arrive on its scheduled date. Nor did it arrive the next day, or the day after. The weather was simply too foul to risk an entire crew to rescue one man. Days turned into weeks, and still Brown remained a prisoner on Red Rock.

Come Christmas Eve, Brown no longer held out any hope of rescue. The ship that was to have picked him up was almost a month overdue, and he doubted one would come now that the lake was a daily maelstrom. No, he thought to himself, I'll have to get myself off this rock, and I have to do it now.

By this time the lighthouse was sheathed in ice, looking more like a frozen stalagmite than a navigational aid. Brown had to literally chop his rowboat free from its encasing. It was a mild victory when at last the boat was released, but when he leaned over the railing to lower the boat his heart sunk at what he saw. The ice that covered Red Rock had formed into razor-sharp ridges and jagged spear-points that were sure to rip the bottom out of the boat as Brown dragged it towards the open water.

Brown retreated back inside the lighthouse to formulate a plan. He scurried down to his workshop and quickly inventoried his tools and material as a prelude to determining his options. With a trained carpenter's eye, he decided he had the time and equipment to fashion a jury-rigged derrick that would allow the boat to be safely carried over the ice.

To Brown's relief, the hastily built contraption worked perfectly, and in short order the rowboat was bobbing in the cold waters of Georgian Bay. Hopes buoyed, the stranded lightkeeper climbed aboard the tiny craft and set his eyes upon the shore six miles distant.

Brown shoved off from the lighthouse that had been his prison for the past month and began to row towards the distant mainland. Adrenaline pumped through his veins for the first half-hour or so, helping him cut through the white-capped waves that threw the rowboat around as if it were nothing more than flotsam. But as time passed the short-lived rush of energy drained away, and as it did, the exertion began to take its toll.

Suddenly, the boat ran up against an ice-field that stretched as far as eyes could see. With no gaps in the icefield, Brown had no choice but to get out and walk across the ice.

Putting one numbed foot after another, Brown began to trek across the ice-floes.

* Sideroads of Parry Sound & Area

By the time the sun was high upon the horizon, the weather had begun to change for the worse. The sky turned steely and the temperature dropped rapidly. A frigid wind whipped up the waters behind him in an icy froth and swept in ominous, heavy clouds. Soon, snowflakes began to fall. Adam turned up the ice-crusting collar of his frayed coat and bent into the wind, driving himself into the gathering storm.

He had traveled two miles, but another four still separated him from the rocky shore ahead. Slowly, doubt began to seep in, diluting his faith, and exhaustion washed over his body. He was about to give up, submit to the cold embrace of death.

Then he heard it, voices out on the bay. Summoning the last of his strength, Brown put two fingers in his mouth and blast several sharp, shrill whistles.

Half a mile away, three ice-fishermen huddled in a drafty shanty, seeking the warmth of a pot-bellied stove. By chance, one of the men happened to duck outside when he heard the whistles. Realizing that someone was in danger out on the ice, the fishermen and his friends raced to the rescue. They made it just in time to save Brown's life.

Brown survived the incident with no ill-effects. Nor did the close brush with death turn him away from light-keeping. Brown returned to the isolation of Red Rock the next season, and for thirty-three seasons beyond that.

In fact, it was only when the government forced retirement upon the 75-year old veteran of the lakes in 1937 that he left Red Rock. It was a tearful day for Brown, because while there were surely many harrowing experiences and countless lonely days during his tenure at the forlorn lighthouse, it was also here that he experienced his one true religious experience.

How else does one explain his survival during the storm of 1903? He should have died upon that ice. Why hadn't his cold and hunger-addled body given out sooner? What providence had brought fishermen out on the lake that day, when they should have been home with their loved ones? Why had one of the rescuers happened to be outside in the cruel elements at the exact moment when Brown whistled with the last of his strength, and more importantly, how had he heard it over the howl of the wind half a mile away? There's no rational way to reconcile it all. It was a Christmas miracle.

Adam Brown died in 1968 at the age of 106. To the very end, his hard face would soften and his cold, blue eyes would melt whenever he spoke of that magical Christmas of 1903.

~11~