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## Whitefish Point Lighthouse: Lake Superior Sentinel

 By **Michael Salvarezza**
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Whitefish Point Lighthouse: Lake Superior Sentinel



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[The Whitefish Point Lighthouse.](#)

Photo by: Michael Salvarezza  
and Christopher P. Weaver.

Standing guard over the entrance to Whitefish Bay on the eastern end of Lake Superior in Michigan, and just a few miles from the Canadian border, is the [Whitefish Point Lighthouse](#). Comprised of a steel cylinder rising some 80 feet in height supported by a skeletal steel framework, this lighthouse lends a relative modern appearance, despite having been constructed in 1848 and first lit in 1861 during the start of the American Civil War. A true guardian over one of the nation's most infamous stretches of water, the [Whitefish Point Lighthouse](#) has guided countless vessels to safety over the years. Tragically, it has also borne witness to some of the terrible consequences of an unpredictable and often stormy stretch of water.



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[Huge iron ore carriers, much like the ill-fated ...](#)

Photo by: Michael Salvarezza  
and Christopher P. Weaver.

known as the St. Mary's River and Soo Canal while avoiding traffic coming the opposite direction. Combine these busy conditions with limited visibility due to fog and, often, snow squalls, and the recipe for disaster is evident.

In addition to these problems, the location of Whitefish Bay is at the far end of a large open expanse of water, and Lake Superior storms, which often originate in the Canadian Northwest and scream down over the lake, can churn these waters into truly monstrous seas. The ferocity of a roaring



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nor'easter covering over 160 miles of open water is almost unimaginable and waves can often reach heights of 30 feet or more.

While there are dozens of identified shipwrecks in the waters nearby to the lighthouse, perhaps the most famous of all is the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald, lying in 535 feet of water 17 miles northeast of Whitefish Point. The story of the Edmund Fitzgerald, made famous by Gordon Lightfoot in his haunting ballad "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald", is a chilling story of tragedy on the high seas.

The Edmund Fitzgerald was an ore carrier that plied the waters of the Great Lakes. When she was launched on June 7, 1958, she was the largest man-made object ever dropped into fresh water, measuring 729 feet in length. She was known as the "Titanic of the Great Lakes". On November 9, 1975, she was loaded with cargo and began crossing Lake Superior on a familiar run, heading east towards Whitefish Point. At the helm was Captain Ernest McSorley and onboard were 28 other crewmembers. Within hours, a storm blew up out of Michigan and began building terrifying seas on the lakes.

Throughout the night, the ship battled mightily against the raging seas. McSorley was attempting to steer his vessel across miles of darkened wilderness with waves as high as houses crashing chaotically around him. The wind howled at over 100 MPH. At 7:10 a.m. on November 10, a mate on a nearby vessel, the Arthur M. Anderson, radioed the McSorley,

"How are you making out with your problems?" he asked.

"We are holding our own." was McSorley's reply.

These would be the last words ever heard from the Edmund Fitzgerald. Sometime after this last transmission, the Edmund Fitzgerald sank in the stormy waters of the lake. The captain and crew all perished in the sinking, which must have happened suddenly since no distress call was ever made. Today, the wreckage is broken in multiple pieces, with her cargo of ore spilled across the bottom of Lake Superior. In 1995, the ship's bell was recovered from the wreck and is now on display at the Whitefish Point Great lakes Shipwreck Museum, located in the buildings that once were home to the Coast Guard personnel stationed at the light.

Ironically, though the lighthouse at Whitefish Point has helped countless sailors reach safety through nearly 150 years of service, this important navigational aid was inoperable the tragic night of November 9, 1975. As the Edmund Fitzgerald struggled through mountainous seas and terrifying wind and rain, the light and radio beacon at Whitefish Point suddenly clicked off, perhaps another victim of the ferocious storm. The Edmund Fitzgerald was alone that night in her battle with the elements.

The iron skeleton of the light, painted white, supports an octagonal parapet and lantern room. A red dome covers the lantern. Originally, a third order Fresnel lens was installed in 1857, only to be replaced with the present day optic, a DCB-

24. The entire structure was designed to alleviate stress during high winds.

In 1937, a sound building was added to the complex, joining the keeper's quarters, which were first built in 1861 and modified in 1894 and 1911. Other structures on the premises include a brick oil house (built in 1910), a woodshed added in 1922, a steel paint locker from 1890, two garages constructed in 1922 and a radio beacon.

The surrounding buildings were home to the coast guard personnel stationed at the light until 1970, when the light was first automated. Today, these dwellings are home to the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum, operated by the Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society, a group of scuba divers dedicated to researching and preserving the legacy of many of the shipwrecks of the Great Lakes.

The lighthouse and museum are open from Memorial Day to mid-October from 10 a.m. to 6pm, and there is a small admission fee. Nearby, the Whitefish Point Underwater Preserve is a section of water developed for scuba diving access to some of these historical shipwrecks. The cold water of Lake Superior prevents decay and many of these shipwrecks, although sunk decades ago, still appear to be relatively new. In addition to this, there is a wildlife sanctuary at Whitefish Point and the Michigan Audubon Society has established the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory, across from the light station.

Strolling the beach near the light station, one can still see today's modern ore carriers plying the waters of Lake Superior. Watching these impressive vessels make their way across the waters brings to mind the tragic fate of the Edmund Fitzgerald, and all the other unfortunate ships that have gone down in these waters over the years. And it serves as a reminder of the continued importance of our valued lighthouses. The light at Whitefish Point has numerous stories to tell. Perhaps the best stories are those that nobody knows...the countless untold stories of all those ships that depended upon this lighthouse to successfully reach home and the comfort of a safe harbor.

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