

U.S. Life-Saving Service Drama Plays

True Cape Cod Stories, 1904

*From the unit study,
Exploring the U.S. Life-Saving Service 1878-1915*

Rebecca Locklear

In the midst of a violent winter storm, most people huddle in the safety of their homes. Not my great-grandfather Ernest “Skipper” Eldredge. In his day, as a part of a seven-man crew, he helped row a wooden surfboat over mountainous breakers into the ocean to rescue crew and passengers on sinking ships. And he did that for fifteen years.

Rescuers, like Ernest Eldredge, were part of the U.S. Life-Saving Service, a government organization that existed between 1878 and 1915. During that time, thousands of ships sailed along the U.S. coasts with cargo, but because of storms, lack of navigational aids, and unreliable communication, many ships ran aground.

The purpose of the U.S. Life-Saving Service was to save lives. They were known as *storm warriors* or, as author Joseph Lincoln called them, *angels in oilskins*.

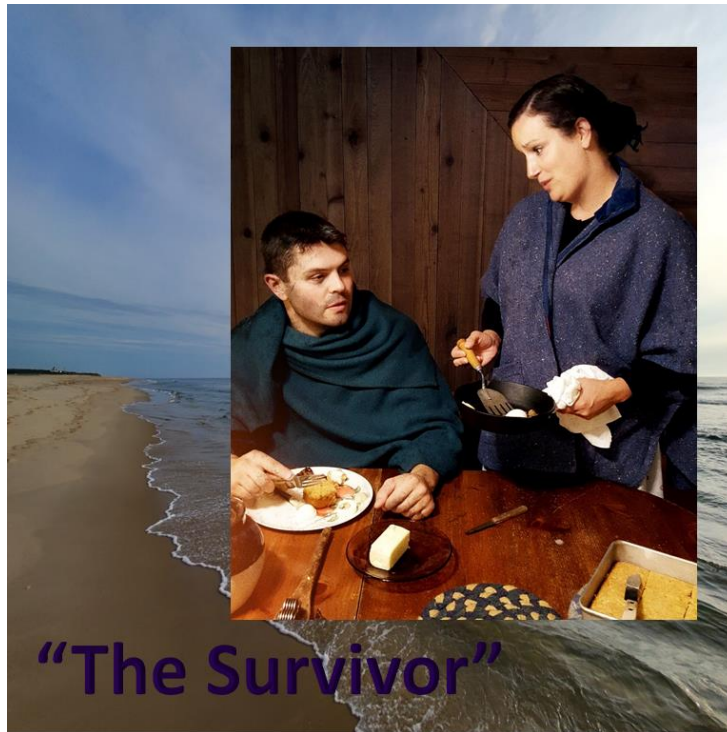
The U.S. Life-Saving Service was the forerunner of the U.S. Coast Guard.

My goal with two drama plays is for teens or adults to connect with men and women associated with these incredible search and rescue teams of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

“The Survivor” and “The Bird We Didn’t Eat”

Where are these plays used?

- History classes studying post-Civil War to World War I
- Maritime museums when focusing on the U.S. Life-Saving Service or search and rescue
- Drama Showcases – particularly because one play is nearly a monologue and the other has parts for seven guys



Summary: In 1904, a sailor was rescued the previous night from a stranded ship off Cape Cod, Massachusetts. How can he pull himself together as his mind recreates the scene of the wreck and rescue?

Type: Based on a true story

Time and Region: 1904, Cape Cod, Massachusetts

Grades: 9-12, adults

Cast: 2

Performance Time: 5 minutes

The Survivor

Rebecca Locklear

MRS. DOANE: *(bustles about in kitchen, getting breakfast ready for seven surfmen and the keeper. She will also serve the eight rescued crew members from the FUTURE. Her hair is up and she's wearing a long-sleeved, floor-length dress with a cardigan sweater and apron.)*

SAILOR: *(one of eight survivors, shaken up over near-death experience, enters kitchen with bruising on face and arms)*

MRS. DOANE: (*turns to see SAILOR*) Oh, you poor dear. Just come right on in and sit here near the stove. (*pulls out chair*) I've just added some coal. (*finds blanket*)

Here's a blanket to throw over your shoulders. (*puts over his shoulders*) It's a bit chilly for April, but 'tain't too bad.

SAILOR: (*nods head in thanks, adjusts blanket, just stares*)

MRS. DOANE: (*turns toward stove to pour coffee in mug*) I'm Mrs. Doane. My husband is keeper here. When it's his week to cook, I come on over and help...although thank the Lord, the men do their own dishes. (*gives SAILOR coffee*) Here's some coffee. Is that better?

SAILOR: (*nods, slight smile*)

MRS. DOANE: Land sakes it must be cold up in the bunkroom. Even with two horse blankets, I shivered all night. No wonder you're cold. (*checks corn bread in oven to see if done, takes it out, cuts it while talking*) My...between the fog and shoals and

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The kitchen of the Old Harbor Life-Saving Station on Cape Cod where the action takes place.

“The Bird We Didn’t Eat”



“The play was hilarious but brought out the stress the men were under.”
-Jenny U., Educator

Summary: Surfmen gather in the mess room at a U.S. Life-Saving Service station in a remote area on Cape Cod, Massachusetts in 1904. How did they handle duties? What practical jokes did they play on each other? Enter into the daily life at a search and rescue station.

Type: Based on true stories

Time and Region: 1904, Cape Cod, Massachusetts

Grades: 9-12, adults

Cast: 7

Performance Time: 10 minutes

The Bird We Didn't Eat

Rebecca Locklear

Scene 1 In the entryway of the life-saving station in November at 4:00 p.m.

SKIPPER1: *(comes in through front door from walking a long shift with a howling wind behind him, starts to take off hat, coat to put on hook, sees RALPH)* That's it for that watch, Ralph. Looks like the wind is shiftin'.

RALPH4: *(walking to entryway to go on his four-hour patrol duty shift, puts on coat and hat)* Aye-yuh. I'm ready for my four hours. See anything?

CHESTER3: *(has on coat, hat, boots, walks over and waits by door)*

SKIPPER1: Quiet as a mouse out there. Just eight passin' vessels.

RALPH4: Back at eight. *(exits outside with CHESTER to begin the four-hour "sunset watch" shift, walking in opposite directions; to CHESTER)* Wind is sure howlin'.

SKIPPER1: *(to BEN who is walking through, indicating kitchen which has kerosene lamp)* I smell somethin' in there, Ben. Doesn't smell like my wife's cookin' though. *(smiles, takes off boots)* Just two more days 'til my liberty day *(day off)*. I can taste the apple pie Hittie will fix. Who's doin' supper?

BEN6: That would be Jim. He went out and caught somethin'. Some bird.

KEEPER: *(walks by SKIPPER and BEN, to mess room, sits)*

SKIPPER1: *(to BEN)* It's his first time to cook, eh?

BEN6: *(moves to mess room with SKIPPER to sit down)* Yeah, I think so.

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Other Ocean-Related Books and Resources

