

POINT PINOS LIGHTHOUSE CELEBRATES

100th ANNIVERSARY

For 100 years a beacon of light has flashed nightly from the Point Pinos Lighthouse as a guide and warning to the many ships sailing off the rocky California coast.

Before the lighthouse was erected, the point of land had a long history of which we know little, and Indian arrowheads found here are the only remaining evidence of its earliest inhabitants. First seen by white men in 1602, it was named the "Point of Pines" by its discoverer, Sebastian Vizcaino. The building of the lighthouse was ordered in 1852, and completed two years later. The lighthouse was constructed of stone; the dirt around the building was shipped here from Yerba Buena Island in San Francisco Bay. The heavy lenses, prisms, and mechanism controlling the shutter were made in France by Henri Lapaute, a Parisian craftsman. Although this was not the first lighthouse established on the California coast -- beacons were placed on Point Loma, the Farallone Islands, and Alcatraz Island in 1852 -- it is the only lighthouse which still uses the original granite building and the original lenses and prisms. The only major change in the structure was made in 1939, when a new keeper's residence was built.

The light, which has burned continually through the years, has changed with the times. The first beam was equipped with a sperm oil lantern in which the oil was forced up from its tank to the light by a rude piston operated by gravity. A shutter moved by a falling weight mechanism rotated around the light, blanking it out during the eclipse period. Some years later kerosene was substituted, and in 1915 the light was electrified. Now a mere 500 watt lamp is used, but through a Fresnel lense placed 89 feet above sea level. The lense throws out a 29,000 candlepower beam which is visible 16 miles out to sea. The bulb now turns on and off to give the Point Pinos characteristic flash of 20 seconds, followed by a 10 second eclipse, but the old shutter mechanism and gasoline lanterns are kept in readiness in case of a power failure and have been used for several such emergencies through the years. The fog signal, too, has been altered in recent years, an air diaphragm horn being substituted for the siren signal. The two fog horns are turned on by the keepers whenever visibility is less than five miles.

In 1939, in the interest of National Defense, the U. S. Lighthouse Service was consolidated with the U. S. CoastGuard, and now, as men of the Lighthouse Service retire, they are replaced by enlisted men of the CoastGuard. The first of a long line of highly efficient Lighthouse Keepers was Mr. Charles Layton, who was succeeded by his wife, Charlotte. Another woman keeper was Mrs. M. E. Fish. More recently some of the keepers have been Peter Nelson, George W. Peterson, and Tom Henderson (who retired in July, 1954). At present the lighthouse is manned by Mr. W. F. Wilkinson, Keeper, and Robert Stone (U.S. CoastGuard), First Assistant, and Ray Davis, Second Assistant.

The lighthouse logbooks give a glimpse of everyday happenings through these hundred years -- of the periodic stops of the supply boat, SS Madrona, from San Francisco, of bear tracks on the Reservation in 1860, and of the birth of a litter of pigs to a keeper's sow. Visits of wild game are frequently mentioned, and even today a small herd of deer frequents the reservation, drawn by a fondness for geraniums.

The Point Pinos Lighthouse has had a relatively quiet history with no dramatic shipwrecks caused by the failure of the light. Behind it, the Point Pinos Lighthouse has an admirable record of 100 years of efficient and faithful service to the men of the sea.

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