

POINT PINOS LIGHTHOUSE CELEBRATES ITS 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. In 1852 the Honorable Thomas Corwin, Secretary of the Treasury, ordered the construction of the Point Pinos Lighthouse, and two years later it was completed.

The point of land on which the lighthouse was erected has a long history of which we know little. 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 lighthouse was constructed of local stone. The dirt around the building was shipped here from Yerba Buena Island in San Francisco Bay. The light -- the heavy lenses and prisms and the 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 being placed on Point Loma, the Fallaron 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 completed, altering the appearance somewhat.

The light, which has burned continually through the years, has changed with the times. The first beam was equipped with a sperm oil lantern. The oil was forced up from its tank to the light by a rude piston operated by gravity. Some years later kerosine was substituted. Around the light rotated in a circle a shutter, which blanked out the light during the eclipse period. The power moving the shutter was supplied by a falling-weight mechanism. In 1915 the light was electrified. A mere 500 watt lamp is now used, but through a focal plane 92 feet high the lens throws out a 29,000 candlepower beam, which is visible 16 miles out to sea. The flash (the Point Pinos characteristic flash being 20 seconds followed by a 10 second eclipse) is no longer controlled by the shutter mechanism, but rather the bulb is turned off and on. However, the old mechanism and gasoline lanterns are kept in readiness in case of a power failure, of which there have been a few through the years.

The fog signal has been altered in recent years, an air diaphragm horn being substituted for the siren-type 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. Coast Guard. As the men of the Lighthouse Service retire they are being replaced by enlisted men of the Coast Guard. Point Pinos Lighthouse has a long line of highly efficient Lighthouse Keepers. The first keeper was Mr. Charles Layton, who was succeeded by his wife, Charlotte. An outstanding 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 W. S. Wilkinson, Keeper, and Robert Stone (U.S. Coast Guard), first assistant, and Ray Davis, Second Assistant.

The lighthouse logbooks give a glimpse of life through these hundred years. Here are notes of everyday happenings, of the periodic stops of the supply boat -- S.S. Madrona -- from San Francisco, of bear tracks on the Reservation in 1860, and even of the birth of a litter of pigs to a keeper's sow. Frequently mentioned are the myriads of wild game which came to the reservation. Even today a small herd of deer frequents it -- being particularly fond of the Geraniums.

The Point Pinos Lighthouse has had a relatively quiet history. There have been no dramatic shipwrecks caused by the failure of the light. Behind it the Point Pinos Lighthouse has 100 years of efficient and faithful service to the men of the sea -- a record of which to be proud.