

Entrance to the Point Pinos Light 25 years ago, before automation.

Point Pinos -- West's Oldest Lighthouse

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It's the Peninsula's Newest U.S. Historic Landmark

By EL FRIEDA
and
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Herald Special Writers

Although to the scientific mind the term "light years" is a measure of distance, the same term when applied to the Point Pinos Light, means the length of time this important navigational facility has served as an instrument of safety and assurance to "those who go down to the sea in ships."

For 122 years this important beacon has flashed its beam out over the rough coastal waters and rocky shoals which

El Frieda and Herbert Liese are Peninsula photo-journalists whose work has appeared previously in this magazine.

lie in the treacherous currents some 89 feet below its path.

Now automated, Point Pinos is the oldest operating light on the Pacific Coast and its historical importance and architectural significance were recognized earlier this month when it was designated a national historic site by the National Park Service.

Standing just off the second fairway of the Pacific Grove Municipal Golf Course, the white stone building — with its light atop — is a familiar landmark along the Peninsula's justly famous shoreline. But, until recent years, visiting was limited. Now open on weekends, it has become a popular attraction for tourists and residents, alike.

Point Pinos Reservation covers an area in excess of 75 acres. The point of

land was given its name by the Spanish explorer Sebastian Vizcaino who in 1602 called it the Point of Pines because of the extensive growth of these trees hereabouts.

The environs of Point Pinos are starkly beautiful, its sandy earth supporting unusual and rare varieties of growth. Some of these plant species exist nowhere else other than the dunes of the Monterey Peninsula; Menzies' wallflower is one. Its brilliant yellow blossoms are enclosed in a cluster of rich green.

Another plant, Tidestrom's Lupine is one of those extreme rarities which grows nowhere else in the world but at Point Pinos.

Deer roam freely on the point. Sea otters play only a few yards offshore. Migratory birds and other species fre-

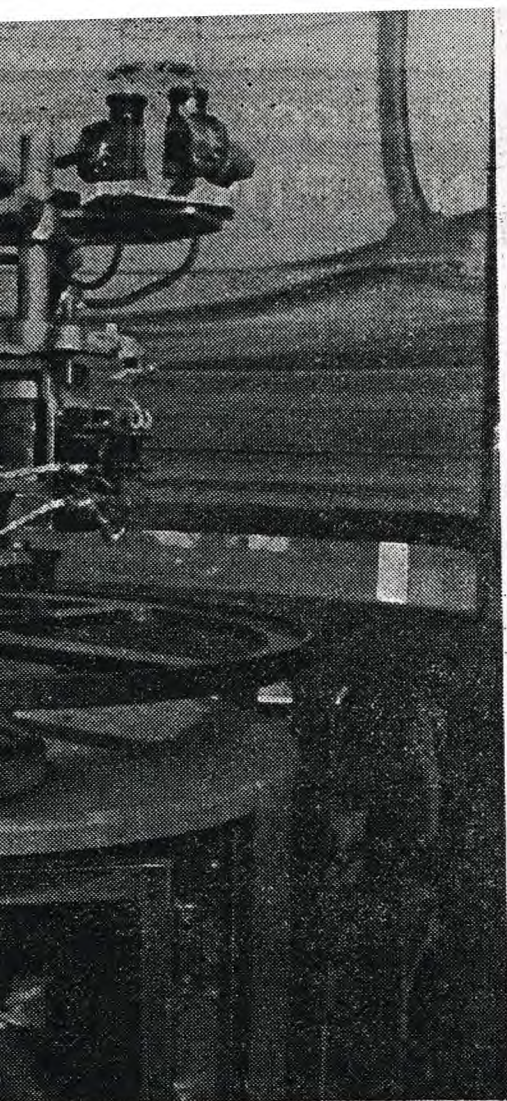
quent the tiny lake below the lighthouse. Marine life abounds in the nearby tidepools.

The two-story building, which houses the light — the former home of the light's many caretakers, though now unfurnished — is comparable to the interesting adobes scattered throughout the Peninsula. The lighthouse's museum has exhibits which offer a pictorial and documentary record of the light's history. Helpful guides are on hand during visiting hours to provide a comprehensive tour of the facility.

This historical landmark is open Saturdays and Sundays from 1 to 4 p.m.

Point Pinos Light came into existence shortly after California was granted statehood in 1850. At that time

(Continued)



Top of the old mechanism that still remains at the Point Pinos Lighthouse to mark the Peninsula's coast.

Historic Landmark

(Continued)

Congress appropriated funds for six lighthouses. Point Pinos with its submerged rocks and dangerous currents was a menace to coastal navigation and, as it marked the southern entrance to the important bay of Monterey, it was considered a logical place for one of these lights to be installed.

Originally the Point was part of a 2,666-acre Spanish land grant made by Mexico to Jose Maria Armenta. In 1852 the United States Government purchased 25 acres for the light's site. More land was added later.

The building housing the light was erected from granite quarried on the site. Men and supplies were brought down from San Francisco on the bark, Oriole, to do the construction. The light with its lenses, prisms and mechanism was made in France by Henri Lapaute, shipped to San Francisco, then shipped down to Point Pinos.

The first beam from the Point Pinos Light flashed out on Sunday, Sept. 17, 1855. It has continued to flash ever since from one hour prior to sunset until one hour after sunrise and whenever visibility during the daytime falls below 5 miles.

Only occasional brief interruptions have occurred. One such was a mysterious incident, though it might have had serious results.

During World War II the light was shot out, and it was feared that a Japanese submarine was to blame. "But if that were so," declared assistant lighthouse keeper, George Peters, "that submarine would have had to be on Asilomar Boulevard."

It was more logical to attribute the unexpected blackout to one of the military personnel stationed on the Lighthouse Reservation who had become annoyed by the intermittent flashing and shot out the light in order to obtain some uninterrupted sleep. This explanation, however, was never proved; the light was put back into working condition and continued to operate during the war years.

Originally the light used an oil burning lamp and the flashing, intermittent signal was created by a revolving shutter that interrupted the beam in such a way that it was visible only 20 out of each 30-second interval. The mechanism which actuated the revolving shutter was essentially the same as that used in old grandfather clocks: that of weights, chains and pulleys.

It was the daily chore of the lighthouse keeper to wind the apparatus with a hand crank. Much of this mechanism is still in place and could be used in case of emergency.

The lamp first was fueled with sperm oil and then with kerosene until electricity came into common usage. Today, a 1,000-watt electric incandescent bulb using commercial power, with battery power in reserve, supplies the light. A second bulb is automatically put into play by electronic means should the first bulb burn out.

The special lens ground for the light is several inches thick which with its slotted prisms multiplies the light's intensity many times, as well as directing the beam both horizontally and downwards.

It is interesting to note that the original lens is still in use. It has never been replaced although the tower was damaged considerably in the 1906

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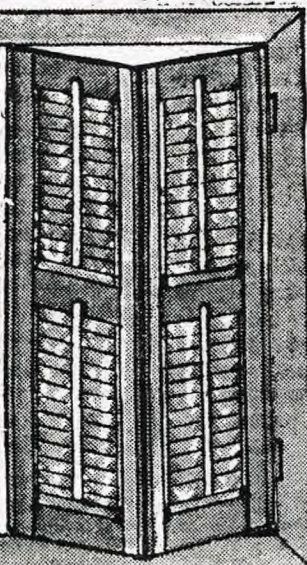
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earthquake. Fortunately, the light escaped harm.

The romance of the light has its human side in the keepers who served it over the years. These individuals were a special breed, willing to endure the enforced isolation, the loneliness and the constant vigilance necessary.

Point Pinos' first keeper was Charles Layton, who died before he could see the light in actual operation. His wife, Charlotte, was appointed keeper of the light by the secretary of the treasury, under whose direction the lighthouse service operated for many years. The service now is under the Department of Transportation. Charlotte Layton married George Harris in 1860 and he became the third keeper.

The fourth keeper was Capt. Allan Luce, whom Robert Louis Stevenson mentioned during his residence on the Monterey Peninsula.

Mrs. Emily Fish was the light's fifth keeper. The two women who tended the Point Pinos Light served a total of 40 years in lighthouse keeping service.

Truman Cook was the last keeper at Point Pinos and was also the last civilian keeper in the lighthouse service in California.

In the early days of the light, the keepers complained of not having a road on which to get a wagon in and out for supplies. As a result, a road was cut through the thick growth of brush and trees in 1872 to connect the lighthouse with the rest of the community.

This same road was used by the Methodists in establishing the axis of their summer religious retreat encampment.

The U.S. Coast Guard now is responsible for the care and maintenance of all lighthouses. Monterey Station has the Point Pinos Light under its aegis.

A ship out at sea can establish its position by observing, for example, the angle between the Point Pinos Light and the light at Santa Cruz Point 20 miles north or that at Point Sur 26 miles south, and then computing its location by triangulation. The lights therefore, serve not only to warn navigation of dangerous coastal hazards but to assure a ship of its exact latitude and longitude.

In May, 1975, the Point Pinos Light with its fog device was completely automated. The light's intermittent beam is visible 15 miles at sea. The foghorn is located several hundred

yards nearer the shore than is the lighthouse. As a further navigational aid, a Class D radio beacon, situated in the lighthouse basement, operates on a 290-kilocycle frequency with a range of 20 miles. It transmits repeatedly the International Morse Code letter "P" for 14 seconds out of each 15 second interval.

Since the installation of the Point Pinos Light, fewer accidents have occurred at this hazardous spot than heretofore. But there is no question that the coast hereabouts is treacherous. In May, 1924, the SS Frank H. Buck ran aground at this site. The ship was refloated several weeks later only to collide with the SS President Collidge in San Francisco Bay. The Buck was a total loss!

Point Joe has been responsible for damage to such ships as the SS St. Paul in 1896 and the Celia in 1906. Cypress Point caused the wreckage of the SS Flavel in 1925 and the SS Stetson in 1934.

Even the local Coast Guard has not escaped the accidents caused by treacherous sea hazards. One of its forty-four footers was damaged at Point Pinos while going to aid the fishing vessel, Santa Rosalia in 1976. While the service boat received approximately \$100,000 in damage, the Santa Rosalia was a total loss with one man drowned.

Amusing as well as frustrating for the local Coast Guard has been the history of foghorns at Point Pinos.

In 1926 the service installed an electric siren to operate as a foghorn. But this proved to be unsatisfactory because its characteristics were too hard to control. Also, its particular sound annoyed the public. Another type, a Clark-Cooper Airhorn was substituted.

At the request from the local fishermen for a louder horn, the Coast Guard established a Diaphone Class C in the early 1950s. The result was an inch-thick fire of complaints, running the gamut from A— an offer from a hotel owner to sell his property cheaply to the Coast Guard (this document is on file) — to Z — a complaint from an irate cat lover that the foghorn was causing his pet to have convulsions. The Coast Guard obligingly changed the horn once more in 1962-63.

In 1974 the service decided to discontinue this particular fog device and use a battery operated horn mounted on the

Point Pinos Buoy. But because of all the difficulties experienced in the past, it first ran a test on the device under consideration. The test determined that the new device could be easily heard the entire length of the 17-Mile Drive, but the fishermen complained that they could not hear it from all directions.

By this time the Coast Guard, slightly weary of the entire situation, returned to the type of fog device established in 1962-63: a Leslie Super Tyfon. This one had a baffle which directed most of the sound seaward. It also had a variable and less annoying tone so as to placate the people in town.

Hopefully everyone was at last happy!

With modern technology making possible their elimination, many lighthouses have now been abandoned or sold.

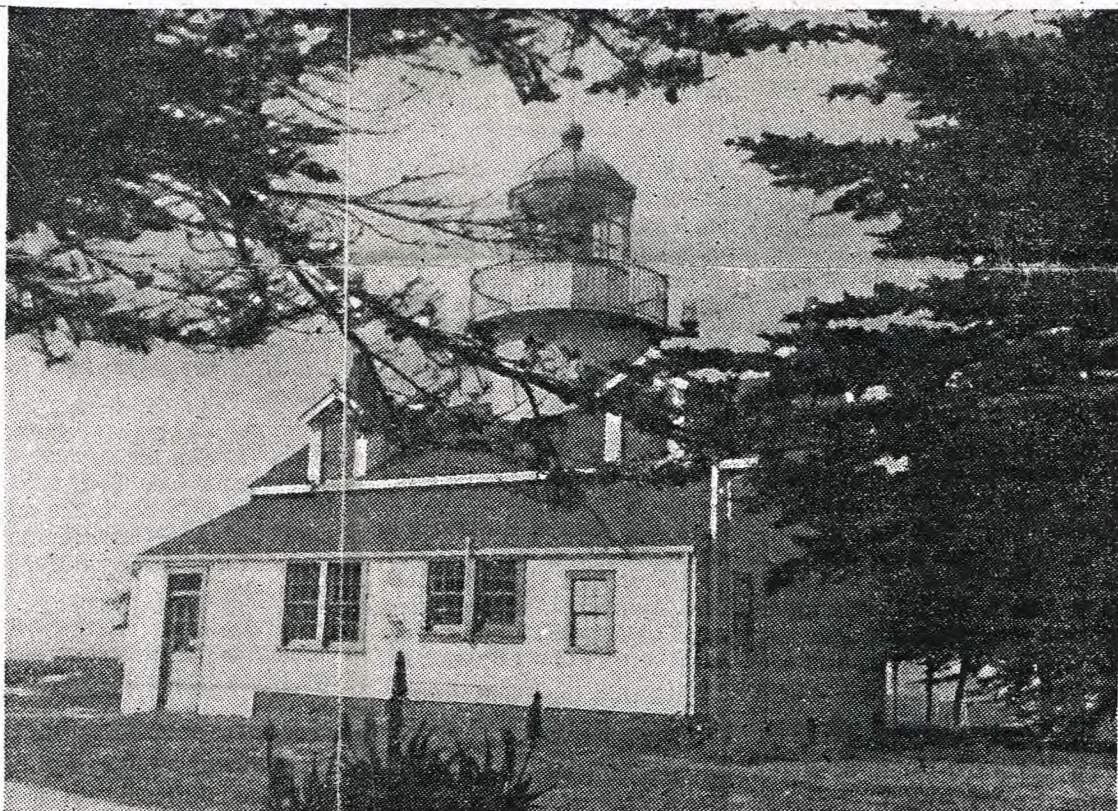
But the reservation and its unique lighthouse structure is an integral part of the Monterey Peninsula's history. Thus the City of Pacific Grove believes that such a precious landmark should be preserved.

Through resolution adopted in 1965, Pacific Grove seeks to acquire the Point Pinos area from the United States Government if at any time the facility should be deemed as having no further use for navigation purposes.

The idea to preserve the light as a relic of times past now has been strengthened by its designation as an historic site.

In the interim, the City, perhaps feeling beholden indirectly to the light for its origin, has assumed responsibility for preserving the lighthouse area. One half of the adjacent city golf course mentioned previously, is on reservation land. The city leases it from the U.S. Coast Guard and with the proceeds from golf greens fees, helps to maintain at least a portion of the reservation.

Under the direction of the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History, the city attempts to control the public usage of the reservation, provides



First beam flashed out from this light at Point Pinos in 1855.



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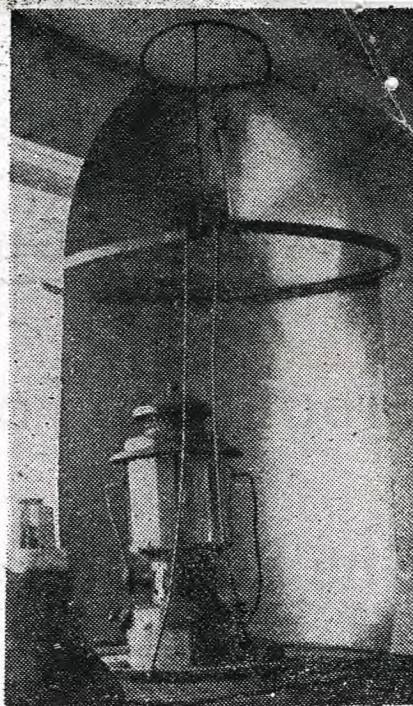
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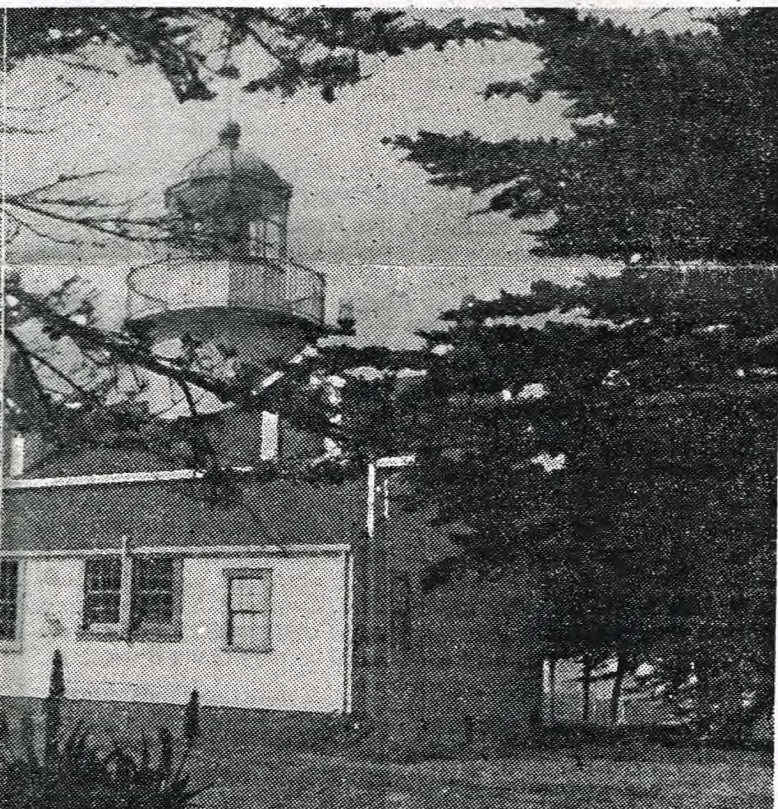


The light's original copper shutter was found discarded in the thick grass around the main building. Rescued, it now is on display at the lighthouse.

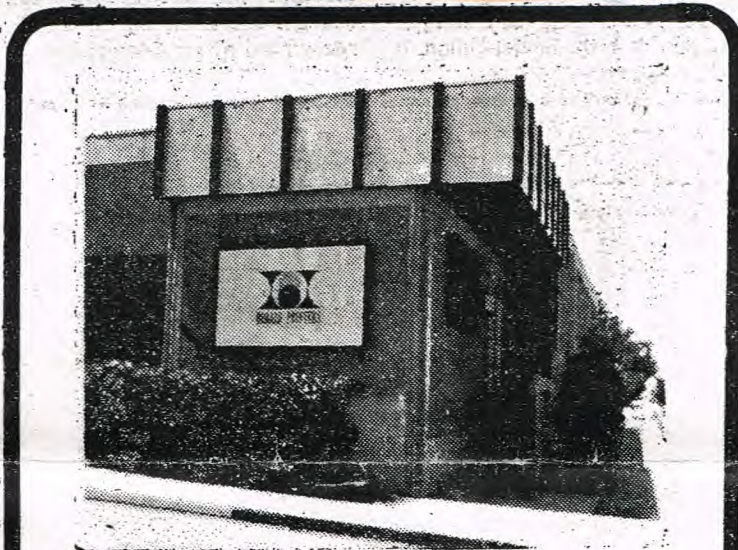
police protection, marine rescue service in case of emergencies, curtails indiscriminate collection of marine life in the area and staffs the lighthouse museum with volunteer guides.

This project with its attendant responsibility is strongly endorsed by such vitally concerned organizations as the Monterey History and Art Association, the Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy and the Monterey Peninsula Foundation, as well as related state and governmental agencies.

With solid support like this, it seems certain that the important historic landmark of Point Pinos will be assured for the education and enjoyment of the people for all time. □



Washed out from this light at Point Pinos in 1855.



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