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Point Pinos Lighthouse: A Beacon for Ships And a Historic Landmark

The first keepers of the Point Pinos Light Station had trouble with grizzly bears.

The grizzlies are gone from California now, but the lighthouse endures, flashing its warning to ships at sea as it has for 128 years and providing a glimpse into the history of shipping — and shipwrecks — for visitors who tour its quiet rooms.

Owned and operated by the United States Coast Guard, the station is maintained by the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History and is open to the public on Saturdays and Sundays from 1 to 4 p.m.

Admission is free. Visitors are prohibited — for safety reasons — from climbing up the open ladder to the light tower itself, but there is still a lot to see, both inside and outside the

building.

Deer and other wildlife roam the rugged Coast Guard reservation at Point Pinos, given its name ("the Point of Pines") by the Spanish explorer Sebastian Viscaíno in 1602.

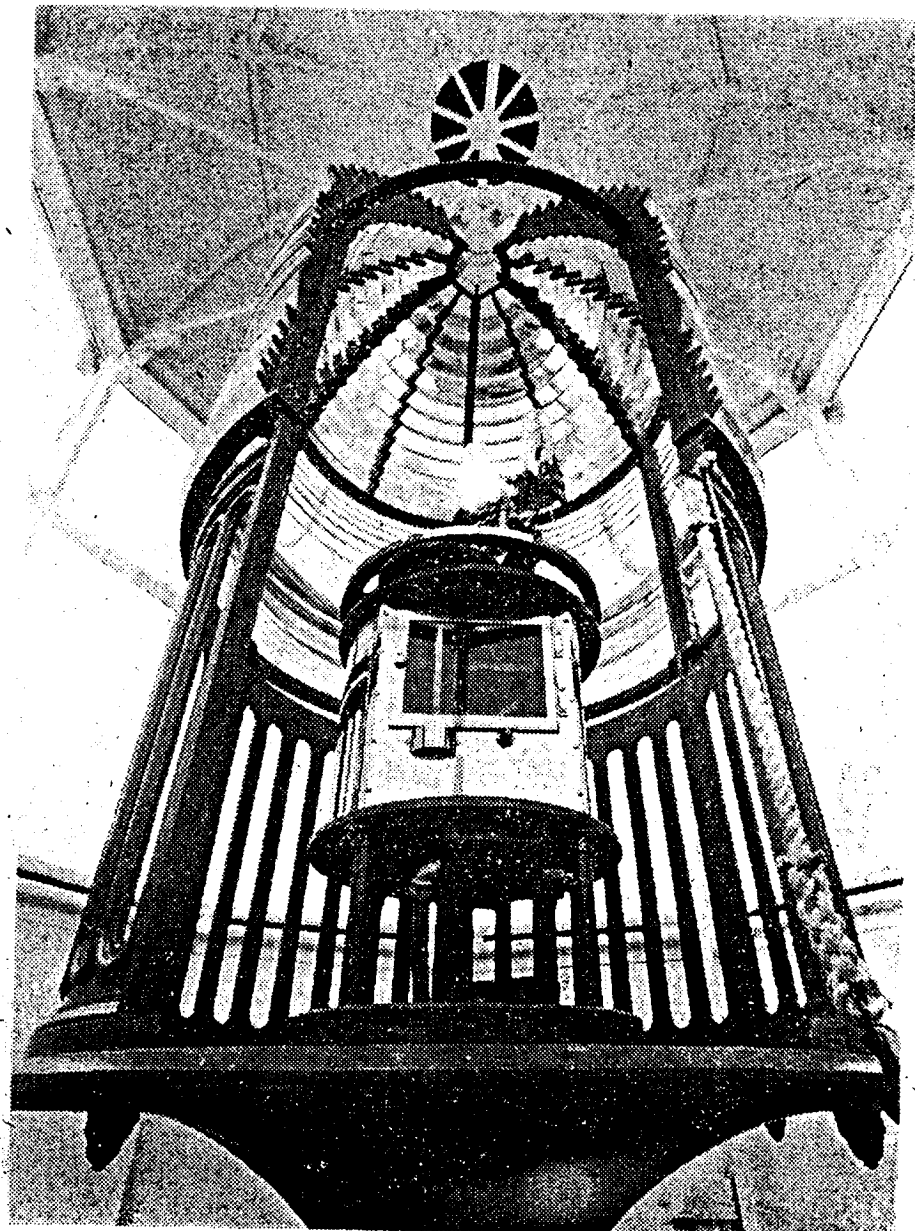
A massive buoy, once moored offshore, lies rusting near the path from the public parking lot, with a plaque explaining how it worked.

Spectacular View

And the view of the shore is spectacular from the undeveloped sandy stretch of the point where the light station sits.

But the single most prominent feature of Point Pinos is the lighthouse itself, which, with very little publicity, attracts at least 100 visitors each weekend.

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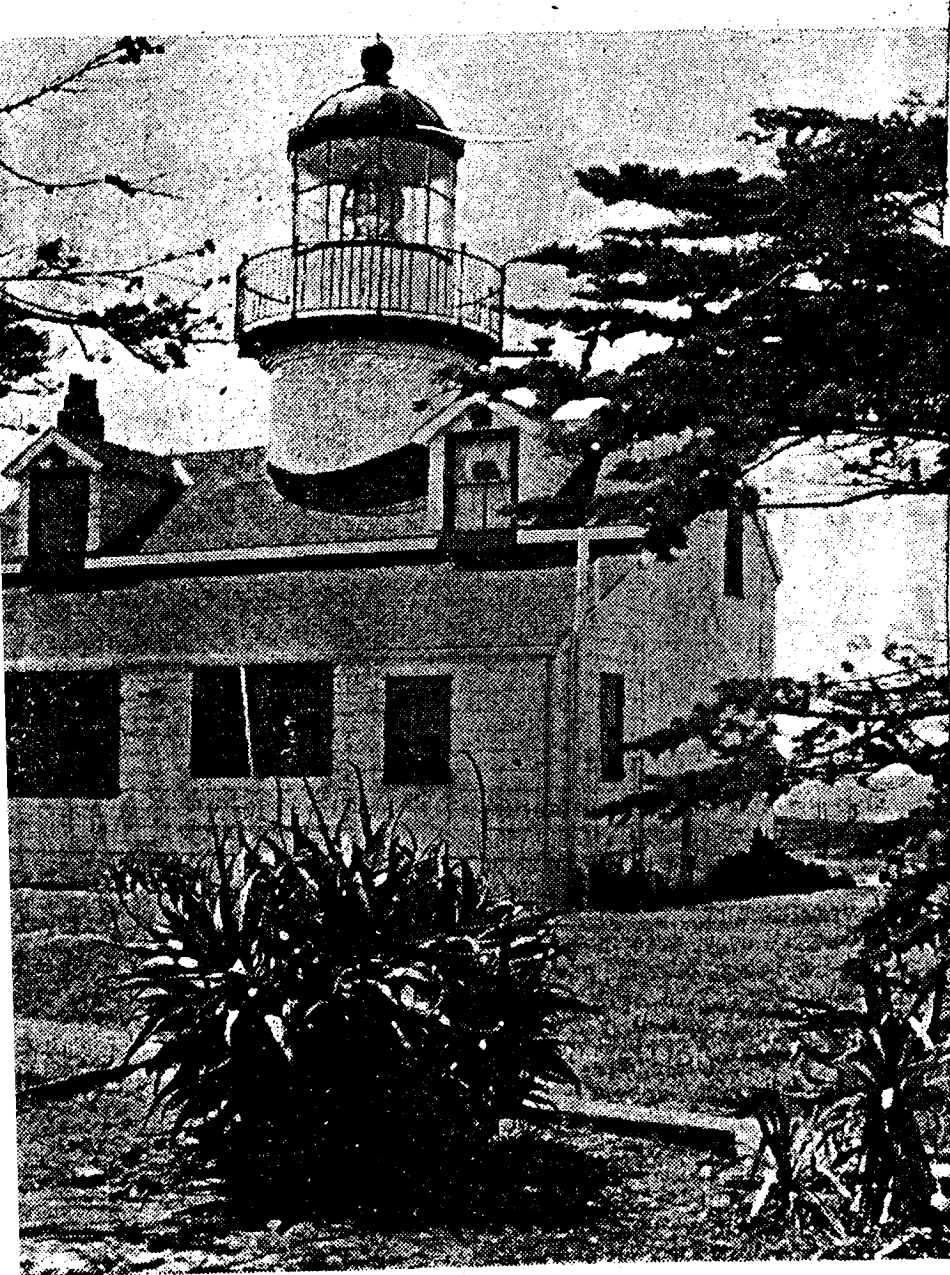


(Herald Photos)

Lamp Shines Through Fresnel Lens

Lighthouse

June 5, 1983.



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The white two-story building, with its granite light tower poking through the top, evokes visions of driving rain, gale-force winds and pre-dawn shipwrecks.

Inside are documents and photographs that tell the tale of the oldest continuously operating lighthouse on the West Coast.

The first lighthouse completed in California was the Alcatraz station, which went into operation in 1854. But its working life was relatively short and portions of its decommissioned light were already on display at the Smithsonian Institute by 1878.

History

Construction on the Point Pinos station began in 1853, using men from San Francisco and material that came around the horn from the East Coast.

The lens, manufactured in France, arrived in 1855, and the beacon first flashed out its warning on Feb. 1 of that year.

"It was a very, very important thing for safety at sea," said Vern Yadon, curator of the Museum of Natural History. "This was long before ships had radar . . . There were tremendous problems with fog."

The light may have been generated at first by burning sperm whale oil behind the lens, though that point is in dispute and if whale oil was used it was used only briefly. Lard oil served the purpose until 1880, then kerosene.

Weather and the rugged coastline continued to claim victims even after the installation of the light. Inside the building, a rotary display holds stark photographs of shipwrecks off the nearby coast.

Also inside, in the small rooms once

used as living quarters by the lighthouse keepers, are period pieces of furniture, copies of the original plans for the station and copies of its log.

The log is worth more than a casual glance.

Its entries are sometimes brief — noting the direction of the winds and the names of visitors — but sometimes include commentary on contemporary political issues and other items unrelated to the sea trade.

Some of the entries are poignant. Allen S. Luce, principal keeper, made this notation in the log on April 8, 1881:

"On this (Wednesday) night at 10:50 p.m. the beloved daughter 'Erma' of the Principal Keeper and his wife after a brief illness died of spinal meningitis. The funeral took place from this station on Friday 8th at 2 p.m. The cortege was very large and consisted of the friends and relatives of the family."

Stevenson's Words

In another room, a placard bears the words of Robert Louis Stevenson, who visited the lighthouse during Luce's time as keeper:

"Westward is Point Pinos," Stevenson wrote, "with the lighthouse in a wilderness of sand, where you will find the lighthouse keeper playing at the piano, making ship models . . . studying dawn and sunrise in amateur painting, and with a dozen other elegant pursuits and interests to surprise his brave, old-country rival."

A piano of the kind that Luce played sits in the "music room" of the lighthouse today, along with three rocking chairs, a fireplace, a portrait of George Washington and a wall-hung sampler bearing the motto, "Faith, Hope, Charity."

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The Lighthouse at 'the Point of Pines'

Lighthouse

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Luce was not the lighthouse's first keeper. That distinction belonged to Charles Layton, who was appointed to the post at \$1,000 per year but was killed shortly thereafter while a member of a posse chasing the notorious outlaw Anastacio Garcia.

Other Keepers

Layton was succeeded by his widow Charlotte. In 1860 Charlotte married a man named George Harris, who promptly took over her job. Luce followed, and then a second woman, the recently widowed Emily Fish, who came to Point Pinos in 1893 after Luce retired.

Luce had been a remarkable keeper, and so was Mrs. Fish. Before her husband died she was active in social circles and when she moved to the lighthouse she brought her horses, Holstein cows and French poodles with her.

She planted a cypress hedge, lawns and flowers and after an appropriate period of mourning took up the social whirl again, entertaining artists and writers and winning election in 1898 to the executive committee of the Monterey-Pacific Grove Chapter of the American Red Cross.

An entry in the log carries Mrs. Fish's observations during the earthquake that ravaged San Francisco in 1906:

"At 5:13 a.m. violent and continued

earthquake shocks, jarring the lens so that it is movable, also enlarged the crack in the tower and coping . . . The water in the wood-house tank was thrown on the floor . . . Red Cross Society meets to arrange for receiving refugees."

The tower was badly damaged by the earthquake and was partially rebuilt in 1907. Mrs. Fish held the keepership until 1914, turning it over to a John H.

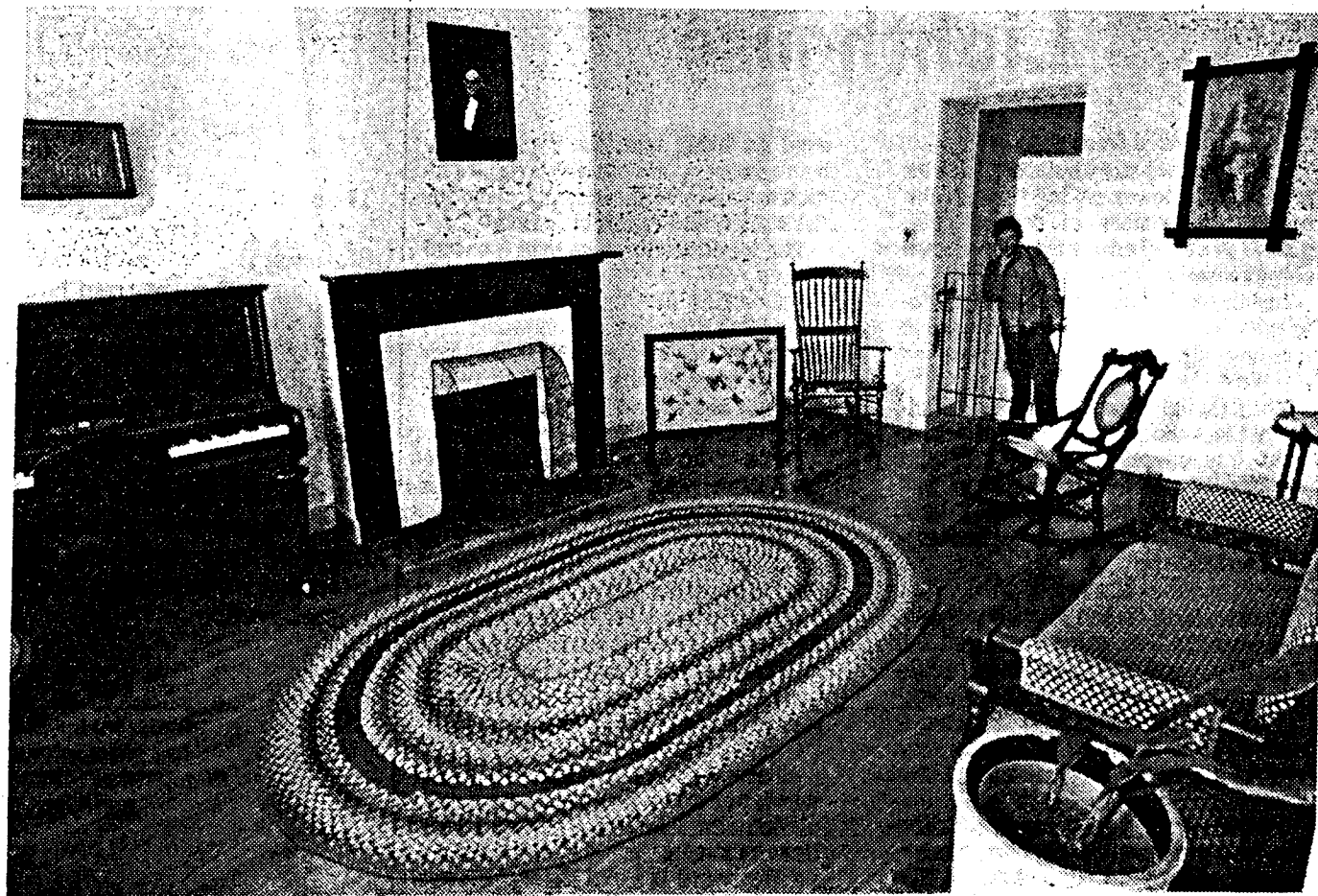
Jeffrey.

In more recent years the lighthouse has been automated, so that it no longer requires a resident keeper. Since 1915 an electric lamp has provided the illumination for the beacon. It produces a 50,000 candlepower beam through the tower's Fresnel lens, a giant-sized glass jewel that concentrates the light into a beam visible up to 15 miles at sea.

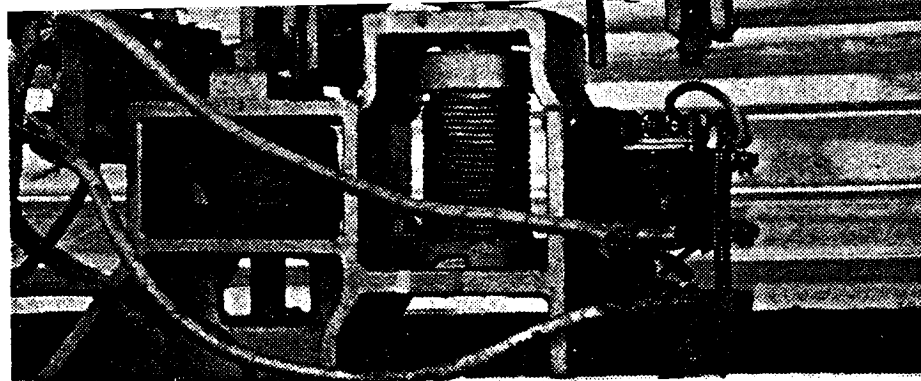
Much else has changed since the lighthouse first went into operation. Monterey was technically part of the United States in 1855 but culturally very much a sleepy little Mexican village.

"This was pretty primitive land," Yádon said. "From the sea, it looked sort of like the coast of Baja California does today."

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Peggy Wiltshire-Martinez in First-Floor 'Music Room'



1,000-Watt Bulb in Light Tower

Lighthouse

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The changes are reflected in the lighthouse itself, which Yadon describes as "kind of a jumbled mess, historically speaking."

There have been several alterations to the building. One project enclosed the cellar. Another brought the privy inside and another enclosed the front porch. Dormer windows were added in the 1940s, making it resemble, in Yadon's words, "a picturesque little Cape Cod lighthouse."

Restoration

Since the city of Pacific Grove assumed caretaking duties 12 years ago, restoration work has included scraping as many as 15 coats of paint from interior doors — partly because the weight of the old lead-based paint was pulling the doors out of their hinges.

The Coast Guard "seems to like what we're doing," Yadon said, "and they've been pretty good landlords."

Actually, the Coast Guard might prefer to tear the old building down and create a more modern structure. But federal law lays severe restraints on what can be done to the lighthouse, which is listed in the National Registry of Historic Sites.

In the near future the museum plans to add some more furniture to the rather sparsely furnished interior rooms —

tor. The museum is also about to acquire a depression-era stove for the kitchen.

Modern Hazard

There are no more grizzly bears to worry about, but there is one modern hazard: golf balls from the adjacent municipal golf links zoom onto the property with such regularity that a closet contains buckets full of them, available to visitors at 25 cents apiece.

There is no more lighthouse keeper. Bruce Handy, an employee of the city of Pacific Grove, assumed duties as the museum's latest docent just last month, and welcomes visitors on weekends. A former sailor and a longtime lighthouse buff, Handy enjoys regaling his guests with the history of light stations, beginning with the Phoenicians.

Handy, however, does not maintain the light — which was automated in 1975 — nor does he keep up the log. And he doesn't live in the building.

But the lighthouse continues in operation today as a federal facility and an active aid to navigation. Besides the light, an automatic horn blasts a warning to sea when fog covers the point and a radio signal operates continuously.

And for ships at sea, the Point Pinos lighthouse remains a much-heeded beacon, tirelessly warning of the catastrophes that await errant vessels when