

# EMILY FISH

## The Socialite Keeper

by Clifford Gallant

**E**mily Fish and her niece Juliet, from all evidence in their backgrounds, were unlikely candidates to join the ranks of the women who tended the lights. Having the advantage of education and social position, why did they become involved in work so lonely and foreign to their backgrounds?

Trying to solve this enigma would call for the talents of a Sherlock Holmes.

We do know that Emily A. Fish was born in 1843, in the insular village of Albion, Michigan. Her parents, John and Isabella Maitland, were British immigrants and the proprietors of a general store.

Although Emily was not aware of it at the time, the marriage of her older sister Juliet to Melancthon Fish was to have a profound influence on her life. Fish attended medical school in their community. Instead of establishing a practice after graduation, he traveled with his bride in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Reaching China, they resided there for six years, during which time he served as Inspector of the Imperial Customs.

In 1859 his wife Juliet died in childbirth and the baby was named after her mother. In the following year Emily, at the age of seventeen, became the wife of the widower, Dr. Fish. Nothing is known about this early period in Emily's life, it is only a riddle. But buried in the following questions is the likely answer.

Was Emily in China at the birth of Juliet? This was on August 12, 1859.



**Emily Fish.**

Photo from Monterey Public Library

Was she married, a year later, in China or in the United States?

If Dr. Fish returned to the land of his birth to marry Emily, would he go back to China, a four month voyage, when all obvious signs pointed to armed conflict between the states, which occurred the following year? The logical answer to these questions seems to be that Emily was in China.

To bolster this argument is the fact that George Whitefield Fish, Melancthon's brother, suffering from poor health, left the United States for China in February of 1859, hoping the rest and clean sea air would restore his health. It seems reason-

able that 16-year-old Emily, anxious to see her sister, would accompany him on the voyage around the Cape of Good Hope.

Since we have assumed that Emily arrived in China sometime in May or June, she must have learned of her sister Juliet's pregnancy only upon her arrival. Along with the joy of being with her sister, there was the experience of living in Asia.

Everything the small town girl saw was new to her. China's teeming population, crowded streets, men carrying burdens which animals bore in the United States, the odor of strange foods, the funeral processions with gongs being beaten to

drive off devils, the cries of street vendors, the alien tongues, contrasts of poverty and extreme wealth and luxury, were puzzling to Emily.

There are no records of the sorrow she felt on her sister's death or of her subsequent marriage to the widower. One year later, Emily, Melancthon, her sister's child Juliet, and Que, a Chinese male servant, were in the United States and she was introducing the baby as "my daughter."

Soon Dr. Fish left the ranks of civilians and joined the Union Army to serve as Medical Director of the 16th Army Corps. His headquarters were moved often to be close to the battle lines, and Emily was always nearby working for the Sanitary League, the predecessor of the American Red Cross.

At the end of the war, he was transferred to a California military post and soon resigned his commission to enter the private practice of medicine and to teach in the medical school of the University of California.

Fish had an insatiable appetite for public service, being elected to the Oakland City Council and the presidency of the School Board, and high offices in fraternal organizations.



Emily, too, joined in this busy life as hostess to their ever-widening circle of friends, and attending balls, theatre and dinner parties. Hardly the activities you would expect of a future lighthouse keeper. There was also the excitement of her niece (daughter) Juliet's wedding to Lt. Commander Henry E. Nichols, a distinguished naval officer.

This social life came to an end three years later, when Dr. Fish died unexpectedly at the age of sixty-three.

During the mourning period, Emily lived quietly, seeing only a few close friends, perhaps wondering if she would find something meaningful to do with her future life.

Such an opportunity occurred two years later, when Commander Nichols, serving as Inspector of the 12th District of the Lighthouse Service, casually mentioned that Allen Luce, the keeper of the Point Pinos lighthouse on California's Monterey Peninsula, was about to retire.

---

## Emily closely questioned the commander about the Lighthouse Service and Point Pinos...

---

Interested at this news, Emily closely questioned the commander about the Lighthouse Service and Point Pinos and then expressed a desire to serve as keeper. Since there were no examinations for this work at the time, his recommendation assured her of the appointment.

She was fifty, tall, slender, and fashionably dressed, and not deterred by her first sight of the light station near the ocean. The drab, Cape Cod type building of grey granite stood in a sea of sand. There were no trees, only bushes and wild flowers common to beaches and sand dunes.

Luce was waiting for her, his furniture packed on a wagon to which a team of patient horses was hitched. The retiring keeper showed Emily about the buildings and took her into the tower to explain her duties. After these meager instructions, Luce left the station where he had served for twenty years and Emily assumed the responsibility of keeper of the Point Pinos Lighthouse.

It was not long before the inside of the lighthouse presented a different appearance to visitors. Furniture, paintings, and silver in book-cluttered rooms took on a rare beauty as they glowed in the soft light from flickering candles, lamps, and the

burning coals in the fireplaces. Never before had the lighthouse been so attractive.

Once the house was in order, Emily and her servant Que began to improve the grounds around the lighthouse. After topsoil was brought in, Emily and Que planted trees, grass, and other ground covers. Soon a cypress hedge peered over the white fence that enclosed the lighthouse yard.

The ninety-two acres of the lighthouse reservation were sandy and the scant grass barely supplied enough pasture for the keeper's cows, horses, and other animals. The government provided horses for transportation of supplies, but Emily brought in blooded animals for her driving pleasure. She kept thoroughbred cows, a sharp contrast to the nondescript cattle that previously foraged for food on these unfertile acres.

Gradually, as the tacitly accepted mourning period came to an end, Emily became involved in the social life of the Monterey Peninsula. Artists and writers were her guests at small dinner parties, and when naval vessels called at the Bay, she frequently entertained a few of the officers.

The proper functioning of the Point Pinos Light was imperative since ship traffic was much heavier than it is today. Before giant trucks began hauling freight over the roads, coastwise vessels hugged the coast and stopped at the smallest ports to drop cargo. Each day it was common to see more than one of these ships entering the Bay. Besides the small vessels, ships such as the tall square-rigger, the Falls of Clyde (now a museum ship in Honolulu), came almost monthly to pick up cargoes of case-oil for the islands of the South Seas.

Not expected by the government to do all the work about the station, Emily employed a laborer to help out. She was a hard taskmaster; the lighthouse logs show that she hired more than thirty men during her

years as keeper. Most of them were discharged because of incompetence.

Every few years a new inspector was assigned to examine the light stations of the district. Invariably the Monterey Bay Lighthouse was marked as being in excellent condition.

Unlike most women, Emily had seen at first hand the blood and shattered bodies of men at war. She knew that the organizations she worked for during the Civil War had given comfort to the wounded. For this reason, with the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, she convinced her friends to found the Monterey-Pacific Grove Chapter of the American Red Cross, and served on its first executive committee.

Near the end of the war sad news came to Emily at Point Pinos: Her son-in-law Henry Nichols, Juliet's husband, now a naval captain, had died in Manila. Her true feelings, and how she consoled Juliet, are unknown. The only record of this tragedy is a newspaper cutting pasted in the log book. One more incident of her privacy!

A few years later, Juliet became keeper of the Angel Island Light in San Francisco Bay.

On April 18, 1906, near the end of her watch, Emily noticed that the animals in the barn were restless. She wondered why. It was a beautiful night. The moonlight lit up the sand dunes and rippling sea, with the surf appearing a pure white as it broke on the shore. The drifting clouds created unusual patterns of light and shadow in their attempt to smother the moon.

The light of the lamp, greatly magnified by the jewel-like Fresnel lens, moved over the waves causing ever-changing, glittering patterns as the shutter traveled around the lantern.

While she made her final check of the equipment in the tower, the fitfulness of the animals increased; the horses pounded the barn floor and the cows lowed. Puzzled, she left the tower for the watch room where



Point Pinos Lighthouse circa 1908.

Official U.S Coast Guard photo

she sat by the window that looked seaward. Her thoughts were interrupted by Que bringing her breakfast tray. This was her routine, breakfast every morning in the watch room. While he laid a linen cloth on the wide window sill she told him of her concerns.

Before he could answer, a great earth tremor jarred the building. The lighthouse shook and swayed, cracking noises and tinkling sounds came from the tower, as though broken glass was cascading from a great height. Trees outside the window swayed wildly and the voices of animals protested the rumbling of the earth.

These sounds, the shifting of the earth and the shaking of the building, lasted about two minutes. Before it ended the keeper and her servant rushed up the stairs, where they discovered a crack in the brick tower. At the same instant an unusual sound came from the lantern, where the flame was much higher than it should have been. The violent shocks continued while they fought to control the flame.

When at last the tremors ended, they were able to assess the damage. The tinkling sound had come from the prisms which, loosened by the shocks, had been striking each other during the swaying of the tower.

The granite walls of the light sta-

tion survived the shocks, but one of the wooden buildings was wrenched from its foundation.

When she tried to report the damage to the district office in San Francisco, Emily found that all telephone, telegraph, and train service beyond Salinas, ten miles away, was impossible.

Unable to sleep, Emily worked around the station and saw arrival of the destroyer PRIBLE. The ship brought news of the catastrophe that followed the big earthquake in San Francisco and orders for two battalions of infantry to be sent to the city and one battalion of cavalry to go to San Jose to preserve order.

Emily was concerned for Juliet, the keeper of the Angel Island Light in San Francisco Bay. Was she safe?

The first trains from San Francisco came two days later with news that Juliet was well. No longer worried, Emily went about her duties at Point Pinos and helped in the campaign for money, clothing, and food to be sent to the victims of the great disaster.

Emily was appointed chairman of the Ladies Welcoming Committee at the celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the landing of Commodore Sloat at Monterey, where he took possession of California for the United States. This was a great civic event, but the greatest social event



The original 3RD Order Fresnel lens that Emily Fish polished is still in operation. In later years a clockworks was installed that rotated a brass panel ("eclipser") which gave the light a flashing characteristic.

Photo by Bob Diskowski

of all the years that she lived on the Peninsula occurred in 1908, when a grand formal ball was given at the Presidio, the military base in Monterey. This was to honor the officers of Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet, anchored there during their world cruise. Never before had the small city seen so many dress uniforms and medals, elaborate gowns, furs, and jewels. Emily Fish was prominent among the women guests.



Social events of this type were rare on the Monterey Peninsula. Excitement was more apt to come from the killing of coyotes and skunks who raided her hen yard, and the trapping of badgers and wildcats. We don't know who did the killing, but it's likely that Emily did the shooting and the laborers set the traps.

In 1914, after 21 years at Point Pinos, Emily retired and bought a house in Pacific Grove. Her main occupation became her flower garden. Que, her servant, remained with her, but more and more he talked of returning to the land of his ancestors. Finally he departed and Emily was alone.

In 1931 Emily died of cancer and funeral services were held at Saint Mary's By The Sea, the Episcopal church of which she was founding member. She was taken to Oakland to lie by her husband in Pleasant Hill Cemetery.

Juliet's life was also unusual. She, unlike her Step Mother/Aunt Emily,

did not wed at an early age. She was thirty when she married 45-year-old CDR Henry Nichols on November 1, 1888. Although her family was prominent in the Oakland, California area, and Nichols was a distinguished naval officer, there was no mention of the wedding in the press. County records state that H. D. Lathrop married them.

Juliet's husband was highly praised for his work with the U.S.

Coast and Geodetic Survey from 1880 to 1891. During the last three years of his tour of duty, they were separated each summer while he worked charting the waters of South-East Alaska. At the end of this assignment he became District Inspector of the lighthouses of California's coast.

In 1898 Juliet was again alone, but this time it was to be permanent. Nichols, who earlier had been promoted to Captain, joined Admiral Dewey's fleet at Manila. Six months later he was given command of the turret monitor *Monadnock*. This vessel, under his direction, gave a good account of herself, shelling the enemy fortifications in cooperation with the Army ashore.

Captain Nichols suffered from the intense heat but refused to leave the deck, a fatal decision since he was overcome by the weather and died a few hours later.

Obituaries and pictures of Captain Nichols were prominent in the press, but nothing is heard of his widow

Juliet until three years later. On September 18, 1902, she became keeper of the Angel Island Light in San Francisco Bay. At a time when political influence was important, there is no doubt that Juliet's connections with the Navy were a deciding factor.

She led a quiet, contemplative life only a few miles from the bustling cities lining the Bay. The island was secure in the great Bay of Saint Francis; it escaped the great storms so common at many of the light stations.

April 18, 1906 was a day that Juliet never forgot. It was early morning and the lights of San Francisco business buildings and homes were being lit as the city prepared for another day's work. Making a final check of the equipment, she heard a rumbling sound. Concerned and troubled, she looked toward the city and was dismayed to see building after building on San Francisco's waterfront collapsing. Although there was no damage on Angel Island, she was witnessing on this fateful day one of the world's great earthquakes.

The picture through her field glasses was awesome, rubble piles where familiar buildings had been. She watched with horror as structures weakened by the tremors of the earth's bowels continued to collapse like autumn leaves being whipped from trees in a wind. Soon fires broke out and leaped from factories, homes, and office buildings, until the skyline was covered with fire and smoke.

Isolated on Angel Island, Juliet could only imagine the extent of the damage and tragedy experienced by the people of the city. It was even more shocking when she learned that the earthquake had damaged communities as far away as 100 miles.

Less than three months after that great disaster, Juliet watched the fog billowing in through the Golden Gate. The foghorns from the lighthouses on both sides of the straits



The lantern room of the Point Pinos Lighthouse.

Photo by Bob Diskowski

began to blow their warnings and, as the fog advanced into the Bay, other horns joined the foghorn symphony.

Juliet rushed to the fog bell and started the machinery that rang the fog signal. A few minutes later it broke down and there was no time for repairs since she could see through the fog the masts of a sailing vessel approaching. She grabbed a hammer and frantically pounded the bell. Heeding the signal the ship was able to veer away from the dangerous shores of the island.

Now that the danger was past, Juliet rang the bell in its proscribed rhythm. Hour after hour passed and many times she thought she could not continue, but each time this happened she heard a ship approaching and this revitalized her energy. At the end of twenty hours the fog lifted and she was able to rest.

Two days later, only partially recovered from the ordeal, she had to pick up the hammer again because the machinery had again failed.

In 1914, Juliet left the island on the beautiful, busy bay. (The same year her Sepmother left Point Pinos.) No longer did she have the care of the light and fog signal. She now watched the ships from the hills of Piedmont, a suburb of Oakland. A very private person, nothing is known of the next thirty-three years of her life. The census report lists her as a housewife. She died at the age of 88 in 1947 and rests in Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland.

Emily and Juliet, who broke new ground in occupations generally thought as belonging to men, are ignored in their final resting place. A large, dignified, polished black marble monument, with the names Fish and Nichols, marks Plot 33, Lot 18. A smaller marker on the left says Capt. Nichols, and on the right Dr. M.W. Fish. No mention of the two women. But Emily and Juliet are there because the cemetery records say they are. It is ironic that Capt. Nichols' body is not under his marker, he was buried at sea.