

Peninsula Diary May Hayes O'Donnell

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Pt. Pinos Lighthouse

The Point Pinos Lighthouse is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year, so it is fitting that we should today recite a bit of the past history of this well-known reservation on the historic point of the peninsula.

The original 25 acres of the Point Pinos reservation was purchased by the United States government about 1852. The land was part of the Rancho Punta de Los Pinos of 2,666 acres, granted to Jose Maria Armenta in 1833 by Mexico and later confirmed by the United States to Henry De Gaw in 1868. The Pacific Improvement Co. bought part of the land from David Jacks and sold 67 acres of it to the Lighthouse service to be added to the original 25 acres.

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.

Through the cooperation of the Monterey Public Library Reference Department, the Californiana there, and the lighthouse keepers, we have been able to gather an interesting history of the lighthouse which is familiar to all visitors to the Monterey Peninsula.

Before the lighthouse was erected, the point of land had a long history of which we know very little, and Indian arrowheads found there are the only remaining evidence of the 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 by Thomas Corwin, secretary of the treasury in 1852 and completed two years later. The lighthouse was constructed of local stone; the dirt around the building was brought 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 had been placed on Point Loma, the Farallon Island, and Alcatraz Inland 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 cottage 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 focal plane 92 feet high the lens throws out a 29,000-candlepower beam which is visible 16 miles out to sea. The bulb now turns off and on to give the Point Pinos characteristic flash of 20 seconds followed by a 10-second eclipse, but the old shutter mechanism and gasoline lanterns have been kept in readiness 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. Coast Guard, and now as men of the Lighthouse Service are retired, they are replaced by enlisted men of the Coast Guard. The first of the long line of highly efficient lighthouse keepers was Charles Layton, who served from 1853 to 1855. Upon his death his wife Charlotte, took his place. Layton had come to California with Col. J.D. Stevenson's regiment in 1847. In 1855 he was fatally wounded while with a sheriff's posse attempting to capture Anastacio Garcia, a noted outlaw.

Another woman keeper of the Point Pinos Lighthouse was Mrs. M.E. Fish. Other keepers have been Capt. Allen Luce, 1871; Dick Williams, 1914, Peter Nelson, 1931, and Thomas Henderson, 1938-1954. At present the lighthouse is manned by W. S. Wilkinson, keeper, and Robert Stone (U.S. Coast Guard), first assistant, and Ray David, second assistant.

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

The Point Pinos Lighthouse has had a relatively quiet history through these hundred years in comparison to some of the others, 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 at sea.