



COUNTRY GAZETTE

Vol. VII, Issue No. IV Country Gazette Page 1

THE COUNTRY GAZETTE
 An Illustrated Journal of Country Manners and Methods
 Published Bimonthly By MEREDITH CORPORATION
 At 17th and Locust Des Moines, Iowa
 With Pressrooms at 5701 Park Avenue

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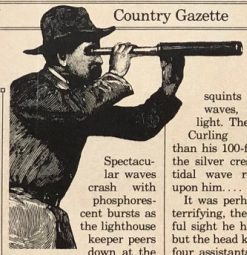
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For more lore about lighthouses and the old fogs that kept their beacons glowing, contact:
 The U.S. Lighthouse Society
 964 Chenery St.
 San Francisco, CA 94131
 415/585-1303

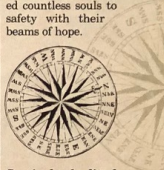


Spectacular waves crash with phosphorescent bursts as the lighthouse keeper peers down at the angry sea. Its dark water swarms like sea serpents snapping and writhing in foaming turmoil. Although the lighthouse trembles and its iron girders groan with each watery assault, the keeper is undaunted. Steadfastly, he guides his powerful beacon and sounds the deafening foghorn. He

squints out over the waves, following his light. Then he sees it: Curling high—higher than his 100-foot perch—is the silver crest of a killer tidal wave roaring down upon him. . . .

It was perhaps the most terrifying, the most beautiful sight he had ever seen, but the head keeper and his four assistants did not live to tell the tale. On March 31, 1946, at Scotch Cap Lighthouse, Alaska, the sea swallowed them up, and seconds later nothing remained on the rocky cliff except the jagged rubble of the tower's base.

Keepers' work could be dangerous indeed, but most lived to recount their adventures atop the towers by the sea. The lore of the keepers of the lights is legendary. Cloistered in crowned turrets high above pounding waves, lightkeepers guided countless souls to safety with their beams of hope.



Sentinels of solitude
 Although the tales of their heroism and hardship are many, lightkeepers' lives were often uneventful and



In the 1800s the U.S. Lighthouse Service built some 1,200 lighthouses in the United States. There were three types: Masonry towers were conical structures of stone, granite, or brick built on land. The screw-pile lighthouse had giant screws twisted into the sandy bottoms of a bay, river, or harbor. The caisson rested on a huge submerged iron tube that had a base filled with rubble and concrete.



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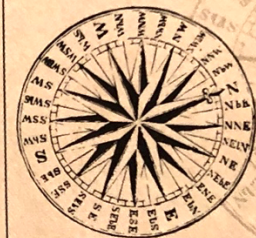
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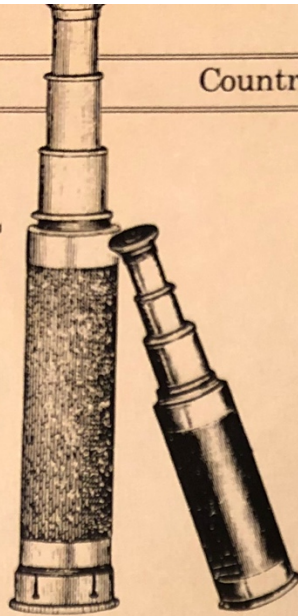


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lonely, only occasionally punctuated by bad weather and rarely by catastrophe.

Early keepers had many duties, but trimming the oil-burning wicks to ensure steady flames was paramount. In fact, keepers were nicknamed wickies because of their constant vigilance in caring for their lights.

Other duties included



endless spiral climbs to the top of the tower to polish the lens or reflectors and lantern-room windows, winding the clockworks, white-washing the tower, and maintaining the equipment.

Because lighthouse existence was so insular, keepers and their families were self-sufficient. Garden produce and livestock were often raised on the premises.

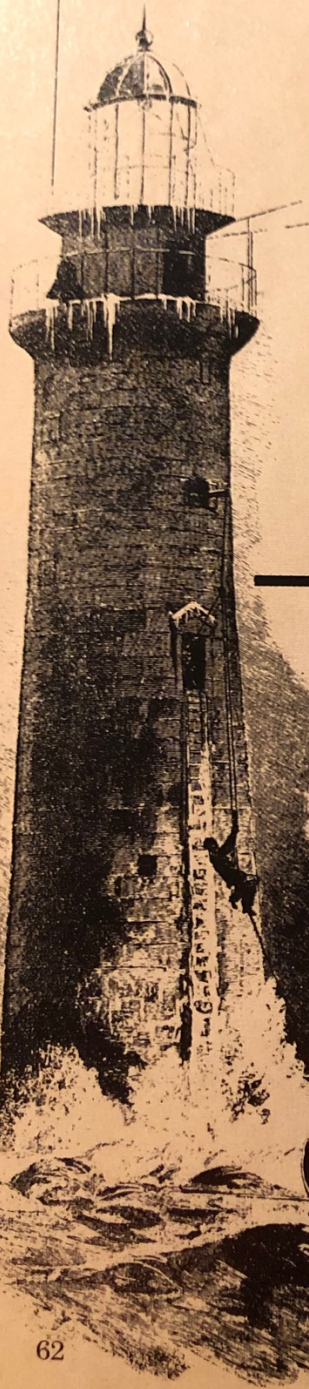
Daily tasks, weather, shipwrecks, rescues, or other events were recorded in a keeper's log. A poetic ac-

count by head keeper Edwin Seaman at Point Detour, Michigan, mentions his specific duties as both parent and lighthouse tender: "Feb. 23, 1876: This day I note with pride and joy, It brought to life my bouncing boy, Dark eyes and hair and ten lbs. weight, My first born boy (tis well to state, For we must note with due precision, supplies received at this division), So in con-

for the mail, returned at 2:30 p.m., drunk, mail wet.

February 8: Wind N.E., clear. Mr. Page went for mail, drunk, no mail."

The life of solitude was a common theme in a keeper's log. L. D. Marchant, who dedicated 38 years of his life as keeper for several lighthouses, wrote this account: "The most lonesome time I ever experienced was during the winter of 1912,



Eddystone Light

*My father was the keeper
of the Eddystone Light;
He courted a mermaid
one fine night.*

*From this union
there came three:*

*A porpoise and porgy
and the other was me!
Yo-ho-ho! The wind
blows free!
Oh, for a life
on the rolling sea!*



John Rankin, left, was a devoted lighthouse keeper who in his lifetime rescued 17 people from drowning. He once saved a couple who had fallen into San Francisco Bay. After stripping, he first saved the struggling man. The woman was bobbing safely above water, her immense hoopskirt filled with air. After the soggy lady was brought to shore, she slapped Rankin and proclaimed that her modesty had been offended by his nakedness.

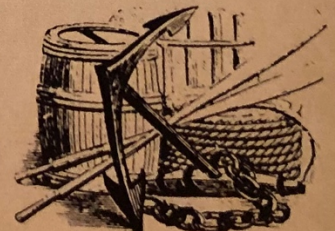
clusion I would add, this supply has made me Dad."

The logbook of the head keeper at East Brother Lighthouse near San Francisco is rife with complaints about his assistant, who it seems came out the loser in his bouts with the boredom of lighthouse life. It reads: "January 2, 1883: Wind S., light, hazy. Mr. Page took the mail over to San Quentin, returned drunk.

January 11: Wind N.E., cold, foggy. Mr. Page went

when I was alone for 30 days in a freeze [on the Chesapeake]... No boats were passing and there was nothing to see but fields of ice."

According to Marchant, the lonely life-style did have





advantages, too: "During my long time in the Lighthouse Service, I have not been sick a single day. The secret of my good health is that I have been where the doctors could not get to me."

Grand dames of the shining towers

Although lighthouse work was considered a man's job—dangerous, rugged, lonely—some women achieved the lofty height of keeper of the light. Point Pinos Lighthouse in Monterey Bay, California, was home to Charlotte Layton and Emily Fish, two of more than 100 women lightkeepers in American maritime history.

Emily's daughter, Juliet Fish Nichols, followed her mother's example and was appointed keeper of the Angel Island Lighthouse in San Francisco Bay in 1902. Both mother and daughter were keepers at California lighthouses during the

great earthquake of 1906.

From Angel Island, Juliet reported watching in disbelief as San Francisco's shoreline appeared to crumble into the sea. Soon the city's skyline erupted into

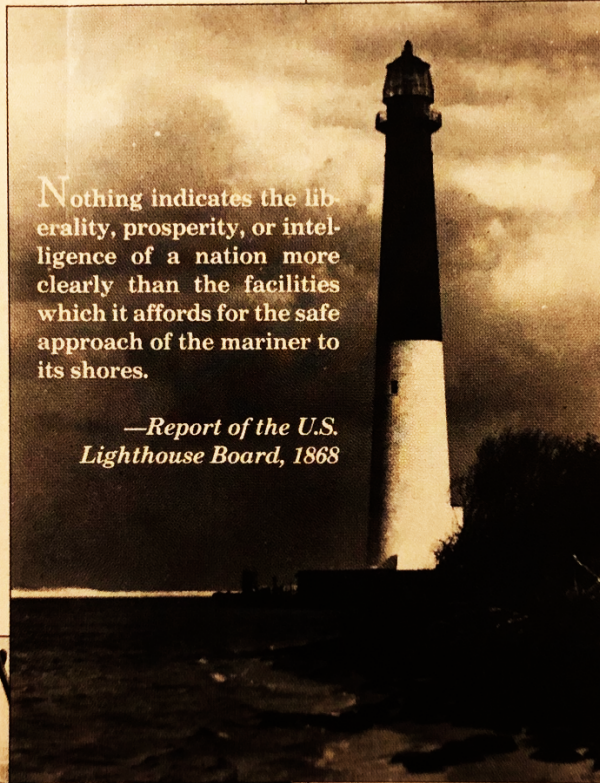
flames, and smoke blackened the horizon, but Angel Island remained unscathed.

Several months after the great earthquake, Juliet's fog signal failed during a heavy fog so she took up a

time history is the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse at Buxton, North Carolina. When built, it was the tallest lighthouse in the United States—208 feet. Awash in the sagas of storms and shipwrecks, Cape Hatteras was no stranger to the sea's treachery. The lighthouse served as guardian over one of America's most dangerous coastal areas, nicknamed the "Graveyard of the Atlantic." From its lookout, the skeletons of shipwrecks ensnared on the looming shoals were visible reminders of the unlucky mariners who had met watery graves.

One of the greatest catastrophes to besiege the lighthouse was the San Ciriaco hurricane of 1899. F. E. Simpson, the cape's principal keeper, knew the hurricane was coming. It had already killed thousands on the Latin American coasts and was heading for Cape Hatteras. Simpson alerted the vessels within the reach of his beacon. The captains of several of the ships chose to run aground; the other captains chose to bide their luck and ride out the storm.

For three days the hurricane's 100-mph winds and raging waves unleashed their wrath. Seven ships at sea disappeared and with them 50 men. Six other ships ran aground and were also destroyed. One of the ships was the *Priscilla*, reputedly the fastest schooner in the world. Her captain had been on deck desperately clutching his family and



Nothing indicates the liberality, prosperity, or intelligence of a nation more clearly than the facilities which it affords for the safe approach of the mariner to its shores.

—Report of the U.S. Lighthouse Board, 1868



hammer and began ringing the bell. Hour after hour she hammered until the fog lifted, 20 hours later. Today her hammerblows still ring as proud clarions in the annals of lighthouse lore.

A tale from "The Graveyard of the Atlantic" One of the most famous lighthouses in U.S. mari-

The beacon cuts through the smog and mist/for the Wickie makes it shine,/and a sailor knows without his light/the shore's impossible to find.

—By STCS R. E. Matuska from "Keeper of the Light"



attempting to disembark when a rogue wave smashed the ship, ripping her apart. The captain watched in horror as his family was swept into the sea and perished.

The storm left a devastated and partially submerged coast, but the lighthouse survived the 1899 hurricane

For eons man has watched the sea in all its fury and rage, but who remembers his vigilance now in this "modern" day and age?

—From "Keeper of the Light" by R. E. Matuska

ble up to 24 miles away.

The lens was the pride of many a lightkeeper. Today many of those elegant beacons have flickered and died in the winds of modern technology, and their keepers—no longer needed—have left the regal towers. Both have been eclipsed by spiritless computerized lights requiring little care and often mounted on sterile steel structures. Today only a handful of human-operated lighthouses remain.

In the wake of obsolescence, some old lighthouses will be automated, some will assume new lives as museums, bed-and-breakfast inns, and even homes. Still others will be doomed to decay and demolition.

Although these shining sentinels of the past may be extinguished, and those who sustained their radiance rendered obsolete, the romance of their legacy will remain, forever bright. □



to guide thousands more to safety in the next century.

Beacons of the past

The mighty lights that yielded safe passage and welcomed weary seafarers evolved over the centuries. The first lamps were fueled by whale oil, then kerosene, and finally electricity. Until the 1820s, simple reflectors were used to enhance illu-

mination. In 1822, the invention of the Fresnel lens marked a turning point in lighting. The mammoth 4-ton, 19-foot-high lens was made of hundreds of precision-ground prisms, giving it the appearance of an immense chandelier. The prisms refracted a flicker of light into a hyperradiant ice-blue beam visi-

Right: A lamp boy climbs to light a wick. Dangerous waters were first lit by wicks fired by whale oil, then kerosene, and later by electricity. Now computerized beacons are used.

