

Ballast Point Light Station — From left: roof of boat house, fog bell structure, oil house, combination light tower and keeper's dwelling, assistant dwelling. Circa 1910 Post Card.

In 1855 the Lighthouse Service constructed the first Point Loma Light Station high on a bluff to mark the entrance to San Diego Harbor. The location was thought to serve two purposes: 1) show the entrance to San Diego Harbor, and 2) act as a seacoast light to help vessels fix their position. In actuality, it served neither. It was too far from the channel into San Diego Harbor to help vessels navigate the narrow channel and it was too high to be of use to vessels sailing offshore as layers of low coastal fog obscured the light.

In 1888, Congress appropriated \$25,000 to build the Ballast Point Light Station at the end of a long spit of land in San Diego Bay to aid harbor navigation. March 23, 1891 the new Point Loma

Light Station shined its light for the first time. It was constructed at the base of the bluff near the ocean and low enough to be visible to passing vessels.

The Ballast Point Light Station went into operation on August 5, 1890. The station consisted of a wooden combination keeper's dwelling and tower, assistant's quarters, a fog bell house, and a boat house. The design was identical to stations constructed at two other California locations: San Luis Obispo (1890) and Table Bluff (1892).

The 5th Order Fresnel lens installed in the tower displayed a fix white light. A nearby bell fog signal, powered by a weight driven automatic striker, sounded once every ten seconds during thick and foggy weather.

For most of its life, the Ballast Point keeper was also responsible for lighted buoys in the harbor. The station was classified as a Light Attendant Station. In 1900 there were twelve lighted buoys in the Bay and a few at the entrance. Using a station launch, the keeper and his assistant would visit the lighted buoys in the harbor on a regular schedule. They cleaned lenses, replaced acetylene tanks, and touched up paint on the above water surfaces of the buoys. Often this required chasing sea lions off the buoys before working on the aids.

In 1928 a diaphone fog signal replaced the bell. In 1931 Hermann Engel, who had been keeper since 1914, was replaced by his assistant Radford Franke, who

remained keeper until the station was automated in 1957.

During World War II a small garage was converted to quarters for single Coast Guardsmen who were engaged in beach patrols. Keeper Radford Franke tells of the events of the evening of December 7, 1941: “... the city was blacked out, there was not a light showing anywhere. I extinguished the light in the tower and was taken by a Coast Guard 83 footer [patrol boat] to the entrance of the harbor. I first extinguished the light of the whistle buoy, located about a half mile off the entrance. I then worked my way back into the harbor extinguishing all the other lighted buoys. We even secured the whistle buoy signal by tying a burlap bag over the valve to muffle the sound. At each buoy I left the Coast Guard cutter and rowed to the aid to secure the gas flow to the light. This was a frightening operation as it was dark and I imagined enemy submarines everywhere. The cutter would drift out of sight and I was never sure I would be picked up again. Operation completed, I was returned to Ballast Point and San Diego Harbor entered World War Two.”

The U. S. Navy wanted the Ballast Point property to expand their submarine base. The entire station was razed in 1961. But for 71 years the light of the Ballast Point Light Station greeted merchant ships, war ships, pleasure vessels, and fishing boats as they plied the narrow channel off the lighthouse. And, it seems like Only Yesterday.

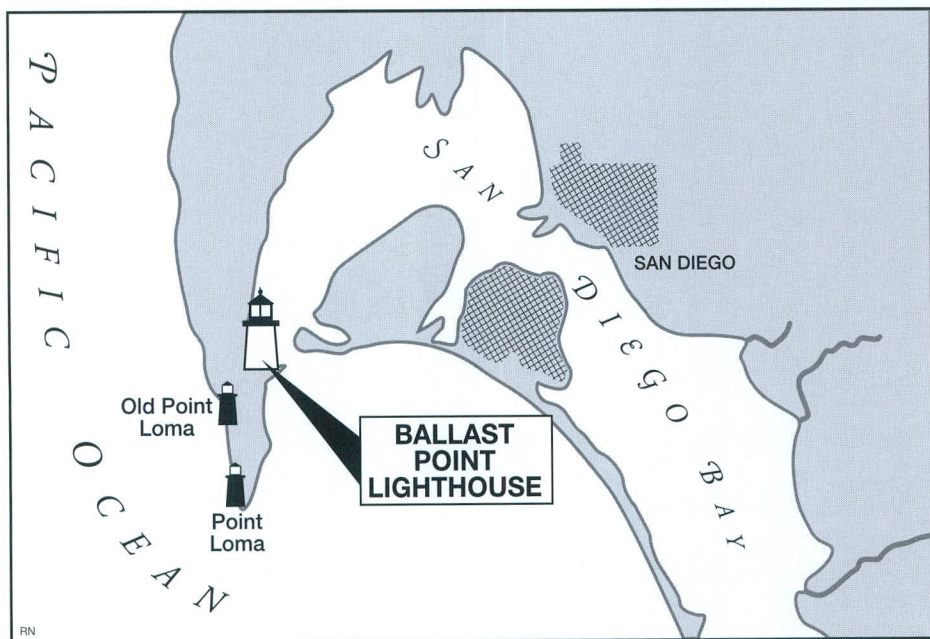


Top — Keeper's house and tower.

Bottom — From left: Assistant's house, top of tower, second boat house. Both photos circa 1930 from Society archives.

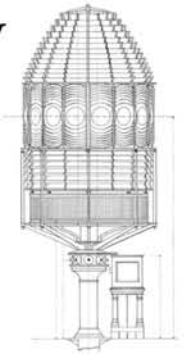
The Ballast Point station was a sister to the San Luis Obispo and Table Bluff stations, all constructed in the 1890's. All three stations had their buildings along the same alignment. The San Luis Obispo tower-dwelling and fog signal house still exists. The Table Bluff station is complete except for the tower-dwelling.

Radford Franke's son graduated from the Coast Guard Academy and rose to the rank of Captain. Now retired, he is director of the San Diego Maritime Museum and that facility has the old fog bell and lens from his father's Ballast Point Light Station. Radford and his wife, Marie, live in San Diego.





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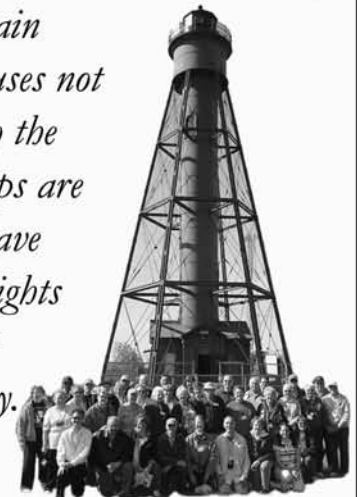
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