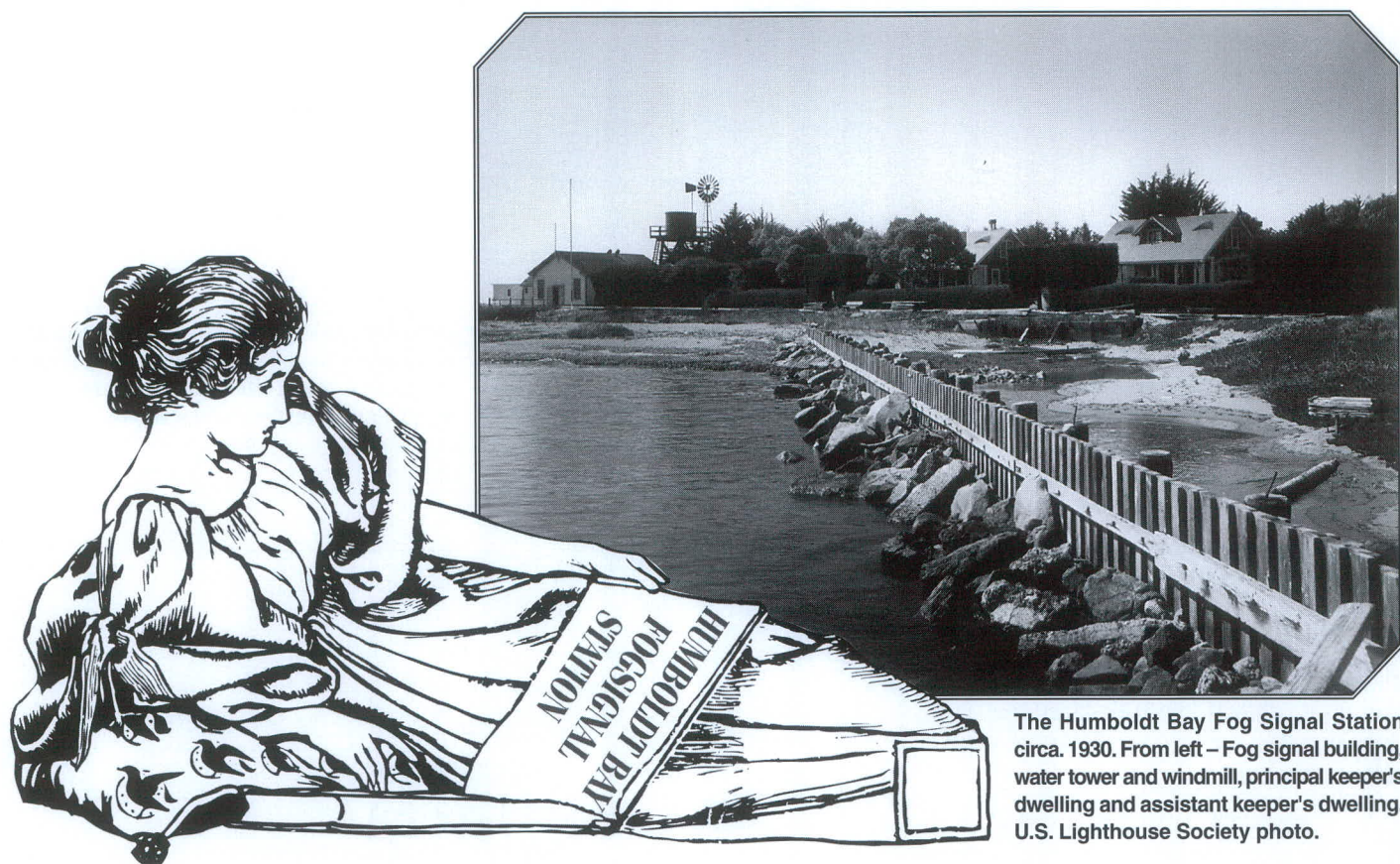


Growing Up at the Humboldt Bay Fog Signal Station



The Humboldt Bay Fog Signal Station circa. 1930. From left – Fog signal building, water tower and windmill, principal keeper's dwelling and assistant keeper's dwelling. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo.

Lighthouse Memories

An edited memoir of Dorothy Allen

Dorothy Allen became a registered nurse and practiced in California for many years. She died in 1985 at the age of 62. Her father, T. J. Allen, died at the Point Arguello Light Station in 1941. In addition to his only child, Dorothy, he was survived by his wife, Martha, who died in 1990 at the age of 92. Ms. Allen spent many hours documenting her father's U. S. Lighthouse Service career. We received the manuscripts, along with many excellent photographs and newspaper clippings several years ago. We will run at least one more article from this collection in the future.

It was around the latter part of January 1932, my dad, T. J. Allen, told my mother, Martha, and me that we were going to move to northern California. He had been accepted into the United States Lighthouse Service as a 2nd Assistant Keeper [at the Humboldt Bay Fog Signal Station]. Prior to this, as far back as I can recall, he was chief engineer on the Southern Pacific Ferry boats that ran between Oakland and San Francisco before the Bay Bridge was built. Knowing that the bridge was in the near future and that many of the ferries would be inactivated [construction began in 1933 and was completed in November 1936], gave him the reason for

joining the Lighthouse Service. Since I was raised and educated in Berkeley, this was to prove quite an adventure for me in the years to come.

We left Berkeley during Easter vacation of 1932. It was a two-day drive up Highway 101 and very rainy all the way. The last half of the trip seemed to take forever, but it was simply beautiful – through those giant redwoods I think the fact that that the highway was only two lanes made it take so long. I know this to be a fact now, as in 1960 I drove up there and it only took seven hours on the new four-lane highway.

When we arrived in Eureka, just two miles across the [Humboldt] Bay from the station,

dad called the Keeper and was informed that we would have to continue north to Arcata and then come down the peninsula through Samoa (the Hammond Lumber Company town), Fairhaven, a small burg with a few fishing families, and Rolph, another small town with about four families and a grammar school, to a small ranch. This ranch was about two miles from the station. The rancher rented garages to anyone who lived in the area, otherwise you could just leave your car sit out on his property. My dad opted for the garage, but even with the car under cover the salt air sure got to the chrome. We experienced this at all the light stations we lived at. Some of the men would paint their bumper with aluminum paint to help preserve them.

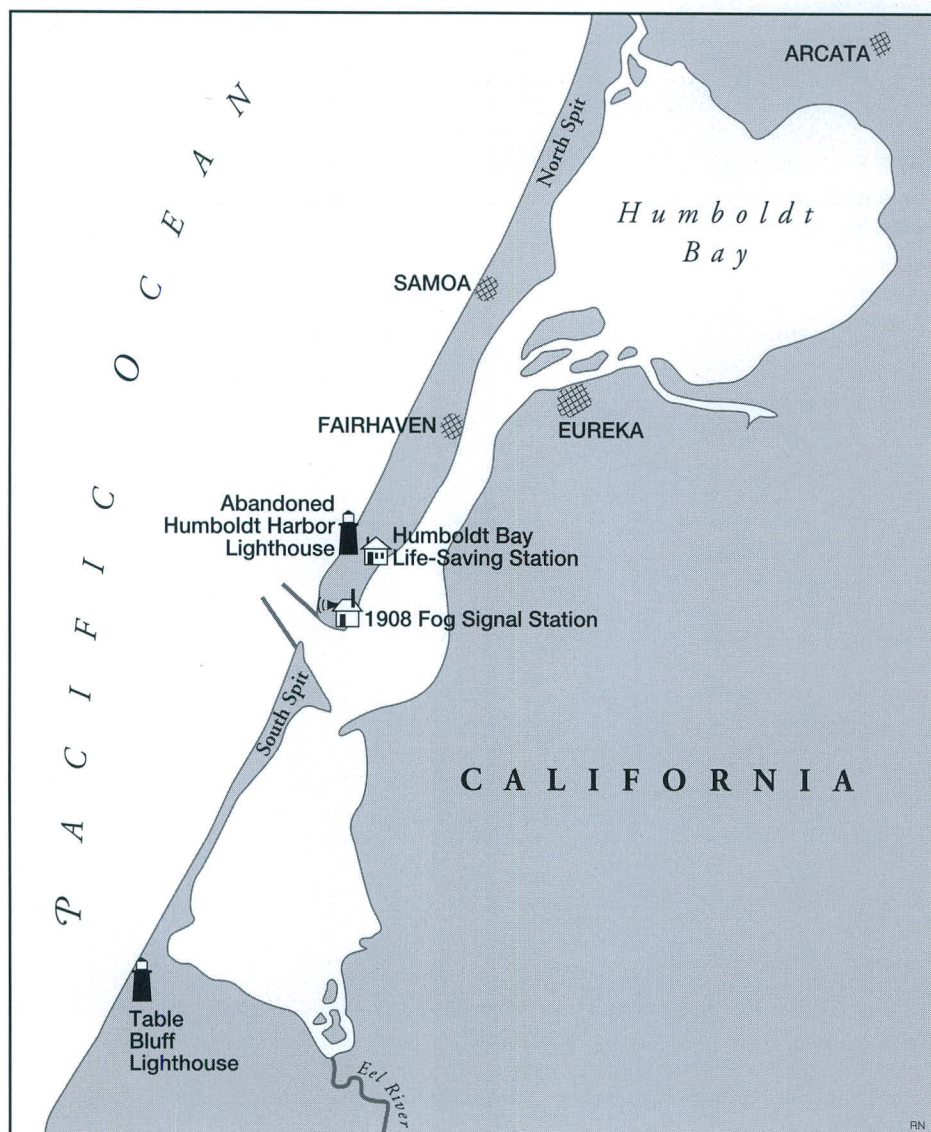
After arriving at the ranch, we found that there were several ways to reach the fog signal station: (1) you could walk the board walk which went down the bay side of the peninsula, (2)



The Allen family on the Model T rail car. Author's photo, May 1, 1932.

you could walk the beach on the bay side, if the tide was low enough, you learn quickly that it's much easier to walk on damp sand than dry, (3) on the ocean side of the ranch, just about down the middle of the peninsula the Corps of Engineers had constructed a single set of railroad tracks which ran all the way from Samoa to the end of the north jetty. Three vehicles used the tracks; an engine, a speeder (small repair cart) and a Model-T (later A) car. Well, the Model-T was the way we first reached our new home. I think the Model A came about six months before we moved to the next station. Both cars were equipped with flanged wheels and had to be jacked up and a makeshift turntable place under it. We called this train wheel car the "hurdy gurdy." When the car was not in use it had to be removed from the track onto a siding of railroad ties..

Our first house was the 2nd Assistant's quarters, which was about 500 yards from the fog signal building. It was on the ocean side of the tracks, the Coast Guard station was just across the tracks on the bay side. A four-foot-high fence surrounded our home and instead of green grass for a yard there were wooden planks about 4 inches thick. We had a large five-room, two-story house. The thing that amazed me most was that the bathroom took up the entire back half of the upstairs portion of the house. It had everything that a bathroom should have, but all the spare space led to a beautiful view of the now crumbling, white towered lighthouse [1856], about a half a city block from our house. Because the lighthouse was too low to be effective, it





The original Humboldt Bay North Spit Lighthouse. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

was discontinued in 1892 and a replacement constructed on a bluff on the south side of the bay (Table Bluff). Soon after I arrived I thought it would be nice to climb to the top, but the stairs were in ruins so my first chance to climb a lighthouse was thwarted.

Some of our furniture had been crated and delivered by the Lighthouse Service tender before we left Berkeley and the rest was delivered about three weeks after we arrived. Everything had to be packed in heavy wooden crates, all taken care of by the Lighthouse Service. After our furniture and other effects were off-loaded on the station dock, all hands turned out and loaded everything on push-carts and delivered it to our house, about a city block away.

There seemed to be all the modern facilities at our house, except that mother had to cook on a coal range and our only lights were kerosene lamps. Quite an adjustment had to be made by all, but it didn't take too long. I can truthfully say, to this day, that kerosene lamps are much easier on the eyes. The Service furnished the coal used for cooking and to burn in the living and dining room fireplaces — as well as the oil for the lamps.

Two weeks after arriving school started and it was quite different. I had to leave the house by 7:30 and four boys and I walked the boardwalk by the bay to reach the ranch, and then we cut over to a dirt road to reach Rolph. There were eight grades in one classroom with one teacher. I was a mid-term student since I started in January and all rural schools

start in September. Instead of being in low fourth grade as I was in Berkeley, the teacher put me back in high third. Naturally, having been in this grade already, I had a snap of it until June when school was out. The following September we had a new teacher and she thought everyone was in their right class until she got wise to me. I would whip through the lessons and then sit and fool around. She placed me in low fifth and I never went backwards after that.



The author standing by the station launch. Author photo.

There were several ways to get to school. One was right down the middle of the train track. I didn't like this route as occasionally a snake would pop up.. Sometimes we would cut through the ranch and give the cattle and horses a run for their money. If we came home this way the boys would always try to ride the calves. One day they convinced me to try it. I managed to get on and the calf took off. That was my last try at riding a calf or cow. If we were lucky we would get a ride on the Model-T. Once in a great while we would get a ride in the station launch (16-foot inboard engine with a cabin) or the small Coast Guard runabout.

About a year after arriving, the Army Corps of Engineers sent workers to repair the north jetty. The couple that did the cooking had a girl who was my age and another family had a boy and a girl — now we really had a gang to go to school with *and* I had someone to play with besides boys! The cook used to take us to school almost every day on the speeder (a workers side-car which ran on the tracks) . This was a lot of fun for us. To start it, we had to push it onto the tracks and jump on once the engine started.

A few times we would misjudge and the cook would have to stop for us. Once the engine was going it could idle or go at one speed,



The 2nd assistant keeper's dwelling, May 20, 1932. "The plant life on the dunes is mainly yellow lupine. To the left is a building used to store coal and other station supplies. The water tower is the one from which water was tossed over the dwelling's roof during an earthquake." Author photo May 20, 1932.

until it was shut off. The engineer sometimes let us take turns at starting and stopping the car. As the tracks were government property there was never any other vehicle on it, except the Model-T and they went in a straight line from Rolph to a bend in the jetty. It was on these tracks that I first learned to drive a car. Of course I couldn't run into anything, although the old Ford did jump the tracks a few times.

When I was through 6th grade, they sent me to Eureka to attend Junior High School. Going to Eureka was not as much fun as going to school in Rolph. The only way was by way of the station launch or occasionally the Coast Guard motor lifeboat. We were left off at a pier called Bucksport and two blocks away boarded a streetcar to get to school. I remember that it rained a lot in the area and occasionally we had thunder and lightning. One winter we actually had snow.

Between the north jetty and the fog signal building was a tide pool and at high tide it made

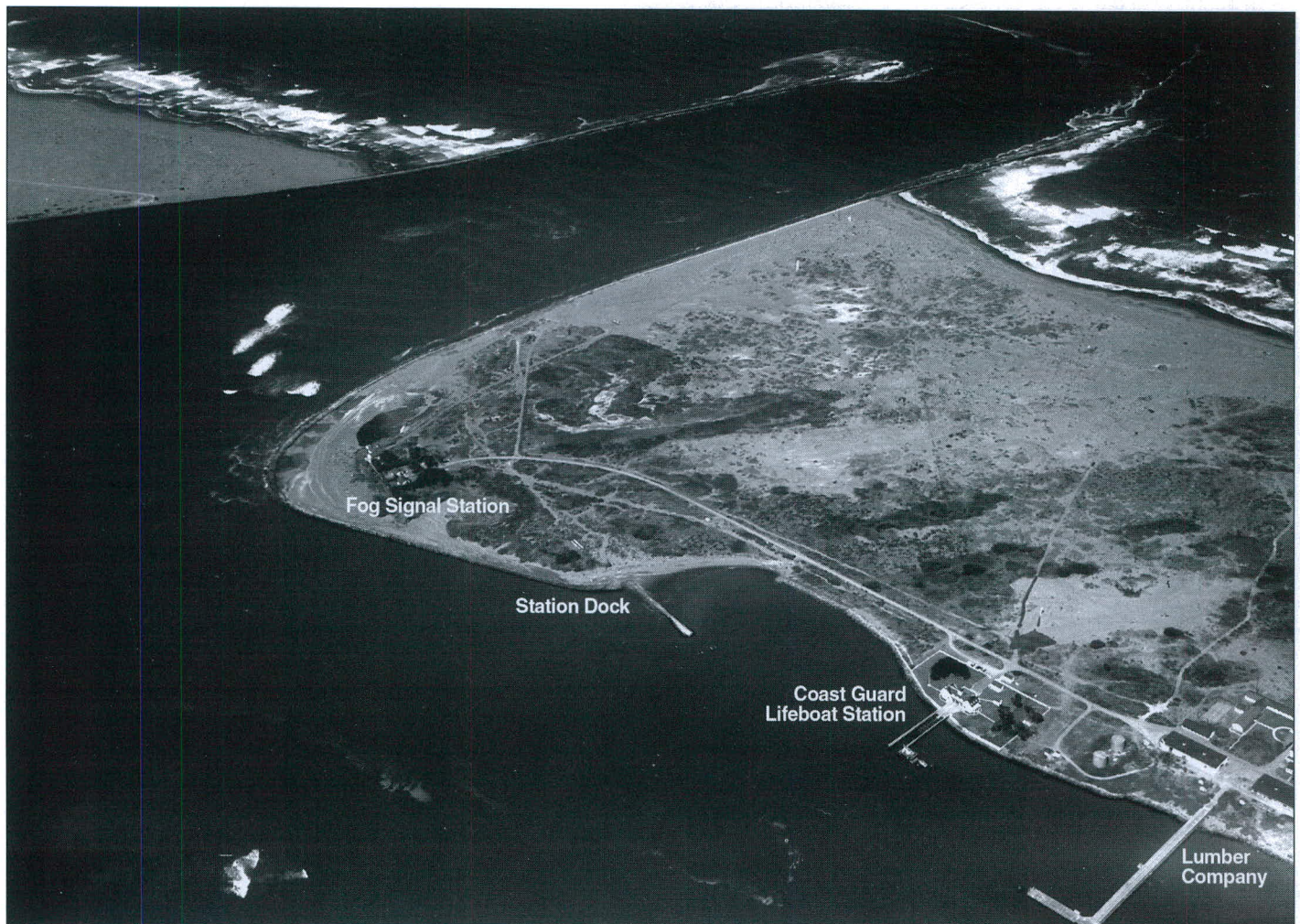
a wonderful swimming hole. This is where I learned to swim. I was on a makeshift raft made of railroad ties, out in the middle of the pond, when it upset – throwing me into the pond. It was about 6 or 7 feet deep, but all dad did was shout, "You got yourself in, now get yourself out!" I was frightened but my dog paddle worked.



Station children in the ol' water hole. The author states they are sitting on an overturned skiff.. Author photo, Oct. 1932.

Although it never got hot in the area we use to swim almost everyday in the pond, and some nights too. In the summer we had hot dog roasts on the beach. We also boiled those delicious Humboldt Bay crabs when the local fishing boats would throw the keepers a sack full of them as they passed our dock.

Usually the station boat went to Eureka on Tuesdays and Saturdays to get groceries, mail and supplies. On Tuesdays the men would also service several of the minor lights along the bay. Servicing consisted of filling the lamps with oil and cleaning the lenses. When we went to Eureka the boat was always tied up at a floating dock at the foot of F Street. One day the launch was tied up too close to the shore and when we returned the bow was stuck in the mud. I can still see my father falling off the stern as he tried to rock it free. When he came up [from the water] he still had his hat and glasses on, but the boat was free.



The Humboldt Bay Fog Signal Station is at left. At right are the station dock, the Coast Guard Lifeboat Station and the lumber company. The old lighthouse was directly behind the Coast Guard station on the beach, long gone when this photo was taken in 1959. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.

We had only been at the fog signal station for about three months when we went through the worst earthquake I'd ever care to experience. Late one night I woke up and my bed was rolling across the bedroom floor. I heard rumblings and thuds, needless to say there was no more sleep that night. At daylight we found that all three chimneys had been shaken down and caused large holes in the planks around the house. Water from the cistern tank in back of the house was actually thrown over the house. There was quite a bit of damage done to buildings in Eureka.

About a month after this nightmare, my dad got promoted to 1st assistant keeper and we moved to the house right by the fog signal building. The keeper dad replaced was transferred to Cape Mendocino. The new house was also a five-room house but much nicer and with a grass lawn. High hedges surrounded the yard.

In addition to our two dogs, each family had chickens. There were plenty of jackrabbits, skunks, weasels and bobcats in the area.

There were numerous things to keep one occupied. We fished from the dock or along the jetty. If you wanted, you could sit on the dock and watch the trawlers arrive from sea. They would occasionally throw us a salmon, or a gunnysack of halibut and sand dabs. We picked wild strawberries in the sand dunes. We dug clams at low tide and swam in our swimming hole. I had a bicycle and I would ride all the boardwalks.

This station was the only fog signal station on the California coast. Several light

stations had fog signals but ours was strictly a fog signal station, no light. [It had once been a complete light station. A new tower, Table Bluff, located on the south side of the bay had replaced the 1856 light tower, damaged by earthquakes.] It had a two-blast diaphone horn. In addition to the bay beacons I mentioned earlier, the men had to service a kerosene light on the south jetty, which was operated by some sort of timer.

There were two light stations not too far from Eureka and we visited them during the time we lived there. The first one was Trinidad Head, north of us. It was a short tower located 196 feet above sea level. The second one was Table Bluff, south of us, on a high bluff on the south side of Humboldt Bay. We also visited Cape Mendocino and Punta Gorda because the keepers there had been stationed at the



The principal keeper's dwelling, with a lawn sporting real grass. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo, August, 1926.



Most stations grew much of their produce. Rhubarb can be seen near the fence in small barrels. Sunflowers grew along the fence and on the left of the walk; strawberry plants and lettuce thrived – all in the yard of the Humboldt Station. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo August 5, 1926.

Humboldt Bay fog signal and dad knew them.

One day we saw the water churning up about 200 yards off the station dock. It turned out to be a shark and porpoise fighting. If I had not seen it I never would have believed it, but the shark lost. It was not a killer shark, just a huge leopard shark. They said that man-eating sharks never got that far north, but one afternoon two teenage boys were sailing in rather rough surf across from the station when their boat capsized. One boy was never found, but the other washed up about a mile up the bay at the Union Oil dock and part of his feet had been bitten off. They never knew by what. The boy did survive.

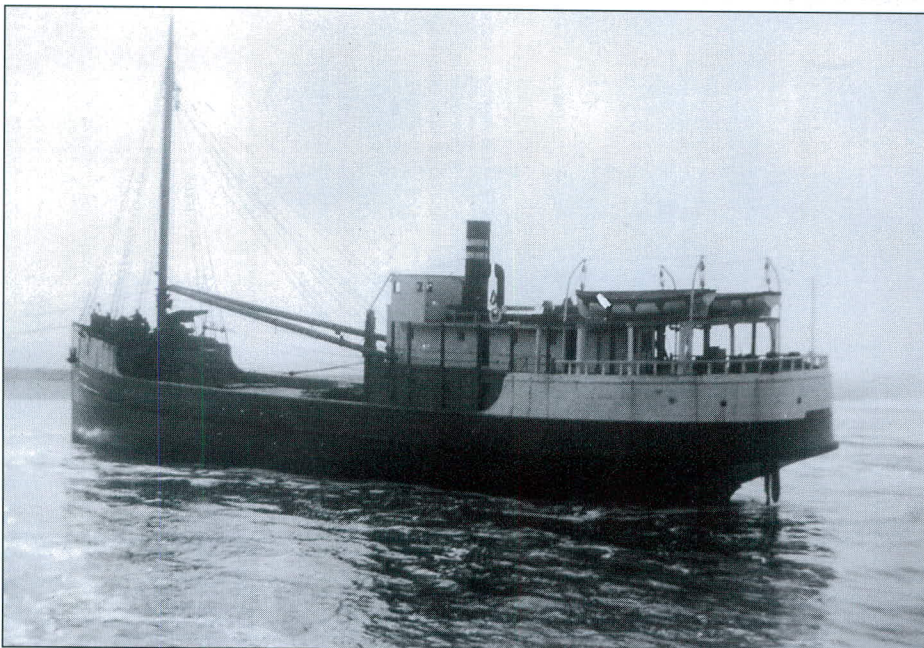
Coming home from school one day we saw the lumber schooner *Yellowstone* beached stern first halfway between the Coast Guard station and the fog signal. When we got closer we noticed a big hole torn in the stern. This was the afternoon of February 24, 1933. The hole occurred when the ship tried to cross the bar and enter Humboldt Bay, considered the most dangerous to enter on the west coast. A large swell picked the vessel up and set her stern first on the end of the south jetty. Another swell lifted her clear. The Coast Guard and some fishing vessels assisted her into the bay but she began taking on water and listing badly so they beached the ship so she wouldn't sink in the shipping channel. Later the ship was made watertight long enough to tow her farther up the bay and beach her where she slowly wasted away.

Not quite one month later [March 13, 1933] another schooner came to misfortune also due to the treacherous entrance to the bay and the usual fog. This time it was the *Tiverton* trying to make the entrance in heavy fog and the captain confused the south jetty for the north jetty and went aground south of the south jetty. A salvage company unloaded everything possible after they realized she couldn't be refloated. Soon after they had all the cargo on the south jetty heavy seas came up and washed almost all the cargo back into the ocean and entrance channel. A few boats picked up some of the

furniture in the bay, but most went to sea. Walking along the beach, we kids found tons of Milky Way candy bars, lunchmeat and big wheels of cheese. Imagine what fun the dogs had with all this flotsam. We also found 5-gallon cans of linseed oil that we carried back to the station, along with numerous cans of popcorn and cans of coffee. Shortly after the *Tiverton* went aground it was time for dad to service the light on the south jetty and we went with him. After he had finished his duty we got to climb aboard the ship, which was surrounded by sand – she was left to the elements.



The submarine *H-3* on the beach of the north spit with the battleship *USS Milwaukee* stranded in the background. Old postcard photo.



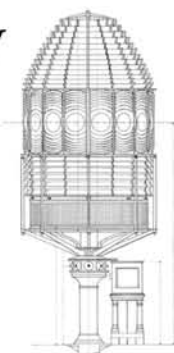
The lumber schooner *Tiverton*, hard aground by the north jetty. This vessel was a typical design used along the West Coast. Author photo, January 19, 1933.

The first shipwreck I ever saw was the battleship *USS Milwaukee* which ran aground in January of 1917 while attempting to pull a submarine off the beach. The sub ran aground the previous December. Ironically my dad had been stationed on the battleship and was discharged just before the vessel went to the rescue of the sub and her doom. Several portholes were still visible, which he said he used to polish.

In February 1935 dad was transferred to the Los Angeles Breakwater Lighthouse...
to be continued.



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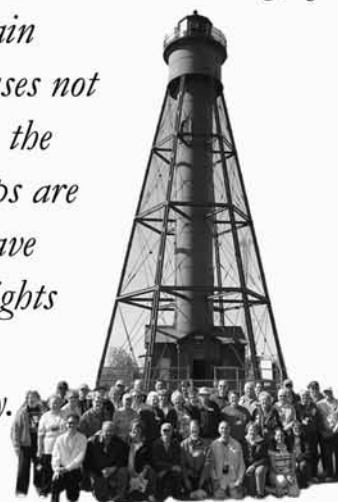
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