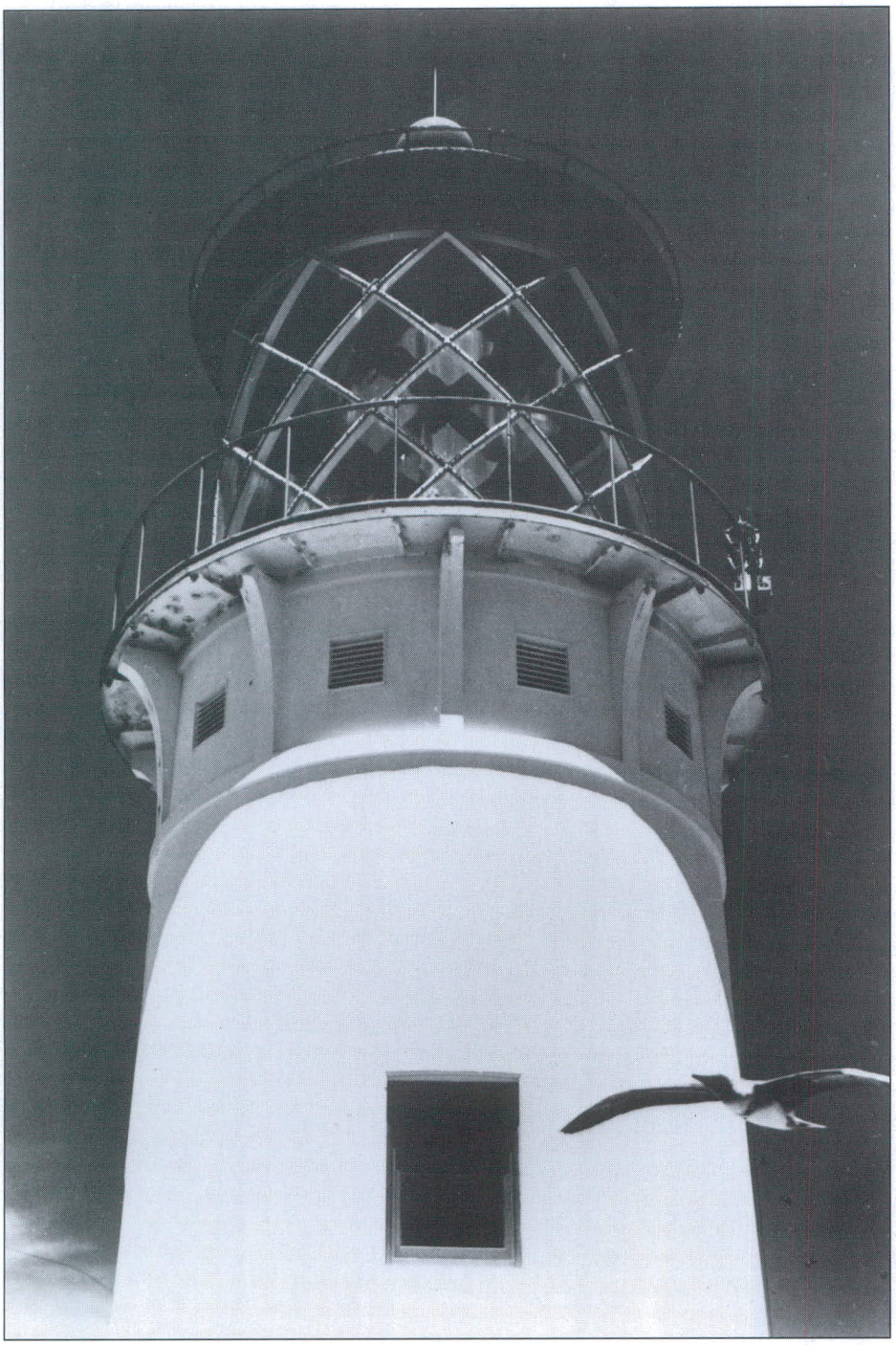
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Kilauea Point

Landfall Beacon On the Orient Run

by Ross Aikin

In a windswept point of land which stretches seaward from the rugged, verdant north shore of Kauai, Hawaii's westernmost inhabited island, there stands a stalwart member of the society of venerable lighthouses whose history is now characterized as near legendary in nature.

This station, the Kilauea Point lighthouse, marked its 75th anniversary last May with a day long celebration honoring its former keepers who are still alive and commemorating the remarkable milestone in the life of Hawaii's "landfall light."

Today Kilauea Point is under the control of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, having taken over custody of the

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31 acre Refuge site when the lighthouse was decommissioned by the Coast Guard. It was a natural choice for the federal government, since throughout all the active years of the Lighthouse Service, the wild and sequestered Kilauea Point area had been known for its wide variety of sea bird species whose home habitats were well established there. In the interim years the Kilauea Point National Wildlife Refuge has become one of the nation's most popular Refuge visitation areas because of the attraction of the light station and the appeal of the spectacular north shore wildlife setting.

A look at the determining features upon which the first Light House Establishment surveys were based for the new Kilauea light station (as early as 1907) reveals some intriguing parallels with site selection processes which the ancient Hawaiians themselves must have used.

Though there is of course no record to indicate that the Hawaiians had used Ka Lae o Kilauea (Kilauea Cape or Point) as a landmark guide for their returning or voyaging canoes, there is abundant evidence that many promontories nearby, as well as elsewhere on Kauai, were indeed used for just such activity. One panoramic hillside area on the south shore (near where Captain Cook first came ashore in the islands) is documented as having served this purpose for Hawaiians.

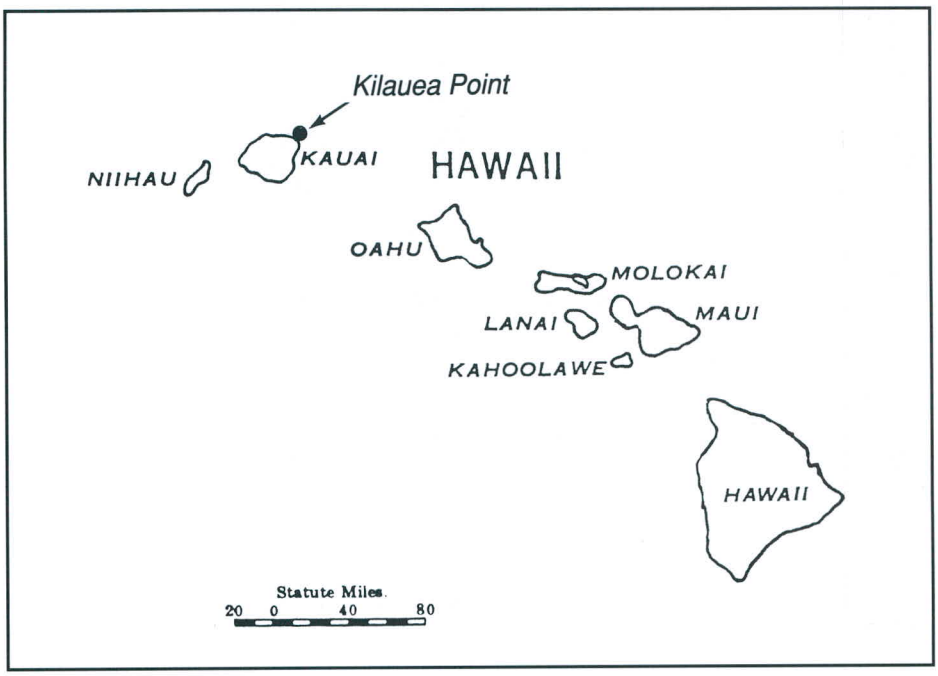
The evidence from ships' captains and maritime officials assembled by the Lighthouse Board quickly confirmed what the Hawaiians had obviously known for centuries - the best island location for a landfall light (in this case serving the Orient run vessels) was Kauai's Kilauea Point. The northernmost point of the inhabited islands of the chain.

Authorization for construction was issued in May 1912. As a footnote to development of this lighthouse, it should be noted that Kauai's own native born Prince Jonah Kuhio (direct descendent of the last King of Kauai, Kaumualii) was instrumental in pursuing the related Congressional activity to its successful conclusion, serving in his capacity as Territorial Delegate for Hawaii from 1902 until his death in 1922.

Land for the lighthouse (31 acres) was purchased "for the consideration of one dollar" from the Kilauea Sugar Plantation Company, the conveyance instrument being signed by a scion of the "Sugar King," Claus Spreckles. By the time the Commissioner of Lighthouses issued his annual report in 1911, engineering plans had been completed and bids let to a French company for the Fresnel lens and clockworks and to a Kenton, Ohio company to fabricate the metal lantern and interior metalwork. Anticipated completion and commissioning of the lighthouse was slated for April 1, 1912. During shipping there was minor breakage of lens prisms and the clockworks mechanism malfunctioned after being installed. Considering this and the shipping distances involved for all major components, and the inevitable contractual delays, it is remarkable to note the heroic efforts on the part of personnel from the Honolulu District Office who overcame considerable obstacles, and enabled commissioning ceremonies to be held just one month late, May 1, 1913. It was a grand culmination to what had been an unusually difficult station installation, principally because of the very isolated location, the lack of a trained work force and limited equipment availability.

Evidence of the problems presented by this isolated area and extremely rugged north shore terrain is graphically indicated in the photograph accompanying this story. The derrick and landing platform constructed by the 26 man construction crew in 1912 served the station for 15 years. Eventually roads were constructed to the light station from commercial harbors serving the island. But until a road was developed, in fair weather and foul, the Lighthouse Service tender *Kukui* delivered all supplies and visiting District Inspectors, providing in a very real sense the major lifeline support which the keepers and their families relied on.

By dawn of May 1, 1913 all eyes in the Kilauea community were literally turned toward the brilliant white structure standing sentinel on the wind-swept headland thrusting seaward from their northern shore. According to local newspaper coverage of the event, "hundreds of country people had gathered to witness the wonderful sight." The dedication ceremonies included a big luau and a shark shoot. Ms. Ruby Scott, daughter of a manager of the Kilauea Sugar Plantation, stated that the entire population of Kilauea town was invited to the day long celebration preceding the formal lighting ceremonies that evening. A big luau (feast) featuring Kalua (pig) baked in a ground oven, sweet potato, poi (taro root) and opihi (limpet) was held that afternoon.



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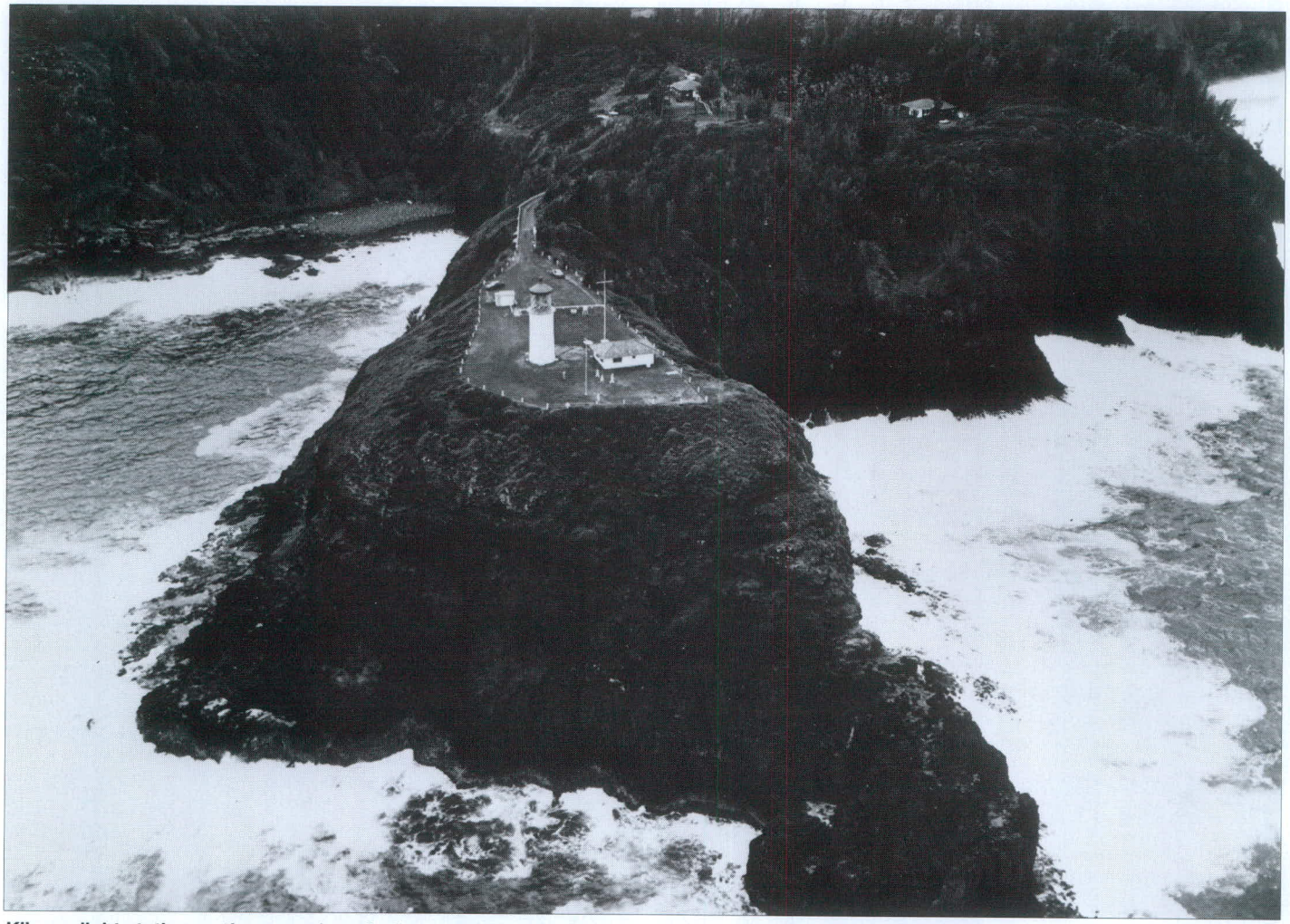
Among the diversions of the day was a shark shoot where the carcass of a cow was lowered into the landing cove, by the station derrick, thus attracting sharks to kill.

Ms. Scott reported there was "much speech making at the luau." The climax of the commissioning ceremonies was the dramatic first lighting of the 250,000 candlepower lens. That event was sufficient to elicit the typical Hawaiian expression of wonder and awe for those present—"auwe! auwe!"—as the brilliant double flash of light swept across the landscape inland from the old lava peninsula.

That the high drama of this event was felt by all present is evident in the recorded commentary of the Lighthouse Service personnel in attendance. Ordinarily prone to matter-of-fact reporting in typical engineering terminology, the highest ranking official, Mr. A.E. Arledge—Inspector of the 19th Lighthouse District in Honolulu, was moved to wax poetic with a descriptive report. He wrote, ". . I wish to state that the lighting was accomplished with a great deal of interest. From a structural standpoint the tower put up a good appearance and the lens is magnificent. The night of lighting was dark and the light was brilliant. There is a cliff about 400 feet high located 300 yards southeasterly from the tower across which the beam of light rapidly swept. On the whole I believe that this is the most beautiful light station I have witnessed. . . ."

The first keeper of the Kilauea Point station was Harry W. Flint, whose first assignment was to last just under two years. He returned and assumed command in 1925 and remained at that post until his retirement in 1932. Some of the most vivid entries in the Log of the Kilauea Point light station were written by a man whose personal commitment to discipline and unwavering service earned him the much respected title of "Hawaii's Dean of Lighthouse Keepers." He was Samuel Apollo Amalu, who succeeded Flint in 1915 and served for ten years, the longest unbroken string of service at Kilauea until the Coast Guard assumed command in 1939. He left Kilauea in 1925 to assume the post of keeper of Makapuu light station on Oahu, where the hyper-radial lens still carries the distinction of being the largest lighthouse lens in the United States.

Keeper Amalu typifies the character of the type of men who were devoted to the service and whose sense of discipline and responsibility provided enviable records such as he established at Kilauea Point and throughout his entire career.



Kilauea light station on the rugged north shore of Kauai. Note the keeper's houses at the top. Author photo.

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Keeper Samuel Amalu. Note the star and bar on his left sleeve. The star signifies 25 years service, the bar 5. Author photo.

In his wake came many whose years of service were equally committed—but none whose standards of performance were surpassed.

Reading the old Log entries of the Kilauea station it's evident that, through the lives of the keepers at this island outpost were bound to daily routines of near military regularity, there was nevertheless a considerable social exchange with the residents of nearby Kilauea town. Amalu, and many of the other keepers in the islands, were of Hawaiian descent and they recorded frequent casual references to their off day activities of fishing, swimming, feasting and visiting to nearby towns of Hanalai, Kilauea and Kalihi Wai. The town excursions were often made to purchase poi, the starchy paste made from pounded taro root, of which the natives are so fond.

Kilauea Point recorded its share of helping resolve emergencies involving vessels in distress in the vicinity of the station. However, no major maritime disaster ever occurred in the sea lanes that the station guarded.

When Kilauea Point's greatest moment of assistance did occur, it was of startling melodramatic impact, in an episode which became a highlight in the annuals of Hawaiian Islands lighthouse lore. The event riveted the nation's attention on two young aviators, almost as much as had occurred when Lucky Lindy made his hop over the other "ditch."

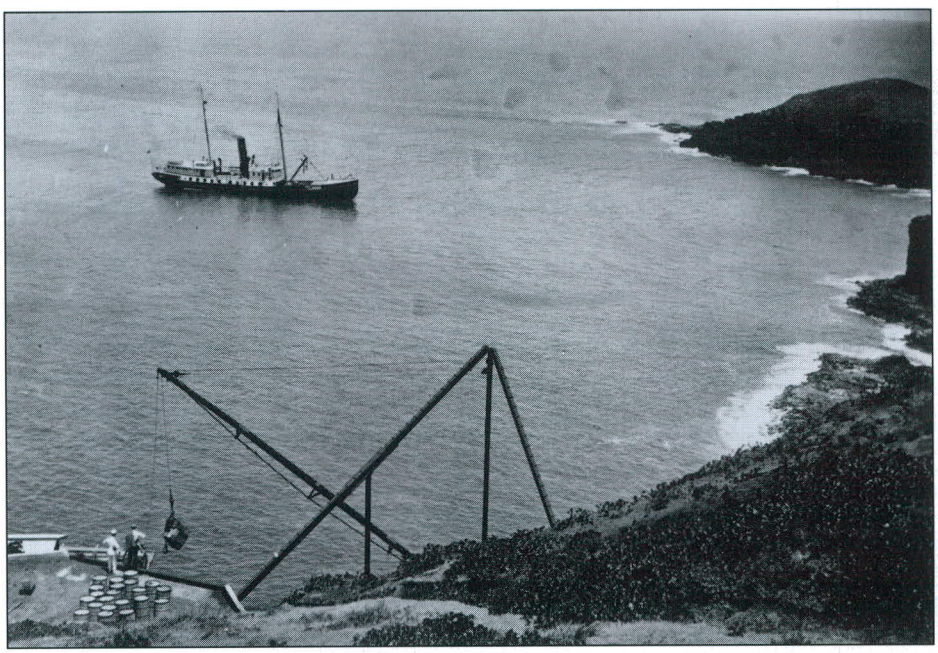
They were Lieutenants Lester Maitland and Albert Hegenberger, pilot and navigator of an Army transport named *"The Bird of Paradise."* The aircraft had been modified and especially equipped for the Army's long planned first trans-Pacific flight from Oakland, CA to Wheeler Field on Oahu.

Following close on the heels of Lindberg's acclaimed feat in May 1927, the intrepid fliers took off from Oakland at dawn on June 28. Their flight plan was to bring them over the islands prior to the next dawn. Thus all the lights of Oahu would help them in locating the island and would assist with a final fix enroute to Wheeler Field. The Lighthouse Service lights on the big island of Hawaii, Makapuu (on Oahu) and at Molokai were to be the initial contact beacons as they winged in from California. The light of Kilauea, being too far to the west, was not suppose to come into play . . . or perhaps a light of last resort, should they be far off course to the west. The search lights at Wheeler Field were also energized to assist them to nagivate.

From the very beginning a number of equipment problems occurred. About 200 miles out of Oakland their radio failed. During the late night hours as they approached Oahu the skies became overcast eliminating any hope of navigator Hegenberger using celestial navigation. He was forced to use dead reckoning calculations. Also, some time after midnight, while flying at 11,000 feet, carburetor icing caused an engine malfunction, forcing a drop down to 4,000 feet for the remainder of the flight. During the last few hours they were buffeted by continual rain squalls. Any chance of picking up the beam from a lighthouse was almost nil.

Hegenberger adjusted their course a few degrees southward, feeling that the persistent southerly winds had been pushing them too far north. Then, a short time later, he reluctantly yielded to Maitland's concern that they were too far south and adjusted their course to the north. About this time they both calculated that they had run their course and were perhaps in serious trouble. They were very fatigued from the long flight and from being buffeted by the weather. Peering into the darkness they could discern no point of light in any direction. Things looked very bleak and their fuel was running low.

In what was by all accounts the final few minutes of desperation before a critical decision had to be made concerning



The lighthouse tender *Kukui* approaches the Kilauea light station landing. The cow carcass was hung from this stiff leg derrick during the shark shoot. Author photo.

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an abrupt course change to the south, the aviators spotted through a brief opening in the overcast skies, a strange low star off to the left, on the horizon. Banking their tri-motor to the left they headed for the star which they soon realized was not a celestial body but the distinctive double flash characteristic of the Kilauea lighthouse. It was that beacon of last resort, had they missed this light they surely would have missed the islands and perished.

Their prior moments of anxiety dissolved in a flood of relief as the *Bird of Paradise* homed in on the beacon in the rain and mist shrouded night skies of Kauai. The mission was virtually a success. To avoid another miscue, and because of the dangerous mountain ranges of Oahu, they circled the Kilauea Point area until dawn, then flew to Wheeler Field arriving at 6:30 a.m. on June 29 to a tumultuous welcome.

Considering the position of the fliers when they saw the light, some 90 miles northwest of Kilauea Point, the importance that the light played in the successful completion of the historic flight was not ignored. Maitland wrote to the District Inspector in Honolulu that ". . . the Kilauea lighthouse saved our lives." The national press reports were equally liberal in their comments to that effect, with a consensus concerning the heroics of the aviators (as expressed by the New York Herald tribune) ". . . in firing themselves off on a tremendous range where a miss means extinction in the vast wastes of a trackless ocean."

Essentially on the basis of the Kilauea Point light station involvement, the Lighthouse Service was able to effectively lobby Congress for another landfall light on the other end of the island chain, at Cape Kumukahi. This lighthouse went into service in 1929.

In that same year the service received authorization to install a radiobeacon for Kilauea Point and in the next decade the intensity of the light was increased to over one million candlepower. The station was electrified in 1939.



The *Bird of Paradise* about to touchdown at Wheeler Field on Oahua at the end of its historic flight across the Pacific. Author photo.

This decade of change culminated with the absorption of the Lighthouse Service into the Coast Guard. On December 7, 1941 the terse entry in the Log read "Condition One is in order . . . Kilauea Point light blacked out. ." Much of the war time activity was centered around a Signal Corps (radar) installation on an adjacent promontory named Crater Hill. This installation greatly limited public access to the area.

Because of the rapid and extremely effective electronic equipment developed for vessels after WWII (radar & LORAN), and the development of automated lighthouse equipment, the manning of lighthouses entered a twilight period. The crew was reduced from three to two in the late 1950's. The tide of technological changes finally caught up with Kilauea early in 1976 when the Coast Guard formally decommissioned the station, replacing the optic with a modern aero-beacon mounted on a mono pole near the old tower. The decommissioning brought to a close 62 years of effective lighthouse service. In all those years only one failure of the light to "watch properly" was recorded. During a minor earthquake in October 1929 the oil vapor mantle of the i.o.v. lamp was broken. But the light was out no more than the 15 minutes that it took to replace the mantle.

The tradition of "Keeping the Light" continues today with a commitment to that legacy as strong as at any time in the past under the care of the Kilauea Point Wildlife Refuge staff (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service). Although the light station no longer fulfills its original mission, it is still every much an attraction to tourists and local residents alike. The station was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

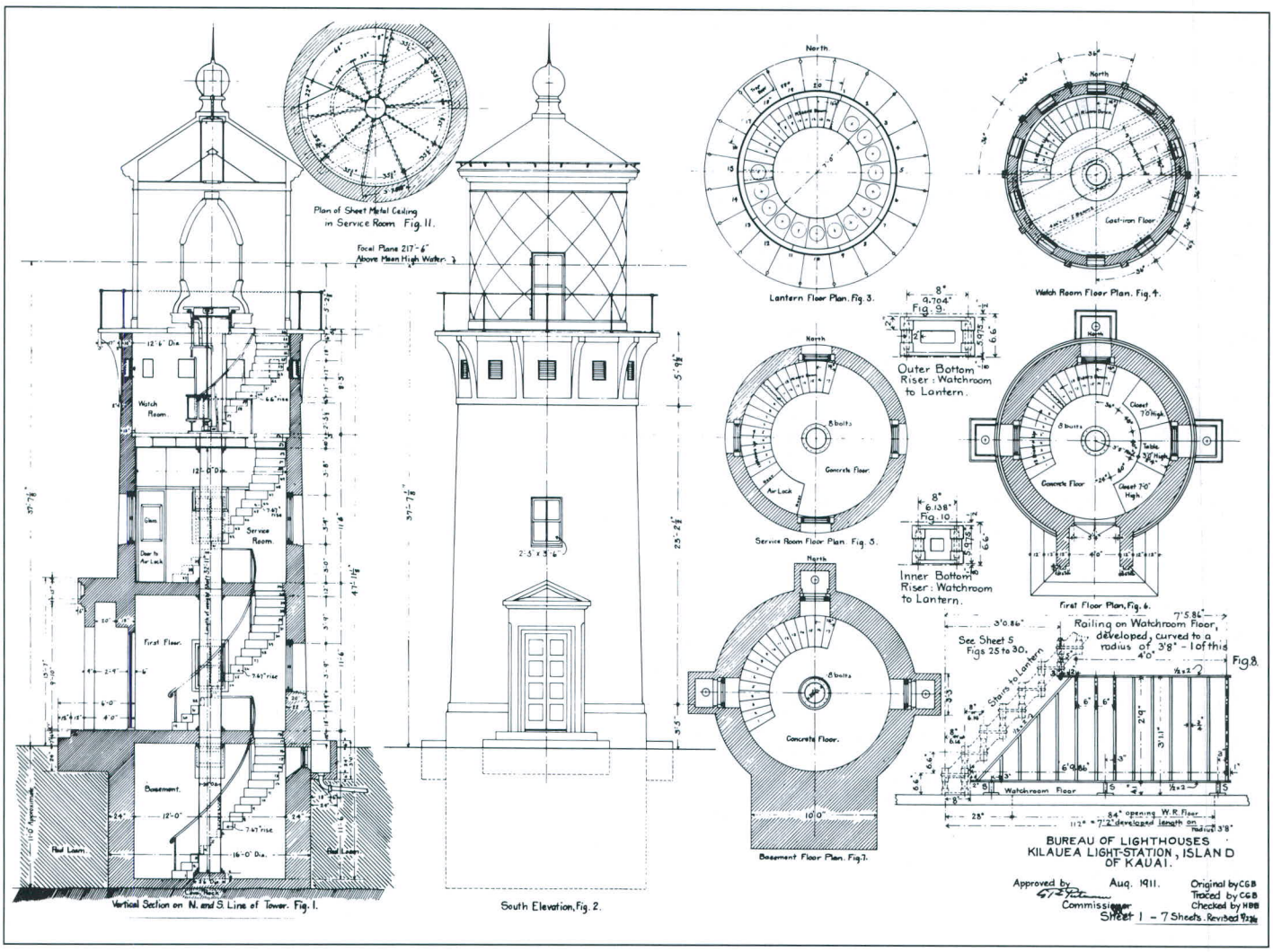
As the visitor count has dramatically increased over the past decade, so too have the functions of wildlife management. Today the personnel assigned to Kilauea conduct a broad range of research, documentation and biological study programs. Much of this workload is shared by a significant cadre of volunteers. Substantial financial and interpretive support is provided by the Kilauea Point Natural History Association.

Most keepers, prior to the Coast Guard years, would no doubt be saddened to learn of the evolution which has de-emphasized the mission to which they had been so energetically committed. However, the former keepers were not unresponsive to the beauty of the

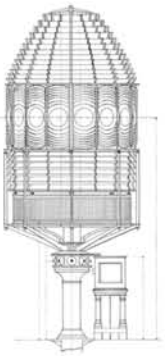
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habitat in which they were stationed. Their comments in the Logs frequently made respectful reference to the flora and fauna of that rugged and isolated north shore.

It seems appropriate to conclude that they, the keeper of old, would approve of the shift of emphasis from "Keeping the Light" to whale and spinner dolphin watching, to conserving seabird habitats, promoting nesting for the graceful Laysan albatross, banding of shearwaters and the like. And, in the midst of this environmental activity the new keepers of the point also preserve and tell the history of those who did man the landfall beacon on the orient run.



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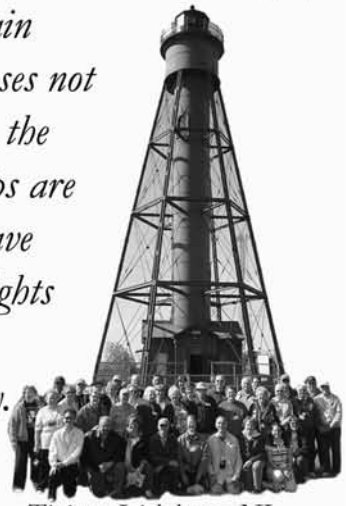
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