

Point Cabrillo



Point Cabrillo Light Station. The three keepers' homes at right. The combination tower/fog signal building at left with the oil house and blacksmith shop barely visible. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo.

Lighthouse Memories Part IV

By Cora Isabel Owens

Earlier, at Pt. Arena, upon hearing that BMI O'Neal of the Pt. Cabrillo Station was to be transferred, Bill had put in a request for that station. In order to permit this request, the classifications of the two light stations had to be changed. Pt. Arena had been a part civilian unit, and Pt. Cabrillo all military; they reversed the classifications for the stations, and granted Bill's request. There were two other military units in the Pt. Arena area: the Loran Station and the Lifeboat Station. The Commanding Officer at the Lifeboat Station had authority over all three, and with Bill gone he wouldn't have had to contend with "that cantankerous civilian." We arrived at Pt. Cabrillo Light Station on my birthday, January 22, 1952. It was considered the best station in the district.

We drove the curved road across the plateau toward the bluffs and came to a cluster of buildings, the quarters for the

keepers. Pt. Cabrillo had one large house for the Officer-in-Charge, and two smaller ones for the two assistants, all framed by a windbreak of trees. There were some small outbuildings and a building for radar equipment which had been installed during the war. It had not been used since the end of the war and was dismantled soon after we arrived. Further out on a peninsula of land, which had been eroded by the sea from the north and south so that it was almost an island, was the lighthouse itself.

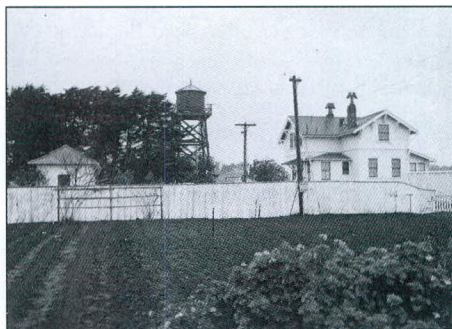
The front and backyards of each house were large, with ten foot high lattice fences on both sides of the house separating the front yard from the back yard. One fence was covered with red American Pillar roses and the other with pink rambler roses. They were a beautiful sight in the spring and summer. There were also several Veronica bushes, a flowering quince, and a cab-

bage rose in the front yard. Most of the backyard had been used as a vegetable garden, but there was nothing we could do with it until spring. (Nowadays things there are rather bare looking, what I call the "military look.")

The amount of space in our quarters was about the same as at Pt. Arena, but all four bedrooms were on the second floor. There were two sun porches in front, the smaller one served as the office. Originally each house had to depend on two fireplaces for heat, except in the kitchens; cooking three meals a day keeps a room warm enough. Later, gas heaters were installed which made the houses more comfortable.

Bill soon found that one of the men under him did not like taking orders from a civilian. Bill called the District Office and explained the situation to them. The man was transferred to an all-military unit and a replacement for him sent to Point Cabrillo.

Then we settled in and when spring came we started work on the garden. It was much larger than the garden space in Pt. Arena. I planted a variety of vegetables and they did so well we purchased a freezer. We froze lots of corn on the cob and peas, and of course abalone and fish from the ocean. I canned, learned to make sauerkraut from the cabbage; fresh tomatoes lasted through Thanksgiving, brussels sprouts through the winter. The gophers continued to make trouble, but not near as much as at Pt. Arena. Earwigs were worse; I used DDT on them. I believe it is not allowed anymore. We acquired two ducks and they kept the earwig population down quite a bit.



The garden in back of the Owens' house at Point Cabrillo. USLHS photo.

Besides insects we had to contend with animals. There was a goat that kept jumping the fence onto the light station and eating anything and everything that grew. The men kept putting him back into the field until they got disgusted and shot him in the leg. He just lay out in the grass, unable to walk. I felt sorry for him and kept a pan of water near his head. There was plenty of grass beside him that he could eat. After four or five days he got up and started walking, and he was put over the fence again. He stayed there after that.

We were in a new School District, and Diana went to the seventh grade in Mendocino right away. She graduated from high school in 1957. She and Joe Brown (a young Navy man she met after we moved to Pt. Cabrillo,) became engaged, but they decided that Joe should finish his military service and she would go to Junior College in Santa Rosa before getting married. However, about one and a half years later he came

home on leave between assignments and they decided to marry then and she could accompany him to his new assignment in Hawaii. Their first baby was born there.

In 1960 there was a severe wind and rain storm which started late in the afternoon. The waves got higher and higher, slamming into the cliffs until they went over the top of the fog signal building. It was getting near time for the light to be turned on. Because of the storm, Bill decided it should be done early and then he ordered all men away from the building. The light tower was a short structure on top of the fog signal building. Bill reported the weather conditions to the District Office, since they would not be able to turn the fog signal on. The district notified the shipping companies. Everybody stayed in their quarters and hoped the waves would not reach the houses. Luckily, the houses escaped any damage.

Late in the evening, after dark, I heard a sound that reminded me of cattle or horses stampeding. I wondered what it was but had to wait until morning to find out. While the men were assessing the damage to the fog signal building, I took my camera and went to see what caused the sound. On the south side of the property, I found that a great many rocks had been thrown up by the waves a great distance from the edge of

the bluff. One huge rock was at least fifty feet back from the cliff.

The men found the large door of the fog signal building broken off, pieces of siding ripped off and windows broken. The big diesels and the Kohler generators were ripped from their foundations and scattered around the engine room and several inches of mud was on the floor. However, the big lens in the lantern room was not damaged. Bill called the District Office and reported the extent of the damage. In the meantime, I was trying to get some pictures with my camera. But I was not looking at the right place when the last wave came over the fog signal building. I looked around as the water was draining off into a cove and got that much on film. A machinery company from Willits brought trucks over, loaded the diesels and generators and took them to Willits to be cleaned and dried. I think it took about two weeks. Carpenters came up from Yerba Buena Island Depot to repair the remaining damage to the building.

In 1958, Congress passed a bill to give Federal Government employees a 10% raise. However, the lighthouse keepers got less than half of that. Bill wrote to the District Office about it and was told that was the ceiling for them. It certainly didn't seem fair. Bill wrote to Congressmen Clem Miller, explaining the situation to him. Mr Miller introduced a bill, HR 7148, to raise the ceiling pay



A storm lashes the Mendocino coast, often hurling large boulders at the fog signal building. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo.

from \$3,750 to \$5,100 per annum. On June 17, 1959, the subcommittee of the Merchant Marine Committee reported favorably on the salary increase bill. Eventually it passed with no opposition and the keepers got the rest of the 10% salary increase, but it was not retroactive.

Sometime later, when Congressman Miller was in the area, he stopped by to see us. He told us his father had been a lighthouse keeper and had often complained that the keepers had been left out of a lot of improvements that Congress had made for other federal employees.

Before the Coast Guard took over, lighthouse keepers were a part of the Civil Service System. The Coast Guard made it clear they would not hire any more civilians as keepers. The Civil Service system was overhauled, brought up-to-date and keepers were left out. Thereafter keepers were listed as members of the Federal Lighthouse Service (FHLS), not as Civil Service employees.

Rent for the houses was deducted from the keeper's salary. About 1961 Bill and other civilian keepers were notified they would be charged rent for the Coast Guard furniture in their quarters. There were not many civilian keepers left on the light stations. The keepers' salaries were much lower than a Coast Guard Officers' pay, and it would have been a hardship for them. The keepers protested, because they had their own furniture when they went into the Lighthouse Service and had to get rid of it to make room for the Coast Guard furniture! The Coast Guard District Office finally gave up on the idea.

The Air Force moved some of their men to Pt. Cabrillo in May 1962. They remodeled a building the Coast Guard personnel did not use. They made very comfortable living quarters, an office and a small PX. It was Detachment 1, EOW, Air Force Officers Training School. Bill made lasting friendships with some of the men, especially with Bob Davidson and his wife, Betty, who settled in Fort Bragg when Bob retired.

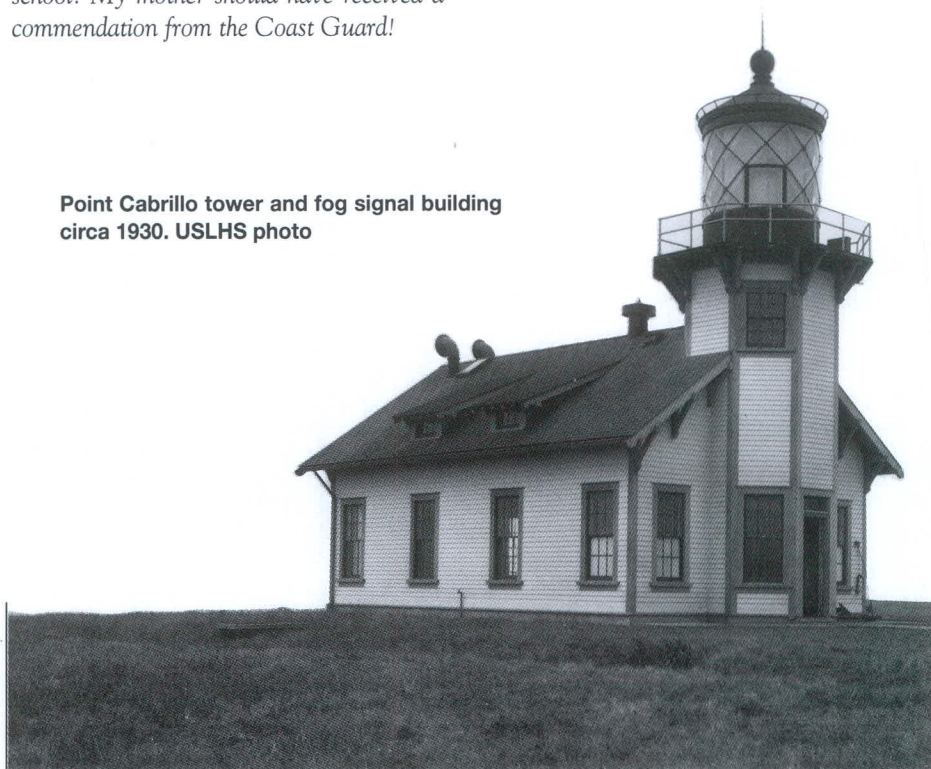
By Joan Silva

There were times when my father would get a call early in the morning from the lifeboat station office telling him the district inspectors were on their way over to the lighthouse for a surprise inspection. It always seemed to happen on a school day when we were all getting ready for school. Mom would be in the middle of preparing breakfast and packing lunches, while some of us were getting dressed and others were waiting their turn to get into the bathroom. As soon as the news hit, we would all have to stop what we were doing. A mad dash to make the beds and straighten up the bedroom, then run to the living and dining rooms to tidy up there.

Poor Mom would frantically be trying to finish our lunches and clean the kitchen. What havoc those inspectors caused by their little sneak inspections! Most of the chores that could normally wait until Mom returned home after taking us to school, had to be hurriedly done in five minutes. We couldn't be late because she used our car as a bus to pick up other children from the other side of town, and drive us all to school. My mother should have received a commendation from the Coast Guard!

My sisters and I will always have fond memories of being raised on lighthouses. It was a different kind of life that few people have experienced. We learned to respect our dangerous environment. We know how beautiful the ocean is, but also how treacherous and unpredictable it can be. We could scale down the side of the cliffs in record time, but we also knew the consequences of being careless and daring. We always looked out for each other and rarely did one of us ever venture out alone. We came to know the tides; how far we could walk out on the reef and how long we could stay out before the tide came back in to cover the rocks. The ocean was such a huge part of our lives. To be able to look on all three sides of us and see nothing but ocean, it gave us such a sense of freedom and spaciousness. Even the fog horn blowing gave us a sense of comfort. As loud as it was, sometimes you would have to really listen to hear if it was blowing. It all became a part of our every day, unordinary, life.

Point Cabrillo tower and fog signal building circa 1930. USLHS photo



By Diana Brown

There were three houses at Point Cabrillo and we lived in the middle one. With no sisters at home, I had my choice of bedrooms. Eventually, I chose the bedroom that faced the light tower so I could have the light flash through the window every few seconds. I guess it sounds strange, but it was comforting.

Being a teenager at Point Cabrillo had one large drawback though, the telephone system was set up so that every call in and out was considered a toll call which meant it was an extra fee for us if I called out or for anyone that called in. Can you imagine a teenager without access to a phone?

When I was sixteen, mom and dad allowed me to go on a date with my then boyfriend and now husband to the movies. It was the first time I'd been allowed to go anywhere alone in a car with a date. Everything went fine and on our way down the lane to the station we decided to take a ride down to the tower, turn around and come back up to the house. I'm sure we were trying to prolong the evening. Where the tower is located, there is ocean on three sides and on one side the bluff was quite close to the road. Joe was in the process of turning the car around when apparently, they had just turned the foghorn on. Poor Joe wasn't expecting it and as he had never driven down there before, he didn't realize how loud it was up close. When the foghorn blew, it startled him so bad, he threw his hands off the steering wheel and we headed for the bluff. We laugh about it now, but at the time it was pretty scary. Joe said the first thing that went through his mind was that Dad had come up behind him and was going to do something to him — he had no idea what.

My memories of my childhood bring many things to mind — the quiet and solitude I was allowed and the freedom to grow and explore, but the main memory would be beauty. The main weather I remember was fog and wind, but that is beautiful in itself, those were the times I



The keeper's house at Point Cabrillo shortly after construction in 1909. USLHS photo

loved to be outside. We also had days where the ocean was so calm, with the blue skies and sparkling water, and then of course, the most beautiful of all, the storms, with waves rolling in and splashing over the banks, wind blowing and being thankful you were inside a warm house with the family. I've been fortunate to see nature in all its phases.

My childhood on light stations instilled a

great love and respect for the ocean. To this day, if I'm troubled or just need a few quiet moments, I'll head for the beach and walk or just sit and watch the water. I've often told my husband, please don't ever ask me to move away from the ocean. It's been a part of me since the minute I was born and it's part of my soul.

To hear a foghorn today immediately brings a feeling of peace to me.



In the middle of the photo an arm of the sea almost reaches the road. The erosion from the north stops just short of the carpenter-blacksmith shop. The head keeper's house is in the middle. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo.

When the main holidays of the year came around our family, as many of them as could make it, came home for one to three days. We had Easter egg hunts on Easter Sunday, picnics on the Fourth of July and feasting times for Thanksgiving and gift-giving for Christmas. Our family enjoyed getting together with us, and we had the pleasure of seeing them enjoying being together. I'm happy there were no inter-family quarrels or bad feelings. We also enjoyed the friendship with people we met along the way. There were several young Coast Guard men, who served under Bill on Pt. Arena and Pt. Cabrillo stations who came back to see him and talk over their times of service with him. These were rewarding experiences for Bill.

By Jean Carpenter

The best time of the year for me was Christmas at home by the ocean. We never had snow but always hoped it would rain for the Holiday Season. To this day, I love rain, partly because it reminds me of Christmas and also because the outdoors takes on such a fresh glistening glow. It seems as though you can almost hear the plants saying, "Look at me, see how fresh and clean I am." Several weeks before Christmas the whole family would load into the Packard and head for the mountains. There we would tramp through the woods looking for the perfect Christmas tree. The woods are a wonderful fairyland with the tall, majestic pines, the huckleberry and blueberry bushes. I do believe that the odor of pine is the most glorious smell in the world. Memories are what really make your adult life have the magic of fulfillment.

Our Christmas tree was always set in a prominent place in the large dining room. We helped decorate as Mom unwrapped her delicate Christmas balls that she had brought from Baltimore when she married. The last item to go onto the tree was the lead tinsel. It seemed to add the finishing touch that made our tree become magical. How I loved it all. The fireplace would be burning and it would be warm and cozy as we all sat around the hearth and dreamed our dreams of Christmas trees and presents yet to be opened. My sister, Sarah, would get up and

exclaim that some homemade fudge would be the absolute perfect refreshment to have right now while my other sister, Shirley, would go with her to the kitchen to make popcorn. Later, while we were enjoying the fruits of Sarah and Shirley's labor, we would turn on the radio to listen to a mystery. Listening to a mystery on radio allows your mind to conjure up all kinds of ideas and scenes. I'm sure all of us interpreted what we heard on the radio into many, many different views. Life on a Lighthouse allowed all of us to grow in whatever direction our imaginations would take us.



Cora and Bill Owens in the garden at Cape Cabrillo. Cora Owens photo.

As Bill was nearing retirement age in 1962 we decided to make a trip to our childhood homes in Kentucky and Maryland. Our oldest daughter Shirley and her husband Cliff Stormes went with us. Soon after our return Bill had what they called "walking pneumonia." He couldn't seem to get his strength back. By counting his military service, he had enough time in the Lighthouse Service to retire.

We bought a house in Mendocino, but it needed a great deal of work to make it livable. We were offered twice what we paid for it and accepted. We started looking for another house and found a new one in the Little River area. We

started proceedings to purchase it through the Cal-Vet program. We wanted to stay in the area because we enjoyed fishing in Big River. In due time Bill was notified he qualified for the Cal-Vet program, and we could move in anytime.

We started moving our personal possessions, although Bill couldn't leave the light station until March 1, 1963.

Commanding Officer Capinha of the Ft. Point Coast Guard Group arrived on February 28, 1963, for the retirement ceremony, along with other dignitaries representing civilian personnel, the crew from Noyo Life-Saving Unit and the Air Force Unit. CO Capinha gave a short speech and presented the retirement papers to Bill. He received a letter from Rear Admiral Allen Winbeck, Commander of the 12th Coast Guard District, which included the Albert Gallatin Award, the highest award a civilian federal employee can get. He also received commendatory letters from Glen Logan, a former colleague from the old Lighthouse Service District, and the Coast Guard Commandant, Admiral E.J. Roland.

In spite of Captain Rhodes' belief that he would not be able to perform the duties of a lighthouse keeper, Bill proved to be able to do his share of the work, standing watches day and night and discharging all aspects of maintenance responsibilities. As a Head Keeper, or Officer-in-charge (as he became under the Coast Guard), Bill proved again his ability to run a light station. He had the respect of the men under him, and always received "Satisfactory" or "Very Satisfactory" Performance Ratings. He was the last civilian keeper on the west coast.

As I finish writing this, it is early in 1986. Bill passed away May 3, 1984, after a massive stroke. His ashes are buried in our plot in the Odd Fellows Cemetery in Point Arena, California.

I have often been asked: "If you could live your life over, would you choose to live on a light station again?" It was a unique experience with never a dull moment. Our children remember with pleasure growing up on light stations. The only thing about it which *wasn't* perfect for them: as they became

teenagers they would have liked to be in town more, with others of their age. But that one thing was just what I appreciated: we were too far from town for them to get in on the town night life! Once grown, most of my daughters would have liked to live at a lighthouse and raise their families there. My answer to the above question is that I *would* choose again to live at a lighthouse.



Cora Isabel Owens now resides in Willits, California. Oldest daughter Shirley Stormes is widowed, living in Prunedale, California; she has six children. Sarah and Jack Swartz live in Gualala; they have three children. Dixie and Richard Spence, with two children, live in Seattle, WA. Jean and Ed Carpenter and their two children are in Loveland, CO. Joan and Don Silva, with two children, live in Foresthill, CA. Diana and her husband Joe Brown (the odd "Navy Man" among the coastie crew of sons-in-law) and their two children live in Eureka, CA.



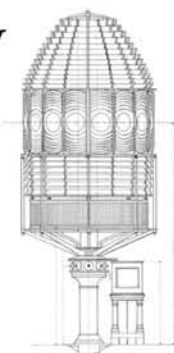
Point Cabrillo Light Station shortly after completion in 1909. The building on the right is the carpenter-blacksmith shop. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo



February 28, 1963 - "Attention to Orders!" Keeper William (Bill) Owens retires as the last civilian keeper on the west coast. Photo courtesy Cora Owens.



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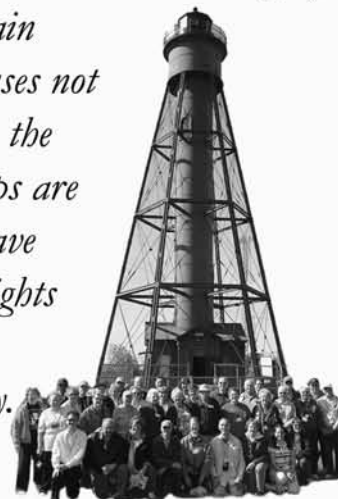
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