



PT. Conception U.S.
Lighthouse Society Photo

Lighthouse Memories **Part I**

By Cora Isabel Owens

A keeper's wife, from 1931 until her husband's retirement in 1963, Cora Owens shares her story of life with Bill Owens, the last civilian lighthouse keeper on the west coast. The Owens family lived on four stations, growing from a small family to one which became famous, as Bill was known as the "Keeper with six daughters." The time of Bill Owens' service encompassed the Depression, a World War and the transition of the Lighthouse Service from a civilian agency to a branch of a military service, the Coast Guard. Mrs. Owens has generously provided photos, documents, and reminiscences from her children, to help tell this fascinating story. The Owens girls' comments will appear in the last three installments of their family's saga.

I was born in 1904, on a farm on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, near the town of Cordova. When my sister and I were still infants, our mother died. My father remarried, moved to Baltimore and worked on the B & O Railroad, leaving us with our grandparents. When I was 10 we went to Baltimore for the summer. As we crossed the Chesapeake Bay, I would see a lighthouse in the middle of the bay. It looked like it would be a lonely life. I didn't dream that one day I would live in lighthouses and raise six daughters. When I was 16, my sister and I went to Baltimore to live. I found work as a bookkeeper there. A year later, in 1921, I met Bill Owens.

Born in West Virginia and raised in Kentucky, Bill left home at an early age. He worked in a bakery, in a logging camp, enlisted in the army—lying about his age to get in. After receiving an honorable discharge in 1919, he went to

sea, as an oiler on the M.S. Benowa, getting as far as San Francisco. The shipping company declared bankruptcy, and Bill moved to Maryland, where I met him. We were married on Feb. 4, 1922.

Ever since his short time in San Francisco, Bill wanted to return to California. He liked the mild climate; winters in Maryland can be very severe. So, in 1926 we moved to San Francisco, where Bill worked for about four years as a plumber at the Bethlehem Shipyard. He liked to fish, on Sundays he would go to Angel Island and spend the day fishing. During one visit he became acquainted with the lighthouse keeper stationed there and decided that was the life for him. He could spend his spare time fishing and there would be the security of a government job. By then, we had lived in San Francisco for about four and one-half years and had three children: Shirley, Sarah Lou, and Dixie.

In January of 1931 Bill went to the District Office of the U.S. Lighthouse Service in San Francisco. He applied for a job as assistant lighthouse keeper and in April was informed he made 89.60 on the test. At that time Captain Rhodes was superintendent of the 18th District, which included all of California.

When there was an opening on one of the light stations the office would write to three applicants asking if they would accept appointment to that station if it were offered to them. Bill received such a letter three times and each time he answered that he would accept. But each time the appointment went to another applicant. He was then notified that since he had not qualified three times, he was off the list. When Bill went to the office to find out why, he was told they felt he was not physically able to do the work required of a lighthouse keeper. He weighed about one hundred and twenty pounds, and was about five feet nine inches tall.

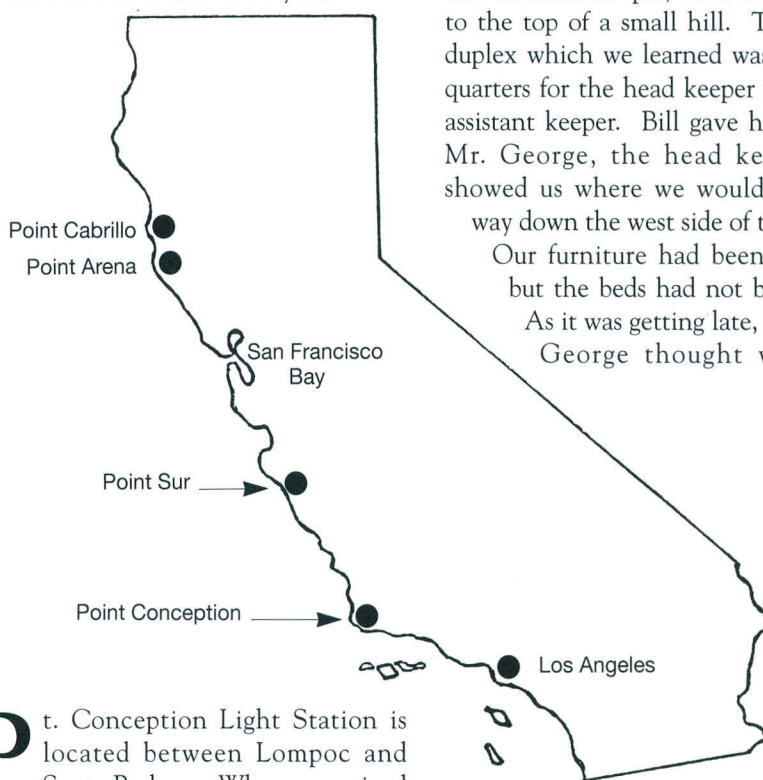
Bill had been on his own for several years and he was a fighter when he wanted something; and he wanted that job. He got help from the right people and on the evening of August 3, 1931 received a notice from the District Office to report for duty at Point Conception Light Station on August 6, as third assistant keeper at a salary of \$1,140 per annum.

To qualify for an appointment to a lighthouse it was necessary to have a trade, such as mechanic, carpenter, plumber, electrician, or anything similar (Bill had been an oiler and plumber, and was a member of the Machinists' Union.) Keepers were expected to keep the equipment running, and to make minor repairs as needed. Work beyond the capabilities of the keepers was done by a crew from the Yerba Buena Island Depot. Or sometimes the Head Keeper would be given permission to hire one or two local men to accomplish a task.

I had lived in Baltimore for ten years after leaving the Eastern Shore. Baltimore was a crowded city—too many houses, too many people. I liked more open spaces, like farms or small towns. San Francisco was less developed than

Baltimore in those years. But now I was heading for plenty of open space for many years to come.

On August 5, we packed our belongings, shipped the furniture and drove off in our Rickenbacker car, with three small children, to an adventure of lighthouses that was to last for 32 years.



Point Conception Light Station is located between Lompoc and Santa Barbara. When we arrived at Lompoc we stopped at a service station to ask for directions. Lompoc was a very attractive town; the streets were wide and clean, and the people were friendly. It became our main shopping center. From Lompoc, we soon left the highway and went for a few miles along a dirt road among some trees. As we emerged from the trees, we saw the ocean and a trail. We turned left, followed it through the Cojo Cattle Ranch, opening and closing gates as we went through the fields.

Eventually we came to the railway station of Conception, where the station master was the only attendant, as well as postmaster. The crew that worked on the tracks, the Cojo Ranch gang, and the lighthouse personnel were the only other inhabitants in the area. Bill met the station master, and learned that the train did not stop unless there were passengers to getting on or off, or packages being sent or delivered. Mail bags were

thrown off and outgoing mail was grabbed from a hook— a true whistle stop.

We learned that the lighthouse was a short distance from the train station, and in a few minutes we arrived at the gate. We passed one house, the home of the first assistant keeper, then continued on to the top of a small hill. There was a duplex which we learned was the living quarters for the head keeper and second assistant keeper. Bill gave his orders to Mr. George, the head keeper, who showed us where we would be living, way down the west side of the hill.

Our furniture had been delivered, but the beds had not been set up. As it was getting late, Mr. & Mrs. George thought we should

spend the night with them and go down in the morning. In their living room that evening, I wondered what we would do for a doctor if one of the children became ill.

In the morning we met the First Assistant, Mr. Babington and his wife, and Second Assistant Mr. Lee and his wife. We learned that the Georges owned a horse and carriage, the only means of transportation there until we arrived. The station attendants seldom went to town as it was quite a trip by horse and carriage. After we arrived with a car, we started going to town once a month. Mrs. George usually went with us. During the winter months the road through the Cojo ranch was impassable and we had to depend on the train or carriage. All the families dealt with the same grocery store in Lompoc. Once a week we mailed in our orders and the store boxed the supplies and put them on the train for delivery to Conception.

There were one hundred eighty-five steps leading down the hill to our house and the main light station buildings. We had about an acre of land with twenty-five foot bluffs on three sides. There was plenty of fenced in yard space for the children to play and eventually Bill built a swing, a combination merry-go-round and a see-saw. We also had our collie, Shep, which we had brought from Maryland who was like one of the family.

The buildings at our level included the light tower and watch room, the fog signal building, a work shop, a storage shed and a house for storing coal. Our boxes of groceries would be sent down a chute, but heavy things could not be delivered that way as they would gather too much speed and crash into the storage shed door at the bottom. We were told that one time a large box of apples was sent down, broke the door and apples flew everywhere. Another story was about a man who thought it would be fun to slide down and ended up with a broken leg. Very heavy things, including our furniture, were lowered by block and tackle, with the help of a horse.

We were warned not to open the front door of the house. It faced the ocean and during rough weather the crests of the waves splashed against that side of the house and if the door wasn't sealed tight water would seep in.

The next morning, after breakfast we started down the hill. I was anxious to see our house. It had a very large bathroom and a screened-in back porch with two stationary tubs. Bill wanted to install a gasoline motor on our electric washing machine, but we found that was not allowed. I was glad I brought the old glass washboard. We arranged the furniture, set up the beds and were ready to start housekeeping.

There was a large stove in the kitchen. In Maryland, on farms and small towns, we had used wood for cooking, in Baltimore we used gas. Now I had to learn to cook with coal. It created so much ash, that the stove had to be cleaned out every morning before starting a new fire. A hot water tank was installed beside the stove with pipes running through the firebox, so there was plenty of hot



Point Conception Lighthouse in the 1930's. The 1882 tower, at right, replaced the original structure that was constructed at the top of the hill in 1856. The lantern room contains a 1st Order Fresnel lens that shows a white flash every 30 seconds (range 18 miles). The building in the foreground is the fog signal building and in this era the signal was a diaphone horn sounding two blasts every 60 seconds (a ladder is resting against the horn). The large building at the top of the hill is the duplex where the keeper and 2nd assistant resided, a water tank and the 1st assistant's house are the other structures. The 185 step staircase is at right and the delivery chute Cora mentions at the left. The Owens family lived in the 4th assistant's house which is located behind the fog signal building. U.S. Lighthouse Society photo.

water as long as the fire was burning. Ironing was done by heating the old Sad Irons on the stove. We used coal oil lamps for light. All of this was quite a change after getting used to electricity and gas, but it not totally uncomfortable as it was similar to the way I lived growing up.

The government did furnish a few things, such as brass polish, toilet tissue, a strong yellow soap for scrubbing woodwork and such, and Sal Soda for the hard water. It was impossible to get suds in the water without adding Sal Soda. When I washed my hair it would be stiff for a couple of days.

No account of life at a lighthouse would be complete without some mention of inspections. The head keepers were supposed to inspect all quarters once a week, but few did. However, we heard a lot about Captain Rhodes' inspections. He wore white gloves and would occasionally rub his hands over the wall or above the ledges of door frames. He had been known to look in closets and chests of drawers. He made an inspection trip to Pt. Conception while we were on a few days vacation.

We were told he made no complaint about our house, although I'm sure it was not as clean as houses with no children. Since Bill had gone over Capt. Rhodes' head to get the job, I would not have been surprised if he had made it tough for us, but there was never any sign of it. There was always two or three days notice before he was going to inspect. When cleaning up for inspection the last job was always the kitchen stove. Right after breakfast it would be polished and not used again until after inspection.

Saturday was the weekly cleaning day for the men. They mopped and waxed floors, polished brass and cleaned the tower, watch room, work shop and fog signal building. We women also had our share of brass to polish: a large lamp for the living room, two small lamps, a lamp filler, a dust pan, and brass door knobs throughout the house. And, we had windows. I tried washing windows with Bon Ami soap as I had always done before. It worked as usual on the inside, but the outside was pitted from sand being blown up from the beach, and the dried soap couldn't be wiped out of the pits. I had to wash it off with clear water.



The Owen's house at the bottom of the staircase. The picket fence gate where the rattler lurked is in the foreground. Photo courtesy of Cora Owens.

The area of the coast between Pt. Conception and Pt. Arguello to the north is known as the "Graveyard of the Pacific." Seven U. S. destroyers went on the rocks just south of Pt. Arguello in 1923. Many luxury liners have also been wrecked on that stretch of coast. A ship was beached south of Pt. Conception while we were there. It was not damaged and was towed back out to sea. Another just missed being wrecked one night. It was foggy and the engine which operated our fog horn had broken down and the men

were working on repairing it. A ship came in so close we could hear the men talking. One said, "Where the Hell are those lighthouse men? Probably in bed asleep." Just then the horn let out a blast and the ship altered course accordingly. But, it was a close call.

One Saturday afternoon I was taking clothes off the line, facing the light tower. The men had finished their Saturday cleaning. They had lit the light early so the man on watch wouldn't have to come down the steps again to light it at sunset. Their backs were to

the tower. Suddenly I saw the lantern that housed the light flash into flames. I told the men something was wrong with the light. They turned to look, then ran for the tower. They got things under control and cleaned up enough for the light to work that night. The light was a type they called a vapor light, [Ed. -- Incandescent Oil Vapor Lamp] with a mantle which had to be warmed up before lighting the lamp. It is a delicate operation and if it isn't done just right it can flare-up.

With no television, and not much radio we had to make our own entertainment. Bill fished any afternoon he was off duty. Mrs. George and Mrs. Lee sometimes joined him. The only time I could take part in anything was in the evening. As our house was about fifty feet from the tower, a window in our living room was an excellent location for watching the light. If the man on duty stood his watch in the watch room he couldn't see the light because the watch room was below the tower. He would have to wait for the beam as it passed across the hill behind the lighthouse to ensure it was operating properly. We started playing pinochle on Mr. George's watch and on Bill's watch. We would play two nights, then the next two nights Bill and Mr. George had to go to bed early to be ready for their night watch. We continued this way as long as we lived there. [Ed. -- that's a lot of pinochle!]



The remote bleakness of Point Conception is all too evident in this turn of the century photo. The original two peaked roof fog signal building is at left. The house that would be the Owen's home for 4 years, and later blocked by the new fog signal building, can be seen at the base of the staircase. The telephone poles marching up the hill behind the tower carried the wires for the bell call signal system between all the keepers' homes. National Maritime Museum photo.

One afternoon, sitting in the living room looking through a magazine, while the three girls were playing, I heard a funny rattling or rustling sound in the yard. It sounded like dry paper being blown about or against something. Every few seconds I heard this noise. As no wind was blowing, I went out to investigate. In the back yard I saw Dixie standing in the open gateway watching something behind the gate. When I got closer I got the shock of my life. There was a rattlesnake, coiled up, shaking his rattles and trying to strike Dixie through the fence slats, but his head would not go between them. I got her away fast, and into the house. The rest of the children were playing on the other side of the house. Bill was up on the hill so I called on the intercom. He had me get his shotgun and hand it to him over the fence when he arrived. And that was the end of that snake. Mr. & Mrs. George said they had never seen a snake down there before. I had seen rattlesnakes before but never that close.

On April 5, 1932, Bill was appointed to serve as Judge on the Election Board for Cojo precinct. Then, in December 1933, Bill was commissioned Postmaster for Conception. The railroad company had closed the railroad station and with the departure of the station master the office of Postmaster was vacant. This was a very small community and being Postmaster did not interfere with his lighthouse duties, but it did add to our income.

After we had been at Pt. Conception about one and a half years, we decided the girls were getting too big for their beds. On a trip to San Francisco, Bill went to a furniture store and bought three single beds. We gave away the child's bed and one crib, keeping the other crib just in case. A few months later I found I was pregnant again, and thought how lucky it was that I had kept the crib.

I thought I'd stay home for this confinement, but I guess that was a foolish idea. The doctor would have had so far to come to our house. Anyway, he said it would be better if I came to Lompoc to



Above—The Owens family takes a quantum leap with the arrival of the twins, as you can see Cora has her hands full. Faithful collie Shep poses in the foreground. Below—Keeper Bill Owens on vacation with daughters Shirley, Sarah Lou and Dixie. His Rickenbacher car is at left. Photos courtesy of Cora Owens.

a nursing home; it would be one large baby or two. Sure enough, one week later, July 22, 1933, the nurse called the doctor, and that night, Jean, at seven pounds, and Joan, at eight pounds, arrived. There was only one crib waiting for them at home. We tried keeping them in one crib for awhile, but that didn't work too well, so Bill went to town and bought another. Once, I read a small item in the *Reader's Digest* that said: "The giving away of baby clothes and furniture are a major cause of pregnancy." I wonder!! And this was the month that President Roosevelt ordered a 10 percent cut in the pay of all government employees.

As a government employee Bill was entitled to fifteen days leave a year, not counting Saturdays or Sundays. We never took all of it at once. Any leave time he didn't use could accumulate and he would be paid for it at retirement. This year in March of 1933, we went to visit Marie and Lloyd Munn in Los Angeles. It was at the time of the big earthquake in Los Angeles and Long Beach.

Bill and Lloyd had gone downtown that morning when there was a loud booming sound and everything started shaking. I had never been in an earth-



quake before and I didn't recognize what it was. Shortly before then there had been some explosions in oil refineries, so I didn't become alarmed until Marie yelled: "It's an earthquake, get outside," and away she ran. I picked up Dixie and told Shirley and Sarah Lou to go outside. Shirley went out, but Sarah Lou was stunned by all the commotion. I picked her up in the other arm and ran out. Our Dog, Shep, crawled under a couch in the



2nd Assistant Keeper Mr. Lee with a fine looking squid. Cora Owens photo.

living room. We went home after a couple of days and found they had felt the quake at the lighthouse. It had shaken the mantle off the lamp in the tower which had to be replaced before lighting the lamp that night. A couple of bricks were shaken out of our chimney and that had to be repaired before we could build a fire in our stove.

My experience with the earthquake made a deeper impression on me than I realized at the time. At Pt. Conception the constant action of the waves had created caves in the bluffs around us. In the winter, when the storms at sea were severe, the waves rushed into these caves making a booming sound and shaking the house. It had not bothered me before because I knew what it was, but after the earthquake I wasn't so sure. Each time I heard the boom and felt the shake I wondered if it was going to be another earthquake. My sleep was disturbed by the type of dreams I had. I would dream some catastrophe had struck and I had to get the three girls out of the house. I

would take one out, and sit her down away from the house, then go back for the second, then the third, and another and another. It seemed no matter how many times I went into the house to bring one child out, there was never more than two outside. And then, when the twins were born, I wondered how I would get five of them up the hill if some catastrophe occurred on the small section of land we were on. I assumed that Bill would probably be working on some other part of the station.

A letter from the District Office dated August 23, 1932, addressed to all the lighthouse keepers, stated the annual allowance of electricity was 360 KW. But the Pt. Conception Station did not have electricity, so it didn't concern us at the time.

When the twins were about three months old, Bill decided something had to be done about a washing machine. He wrote a letter to Captain Rhodes, through the head keeper, enclosing a page from a catalog saying gasoline engines were approved by the International Underwriters. Captain Rhodes wrote that he would allow one if proper precautions were taken and he should be notified just what precautions were planned. Mr. George came up with the idea of putting the stationary tubs and washing machine in the shed across the back yard. He would run the hot and cold water pipes out there and cover the exhaust pipe with asbestos. Capt. Rhodes approved the plan and finally I had my machine again. I put away the washboard once more.

Bill was a great one for gambling. At least, to the extent of buying lottery tickets. He won \$1,000 one week. He had long wanted a new car and could hardly wait until he was off duty so he could go into Lompoc to buy a new Ford. The funny part was that the old car caught fire on the way into town. He took a lot of kidding about that.

By 1933 we were becoming concerned about the children's education. On June 7, Bill was offered a transfer to Pt. Arguello. But Shirley had asthma badly which was aggravated when it was foggy. Because Pt. Arguello is known to have a lot of fog, Bill turned it down, although

it did have a school. On October 16, 1934 he was offered a transfer to Pt. Reyes. That station also had a school, but because that station got the water supply from water sheds no animals were allowed on the station. Bill also turned that down as he would not give up our dog for anything.

He went to the school in Lompoc and asked for a first grade reader, which they gave him. I just didn't have time to sit down with Shirley to teach her to read. Instead I had her sit at the table with the book, and I put the ironing board up behind her and helped her while I did the ironing. She learned very quickly. As a matter of fact, some friends from San Francisco, whose daughter was in the fourth grade, came to visit, and she couldn't read nearly as well as Shirley. Before I got any further with Shirley, or could start with Sarah Lou, Bill had an offer of a transfer to Pt. Sur. There was a school there so Bill accepted.

In the meantime Mr. Lee had retired (on January 1, 1934) and Bill was made second assistant keeper with and given a \$5.00 a month raise. However, we were not permitted to move up on the hill in the Lee's vacated quarters as Mrs. George thought the children would be too noisy for them.

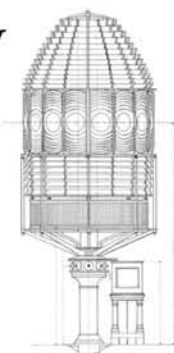
Offered a transfer to Pt. Sur Light Station, Bill accepted. There was a school for the children. We packed up for Pt. Sur and Bill made arrangements to have our furniture trucked to the new station. Bill would be third assistant with the same pay as his present second assistant position. But his total income would be less because of losing income from the positions of Postmaster and Election Board Judge.

We came to Pt. Conception Light Station in a Rickenbacker car with three children. On March 11, 1935, we left in a new Ford with five children and I was anxious to see what was in store for us.





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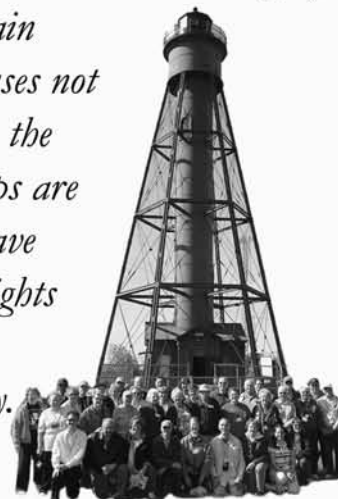
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