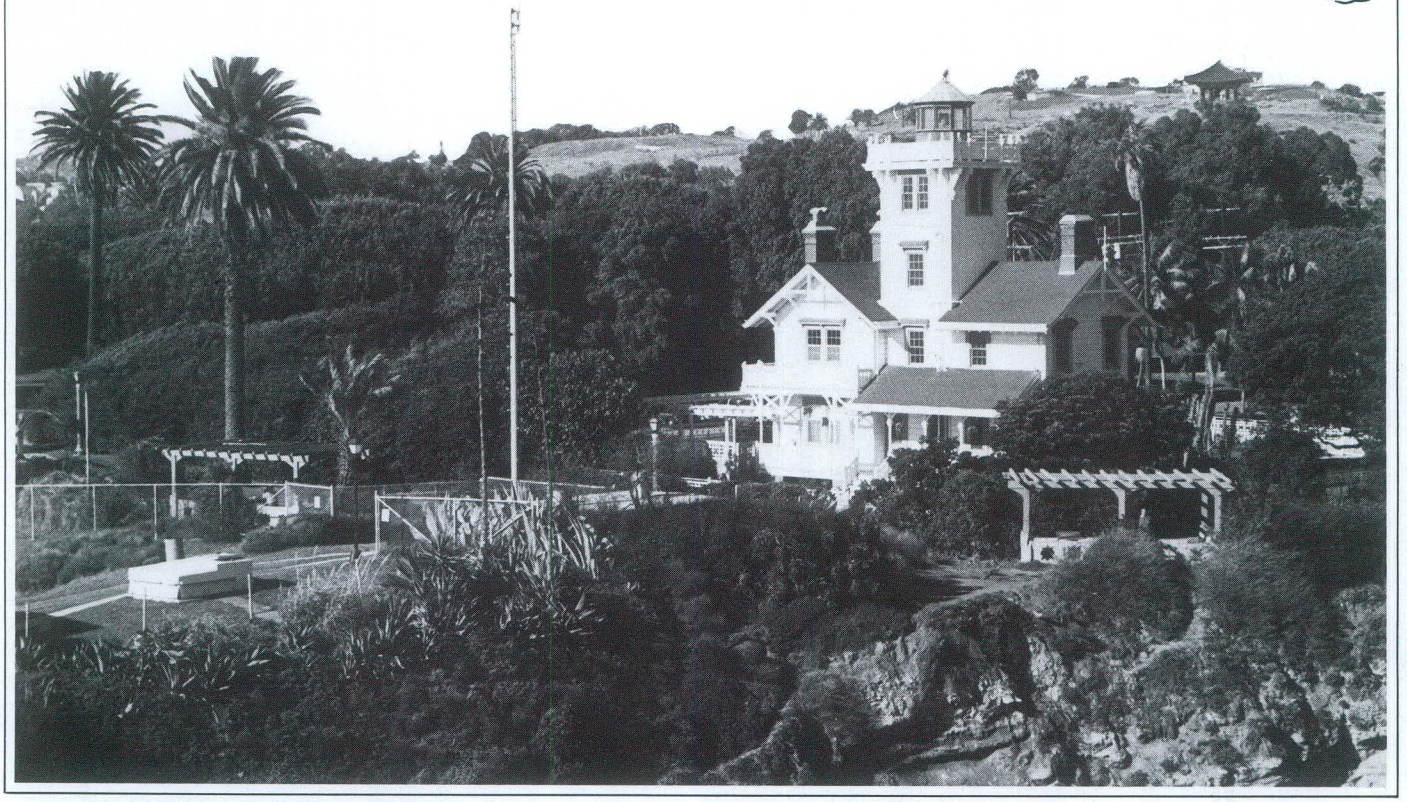
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Point Fermin Lighthouse

A Life Long Love Affair

by Lenore Nicholson



Point Fermin Lighthouse. (Photograph by Bob Nelson, Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks)

Maybe it was love at first sight. He was only 8 years old when he first saw her standing there on a high cliff, stately against the blue of the sky. It was 1912 and the skies were bluer and not as smoggy as now. The awe-struck boy questioned his sea-faring father about her.

"Why, she's there to guide us safely into the harbor, to let the ships' captains know they are getting too close to the rocky shoals. She's saved many a life."

He was speaking of the Point Fermin Lighthouse in San Pedro. When the little boy was 16 years old he moved to San Pedro and has been "seeing this lady" ever since. As a ship builder he saw her from the land and, as a commercial fisherman, he saw her from the sea.

She was there a long time before Bill Oleson saw her. Phineas Banning, the man responsible for the whole harbor being there, wanted a lighthouse built as early as 1834. About 20 years elapsed, however, before conflicting titles to the land were unravelled and the owner Don Diego Sepulveda was contacted.

When the appraised value of $35 for the two acre parcel was offered to Sepulveda, he declined payment, returned the check and gave the property to the government.

After securing the land the Lighthouse Board constructed a redwood and fir Victorian lighthouse of the same design as those located at Port

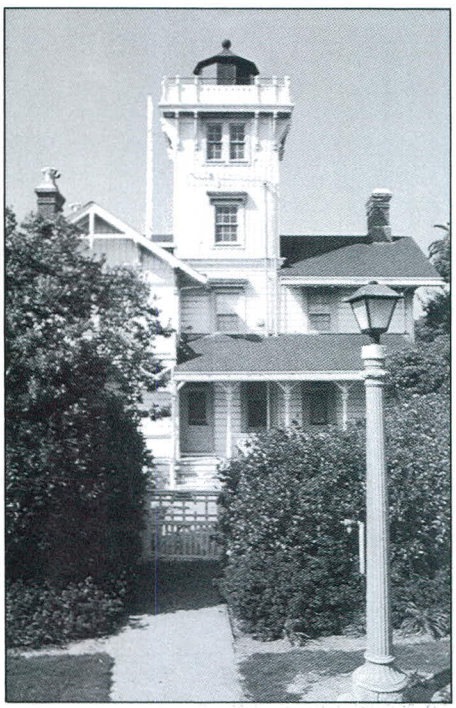
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Hueneme and East Brother Island in Calif., Port Adams in Wash. and similar to Hereford Inlet, N.J. Port Hueneme and Point Adams have been razed, East Brother and Hereford Inlet restored and opened to the public.

The lantern panes and lens for the lighthouse were shipped from France, via Cape Horn. Lard oil was used at first, then kerosene and in 1925 electricity was installed.

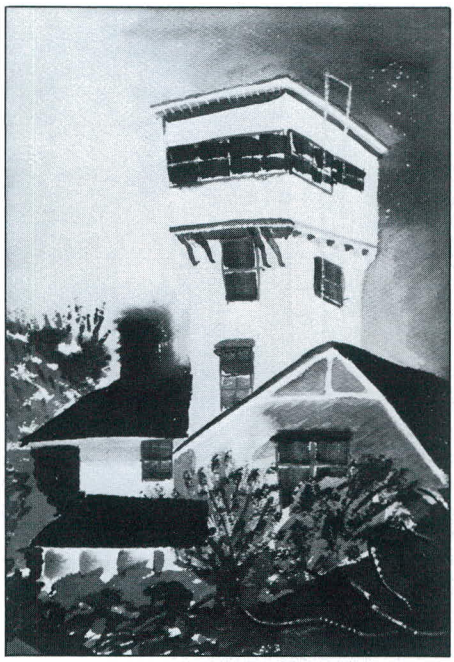
The light was first shone at dusk on December 15, 1874. It operated until 2 days after Pearl Harbor, when the light was "blacked out."

The first and last keepers here were female. The first keepers were Helen and Mary Smith, who kept the light for eight years before giving it up, saying the life was too lonely. From the front of this house, on a spacious veranda the girls could see as far as Santa Catalina Island, as well as up and down the coast. If only they could see the place today. In 100 years the City of San Pedro has spread and grown closer to the house with the light in the tower, perched on a cliff above the sea. It is now in a lovely park cared for by the Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation. The Park Maintenance Supervisor lives in the Lighthouse. Mothers bring toddlers to play in the park and lovers stroll under the graceful trees at night.



Photograph, Los Angeles Dept. of Recreation & Parks

Young Bill was busy earning a living as he watched the succession of "wickies" who cared for her. She was used by the Navy for a radar lookout during WWII. They removed the lens and lantern room and added a structure which looked like and was called a chicken coop.



Pt. Fermin Lighthouse watercolor by Edie Coverdale showing the "chicken coop" which replaced the lens and lantern room during W.W. II.

Following the war an automatic light was established on the outer edge of the high cliff. In 1972 the Coast Guard, feeling the lighthouse was no longer needed, contemplated tearing her down. That was when Bill Oleson came to her rescue.

Bill gained the interest of John Olquin, creator of Whale Watch, lecturer, and now co-Director of the Cabrillo Marine Museum. Together they went through bureacracies, wrote petitions, and applied to organizations to save the lighthouse. It had already been declared a historic landmark in 1965 by the Cultural Heritage Board of Los Angeles. In June, 1972, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The following year several small donations started the restoration. First the "chicken coop" came off. The lens and lantern room apparently had been lost, however, the Coast Guard had the original blueprints, which were used to restore the lighthouse.

A big celebration was planned and, as Bill puts it, "The exterior restoration was completed about 15 minutes before the Centennial celebration!"

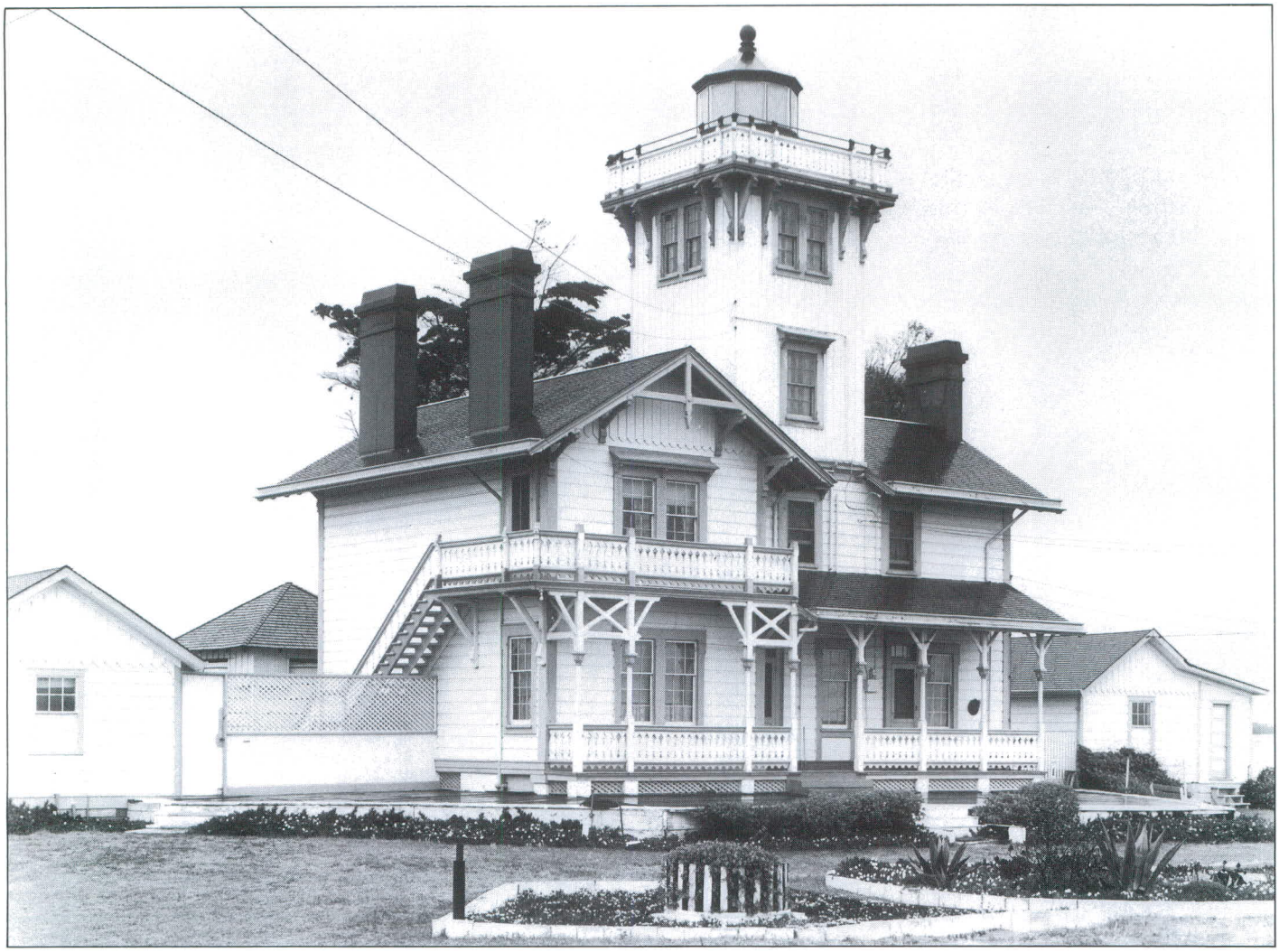
That was some birthday party they gave her on November 2, 1974. Dignitaries came from everywhere to take part in the ceremonies; they had parades, folk dancing, a dedication and ice cream and cake. The cake, 1100 pounds of it, was made in the shape of the lighthouse. It took 30 hours just to apply the 250 pounds of icing. During the 11 hour "party" the Dominguez Air Show flew overhead and Navy ships, as well as other vessels, in the harbor saluted with guns and flags. At 7 p.m. "a light" was lit in the tower and some of the old timers told stories and danced a hornpipe. The gala affair ended with street dancing and fireworks.

In 1900 there were over 3000 visitors. Some of the other "wickies" were James Herald, followed by Capt. George N. Shaw (for 18 years) and finally the Austins. Mr. and Mrs. Austin and their seven children took over in 1917 but in 1925 both parents died. Thelma Austin, the eldest daughter, assumed responsibility for the lighthouse, as well as caring for her brothers and sisters.

"She said the pay wasn't much," relates Bill. "She supplemented it with working as a dental assistant. But, after they installed electricity at the lighthouse, all she had to do was flick a switch." Thelma Austin Cunningham was at that birthday party; she has since died.

Bill Oleson may well feel possessive about the lighthouse, he knows more about her than anyone else. "We held a short ceremony also at sunset on December 15, 1974, actually 100 years after the first lighting." Now 82, Bill still speaks of his love with great reverence.

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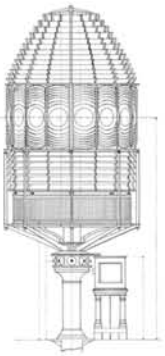
Above—Sister lighthouse at Point Hueneme, CA razed in 1941. (USLHS photo)

Below—Point Fermin Lighthouse as it appears today. (Photograph by Richard Newman)



Epilog—The State of California, Coastal Conservancy has indicated that they may be willing to furnish a considerable amount of funding for the additional restoration, interpretation and for park improvements (see City of Los Angeles letter in the Letters to the Keeper section). Additionally, Bill Oleson & John Olguin, the two prime movers of the initial restoration project, may head up a new volunteer group. Our society has a large percentage of members in Southern California where there are very few lighthouses. This is a chance for you keepers in that neck of the woods to get involved. Please contact the society (and indicate your area of interest/skills) if you wish to become part of restoring, preserving and interpreting the beautiful Point Fermin lighthouse. By the way, this lighthouse is one of the stops on our Spring Southern California tour.

Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today or Give the Gift of Membership!



Restoration & Preservation



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society has donated to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. Most recently we were honored by being presented with the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

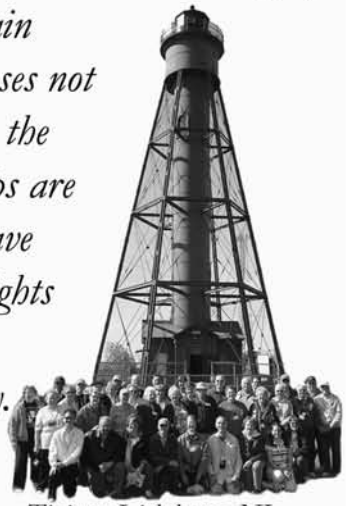
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