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GROWING UP AT POINT LOMA LIGHT STATION DURING WORLD WAR II

An Interview with Lexie Johnson, daughter of Second Assistant Keeper Milford Johnson

By Karen Wagner Scanlon

It was wonderful growing up at the lighthouse. I was pushing three years old when we moved to Point Loma in 1931. Dad had been assistant keeper at the Farrallon Islands [off San Francisco]. Every child should have the opportunity to live at a lighthouse. It was sometimes lonely. [She had no siblings.] I learned to enjoy my own company. Mom loved living on the Point. Dad liked being a keeper, too. The work wasn't real hard, but it was long hours. A keeper has to be a jack-of-all-trades – carpenter, mechanic, painter, you name it, and be able to polish brass! Mom and Dad knew everybody, and everybody liked them. Dad was active at the Masonic Lodge.

The entire place was like a big beautiful garden. My dad had so many flowers. Roses. Poinsettias. Easter lilies. Most everything, as well as all kinds of vegetables and berries and fruit. He also had a big garden on the side of the hill near the old water catch basin. My father grew everything in his garden behind the house – all the produce. There were big cypress trees that were not trimmed used as a windbreak [at the western edge].The cypress near the engine room were trimmed in cone shapes. And there was a tall lattice-type wall fence with cup-of-gold vine and saltbush hedges. Lots of ground cover with purple flowers in bare areas.

The Dudleys had a garden, too [James Dudley was first assistant keeper at Point Loma]. Dudleys had cows; Dad slaughtered hogs. The Dudleys had three horses, but one of them was sort of mine. I latched on to one. We had chickens and rabbits. Seems like we had no money, but I wasn't aware of that then. Dad made $95 a month. I liked going to the post office six miles away, not something we did every day. The road was bad and had kind of an oily surface on it. It was maintained by the lighthouse keepers and was a constant chore to fill in potholes. We used to get milk delivered way out there. The milkman was a friend, and he'd have coffee with Mom and Dad, which he deserved, driving way out there.

We had a huge fishpond. There was a big carpenter shop with two huge rooms. Had a paint locker full of paint, mainly red lead which was used as a base coat for all metal surfaces. Everybody had their own coal shed. When we lived there, the houses had



Lexie Johnson standing in the door of her "art studio." Her father relocated an old privy and renovated it for his daughter. 1945 photo, courtesy of Lexie Johnson.

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side porches with French windows big enough to slide up and walk through into the living room and dining room. The porch ran full length of middle side, great for ventilation, six foot plus. There were four fireplaces in the houses but they are no longer there. We'd light a fire in the living room, but never lit others – too messy. They had grates that stick out in the room – English fireplaces. We got floor furnaces just before the war. We used coal stoves, seems like forever, but was only till 1940ish.

I can remember my telephone number, Bay View 3151 x46, 2 bells, on the Fort Rosecrans exchange. There was the extension to the lighthouse telephone – it was two rings, one ring for the keeper. It was a party line and we couldn't stay on it too long. It was an official line plus a party line.

My father was with the Lighthouse Service until the Coast Guard took over. When he switched to the Coast Guard service, back then your rank was in line with your pay. He automatically [became] a Boatswain's [Mate].

The light [lens] had a 500-watt bulb in it. The keepers rotated shifts, six hour shifts, two on, one off, and every third day off. Dad had a month or so off a year and we went up to San Francisco. Dad had to wear Boatswain's second [BM2] uniform – Navy blue, ugly things – he called it his monkey suit. When the tender *Lupine* came down from San Francisco, it was inspection time. Captain Rhodes, the lighthouse inspector, was a tyrant. He would do white glove inspections and did them in the quarters, too, on top of doors, everything – literally white gloves.

There was a shark pool directly off the little point that sticks out below the tower, with two caves. You could walk into one cave when the tide goes out. It was big and had a sandy bottom and an area with stringy seaweed and an indentation. Sometimes it

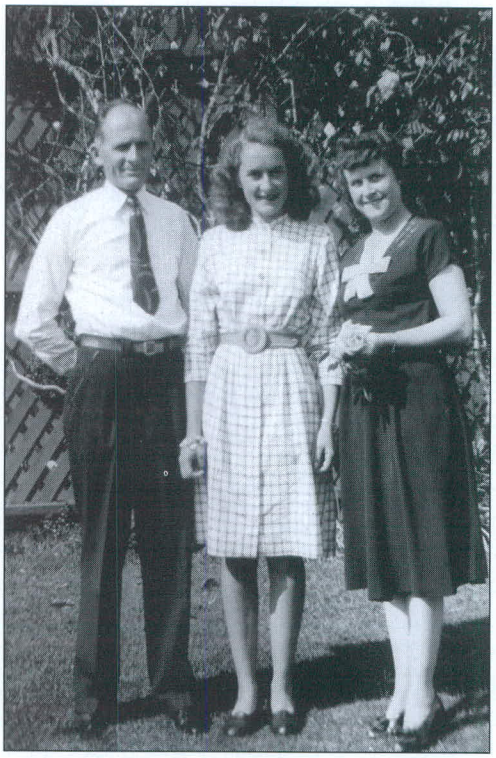


My dad, in "his monkey suit," as he called it, in 1942 or 43. Taken in front of the engine room. He'd have a fit if he knew I sent this. Lexie Johnson photo.



Point Loma from the sea, prior to the addition of the fog signal building. Station barn at left. Note what appear to be two caves in the cliff under the tower, described by Lexie Johnson in her story. National Archives photo courtesy of Karen Scanlon. Date unknown.

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Lexie with her father and mother, Milford and Louise Johnson.



Above – Neighborhood picnic in 1936. Back row, from left, my cousin Miford, Mr. Cobb (principal keeper and perfect gentleman, note tie and keeper's hat at a picnic!), Mrs. Cobb (always called "Mother Cobb"), my mother, Louise, my father, Milford Johnson (2nd assistant). Front row, from left, me, Patty Dudley, Joan Dudley, Violet Dudley and Jim Dudley (1st assistant). When Mr. Cobb retired, Jim Dudley became keeper and my dad was promoted to 1st assistant keeper.

Right – 2nd assistant's quarters, water tank (cistern) and retention or water catcher on the hill. Note all the gardens and the tall lath fence between the quarters. This was taken about 1934.

All photos this page courtesy of Lexie Johnson.

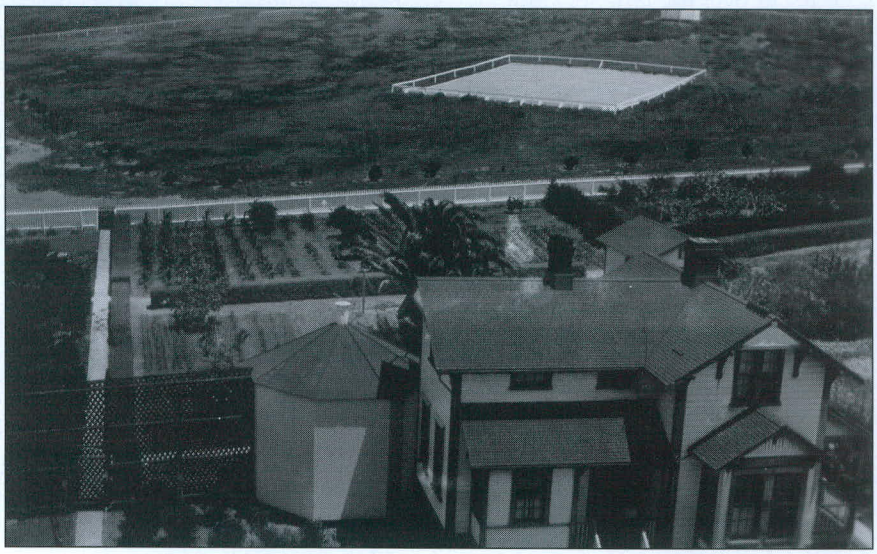
was full of sand sharks and seaweeds. I stepped on one [shark]. It was rough feeling. The water was higher than my waist. We swam around in it, called it our swimming hole. We used to have fun on the shore making towns with parts of lobsters, driftwood, and Japanese floats—I actually found one—and we used shells as a restaurant. We'd make roads and castles and spend a long time at it, but of course when the tides came in, it was all gone. I was a beach rat, I sun bathed north of the tower past the Coast Guard property line. There were some underground barracks used during the war, and after the war, it was a great skating rink. The mess hall was a great skating place. A lot of soldiers stayed in there, during the war only. I used metal shoe skates.

If Mother didn't know what to cook for dinner, Dad would go down to the beach and get lobster and abalone. On the ocean side, north of the light, there was the Mormon salt mine, at least that's what they told us it was. It was six to eight feet across, a hole with ladders. It had a rickety fence around it so we wouldn't fall in. There were bobcats, rattlesnakes, and coyotes out there.

We used to have to go out and get a bucket of coals when we came in from somewhere. We had to start a fire in the coal stove 'cause water in the pipe to the water tank went into [the] coal box. Had to get a fire going before a bath. We had indoor plumbing. I can remember [the] house being wired by the electrician. Took some doing before [we got the] gas stove – cotton-pickin' coal – it was so dirty. The Long Beach earthquake, 1932 maybe. I can remember seeing the kerosene lamp hanging in the kitchen swinging back and forth and Dad rushed me outside.

My cousin worked next to the Navy Electronics Lab right next to the lighthouse. There were some searchlights in that area left over from World War I that had been there forever, I doubt they were working, they were pretty old. We used to go up and climb around them.

When we moved in, the old two-hole privies were sitting on the grounds on the other side of the fence. They were the size of about 8 by 12 feet. Dad moved one. The privy itself was my art studio. It had a cot and a desk in there and cabinets. Dad put a big window in it. The privies were built just exactly as the house [quarters].



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An Army truck with a green canvas top was my school bus. Pat, Joan [2nd assistant Dudley's daughters], and I went to the motor pool for a smaller vehicle, usually a jeep, for the rest of the way cause we were at the end of the line. I'd been in everything in the motor pool [vehicles]—halftrack wheels in front, in back tracks like on a tank. Imagine what a tank would do coming down that hill! Being away from friends in junior high and high school was the hardest part. We were too far away and missed out on lots of after school activities because I had to be there to meet my mother or to catch the school bus. Wasn't really a big deal.

Mom had to learn to drive when I went to school. She was just a typical wife of that era. She went to work with the Navy Electronics Lab during the war (it was scattered all over the Point) and worked as a driver for the Navy. She enjoyed it very much. Drove military people topside and down into the Fort whenever and wherever they needed to go. Later on she worked in the gift shop at the old lighthouse.

Once a good-sized fishing boat got stuck on the shoals off the lighthouse. They couldn't get it off. It sat there till it rotted. Another incident occurred when a young family got lost in the fog and beached themselves. They had no business being out there. Dudley and Dad helped them in. I went out and saved the dog.

A War Going On In My Neighborhood

Most people didn't know there was a war going on, but it touched us more than others. Everybody else didn't have to live in olive drab houses. During the war, we had a total black out on the Point. The entire grounds at Point Loma – all the buildings, even the cement sidewalks, everything – was painted olive drab. The lighthouse, the houses, everything. Going down that hill to our house in a black out was tricky with no car lights. We had to put tarpaper on our windows if we wanted to turn the lights on inside. The foghorn and the lighthouse were out during the black out – for six or more months.

The Army was there way before the war. Marines maintained the lower gate because the Naval facility was there. I was an older teenager, dating, and we'd go out on the Point as they patrolled to look out over the Bay. We knew all these Marine guards. We used to park my Model A at the gate they patrolled. I had built-in chaperons. I was 19-20 at the time.

After the war and most of the Army was gone, the Marines and I had a bowling team in the unused bowling alley – as long as we did our own pin setting. That's hard work!

Danger? Yes, some. They would fire those cotton pickin' guns without warning us and the Army shot shells right over our quarters. The windows would blow out. If they warned us, we could open the windows. The Army replaced the windows frequently.

Ecology wasn't something we knew about then. We used to dump all our trash over the beach. Our family threw it over the cliff. It was before we knew any better. There were no plastics, it was mostly table scraps and the rabbits would come and eat it. There were some cans too. One night I went out to toss the garbage over and I met up with a young soldier on guard duty with a rifle aimed at me. He wanted the password! He was told to guard the perimeter, and not that people lived there. We scared the dickens out of each other.

Another night we had a tremendous scare. A German sub slipped through the sub nets across the bay in the vicinity of Ballast Point. A Swedish ship came in and they thought a German sub came in with it. Everyone was commanded to report with all available guns and ammunition. Dad and Dudley went out with a shot gun and a twenty-two [that was all the munitions at the light], put them in a row boat, and told to "sick em'." Those two were out rowing around San Diego Bay looking for a German submarine. There was total panic in Fort Rosecrans.

The motor pool kept switching around and they didn't know there were teen-aged girls [carpooling to school]. We had to have an armed guard as we walked to our jeep past German prisoners – all looked younger than I was! The motor pool was like a big garage, an open-air parking garage – jeeps, cars, Army vehicles.

One time we were riding the horses to the north on the west side and minding our own business. There was this big Army installation and a rocket sticking out of it. We knew we weren't supposed to be there, so we 'tip-toed' away. This was about 1946. All kinds of men were running around, like something out of a movie. It wasn't just a rocket, they were working on it. We ran home and told our folks and they thought we were dreaming. It was on the ocean side. The rocket was big enough to scare us. It wasn't little—15, 17, 20 feet in an upright position like they were going to shoot it. If Pat Dudley hadn't been with me, no one would have believed me. We never heard of any other rockets. Don't remember any follow-up on that one. Military secrets, I guess.



Back – me and Jerry Key, front – Mom, Dad and Aunt Marie, on our front porch. Lexie Johnson photo.

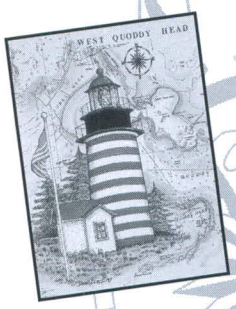
The End of Our Stay

I was 21 years old when I moved away from the lighthouse. When Dudley retired, Dad was offered the keeper's job. He didn't want to move to the big house so he took a two-to-three year early retirement and they moved to Pine Valley [California]. [It was mandatory for the keeper to live in the 'big house' and he was not allowed to remain in the western dwelling as keeper. It was only for the assistant.] Dad and Mom had been there 21 years.

I married Wendell Johnson, my boss in the finance business. That makes me Lexie Johnson Johnson.

[Lexie Johnson moved to Florida in 1992. She wrote to the author in April 2001] Sure envy you being able to visit my old home as you do. When we were there last [about 10 years ago], as much as I enjoyed seeing it was sad to see the tower rusting and the lack of beauty that once was.

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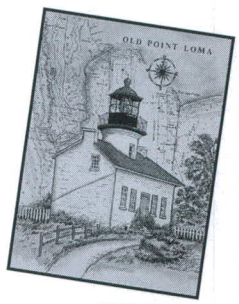


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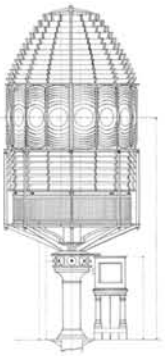


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Point Loma Light Station taken shortly after WWII. Building at left is the principal keeper's dwelling – the big house that keeper Johnson didn't want to move into. Note that it is still painted olive drab. The rain catchment basin is at lower right and grown over. Photo courtesy of Karen Scanlon.

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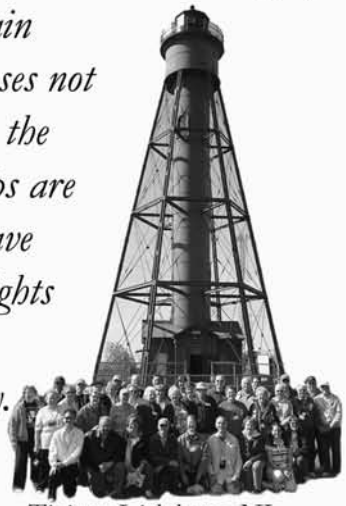
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