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The Keepers of the Light

Point Reyes

by Dewey Livingston

The Point Reyes Light Station held a reputation for many years as one of the less desirable assignments on the west coast. A combination of wind, fog and darkness, the unrelenting fog signal, the immense set of stairs, not to mention isolation and poor wages, took a severe toll on the keepers and their assistants. Incidents of insanity, alcoholism, violence and insubordination plagued the station during its first half-century of operation. Not until modern conveniences arrived, such as better roads, transportation and electrical power, did the working conditions improve to any extent.

The station's staff included the principal keeper, usually a Lighthouse Service veteran, and three assistants, ranked as first, second and third assistant keepers. All were provided quarters, and many had families; until the Coast Guard took over the lighthouses, keepers were reportedly encouraged to come with families as a way to keep the men from boredom and isolation. Pay scales in 1887 ranged from $800 per year for the principal keeper to $600 for the first assistant and $500 for the second and third assistants. Depending on the particular year, the service provided rations, although some reports complain of lack of government-provided rations. Marin County's historian pleaded for the keepers' well being in 1880:

When it is considered how these men have to live, far removed from society and neighbors, on a barren rock, subjected to the dangers and fatigues incident to their vocation, and the great responsibility which rests upon their shoulders, it would seem that the Government could well afford to be far more liberal in remunerating their services. The fate and destiny of valuable property and precious lives are in their hands. . . .

Seven years later the *San Francisco Chronicle* commented on a somewhat different situation:

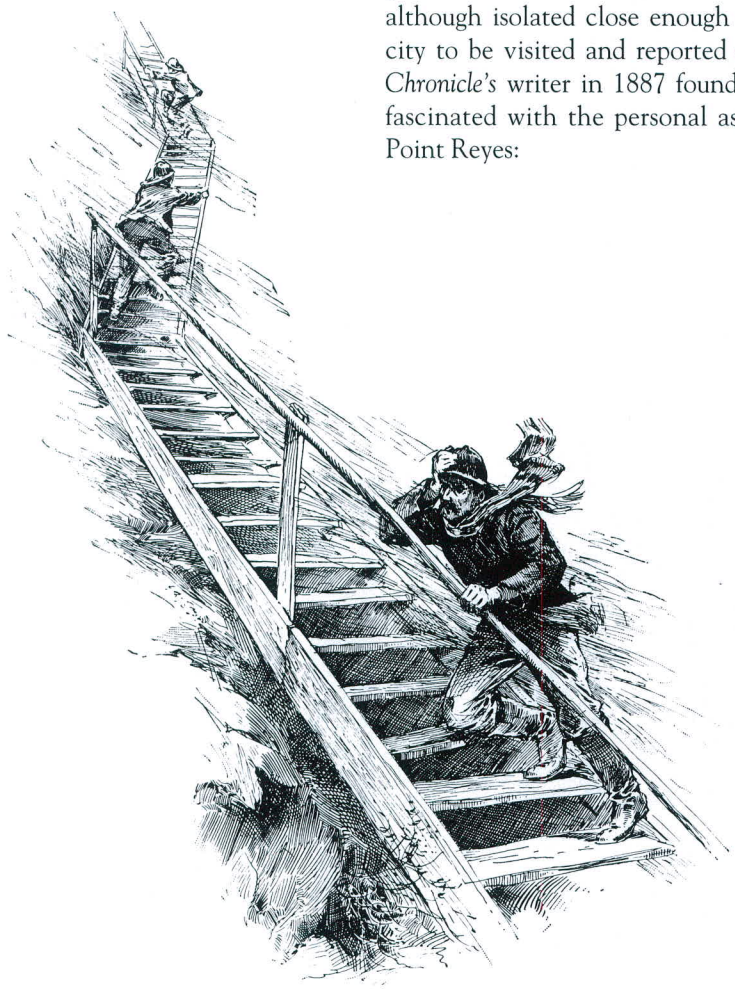
This [wage] seems a mere pittance (in fact it is not lavish), but, considering all that the word "rations" includes, it might be worse. House rent and repairing, stove fixtures, fuel, coal-oil, beef, pork, flour, rice, beans, potatoes, onions, sugar, coffee and vinegar are among the articles furnished by Government, with a privilege of exchanging any of them in something else.

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Until 1929 the keepers worked double watches during the frequently foggy nights. With one man stationed at the light tower and the other manning the fog signal 100 feet below, both withstood battering winds and an unimaginable racket from the fog signal's constant blasts. A sleeping room provided a safe place to rest between watches or when the wind prevented passage up the stairs, an apparently common event, as mentioned in the *Chronicle:* "On the left [of the stairway] a guard rail insures comparative safety to the keepers, who, as it is in heavy gales, have occasionally to prostrate themselves during the passage, making the best of their way between gusts, so furious is the sweep of the wind."

Day-to-day life at the station consisted of tedious tasks such as polishing the lens, cleaning and painting, repair of facilities and instruments, or making trips to the landing, post office or local ranch for supplies. Depending on the disciplinary character of the principal keeper, the work could be performed under pressure or barely at all. As evidenced in the keepers log of 1872-1896, some keepers let the station fall into disrepair while others enforced a stricter work ethic and pushed their crews to make the place shine. For instance, when John C. Ryan took over the station in January 1888, he found it to be in extremely poor condition and put his assistants to work cleaning it up. Ryan crowded the keepers log with lists of tasks performed, many of which were cosmetic; the crew appeared to have worked harder than any other time in the light station's history. Apparently he pushed a bit too hard, as in 1889 one assistant went "crazy" and was taken to the authorities at Olema; this incident was followed by Ryan's dismissal from the service.

The life of a keeper figured in romantic interpretations worldwide during the pioneer era of the job. Point Reyes received fame as one of the remote outposts on the California coast, and although isolated close enough to a big city to be visited and reported on. The *Chronicle's* writer in 1887 found himself fascinated with the personal aspects at Point Reyes:



It is a lonely vigil, disposing one to serious meditation. The various ways in which the different watchers beguile their time, the books they read, the impressions made upon them by the weird and awful nature of their surroundings, are matters of interest to the philosopher. The first assistant has embodied his emotions in verse. It was the writer's good fortune to hear these poems read by their author under peculiarly favorable circumstances, and to the little group of listeners their quaint charm will long remain an impressive memory inseparable from the scene.

Principal keeper E.G. Chamberlain, obviously depressed but in a poetic mood, wrote in the keepers log in September of 1885, "Fog fog and nothing but fog/had no mail since 9th instant/getting short of provisions," and then quoted English poet William Cowper:

O solitude where are the charms
That sages have seen in they face,
Better dwell in the midst of alarms
Than reign in this horrible place.
Society friendship to love
Divinely bestowed upon man,
O had I the wings of a dove,
How soon would I taste you again.

While some keepers found poetic inspiration at the light station, others found loneliness, boredom and claustrophobia. Problems with alcoholism plagued the station, as described by the *Chronicle* writer:

Another local celebrity, in his way, was a late (and now happily deposed) keeper, notorious for his love of the flowing bowl. It is said that he even regaled himself, when out of whisky, with the alcohol furnished for cleaning lamps, and a familiar sight to the ranchman was this genial gentleman lying dead drunk by the roadside, while his horse, attached to the lighthouse wagon, grazed at will over the country. It was no unusual thing for him to be drunk for days at his station.

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Apparently the fog signal caused most of the problems to keepers at the station. The signal building lay some 100 feet in elevation below the light, or another several hundred steps down the cliff. The steam apparatus was quirky and dangerous, requiring a great deal of maintenance and worry. The signal itself, whether siren or steam whistle, brought on numerous staff problems. The 1887 *Chronicle* article considered that the incessant sirens made "night and day alike hideous . . . the blast alone, which lasts five seconds and recurs every seventy seconds, is enough to drive any ordinary man mad, and must, it seems, exert a wearing effect upon even the hardened nerves of a keeper." The writer noted that after 176 hours of continuous operation, "the jaded attendants look as if they had been on a protracted spree."

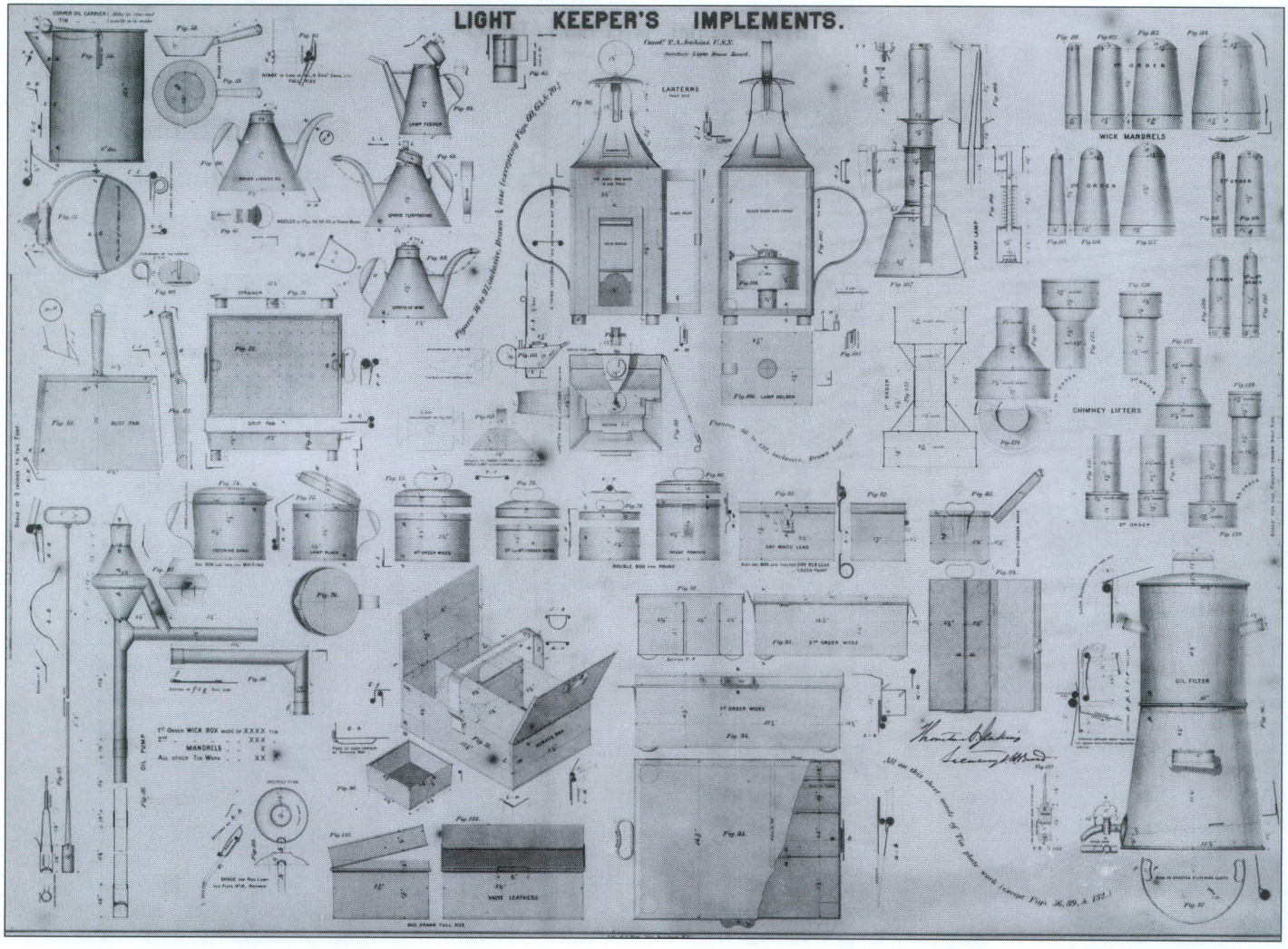
These difficulties wore on all the keepers, but no doubt brought the most problems to the principal keeper. Toogood wrote:

Keepers came and went frequently at Point Reyes light station during the nineteenth century, reflecting the nearly constant personnel problems plaguing that lonely spot. In March 1876 tensions flared between the principal keeper, William Wadsworth, and his second and third assistant keepers, who threatened him with violent language when he tried to put them on road repair. In 1875, however, Wadsworth had experienced his greatest trials with third assistant J.D. Parker, who threatened the safety of many navigators with his insubordination and neglectful duty. According to the keeper, Parker once shut down the fog signal, reporting clear weather when the Point was socked in with fog. Several times Parker failed to start the fog signal for hours after the fog rolled in, or didn't show up for his watch, or was late in reporting to duty. On one occasion Parker blew the fog whistle with little steam, only sounding it



Above – W.H. Hicks, keeper at the Point Reyes light station in the mid 1920's. Photo courtesy of the NPS.

Below – Just a few of the official tools of the trade issued to the keepers by the Lighthouse Service. Many of these implements were manufactured at the General Depot on Staten Island, NY and all were constructed of brass . . . and had to be kept polished. USLHS print.



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on five to fifteen minute intervals, so that when a steamboat signaled, he was unable to respond, although the station had plenty of water to operate the whistles at full pressure. On another occasion, he tampered with the fog signals' adjustments without authority, and on a consistent basis he refused to start his duty at the lighthouse one-half hour before sundown, although instructed several times to do so by keeper Wadsworth. Some days Parker would disappear from the station without explanation, and then return drunk, unable to go on watch. On Christmas eve, 1875, Parker attended a ball at a neighboring ranch, where he apparently burst into drunken song to entertain the guests, and to Keeper Wadsworth's disgust, vomited in front of the company.

Lighthouse personnel did have various diversions, although most required a ride of more than an hour distant. The towns of Olema and Nicasio held regular balls, which were sometimes attended by keepers. One assistant, John McFarland, attended many balls and visited the local towns and ranches frequently during the mid-1870s, according to the keepers log; he often stayed away for days, apparently with the blessing of his superior. Eventually the keeper noted in the log: "Grave charges were preferred against John A.F. McFarland by Misses Vienna Jewell and Fannie Perham." McFarland was suspended but reinstated after the charges were tabled. The nature of Mr. McFarland's transgressions will perhaps never be known; he soon left to take charge of the Point Montara lighthouse.

To many the lighthouse keepers stood as heroes, and one Point Reyes keeper, Fred Kreth, became known as a real hero. In about 1927 the three-man crew of a fishing vessel found themselves stranded for twenty-four hours at an inaccessible area below the lighthouse. After the Coast Guardsmen from the lifeboat station at Drakes Bay failed to reach the wet and frightened men, Kreth climbed down the rocky cliffs to the fishermen and guided them to the safety of the keeper's quarters.

Keepers found friendships and family-style companionship at local ranches. Until after the turn of the century one ranch, the F Ranch near the head of Drakes Estero, acted as a kind of community center, with post office, store and schooner landing. The log often mentions visits, meat purchases, or trips to the post office there. Mail service did not reach the lighthouse itself until well into the 20th century; a fourth-class post office established at the lighthouse in about 1925 survived until the 1940s. The mail drivers commonly would also deliver groceries from the store at Inverness to the keepers' families. The local school was originally located in a gulch beyond G Ranch until it was moved to A Ranch adjacent to the lighthouse in 1923. The old schoolhouse hosted community meetings and parties in addition to performing its educational responsibilities. Also, trustees of a Portuguese social hall on the Inverness road held regular dances and social gatherings, to which all were invited.



Typical brass oil can be used to fill the lamp in the lens. Photo courtesy Sarah Gleason.

The poor condition of the road to the lighthouse from Olema contributed to the isolation and hardships faced by the residents of the light station. The twenty-mile stretch of dirt and sand, planked in some places, was the responsibility of various local roadmasters until the turn of the century. Conditions varied along the road, as some dairymen kept the stretch through their ranch in excellent shape while others ignored their road sections. Sandy portions closer to the lighthouse reservation caused the greatest problems, as maintenance of the corduroy, or planked, sections taxed the keepers and roadmasters. A reporter from the *Marin Journal* remarked after an 1889 visit that "the wheels of the carriage utter sounds that grate upon the nerves, and the horses soon indicate the labor necessary to cross these sandy spaces by slowing down to a hum-drum walk, and a spiritless movement.

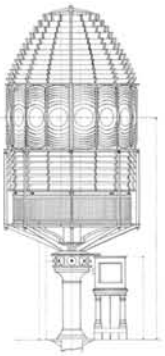
By 1927 the road as far as J.V. Mendoza's B Ranch had been widened and resurfaced, but the remaining 3.3 miles to the lighthouse continued to be poor. Congressman Clarence F. Lea wrote to the Lighthouse Service Commissioner after a visit to the lighthouse:

At present the Lighthouse Service is under a heavy expense for hauling supplies between the landing at Drakes Bay and the station, the road being impassable during wet weather, and the westerly half of it being very difficult to negotiate at any time due to heavy drifting sand. The Service keeps the western portion of this road corduroyed at considerable expense in order that supplies may be hauled to the station.

Congressman Lea introduced a bill for funding road improvements but no money came of it; the county funded a general improvement in 1929 consisting of widening the road to sixteen feet, laying down a rock surface, and constructing culverts and ditches. Finally, in 1931, the Lighthouse Service funded improvement of the road to eighteen feet wide with a decomposed granite surface. Keepers and their families could now travel to the nearby towns without the rigors of the previous decades.

The author, Dewey Livingston, is a historian with the National Park Service, Point Reyes National Seashore.

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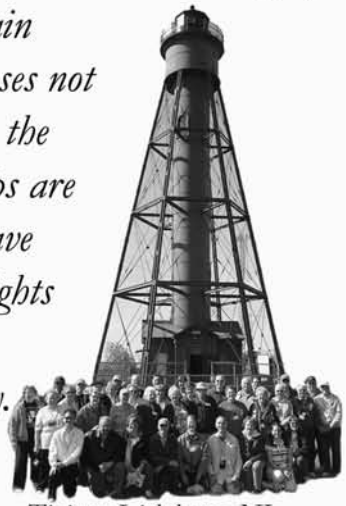
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