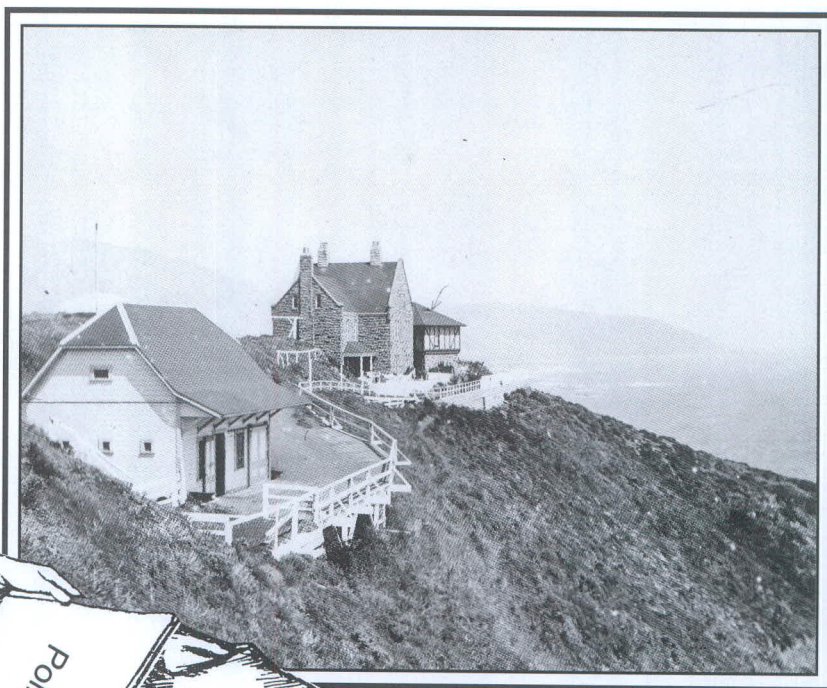




Barn, triplex and keeper's house at Point Sur. USLHS photo.

Lighthouse Memories Part II

By Cora Isabel Owens

We arrived at Pt. Sur Light Station on March 11, 1935. At that time, our family consisted of my husband Bill, myself and our five children: Shirley—seven, Sarah—six, Dixie—three, and the year-old twins, Jean and Joan. The ride was not nearly as long as our ride from San Francisco to Pt. Conception Light Station, where Bill began his service. The road from San Luis Obispo was unfinished and we had to circle around through Monterey and south to Pt. Sur, traveling partly on Highway 1 and partly on Highway 101. We had been expected, so the station gate was unlocked.

Pt. Sur is a huge rock about half a mile from the highway, with a sandy road leading most of the way to the base of the rock. At one place the sand was too soft to drive over, so two tracks of boards had been placed on the sand for

about a hundred feet. From time to time, the sand would blow over the boards, and they would be lifted and placed on top again. From the base, a very narrow road led up and around the rock. About half way up, another, wider road branched off, leading to the fog signal building and tower which were on a wide ledge on the west side of the rock. The construction engineers had to level off space on top of the rock to make room to build the two houses, a work shop, an engine room for the donkey engine, a storage shed for supplies and make the road which circled the top.

We came to the top and stopped between two buildings. Mr. Henderson, the head keeper, came out from his house and invited us in. Bill gave him the transfer orders, including a copy of a letter from Capt. Rhodes, to 2nd. Assistant Day, dated 5 March, 1935, with

instructions for him to turn over the unused room on the third floor of his quarters to us. Mr. Henderson informed us that the garret room which Mr. Day, the third assistant, had been ordered to turn over to us was now occupied by one of his children. At the time we didn't know what a bad piece of news that would be for us.

The assistants' building was very large. It was built of granite blocks taken from the mountains in the area. Because of the thick blocks and double windows, it was well insulated, which was good in such a windy location. It was divided into three sections for the three assistants; the first was for Mr. Harry Miller and family: two rooms and a pantry on the first floor, two bedrooms on the second floor, and one bedroom and bath on the third—or garret—floor. This section was completely private. The next or

middle section was occupied by Second Assistant Harmon Day and Family. They had the same arrangement of rooms, but shared the hallways and stairs with the third assistant. Our third assistant's section had one room downstairs, two tiny bedrooms on the second floor and one tiny bedroom and a bathroom on the third floor. The Day family had not used their attic bedroom until they received orders to turn it over to us, at which time they moved their daughter into it.

Mr. Henderson even managed to find room to keep a cow. He built a connecting platform that extended out over the bluff with a fence on three sides and bought a cow. She gave enough milk for all four families. Soil had been brought in so each family could have a small garden. Also, there was a small patch in front of each assistant's quarters for flowers; this was fenced in, as well as the garden. The

engineers and their crew had done everything possible to make it liveable.

We arranged our furniture as well as possible. One room on the second floor barely held our double bed and a chest. The other room had single bed and two cribs for the three youngest. The garret room had two single beds for Shirley and Sarah. The only way I could clean those two rooms was by crawling under everything and using a brush. But, we coped—the most important thing was to get the two oldest children in school.

The one room school was down on the flat near the gate and main road. The Government had the school built, the county paid the teacher. There were nine children in the school: four from the lighthouse, three girls from the Grimes ranch and two boys from another ranch. Children of high school age were driven into Monterey by their parents.

Miss Gilbert was the teacher. She gave our two girls extra lessons in each subject each day to bring them to the proper grade level for their age. Miss Gillert was surprised that Shirley could read. Sarah Lou got sick and had to drop out and start all over again the following September. We were thankful to Miss Gilbert for managing the children's lessons the way she did; perhaps all teachers would have done the same, but I'm not sure. Shirley finished the first year of school between March 17 and the end of the term in June. Dixie visited school often the last year we were there, with the teacher's approval; she said it would make things easier for Dixie when she started first grade.

The water at Pt. Sur was nicely soft, just the opposite of the water at Pt. Conception. It was piped in from a spring in the hills on the other side of the highway. Once a year



A nice place to raise children, if you can keep them in the yard. From left—two modern Coast Guard buildings, old winch house (which was converted into the head keeper's quarters after the turn of the century), triplex for assistant keepers, three car garage, pump house and cistern.

two or three men went over to clean it out. Once, a rattlesnake was found in it; but then, Big Sur country is rattlesnake country.

With all the wind at Pt. Sur, there was never any trouble getting clothes dry. One day as I was looking out the living room window, I saw a 6' x 6' board go sailing by. It had been ripped out of the fence. I don't know where it landed. Since the engine room for the fog signal and the light tower were built on a lower level, a foot bridge was constructed across an open space to the tower. Since the bridge was open to the wind, the men had their hats blown away from time to time. We were told a dog had been blown off the bridge once, but was not seriously hurt.

One morning, when I got up to a calm and sunny day, I went outside to enjoy it, and saw an unusual sight. The ocean was covered with a thick white fog as far as I could see. It gave me an eerie feeling at first. On top of the rock we were enjoying very good weather, but the fog horn was blowing for those down below. And, sometimes in winter, when it was storming, the water would cover the whole flat, and we could not drive out. But such occasions did not last long enough to be a serious problem.

Taking vacations was becoming troublesome—what with seven in our family. Quite often, when we had visited friends in San Francisco or Los Angeles, we returned home very tired, and with colds. So we purchased camping equipment and went to nearby Pfeiffer State Park for our holidays. We discovered that after a camping trip we returned renewed and rested.

After we were there a year, Mr. Harry Miller transferred to Pt. Cabrillo. Then Mr. Harmon Day was raised to first assistant and moved into the quarters vacated by Mr. Miller. Our family was then permitted to move into Mr. Day's vacated quarters. At last we had enough room. The second floor bedrooms were quite large. Shirley's, Sarah's and Dixie's beds were placed on one side of the room and the twins' cribs were placed in two corners. They were not the least crowded. The



Keeper Bill Owens with the twins and wife Cora second from right. Photo courtesy of Cora Owens.

garret room was our also, but we felt none of our children were old enough to be that far from us at night, if we could avoid it. The garret room became our guest room. The quarters we had just left were given to a Mr. Peterson and his wife, newly transferred to Pt. Sur. They had no children.

In the summer Mrs. Miller and I would take the younger children down to the South Beach. There were lots of shells to be found, especially fan shells. We learned how to attach them to glass jars, turning them into vases. The water on this beach was shallow and calmer than on the north side, therefore, the children could wade in it. There were two ways to get to the beach. One way was to walk all the way by the road. The other way was to go down a flight of stairs, which started near the living quarters and would end about halfway on the road, and then walk the rest of the way. I did not use the stairs, because the twins were too young to walk down them, and I certainly could not carry both.

The Grimes Ranch was not far from the lighthouse. We became acquainted with them since their three daughters came to the Lighthouse School. They decided to have a barn dance to raise some money to erect

a building and the lighthouse people were invited. I think it cost \$1.00 for each adult. Mrs. Miller, Mrs. Day and I decided to go and take our children. Mrs. Miller would drive us over. I put my children down for a nap in the afternoon, but Shirley said she couldn't sleep because her feet felt like dancing. None of our group did much dancing, but we enjoyed the evening anyway. About a month before we moved to Point Sur the dirigible MACON went down into the ocean off Pt. Sur. It was still a big item of conversation.

There was no really good place for the children to play. They had the driveway which circled the rock and a large rock behind the garage which jugged up as high as the garage itself. If any of them fell it usually meant a cut or scraped skin. Shirley had a small cut on her forehead, right at the hairline. It was a small abrasion and didn't require aid. Sarah Lou fell the day before we were to move and got a cut on the top of her head. She had fallen between the rock and the garage. I cut enough hair away to see how bad the wound was. As it needed something to bring the skin together, we rushed into Monterey to see a doctor. He used three clips instead of stitches and told me how to remove them. I felt a little squeamish, but when the time came,



Rugged Point Sur light station showing from left-the combination fog signal building and light tower, oil house (on lower road), one-story carpenter-blacksmith shop, two story barn, assistant triplex, keeper's house and modern Coast Guard building. At the top left is the station road that curves to meet the main highway. The one room schoolhouse was located by the gate at the main road. The low buildings behind the triplex, in the distance, are Navy stations constructed in World War II. Station water was pumped from the hills across the highway. USLHS photo.

they came out very easily, and didn't hurt Sarah.

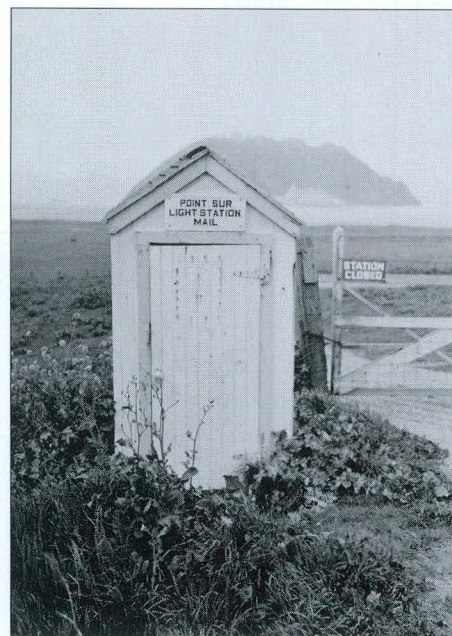
Bill and Mr. Henderson had a quarrel about something. Bill would not tell me what happened, but Mr. Henderson refused to sell us any milk after that. A dairy delivery truck passed the gate every day on their way to Big Sur. Bill went into their Monterey office and made arrangements for them to leave three quarts of milk at the gate each day; he would drive over to get it. Eventually, Mr. Henderson decided we could buy milk from him again, but Bill declined, and we continued to have the dairy leave milk at the gate.

Later, I noted one letter in Bill's file which was certainly out of order: a request for transfer to Pt. Conception as second assistant when there was an opening. Any mail the assistants sent to the district had to go through the head

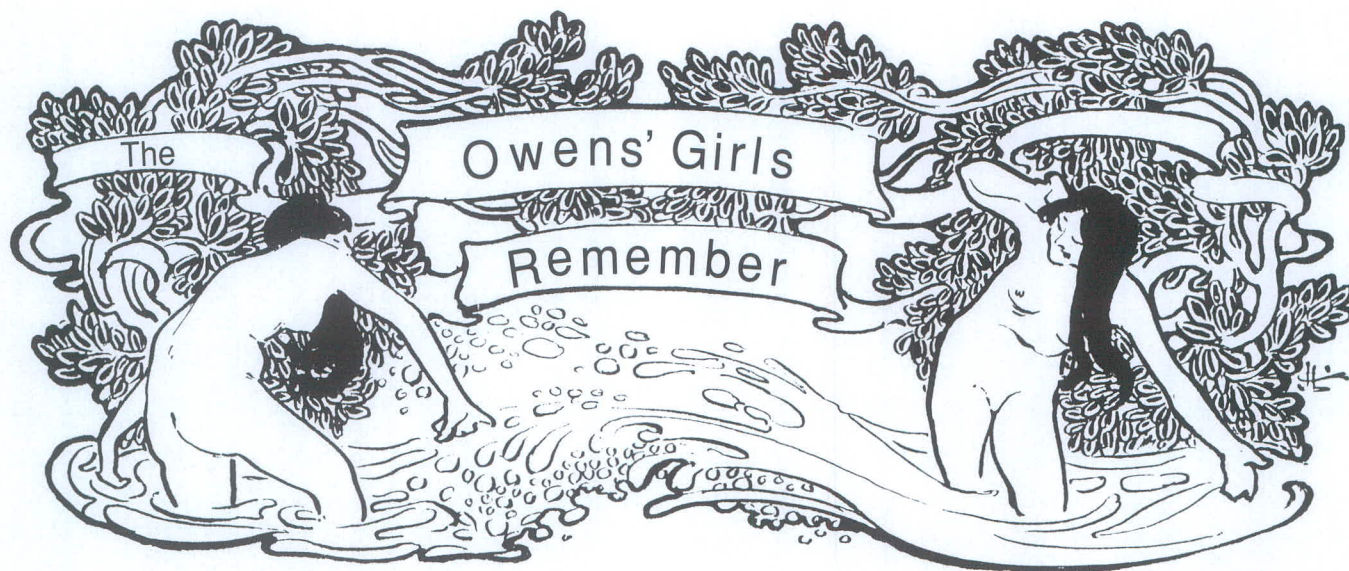
keeper. I wondered: did Mr. Henderson put down Pt. Conception instead of Pt. Arena to get even with Bill for whatever it was that happened between them? If so, things were corrected, because Bill was transferred to Pt. Arena, the station he wanted.

June 15, 1937, Bill received a letter from the District Office stating he had been recommended for transfer to Pt. Arena Light Station as second assistant keeper, and should report there on July 1. Since Bill had requested the transfer, the department would not pay our expenses for moving our furniture. Once again we started packing. So far, each move we made was further north.

(Keep: The next installment covers a busy era: change in the status of lighthouse keepers, a World War. And for the Owens, a new baby and five teenage girls.)



The postman doesn't call here anymore. Point Sur is in the distance. USLHS photo.



Sarah Owens Swartz:

Thanks to our mother being a good teacher at home in Pt. Conception, when we started school at Pt. Sur we were soon in the proper grade. The schoolhouse was just inside the gate leading to the lighthouse. We always thought there was quicksand on both sides of the road; don't remember if our parents told us that to keep us from straying, or if our imaginations were just running wild. But, from the school to the lighthouse, the road went across about a one-half mile open span, with water on both sides on the lighthouse end, which did keep us from going astray, down to the beach.

At the school yard there were thistles growing all over. We used to make trails and rooms in them. I still remember how they felt; it hurt a lot making our forts, but once they were made we had a lot of fun. There was also a lot of poison oak there, and one day Shirley dared me to put my face in it. Boy, was I sorry—I was covered with it!

I remember our mother always had a garden. We had our own fresh vegetables. The only bad part was we all had to take turns pulling weeds. We also had chickens. That was my favorite thing to do—gathering eggs.



The old one-room schoolhouse at Point Sur with a yard of thistles. Cora Owens' photo.

Our father made us a teeter-totter, a swing, a floor for our play tent, and a little table and chairs. Our mother made all our clothing. If we found a picture of a dress we liked, she would make her own pattern, find material almost identical, and she would make us the dress.

I am very thankful that there are organizations dedicated to preserving the lighthouses. They were such happy places to grow up in. It is sad

to see some of the lighthouses that are in such bad shape. I truly wish that the Lighthouse Service could be the same as when my father was in it.

Everything was always painted, whitewashed and the brass polished. The word for it would be: spotless. Of course, the wives had their cleaning to do, also. Houses always had to be spotless for inspections. . .

Dixie Owens Spence:

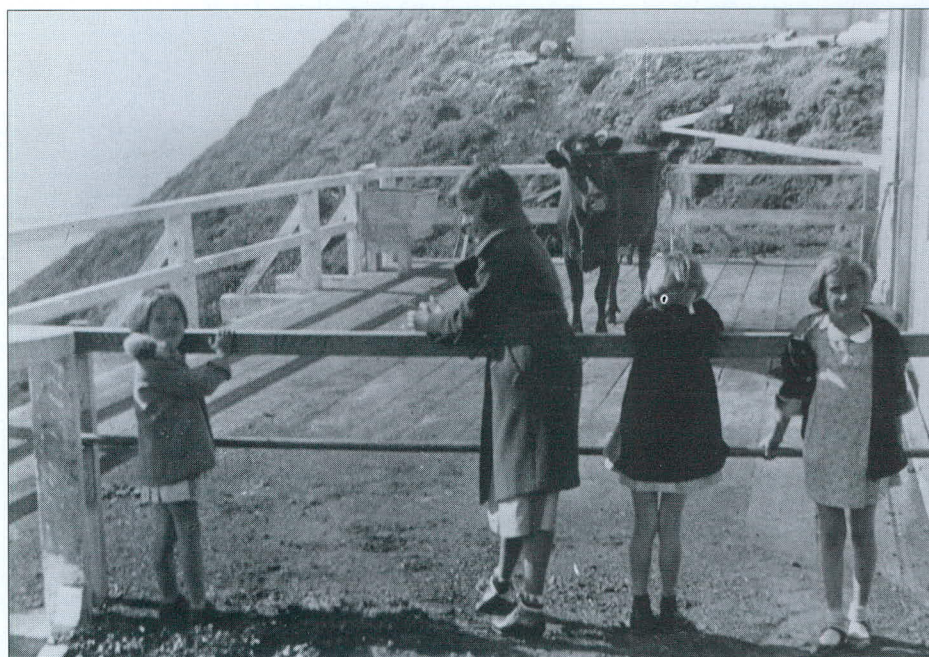
I remember what a mess we made of our clothes. Mom used to spend all day Monday washing clothes and all day Tuesday ironing. We had three ironing boards going at once. We had a coal burning cookstove then, and the irons had to be heated on it. Mom used to make all our clothes for school. We had a new dress for the first day, which most other children did not have. . .



Shirley, Sarah and Dixie in front of their quarters at Pt. Sur. Photo courtesy of Cora Owens.

Shirley Owens Stormes

What a change when we moved to Point Sur. Instead of living at the bottom of a hill, we were on top of a hill. And, at last we were able to go to school, which I liked. Dad would bring us down the hill every morning. Our teacher, Miss Gilbert, gave us a lot of individual attention to help us get caught up to our age level. We had learned a lot from our mother, which helped us to "catch up."



One year we studied about Indians, gathering roots they used as soap. We built teepees and pretended we were Indians. We made a papier maché model of Point Sur, and won a prize in a local fair. We used to play in the fields around the school; the fields were thickly covered with thistles. After a while our legs became accustomed to the sticky thistles. It was beautiful in the spring, with Indian Paint Brush and Lupine.

Other children who attended the school were the girls from the Grimes Ranch north of Pt. Sur (I thought they were the luckiest girls because they lived on a ranch and rode horses), and the three Day children. Mr. Day teased me quite a bit about being so skinny (I was) and one time when he started again, I had "had it" and kicked him in the shins. The bad part about this was that he just had a cast taken off his leg, and it hurt him when I kicked him.

For many years after leaving Pt. Sur, I would have nightmares about living so far above the ocean. In them, I was always going to fall. Perhaps it was because my mother (although I don't remember) had urged us many times to stay away from the edge of a bluff.

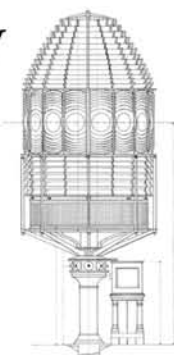
The Owens girls and a friend at the barn watching Mr. Henderson's cow. The blacksmith-carpenter shop is just visible in the background. A sheer cliff is at left. Cora Owens photo.



The twins, Jean and Joan, and faithful Shep at a fence that separates them from a 300 foot fall. Cora Owens' photo.



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.

*To learn more visit
www.uslhs.org
or
call Headquarters at
415-362-7255*

Help Support Our Important Mission!

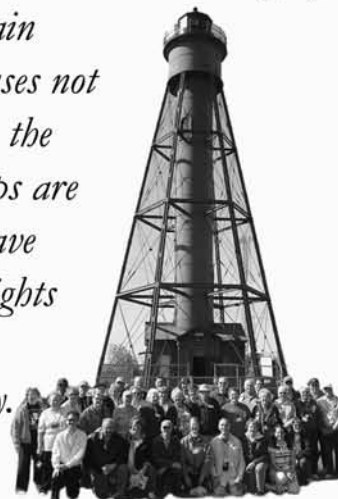
Education



The Keeper's Log magazine is the only one of it's kind and has been published quarterly since 1984. Receive this award-

winning publication as a benefit of membership.

The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



Tinicum Lighthouse, NJ