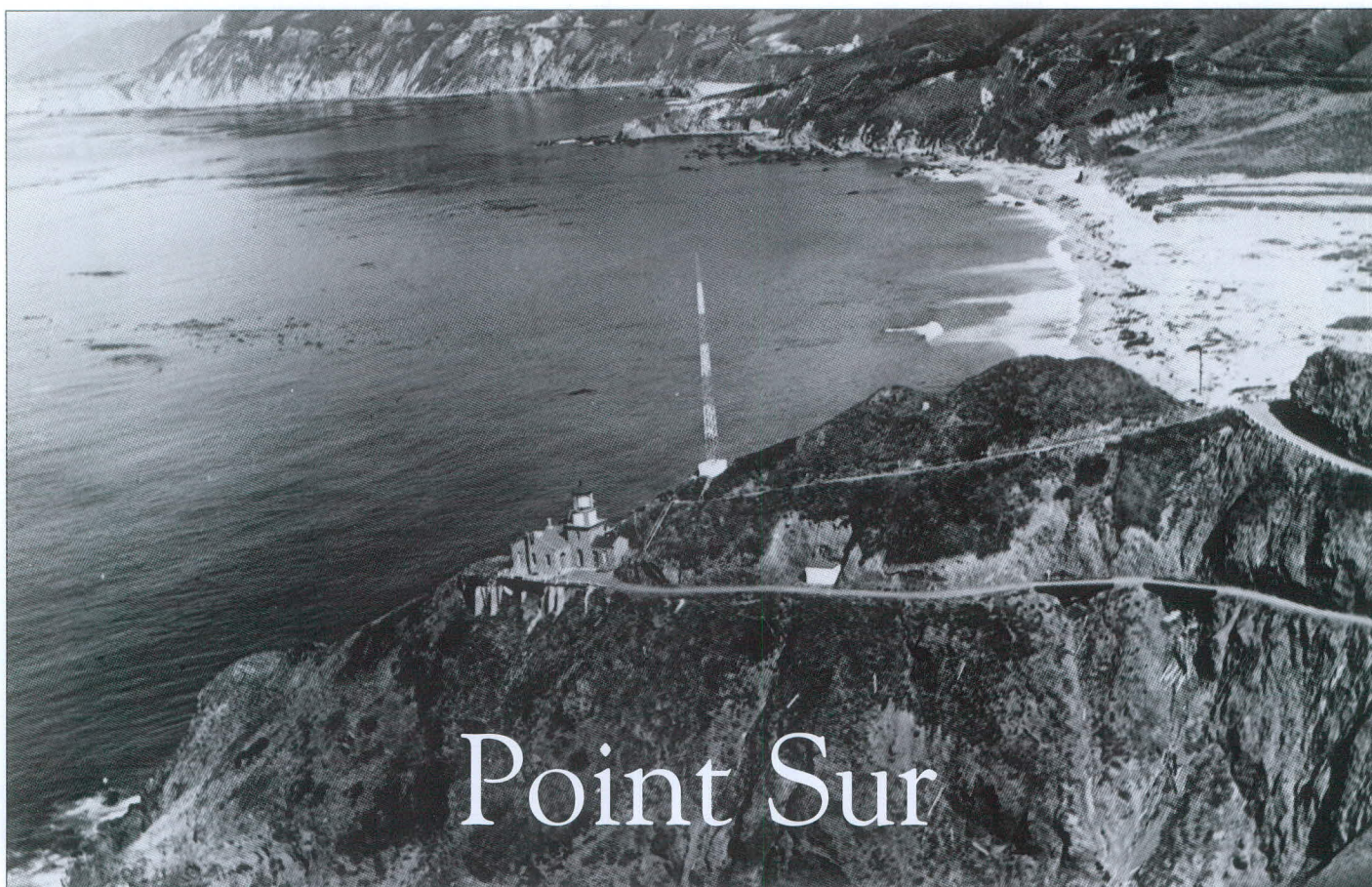




Point Sur light station circa 1960. USCG photo.

By Wayne Wheeler

The coast of California sweeps along a giant curve for nearly 1,000 miles. It is dimpled with very few harbors of refuge and punctuated with a few promontories which mariners have bumped into over the years.

For much of the summer months the coast is enveloped in a dense fog. This climatic condition, coupled with prevailing winds and currents that set vessels to the southwest, and onto the coast, has caused countless shipwrecks. It was especially so prior to the 20th century, during the age of sail and before electronic navigation devices.

One of those bumps, sticking out into the Pacific, that snagged many an unwary or unfortunate sailor is Point Sur. Point Sur is located about half way up the California coast lying south of San Francisco and Monterey Bay. The

Point Sur area is rugged coast—steep cliffs, massive off shore boulders, dangerous reefs, swift currents. Even today, with Highway 1 snaking along and tenuously clinging to the face of cliffs that have been thrust up from the ocean floor, the appearance of this wild coast remains substantially unchanged. It looks pretty much as it did 150 years ago when ships filled with Forty-Niners were creaking their way north to the gold fields of the Mother Lode.

In 1873 the SS *Los Angeles* broke up in the surf at Point Sur. Two years later the vessel *Ventura* came to grief at the same location spewing a cargo of dry goods: silks, linens, farming tools, hardware and wagon parts. Although there were other wrecks at this treacherous location, the loss of these two vessels underscored the need for a lighthouse for Point Sur. The 1885 Report of the Lighthouse Board stated, "This dangerous point, which is still unlighted, is made the subject of much

complaint. The steamer *Ventura* was lost there in 1875." The Board called attention to the need of establishing a lighthouse at Point Sur in its annual reports for 1874 (and other years after that). The following is an extract from its report for 1874:

"Vessels leaving San Francisco for the south, having proceeded as far as Pigeon Point light, take their departure from Point Sur, some 60 miles distant, the great indentation of Monterey Bay intervening. Vessels to the southward bound to San Francisco having arrived at Piedras Blancas, take their departure for Point Sur again about 60 miles distant; hence Point Sur is the most important point and should be the site of a lighthouse. In considering the various points on the California coast where light-houses are still required Point Sur claims the place of greatest importance." In 1866 the Lighthouse Board ordered an examination of this point to be made, and the following is an extract from the report of the examining officer:

"Point Sur is metamorphic sandstone, and has an altitude of 363 feet. It covers an area of nearly three acres, its general shape being that of a wedge with an indented edge. . . . The north side and top of Point Sur are covered with grass, and the sides are very steep, making the ascent very difficult. The extreme eastern and western portions of this point or rock are almost vertical, and the upper edge very narrow, not more than 10 or 12 feet in width. Point Sur is situated about a half mile from the foot of the range of hills which form the prominent feature of the coast, the intervening portion of the country being low and sandy. In very rough weather the low land is overflowed, thus making an island of the rock.

" . . . The only way in which supplies can be sent to Point Sur is by water, for the only road is a trail almost impassable even for a horse.

" . . . It must also appear that the erection there of a lighthouse, with the accompanying buildings, will be an expensive operation. . . . As nearly as can be estimated with the data available, it will cost not less than \$100,000."

In 1886 the Lighthouse Board successfully petitioned Congress for an appropriation of \$50,000 to construct the lighthouse. The following year the Board received another \$50,000 and plans and specifications were made. In April contracts for equipment for a quarry plant (to mine the rock for the buildings), lumber, cars, wire, cable, boiler and engine were entered into. The district office made arrangements for the delivery of the materials and everything was ". . . safely landed through heavy surf in the later part of May and the work was begun." A force of 25 men labored at quarrying stone, grading the area for the railroad track, blasting a trail on the seaside of the rock, building a railroad trestle up the land face and making a corduroy road over the sand dunes to the "mainland." The corduroy road and trestle required 40,000 feet of lumber (cut from Big Sur valley). Clearly the first order of business was to construct access to the rock and to the site on top. By the end of July they had laid 180 feet of rail-



Above—Although Point Sur appears to be an island, it is attached to the mainland by a low sandy tract.

Below—The ocean side tramway with the car being lowered (some 280 feet) for another load of Texaco kerosene. Circa 1900. USLHS photos.



road up the face of the rock (for a tramway), constructed 37 trestles for the remainder of the railroad, constructed a stairway to the top on the land side of the rock and finished 823 feet of corduroy road.

The Report of the Lighthouse Board for 1888 states:

"During the year as large a force of workmen as could eventualities be employed was kept at work. All the rock

necessary for the completion of the buildings was quarried. The railroad 708 feet long and rising 318 feet in this distance (ed—talk about steep!), was completed. A road bed was blasted out of the side of the rock on the seaward face, and a railroad track was constructed 480 feet long to the tower. Sites for the tower, oil room, boiler rooms, cistern, dwelling and engine house all had to be blasted out. The stone engine house is complete (keep'—this was later converted into the keeper's house); the dwelling walls, including party walls are up to the second floor. . . . The tower walls, including the brick lining, are within four feet of being completed; the fog signal house and boiler house are completed except the gables. . . . The pump and pump house are completed, pipes are connected with the cistern (53,000 gallons). Contracts are made for the fog signal apparatus, including the boiler and its engine and for its erection. Contracts are also made for the lantern and iron work for the tower, much of which is now ready for delivery."

The report went on to state that the district had high hopes that the station would be completed by the end of the year. However, "owing to the increased cost of labor and material and an exorbitant charge for a right of way from the lighthouse site to the county road, an additional \$10,000 will be needed to complete this station."

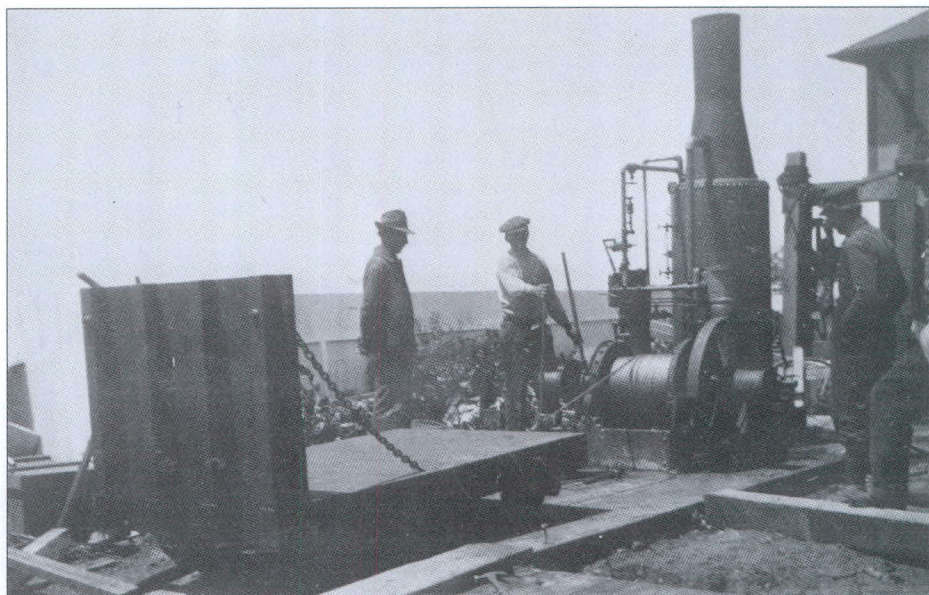
The funds were appropriated and the station went into operation on August 1, 1889. The 1st Order Fresnel lens provided an alternating red and white flash every 15 seconds (to a distance of 20 miles) and a 12 inch steam whistle provided a 5 second blast every 35 seconds when the weather was inclement.

The Report for 1889 noted that the owner of the land between the station and the county highway had demanded \$1,500 for the right of way across his property. While the District thought this exorbitant it was paid rather than go through a lengthy and expensive condemnation suit. The District Inspector stated . . . "temporary wooden dwelling were on the Sur Rock, used while building the station, with the exception of one structure 19 feet by 32 feet in plan formerly used by the assistant engineer in charge, were taken down and removed. . . . As the light keeper's dwelling was only designed for three keepers it was thought advisable, there are four keepers at the station, to keep the building above mentioned for the use of one of them." It's interesting that they only designed a triplex for this station. In this era a station with a steam powered fog signal required that keepers shovel up to a ton of coal for every 10 hours of operation, and the fog was often present for days on end. Most stations in this era with steam powered fog signals, and especially in remote areas, were assigned four keepers and in a few cases, five keepers.

The Report noted that a barn was constructed at the base of the rock, call bells were strung between the buildings and a fence was constructed around the top of the rock to "prevent the keeper's children from falling off."

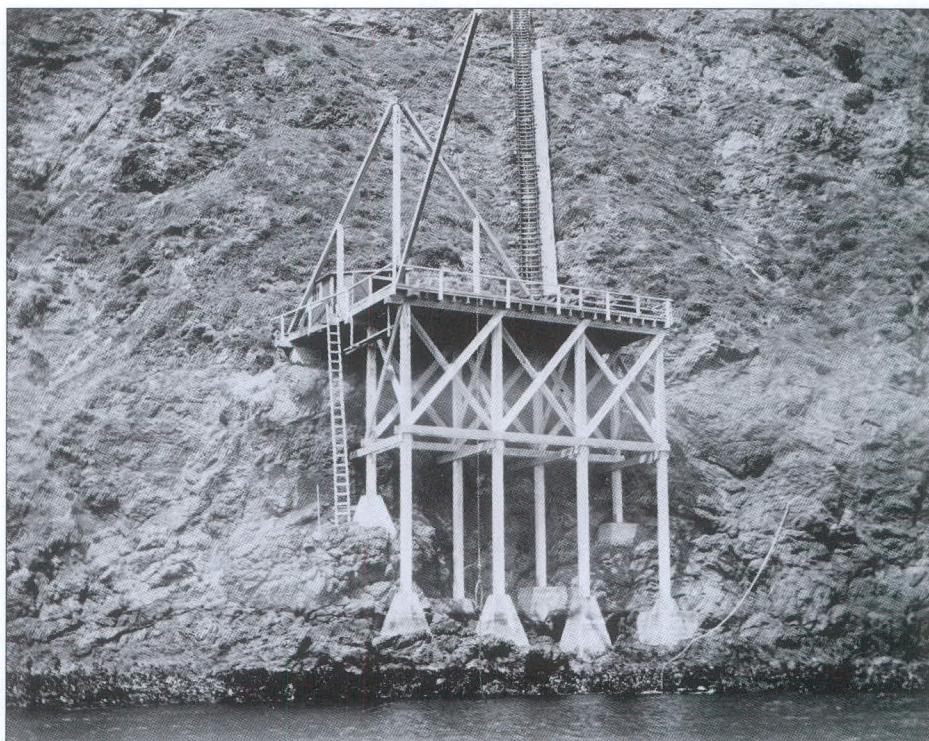
During the 1890's the Annual Reports mentioned a request for \$6,000 to construct a proper quarters for the 4th keeper, yet the sum was never approved. Although a crude wagon road was constructed to the county road the keepers were dependent, until well into the 20th century, on the Lighthouse Service tender landing supplies at their dock. They were then hauled up the steep cliff on a small steam powered tramway.

In 1900 the District decided that it



Above—The steam engine and tram car at the top of the tramway, August 19, 1915. The winch house, now converted to the head keeper's quarters, is at right. USLHS photo.

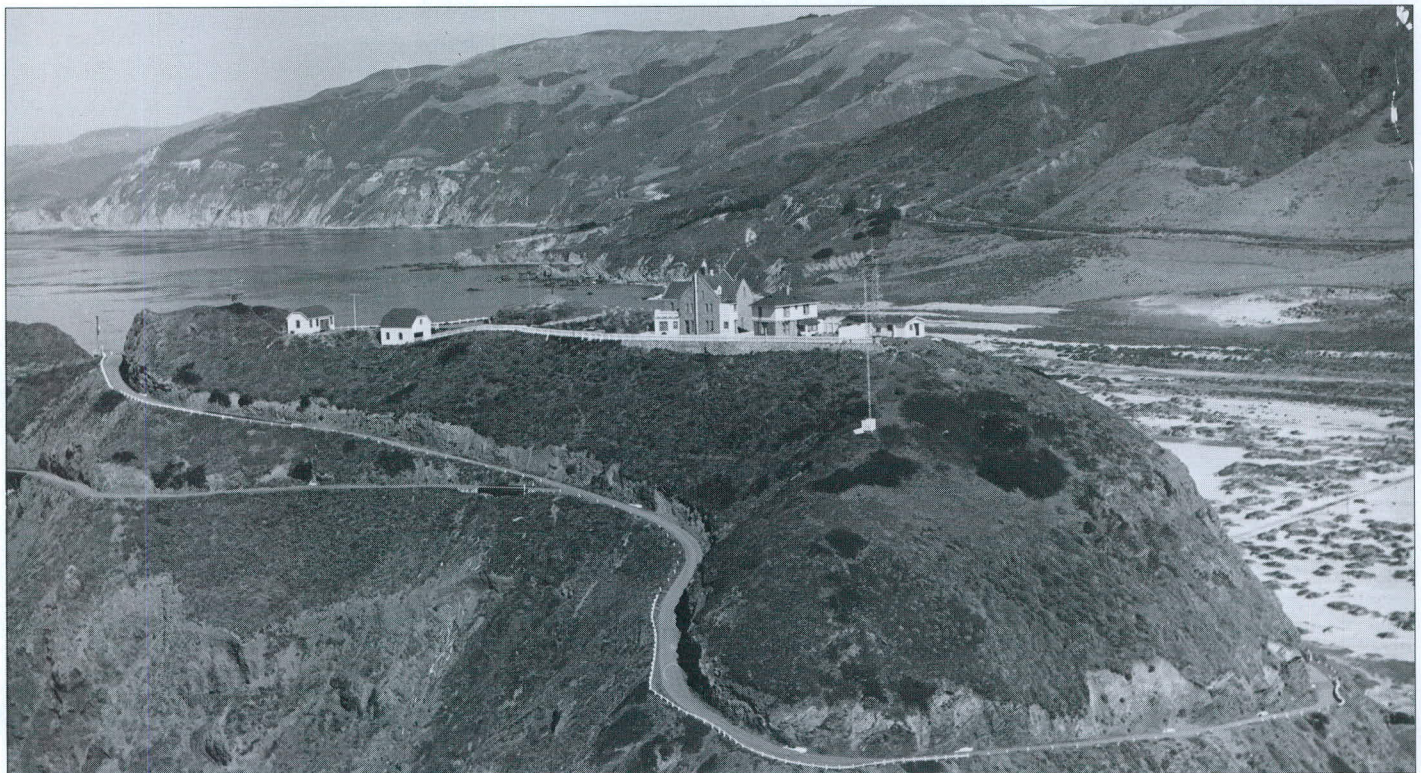
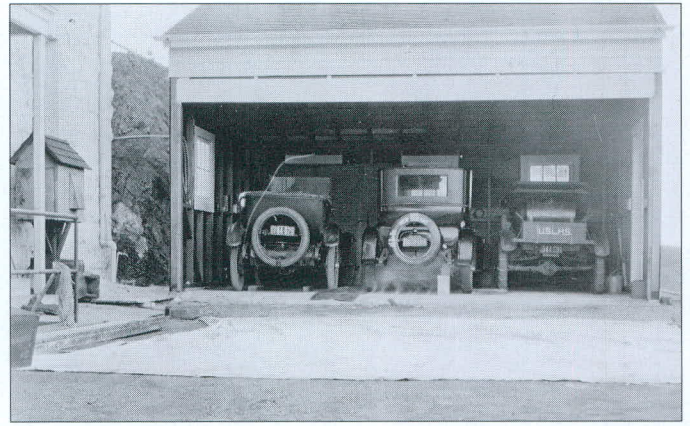
Below—The Point Sur wharf at the bottom of the tramway, March 1935. Supplies were delivered to this wharf by the tender's boat and then hauled up a very steep 280 feet. USLHS photo.



would be better to construct a road around, and up, the side of the rock. Thus a wagon could haul supplies up to the station. This improvement was completed over two seasons and the barn at the base of the rock razed and a new one constructed on top. During this period the District continued to request funds for an additional dwelling. Finally, in

1902 they let a contract to change the hoisting engine house to a dwelling for the keeper and assigned the triplex to the three assistants.

At one point a small schoolhouse was constructed near the county road and a teacher hired that lived at the station and instructed the children of the keepers.



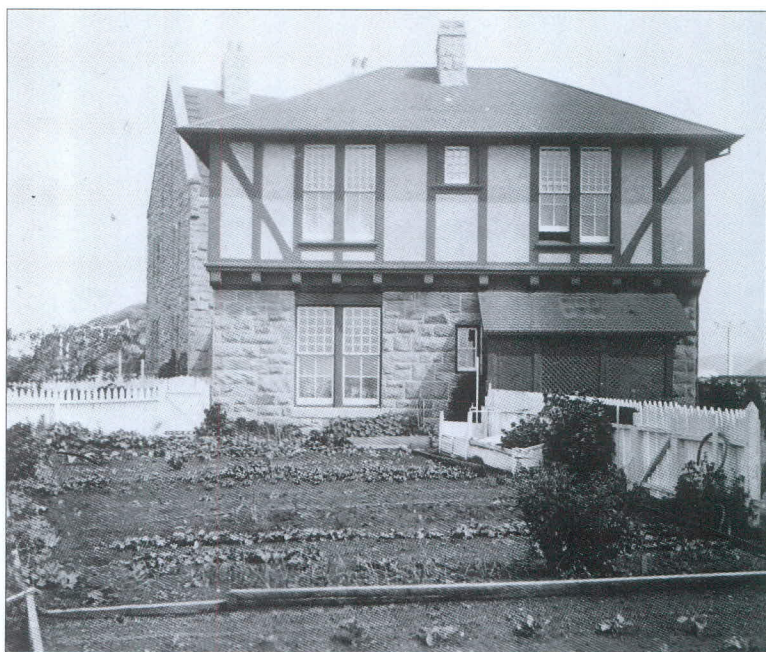
Top left—The new Pt. Sur garage in 1925 with two keeper's cars and the station vehicle at right. The tire cover of the middle vehicle states "That New Durant—new motor—four brakes—balloon tires." Four brakes are a good idea when negotiating the steep, narrow road of the station.

Top right—A keeper's car pulls over at one of the few wide spots to allow the Coastside Transport Co. bus to pass down the hill, circa 1936. The bus was probably bringing station high school students back from Carmel.

Above—Overview of the Point Sur station showing the steep, narrow road that often washes out during winter storms. From left—the carpenter-blacksmith shop, barn, triplex, keeper's house and modern Coast Guard buildings. Circa 1960. Official U.S. Coast Guard photo.

Right—The old horse barn just before removal, probably about 1907. Notice the new road cutting across behind the barn and the remains of the old east side tramway and stairs at left. USLHS photo.





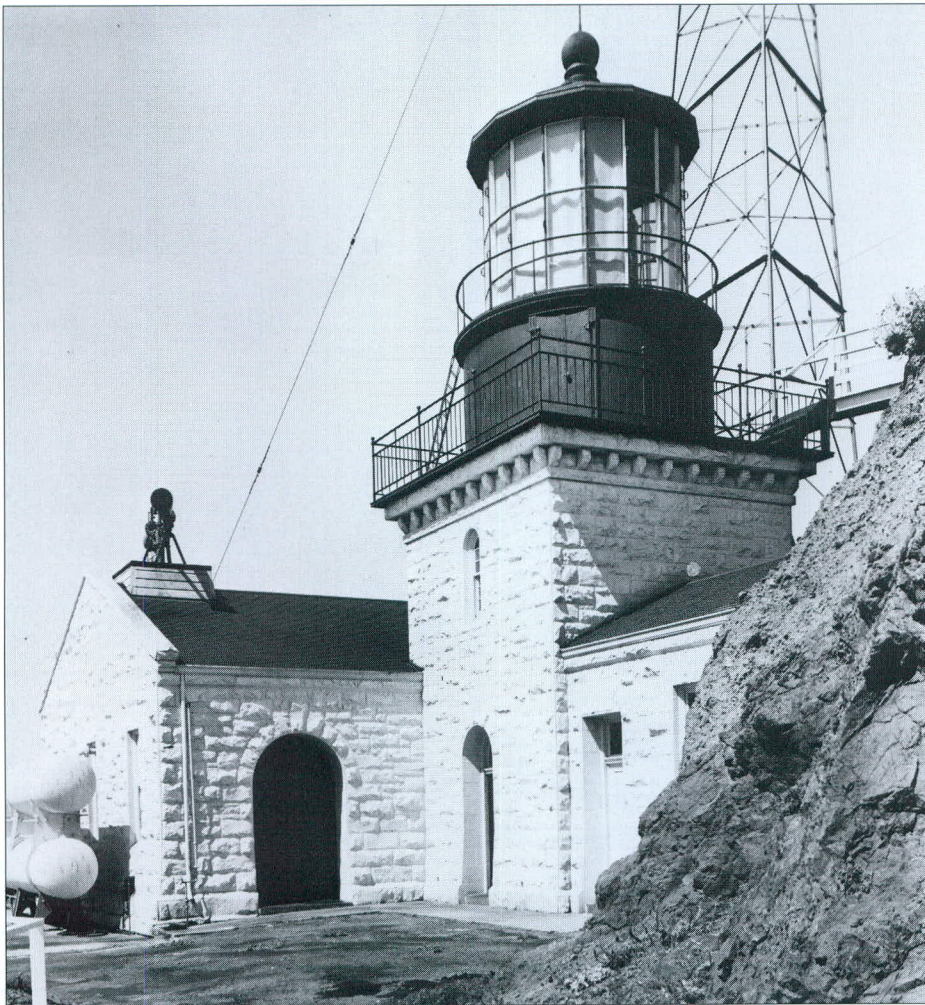
Above—The keeper's quarters in 1907. The triplex for the assistants barely shows on the left side. Note the garden. Isolated stations grew most of their vegetables. USLHS photo.



An overview of the station in 1969 with the fog signal building and tower in the foreground. The large tower behind the lighthouse is a radiobeacon antenna. The small white building to the right of the tower is the oil house. USCG photo.



The carpenter-blacksmith shop circa 1890. Above the roof on the right side is a call bell pole. A keeper on watch could ring up his relief or call the head keeper if he had a problem. USLHS photo.



The beautiful granite Point Sur lighthouse circa 1960. Fog signal building at left and watch room at right. note the diaphone fog horns on the roof. The original signal was a steam whistle. The 1st Order lens was removed and loaned in the Alan Knight Museum in Monterey, CA in 1979. USLHS photo.

On February 13, 1935 the keepers at Point Sur were to witness an extraordinary sight, an event that spelled doom for the Navy's dirigible program.

During that day a large portion of the Pacific Fleet was working its way up the coast. The dirigible *Macon* flew ahead and scouted for the fleet. At twilight the *Macon* was abreast of Point Sur, being watched by keeper Thomas Henderson who was making his way to the light tower to complete preparations for the night. Suddenly a squall struck the *Macon* and crumbled the tail. The great air ship settled slowly into the Pacific. Fortunately, for most of the 83 man crew, their SOS brought Navy ships to the rescue saving all but the radio operator and the mess boy who were trapped and went down with the ship. Keeper Hen-

derson stated to a Naval Board of Inquiry, "I was watching it (*Macon*) through glasses. When it was just abreast of the Point the fin seemed to go to pieces very suddenly. The fabric drifted back, some of it caught on the rudder. I know that there was a portion of the frame remaining but I cannot say whether any of the frame carried away. The failure seemed to start at the forward end of the fin. The front part (of the *Macon*) rose up, then crumbled up swiftly. I could see a hole at the top of the hull." The loss of this \$3.5 million dollar airship was followed by the crashes of sister ships *Shenandoah* and *Akron*, and this ended the dirigible program in this country.

In 1939 the Coast Guard took over control of Point Sur when lighthouses were transferred from Commerce to

Treasury. In 1972 the station was automated and the buildings boarded up. A modern aero-beacon provides a flashing light with a range of 25 miles, the radiobeacon has a range of 50 miles and the old air fog signal has been discontinued. The buildings sat idle and some vandalism occurred. To eliminate vandals entering the tower and destroying the beautiful 1st Order Fresnel lens the Coast Guard placed it on loan to the Alan Knight Museum in Monterey in 1978. None too soon, as within a month of the transfer vandals did break into the tower and defaced portions of it. In recent years all but the tower and fog signal buildings have been transferred to the California Department of Parks and Recreation. The park service has poured almost a million dollars into the infrastructure (electrical service, new water pipes, road repairs, etc.). Although the site is only open for tours on weekends, the park service hopes that someday it will not only be open to the public more often, but that some creative uses can be made of the cavernous buildings of this historic 19th century light station. It is one of the few complete light stations from that century. With the exception of the original barn at the base of the hill all buildings remain: the granite triplex, head keeper's house (old engine room for tramway), wooden two story barn, combination carpenter-blacksmith shop, oil house, circa 1920's three-car garage, tower-fog signal building and a one-story modern building constructed by the Coast Guard in the 1950's.

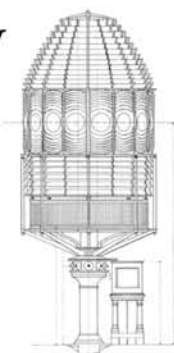
Even today the Point Sur site seems a long way from civilization. The nearby Point Sur community is rustic, to say the least, and while the nearest city, Carmel, is only 45 minutes by car, the road is narrow and tortuous. A slow camper can stretch travel time to an hour and a half and winter rains have often severed this narrow link with civilization.

Point Sur celebrates its Centennial in this, the year of the Bicentennial of the Lighthouse Service.





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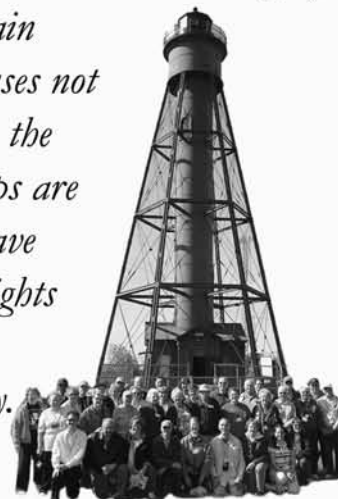
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