

Three Beams of Light

By Norma Engel

1987, 276 pages

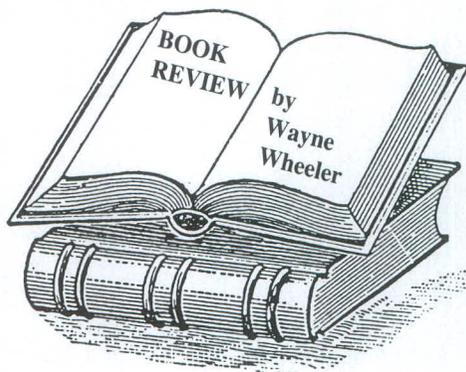
"The woman sat quietly in the stern of the little rowboat, her right hand clutching the handle of a bulging suitcase. She shivered in the dampness of the late afternoon, and drew her coat closer around her slight figure. A bell toned mournfully in the distance. My father stopped rowing, rested his muscular arms on the oars, and let the boat drift idly while he turned to stare

ahead. When he swung back he reached out to touch my mother's hand. 'There it is, Freda, dead ahead.'"

And thus begins the book *Three Beams of Light* as Norma Engels' parents row to their honeymoon cottage and place of employment, the Oakland Harbor, CA lighthouse on San Francisco Bay. The young couple share a three room lighthouse with the Head Keeper from 1900 to 1901 when they are transferred to the Point Bonita Lighthouse guarding the entrance to the Golden Gate.

Ms. Engel relates the life of her parents and her experiences growing up on light stations. In addition to the short stint at the Oakland Harbor Lighthouse, her father served at Point Bonita from 1901 to 1914 and finished his career at Ballast Point Lighthouse in San Diego Bay (1914-1931). This an absolutely delightful story of a young girl growing up at a lighthouse. The well written book (Ms. Engel had a long career as a school teacher) fairly dances as she spins her tale of the trials and joys of lighthouse life. I found it accurate and enjoyable to read. The book is sprinkled with historical photographs and copies of official letters which help to give the "Flavor of the Bean," er . . . beam.

Three Beams of Light is a soft cover book (6"×9") of 276 pages and is well illustrated with 40 photographs, a few drawings and many reproduced "official" letters. It is available from the Keeper's Library at the bargain price of \$8.95 plus \$1.50 shipping.



The Lighthouse

by Tony Parker

1985, 288 pages

An interesting approach that doesn't quite come off. Author Parker seeks to provide the reader with a taste of lighthouse life by interviewing various keeper's families. It appears that he has selected two stations (one shore station and one isolated station) and interviewed the wife and husband of each of the families assigned. He may very well have conducted hundreds of interviews and selected those in the book to provide a cross cut of the types of people who are drawn to living on a light station.

The interviews are given in the first person and the people run the gamut, especially those assigned to the offshore isolated lighthouses where the families remain behind while the men are away for two months (one month off a tour of duty). One keeper hates the assignment, one keeper loves the assignment and one keeper takes it in stride. Some of the wives love having time alone, some hate having their mate away and some take it in stride. Kind of like many walks of life and certainly indicative of humanity as a whole. The book is more about personal relationships than lighthouses. It deals with how the families cope with their mates and with the other families



Ballast Point Lighthouse—Constructed in 1890 and razed in 1961, was home to Norma Engels while her father was keeper from 1914 to 1931. Our Keeper Radford Franke was also the head keeper at this station from 1931 until he retired to 1957. Photo courtesy of Radford Franke.

with which they are thrown together in remote areas of England.

The English lighthouse service is managed by an organization known as Trinity House (established by Henry the Eighth). That organization comes across as a benevolent big brother providing life's wants from housing to special rations, a personnel counselor and meager salaries.

Near the end of the book is an interesting glimpse into life on an offshore tower. The keeper's duties, day cycle and various habits are chronicled. The reader also receives a fairly good impression of the interior of an offshore tower and the dangerous experience of getting on and off those stations.

Author Parker also interviews a few people that are or were associated with lighthouses. Visiting repairmen, a minister, the boatman who transports the keepers to the offshore towers and people who couldn't take the service give their versions of lighthouse life. I do wish he had spared me the ramblings of what an eight year old boy thought of his dad's occupation. He also includes a small chapter on keepers swearing and the difficulty they have trying to curtail their language when ashore . . . rather unnecessary I thought. I don't imagine isolated keepers swear any more than the men in a machine shop, motorpool or an Army barracks. Why he bothered to burden the reader with a chapter of profanity is beyond me.

The most interesting part of the book is the charming introduction where the reader meets a retired keeper living on a cliff where he can view his "old" lighthouse. One particular passage of the keepers interview is worth reprinting.

—It's not one gale, it's not two gales, it's not twenty gales tied together by their tails that frightens you. It's what comes after, when the wind's had two or three days to put a thousand miles of ocean into motion and turn it into what's called a heavy ground sea. That's what it is makes you afraid. It rolls the boulders along with it that are down there on the sea bed; and when it strikes them against the base of your tower the whole place quivers from its top to



Seal of Trinity House

its toe. You can hear them, you can feel them: thump, thump, thump, being thrown like that under the water against the foundation, rolling into it one after the other and making the tower shake; and you shake with it too, like all your teeth are going to be rattled out of your head. On and on it goes, on and on. And each one you feel you think it can't take one more thump like that, the next one for certain will be the one that'll be the end. He'll have to have that experience to teach him to know the meaning of fear.

Overall the book is grey. The keepers all seem to come from poor and/or broken families. Some wives appear insecure. Life seems mundane, sad and without hope . . . drudgery. I found myself wishing the book would end. Again it is an interesting approach but far too much of the same and far too colorless, rather like the English shore line—damp and grey.

And Then There Were None

This column is Roll Call to that endangered and vanishing species, Manned Lighthouse Americanus. And then there were 16 . . .

MAINE

- Burnt Island (1821)
- Fort Point (1857)
- Goat Island (1859)
- Kennebec River (one station)
- Squirrel Point (1890)
- Doubling Point Range (1890)
- Monhegan Island (1850)
- Mamana I. Fog Signal Sta. (1870)
- Owls Head (1826)
- Portland Head (1790)
- West Quoddy Head (1858)
- Wood Island (1858)

MASSACHUSETTS

- Boston (1789)

RHODE ISLAND

- Block Island, SE (1875)

NEW YORK

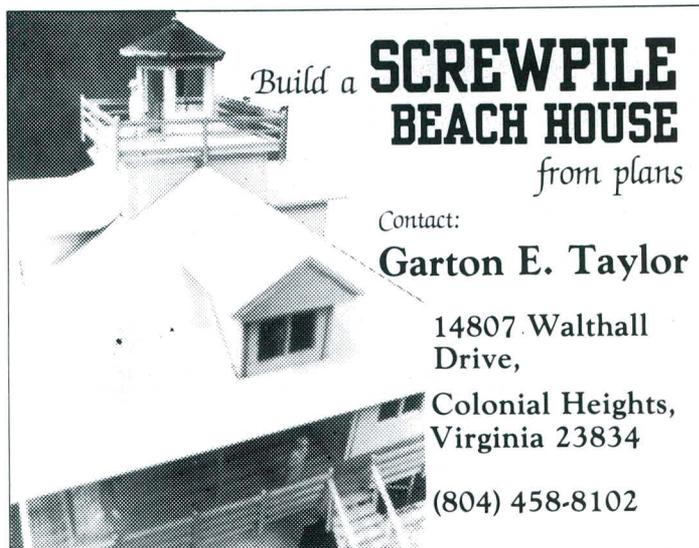
- Ambrose
- Coney Island (1890)

FLORIDA

- Egmont Key (1848)

PUERTO RICO

- Point Tuna (1892)



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