



• At the bottom of the 133-step stairway, a railing surrounds the well into which weights from the ancient clock-works once descended

By William S. Pierson

THE SEA was so calm that the sailors aboard the *Carrier Pigeon* had begun to dread the coming of night. Not a breeze, or even a whiff of air had blown past Cape Horn in over a week. Finally, after almost ten days of being becalmed, the British full-rigger had begun to stir. The rigging groaned, and the sails filled with life-saving air.

Now, 129 days out from Boston, the *Pigeon* suddenly faced a new crisis—a heavy fog rolling in off the California coast. The captain, Azariah Doane, kept the ship on course, hoping it would clear by the time they reached San Francisco Bay. Instead, the fog increased, becoming so dense that even the seamen could not recognize their shipmates more than a few feet away.

Captain Doane, thinking he was in the vicinity of the Farallons, bent the tiller hard to the right. The ship shuddered under his hand. It was too late for him to avoid the dangerous headland, known as Whale Point. He heard the ship grind against a submerged reef, and he knew that the hull had been splintered.

It was June 6, 1853, less than a year since the *Carrier Pigeon* had left its building site in Bath, Maine. Not even her beautiful figurehead, which was carved in the shape of a pigeon, managed to survive the shipwreck. Her crew escaped unharmed, though her valuable cargo was sacrificed for salvage.

Today, Pigeon Point Lighthouse, named after the ill-fated ship, has the distinction of being one of the tallest lights in the United States. Her beacon, which rises to an elevation of 115 feet, now flashes its message eighteen miles out to sea, and its modern radiobeacon encompasses both land and sea for a distance of 100 miles.

Another warning device, of equal importance, is the fog horn or diaphone. Should all other devices fail, the fog horn will alert the keen ears of seamen within eight to ten miles.

Located about fifty miles south of San

LEGACY OF THE *CARRIER PIGEON*

Francisco, Pigeon Point Lighthouse, under the jurisdiction of the Twelfth Coast Guard District, is a perennial attraction to tourists, being open to the public between the hours of two and four, on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays. A well-informed Coast Guardsman is always on duty to direct the traffic, which sometimes exceeds sixty or seventy visitors on a single day.

Contrary to popular belief, lighthouse keepers are anything but solitary men with an abundance of time on their hands. Thoroughly trained in the use of modern electronic devices, they have definite responsibilities and are kept constantly busy caring for the grounds and equipment.

A high degree of skill is required, and the men are rated on their skill, faithfulness to duty and the spotless order of the lighthouse. Even though they might be capable in the pursuit of their job, a messy house can damage their rating.

Boatswain's Mate first-class D. L. Nimmo is presently assigned to Pigeon Point. He and his wife live in a large Victorian house, which they share with three other Coast Guard families. The dwelling rests on a wind-swept point of land, less than an acre in size, a portion of an early Spanish land grant, which was purchased from John H. McKay in 1871.

Soon after this purchase, work was begun on the lighthouse. After an inner sheath of brick was built, an outer one was added to give the tower greater strength. Its walls, tapering from eight feet thick at the base to less than three at the top, have endured the ravages of time and even the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

A colorful history surrounds Pigeon Point. The cove is quiet now, but Boatswain's Mate Nimmo reminded me that it had not always been so. This had once been a thriving settlement for a group of Portuguese whalers. It had also served as a major stop-over for vessels sailing out of Morro Bay.

Then there was the era of bootlegging, when rumrunners beached their small craft near the rocky headland.

Turning our backs on the past, we walked toward the tower. After passing the antenna, which is used to transmit radio warnings, we paused beside a small concrete shed. Here, where paint and gear are now stored, kerosene for the ancient lanterns was once kept.

The two-tone diaphone has been installed in what was the old carriage barn, together with the mighty generators and air compressors to run it. Dials and tubes,

for operating the radiobeacon, are also a part of this electronic maze.

We left this scene, and turned our attention to the lighthouse. Here at the entrance we were met by Seaman Apprentice Mel Braunagel who guided me through a maze of doors and up a huge flight of steps.

A circular well, about ten feet wide, is located at the bottom of the light. As I looked down over the railing of the pit trying to discover its purpose, Mel explained that the nine-foot lens had once been turned by a giant clock spring, as the weights slowly descended into the pit.

Now, however, a one-eighth horsepower motor performs the same job. It is no longer necessary for the light keeper to race up 133 steps twice each night; nor does he have to wind the clock with the aid of a huge crank.

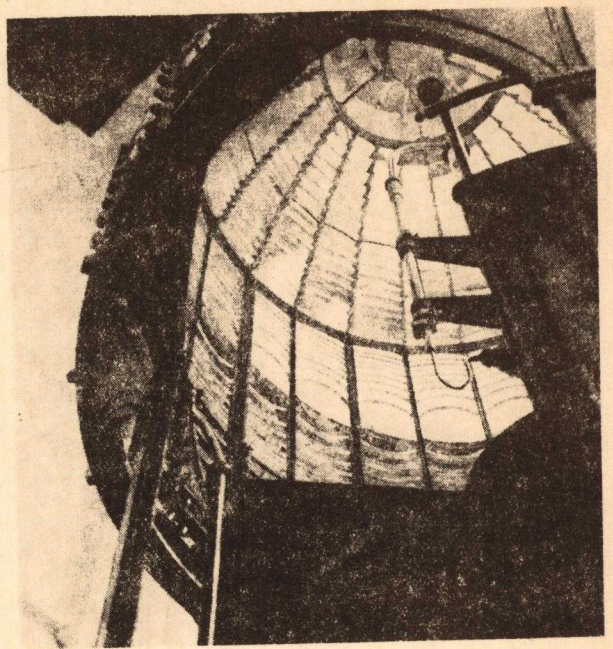
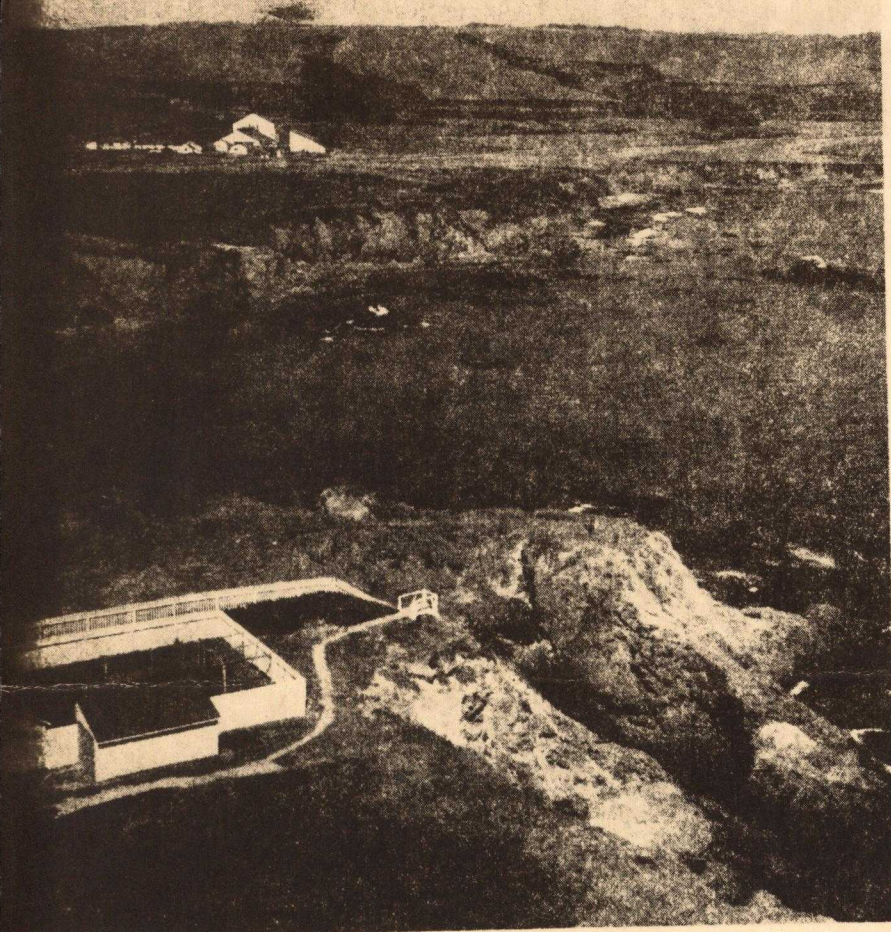
We climbed the circular staircase to the octagonal cupola without much difficulty, pausing at several of the landings to look at the view below—a magnificent seascape on one side and on the other, the rolling hills of the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Up in the light itself, electricity has replaced the wick and fuel of yesteryear, a 1,500-watt bulb doing the same job that kerosene lanterns once did. That such a small radiant could throw a beam of light for a distance of eighteen miles seems impossible, yet it is true. The secret lies in a multiple lens, consisting of thousands of little prisms, which revolves slowly around the lamp. The prisms reflect and greatly magnify the light—a principle discovered by Fresnel more than a century ago.

Though there is a difference in opinion as to where the light originated, one thing is certain—it was used in the lighthouse at Cape Hatteras before it was shipped here.

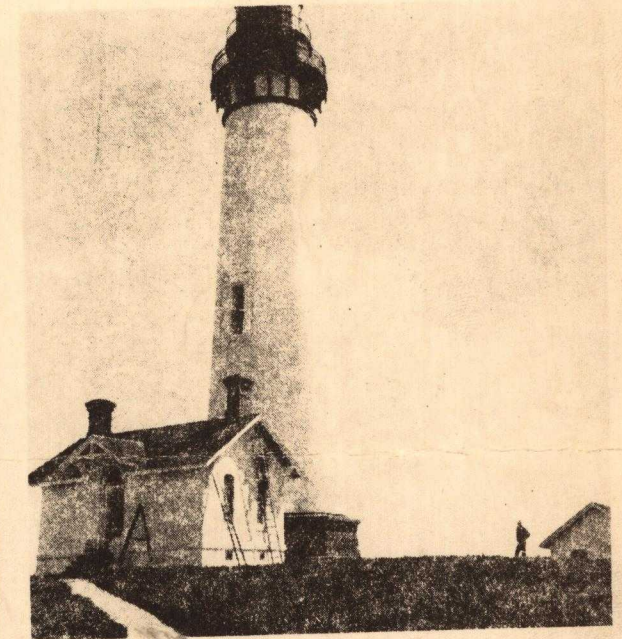
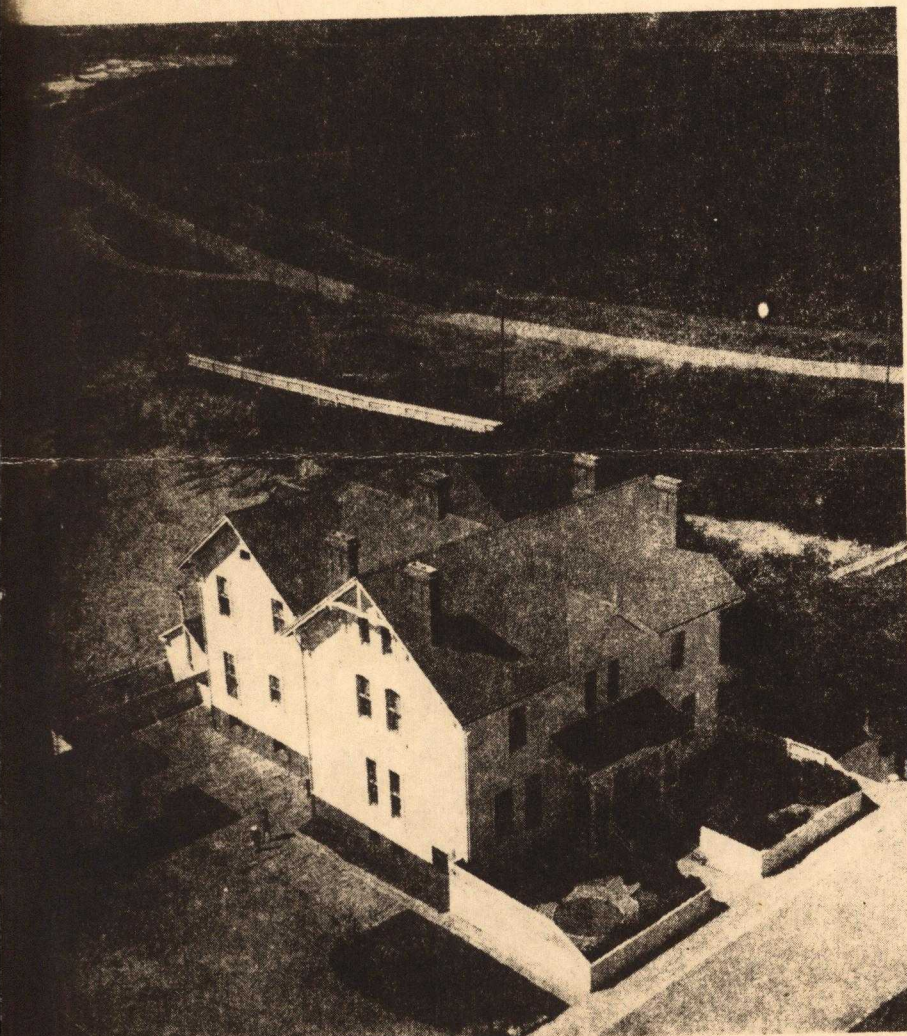
Aside from having to clean the outside lantern at least once each week, Coast Guardsmen must polish each prism of the lens three times weekly. It is an unending chore, which occupies one-half of each working day.

As I started to leave the lighthouse, its radiant was turned on. From one hour before sunset to one hour after sunrise its powerful beam punctuates both landscape and seascape. For those who are on the high seas, or steaming close to the headland, this must be a comforting sight. The legacy of the *Carrier Pigeon* is more than just a name. It is one of the 200 sentinels which keep a constant vigil on our shores.



● The many prisms of the old Fresnel-type light, once used at Cape Hatteras, magnify the 1,500-watt bulb to 450,000 candle power

● At left, the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains look down on historic Whale Cove. The kennels in the foreground were used in World War II for German shepherd dogs kept by the Coast Guard to help patrol the shoreline



● Pigeon Point Light itself is a bewildering maze of landings and stairs. Coast Guardsmen are constantly busy maintaining the spotless appearance of the buildings and grounds. The small building houses lockers for the men

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

● Boatswain's Mate D. L. Nimmo and his wife share this large house on Pigeon Point with three other Coast Guard families. Reached by State Highway 1, in the background, the light is about fifty miles south of San Francisco