

TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SURFER

▼PATRICK BURNSON

HE WAS JUST 18 when he paddled his board into the surf off Pleasure Point one quiet morning. Somehow, he met with a force out there that took his life. For Mark Abbott, the sea was everything—he spent every spare moment in the water, and was well known for his strength and surfing skill. No one witnessed the tragic accident, and 19 years later, the circumstances of his death remain shrouded in mystery.

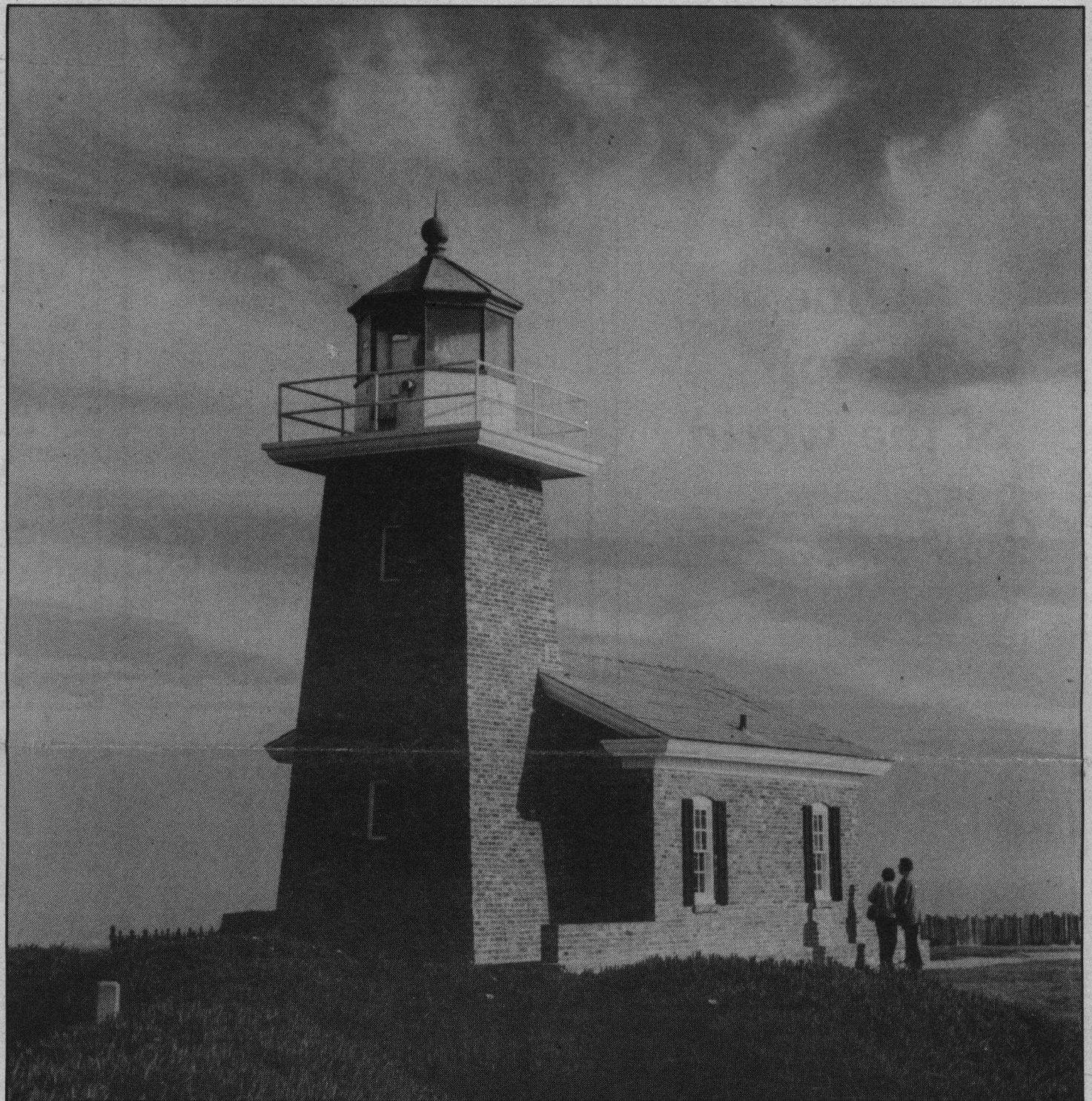
The Mark Abbott Memorial Lighthouse sits ten miles north of that fatal site, atop the northernmost tip of Monterey Bay. The windblown promontory looks out over a spot known as Steamer Lane, where surfers scurry about below, chasing breakers that roll along the cliff. Built by Esther and Chuck Abbott (Mark's parents) in 1968, the simple brick lighthouse is already a cherished town monument. It's difficult to describe such a gesture without sounding sentimental, but there it stands: "...dedicated to all youth whose ideals are beacons to the future."

The structure is also functional, of course, but its operation is less important now than when this stretch of coastline was known as "the graveyard of ships." Santa Cruz ceased being a vital commercial port many years ago, and most of the vessels moving out beyond her shoreline now are there for a day of easy pleasure.

Every weekend from Easter until Labor Day, the lighthouse is open to the public. Inside are nautical charts, maps, and photographs that trace the point's history. By browsing around a few minutes one can learn about the first lighthouse ever built here. In 1868, Adna A. Hecox, an itinerant Yankee preacher, assumed caretaking responsibility. When Adna retired, his daughter, Laura, was appointed in his place. This was back when the lumber industry was booming and Santa Cruz was an export center for both lime and gunpowder. The Pacific Steamship Company, whose clippers came down from San Francisco to haul these goods, lost 19 ships along our reach of coast before the turn of the century. Arthur Anderson took over in 1916 and stayed on until 1941, when the house was demolished and a light tower was erected in its place.

Local writer-historian Frank Perry, who is largely responsible for the latest remodeling and display here, recently authored the definitive book on the subject: *Lighthouse Point—Reflections on Monterey Bay History*. Dispensing with firsthand accounts and oral histories, which he calls "unreliable," Perry culled most of his information from several years of exhaustive research in library stacks, newspaper morgues, and the City Museum basement, where many of the lighthouse artifacts are kept.

"Lighthouses have long inspired artists, poets, historians, photographers, and authors," writes Perry. "My interest in lighthouses, however, sprouted from quite different images—rather faded images in fact, glued to the warped pages of an aged photograph album. My curiosity grew as I turned each leaf. One of the photos showed several people, their identities unrecorded, smiling from the front steps of a little wooden lighthouse. Others showed a woman, wearing a long dress and bonnet, posed beneath a natural rock arch at the beach. Another photo, warmed to a rich sepia by the many years, showed a horse-drawn buggy skirting the edge of a sea cliff, both the buggy and the waves below blurred by the long camera exposure. These photographs, preserved in a museum collection, launched me into four years of probing the history of one of California's least known lighthouses..."



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While laying the groundwork for this book, Perry also found the time to help renovate the interior of the most recent version of the Santa Cruz lighthouse: the Mark Abbott Memorial.

"Lighthouses are out of the realm of most of our experiences," he said in a recent interview. "All the ones that still exist today are fully automated. It took me a year of careful study before I could even begin to put anything down on paper. How did they convert a flame into a flashing light? That was one of the many fundamental questions I had to figure out."

ALTHOUGH OTHER BOOKS have been written about the subject, none have relied so completely on primary sources for their

information. And by using a floor plan gleaned from government blueprints, Perry was able to build a scale model of the original lighthouse.

"It was a pleasure for me to convert something from paper and make it three dimensional for people to appreciate...very satisfying," he said.

According to Perry, the violent storms which battered our coast last winter badly eroded and undermined the surrounding cliffs but spared the structure itself of any real damage: "Another winter like that and we would find the lighthouse on an island or a very narrow peninsula," he said.

"But the building's foundation is anchored to bedrock, so there's at least a 50-year margin of safety until any part of it will be seriously threatened."

Because of dwindling funds and recent budget cuts, this may be the last weekend the City Parks and Recreation Department will be able to keep the lighthouse open for public tours. A donation box set up by the Museum Association sits near the front of the building, not far from yet another bronze plaque:

"In Memorium—Mark Abbott, age 18, challenged the sea and lost, February 28, 1965. His ashes are here interred beneath his favorite statue 'The Castaway.' This lighthouse is further dedicated to all youth whose lives, through fate or misadventure, are terminated before realizing their true potential. May their spirits find new dimensions in the unknown horizons that await us all." ■