

# A closer look at Pigeon Point

**T**OWERING whitely over green fields of Brussels sprouts and the blue Pacific, Pigeon Point Lighthouse looks pristine and perfect from nearby Highway One. Built in 1871, the lighthouse tower is a classic beauty, beautifully situated on the dramatic cliffs of Columbia Cove.

But a closer look at Pigeon Point reveals peeling paint, sagging fenceposts, garbage and weeds in the iceplant and a sign on the gate that warns "NO PUBLIC RESTROOMS — NO WATER — PUBLIC RESTROOMS 2 MILES NORTH OR SOUTH" — all indications of the neglect suffered since the Coast Guard installed an automated light and eliminated the need for a live-in keeper.

At the bottom of one of the cliffs sits a heap of brick and rubble, the remains of the original Victorian-style keeper's house that was bulldozed over the edge and replaced by four plain rectangular bungalows.

The lighthouse grounds are cared for by the Hostel Association, which offers lodging in what were originally the keepers' homes. The attention of the hostel association has prevented further decay of the property, but obviously it is a bare-bones operation.

Despite the shabby upkeep, it is a gorgeous spot. A recent Sunday afternoon found about 25 people clambering along the cliffs, snapping photos and lining up in the blustery winds to take the tour.

Lighthouse tours are led by volunteers from the Ano Nuevo Interpretive Association, and our tour was led by a married couple who introduced themselves as Bob and Joan.

As the group crowded into the small downstairs room of the tower, Bob collected the \$1.50 donation and passed around old photographs of the area. That



Lens with 1,008 prisms dominates.

done, he led the way to the lantern platform, 144 ornate wrought-iron steps up. The trip left some of the less-fit tourists purple and gasping for breath.

Up on the tiny platform, visitors can admire the 3,000-pound glass lens, whose 1,800 prisms were hand-polished in France before being shipped to California. The lens originally focused the light from a lard-burning lantern into a beam strong enough to guide ships. As the technology improved, the light was converted to kerosene, then electricity.

Mounted on ball bearings, the enormous lens could be turned with the push of a finger, but was actually run by a clockwork mechanism that timed the duration of the beam exactly. Each lighthouse had its own "fingerprint," a specific duration for its beam

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that would tell the ships which lighthouse they were sighting.

The lanterns had to be tended continually; the wicks had to be trimmed and the lens polished daily. The job of keeper was a highly re-

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spected one, and was bestowed by the President of the United States. The pay was, at one time, a princely \$50 to \$65 per month.

Now, outside the glass enclosed platform, a super high-intensity lamp rotates endlessly. When a bulb burns out, a backup bulb comes on, and the machine automatically sends a message to the Coast Guard to come and replace a bulb. This is a far cry from the days when the light had to be tended by four keepers working eight-hour shifts.

The new technology may be more efficient, but like most very efficient things, it seems ugly and graceless next to the thing it has replaced. As the aero-beacon rotates endlessly outside the window, the ocean waves are reflected a million times in the prisms of the lens inside.

— MARIA GAURA