Historical Ramblings

Lighting the Way for 150 Years

At Point Concepcion, the “Western Gateway,” where the Chumash believe there exists a portal between this world and the hereafter, stands Point Concepcion lighthouse. The light has served as a sentinel to ships navigating California’s corner into the Santa Barbara Channel for nearly 150 years.

The original Point Conception Lighthouse was a one-story, cape cod dwelling with a tower rising through the center. It was constructed in 1856 high on a promontory, 215 feet above the ocean. Originally designed to house the old-fashioned Argand lamp and reflector system, the tower portion of the dwelling had to be torn down and reconstructed to accommodate the Lighthouse Board's decision to use a first-order Fresnel lens imported from France at a cost of $65,000. The original brick tower was also found to be of poor workmanship and, to make matters worse, the constant wind had effectively sandblasted the mortar from between the bricks. With a new tower, Point Concepcion was first activated on February 1, 1856, making it the sixth lighthouse in California and on the west coast, visible to ships 42 miles at sea.

The government appointed George Parkinson as Concepcion’s first keeper a year before the facilities were even built. He had no light to supervise and no duties to perform, and went without pay for most of the year. Point Concepcion has always been an isolated place, evoking strong emotions in its caretakers. Parkinson called it a "dreadful promontory of desolation". Electricity and the railroad were eventually extended to the area, and a depot and telegraph office established about a mile from the lighthouse, but the station was still considered remote.

In 1875, the Lighthouse Board reported that "the old dwelling at the station is in bad condition, and the best plan is to pull it down, leaving the tower by itself". Their request was not approved. In 1880, the Lighthouse Service reported to Congress that the original tower had suffered earthquake damage and required wooden supports to hold it up, and that it should be scrapped in favor of a new light to be constructed lower on the bluff, near the fog signal building, where fog would be less likely to obscure the light. This request was approved, and a new lighthouse was constructed at the lower level in 1881.

In June of 1882, a fourth-order Fresnel lens was transported to the new tower, while the first-order lens was disassembled in the old tower. The fourth-order lens was installed on a temporary platform atop the old lighthouse, until the first-order lens was installed in the new tower. The relocated lens went into service in its new home for the first time on June 20, 1882. With its tower removed, the original lighthouse continued to serve as a dwelling for several more years. In 1906, a duplex was built at the top of the 280-step staircase, which led to the lower level. In 1912, another dwelling was constructed to replace the original lighthouse structure.

Originally, a 150-pound weight, which still remains suspended in the lighthouse, was cranked up every four hours to provide the energy to rotate the lens around an oil-fueled lamp. A motor replaced that system of gears and pulleys when electricity reached the station. At that time ,the original oil lamp was replaced with an incandescent lamp. With sixteen bull's-eyes the lens made one revolution every eight minutes, producing a two-second flash every thirty seconds.

Although the light station was automated in 1973, the first-order Fresnel lens still revolved in the tower in 1999. Due to the expensive repairs necessary to keep the Fresnel lens revolving on its finely balanced brass gears, the original light was extinguished. A modern beacon is now used at the lighthouse.

Today, Point Concepcion is surrounded by a huge private ranch and is miles from any public road. Due to the remoteness and inaccessibility of the lighthouse, only seagulls, sea lions and Coast Guard personnel conducting quarterly inspections get to enjoy the beauty and solitude of California’s corner at Point Concepcion.