

Historical Ramblings

The Light on the Rocky Finger

America has always had a fascination with lighthouses. Perhaps it is because they signify strength, persevering through adverse elements to guide ships along our treacherous coasts. In a past column, we told the story of the Point Concepcion lighthouse. A second local lighthouse also guided sailors traversing the California coast.

On October 1, 1854, the side-wheel steamer Yankee Blade ran aground near Point Arguello, taking several passengers and a fortune of gold down with her. Sixteen months later, the Point Concepcion Lighthouse began serving this stretch of coast and, in 1878, the Lighthouse Board recommended that a second light be placed 13.5 miles northeast of Point Concepcion at Point Arguello. Acreage for the new station was donated for this purpose the following year, but it wasn't until February 22, 1901 that Keeper W.A. Beeman first lit the lamp in the Point Arguello Lighthouse.

The lighthouse was a modest one-story rectangular fog building with a pitched roof and a tower extending from the center of its western end. Atop the short tower was a circular lantern room, housing a fourth-order Fresnel lens transferred from the Point Hueneme lighthouse. The lighthouse stood near the outer end of a rocky finger of land, which extended into the rough surf. Further up the finger a single-family dwelling and a two-story duplex were constructed to house the keepers. Two first class sirens were activated four months after the initial lighting to serve mariners when fog shrouded the coast. In 1911, a new tower was built adjacent to the fog building. Several other buildings, including a barn, were also added to the station.

The establishment of the Point Arguello Lighthouse did not bring an end to shipwrecks in the area. Early in the morning of July 11, 1911, keeper W.A. Henderson received notification on his wireless that the steamer Santa Rosa had ran aground north of the station. Henderson hurried to the site of the accident, and found that the vessel was lying broadside to the beach. Shortly thereafter, two steamers arrived to offer their assistance. A cable was fastened to the Santa Rosa, and soon the stern of the ship was pointing west. However, the strain on the cable proved too great, and it ruptured, allowing the vessel to swing broadside again. By this time, the constant beating of the surf had taken its toll on the Santa Rosa, and she broke in two.

With the addition of a Radio Direction Finding (RDF) Station in the 1920s, a small community was starting to form at Point Arguello. The town was given the name of Arlight, a contraction of Arguello and lighthouse and was even granted its own post office. Keeper Arvel Settles and his wife Helga served as the first postal agents. Their dining room table was used as the official mail sorter. Incoming mail was thrown from the passing trains in sacks, while the outgoing mail was snatched from a pole erected next to the tracks.

In 1934, a pair of thirty-six inch revolving aero beacons mounted on top of a steel tower replaced the lighthouse. When the Coast Guard assumed responsibility for all U.S. Lighthouses in 1939, the keeper's dwellings were converted to barracks and additional ranch-style houses were built nearby. After a Loran Station was added to Point Arguello in 1948, up to sixteen Coast Guardsmen were located on site. In 1967, the original dwellings associated with the lighthouse were razed and a new metal tower was installed.

Today, Point Arguello is part of Vandenberg Air Force Base. The station is now automated and all that remains at the site is a modern tower with a rotating beacon. There is nothing left of the historic 1901 lighthouse, but Point Arguello, as it has done for eons, still extends its rocky finger into the Pacific attempting to lure ships into the rocky coast.