

A Keeper's Life

by Radford Franke

My lighthouse Service employment started in 1927 at the age of 19. I was encouraged by my brother-in-law who was the cook on the Lightship San Francisco (LV 70), an old coal burner. He started his career as a fireman serving six weeks on board with two weeks shore leave. Although he knew nothing about cooking when he applied he learned in a hurry with the help of his wife (my sister) and the arm load of cook books he took aboard. He became an excellent cook.

The lightship was tied up at Yerba Buena Island, in San Francisco Bay, when I signed on. She was in port for her annual overhaul. After a couple of weeks aboard, at the dock, I thought that I was doing very well. Then we left the dock and headed for station. It wasn't too long after we sailed through the Golden Gate that I thought I was going to die, I had never been so sick. I couldn't get out of my bunk for three days and was fortunate to have my brother-in-law cover for me and stand my watches. How I wanted to quit during that period. I later learned that the ship had been con-



LV 70, Radford Franke's first assignment in the Lighthouse Service, spent her entire service career on the San Francisco station (1898 to 1930). She worked as a cannery tender until ship wrecked in Alaska in 1941. USLHS photo.

demned and that they had poured concrete in the bilges to hold the boiler in place. Several of the bolts had rusted through and the boiler had a tendency to shift in moderate seas. The extra weight of the concrete acted like a pendulum causing the ship to roll more than usual.

The next year I married my wife Marie in June (1928) and left the lightship and Lighthouse Service. I worked as a fireman at the Southern Pacific roundhouse but the seven day a week job got to me and I found work as a time keeper with an Electric Manufacturing Company.

The following year, in April of 1929, I again received an appointment in the Lighthouse Service and was assigned to the Año Nuevo Island station. I packed my two suitcases and, not owning a car yet, hopped a motorstage (bus) for the island, located some 20 miles south of San Francisco. I arrived at the ranch opposite the island and obtained permission from the rancher to pass through his property. This was the only access to the beach. It was about one mile across the ranch property and another half mile over sand dunes before reaching the beach. This was all new to me and with the wind

blowing sand in my eyes and my suitcase between my legs I was ready to go back. I had left my wife in San Francisco, as she had a job, and I was uncertain what I was getting myself into. I finally reached the beach and signaled to the island to come over and get me. Luckily it was calm enough for them to make the crossing. The island is about one half mile from shore and the transportation to and from the island was by an 18 foot dory. It can be a dangerous trip if the wind is blowing as the seas come around both sides of the small island and meet right where the crossing is made.

We had to buy all our supplies in San Francisco. There was one special store that supplied us and they would see that they got to the pier and was loaded on the lighthouse tender. We could not order any fresh food as we had no way of keeping it without electricity, no refrigeration and, of course, no access to ice for an ice box. We could, however, phone into the grocery store in Pescadero (a small town 10 miles north of the station) and order some fresh food; maybe some hamburger, frankfurters—just enough to last two or three days, so it wouldn't spoil. The grocer would send us the goods on the stage and the driver would leave the order at the range in a small shack constructed for our mail. The driver would leave the food there. The only trouble was the stage didn't go by until afternoon and many times a storm would come up and we were

unable to go after the food. Maybe a couple of days, and of course by then it would be spoiled. But we really didn't want for food as the keeper had chickens which kept us supplied with eggs, and occasionally a chicken dinner, besides all the delicious abalone and fish anytime we wanted it. We raised a few vegetables even though there was no real soil on the island. By cutting the bottoms out of cans after we used the contents, we placed a can around each plant, and watered them by pouring the water in the cans. That way it would soak into the sand instead of running off.

We had a real water problem on the island. The light tower was on a slight hill and the hill sloped down to the fog signal building. The hill was cemented as a rain catchment surface, sloping to the cistern at the base of the hill. Our water supply was furnished by rainfall, caught on the cemented surface and funneled into the cistern. It was then pumped back to a 38,000 gallon redwood tank house on the top of the hill. Our water was gravity fed from here to the quarters. Unfortunately a new tank had recently been installed and was not yet properly cured, so the water supplied to the houses was not fit for human consumption. It could be used for laundry and bathing purposes. After we bathed, the water would be dipped out of the tub into a bucket and carried down to water the

vegetables. The water used for cooking and drinking was supplied from another tank beside the quarters. It was kept full from the rain off the roofs of the quarters and was carried into the kitchen by bucket.

There were three keepers on Ano Nuevo Island. In 1929, I was the second assistant, Oliver Berg was the first assistant; he was married and lived in the lower quarters of a two story building. I had the upstairs quarters. The quarters were excellent—two bedrooms, bath, kitchen and living room. Because this was isolated duty we received ninety six days of leave a year, there were only two men on the station at any one time. We stood watches around the clock—six hours on six hours off, seven days a week. In order to change watches once a week we would stand a nine hour watch starting at six a.m. on Sunday. During the day, when not on watch, we turned to for station maintenance.

After I was on the island about two weeks I wrote my wife and told her to give up her work and come down. Life wasn't too exciting for a young fellow isolated as I was, there really wasn't much congeniality on a light station. During the day we worked together which wasn't too bad. But in the evenings you were either in bed resting for your next watch or you were in the fog signal watch room. The light had to be watched closely as it burned kerosene vapor (I.O.V. lamp) and was prone to cooling and flaring up. We had an alcohol torch that we used to heat a small kerosene tank in the lantern room. The lamp was similar to a Coleman lantern and had the same type of cloth mantel. Occasionally a moth would get in the lens and fly into the mantel breaking it and it would have to be replaced immediately.

There really were very few dull moments, specially since the fog signal had to be started right away when the fog rolled in. The fog signal consisted of two distillate engines each running a large compressor which in turn kept the air receivers filled with air for the fog sirens. The engines would be alternated in the event of a long fog run—the



The Año Nuevo station boat on the mainland with turn of the century keeper Otto Becker. A boat similar to this capsized in 1883 drowning the two keepers and their two passengers. See sidebar story on page 19. USLHS photo.



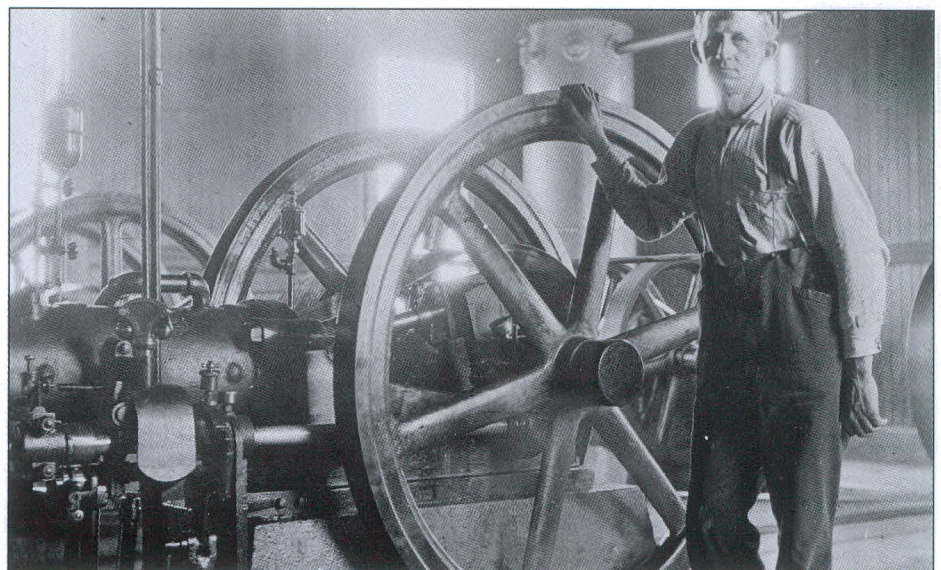
longest period of fog that I experienced was ten days.

The fog signal and the lantern room (which was on top of the tank house) were reached over an elevated boardwalk extending from the quarters with hand rails on either side. At times the wind would be so violent that one had to hang on or be blown away.

Finally after about ten days of corresponding with my wife, Marie, she arrived and we started our long and happy life together in the Lighthouse Service.

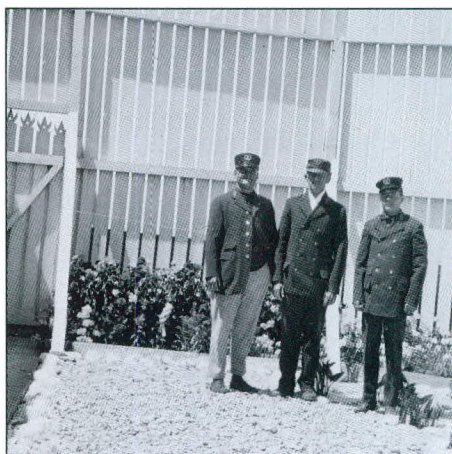
During my stay on Año Nuevo the rocks on the north beach were inhabited by Stellar sea lions, hundreds of them. The females stayed year around, while the males migrated from Alaska for a stay of a few months each year for mating purposes. After the young were born the adults would mate and the males would leave. The young pups had to be encouraged into the water and taught to swim. Many young ones were washed from the rocks and wound up on our beaches where they died. The mothers

Above—The Año Nuevo Island station began as a fog signal station, a light wasn't installed until 1900. The first lantern room was constructed on the tank house (octogan structure in the top left of the photo). The skeleton tower was erected circa 1910. Just below the tower is the fuel oil house. The structure in the center is the fog signal building. The concrete rain catchment apron, situated between the tower and fog signal, caught station water and a lot of guano. The keeper's house and the assistants' two story house are at right. USLHS photo.



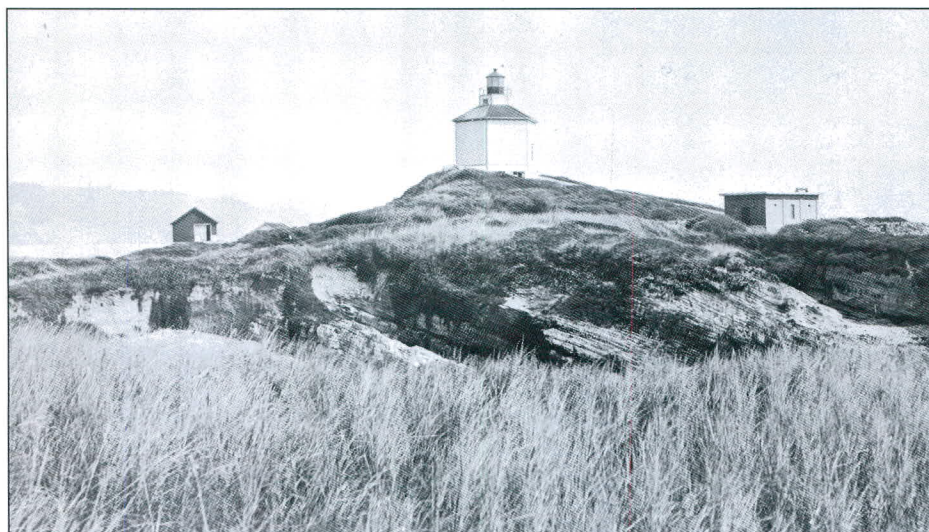
Otto Becker in the fog signal building (circa 1900). He is standing beside one of the two air compressors. The air tank for the diaphone signal is behind his right hand. USLHS photo.

really never tried to find these pups. It was an unhealthy time of the year because of the decomposing seal bodies on the beach. Another interesting experience was to watch the killer whales come around after the young were born. The small seals would be crowded along the edges of the rocks and the killer whales would swim close by and sweep them from the rocks with their huge dorsal fins, and of course, eat them. We also had to watch for killer whales when we crossed in our dory. We were never threatened but we never knew for sure.



Above—Three keepers pose in front of the wind screen on Año Nuevo Island. Note the fancy woodwork on the top of the gate.

Below—A rare picture of the first lantern room, on the tank house. The oil house is at right. USLHS photos.



My stay on Año Nuevo lasted about 18 months. The district asked me if I would like a transfer to the Ballast Point station in San Diego Bay. Not knowing anything about Ballast Point, I asked the office if I could call them back. I then asked the keeper (Jack Chambers) what he thought and he being a real dyed in the wool old salt said, (expletives deleted) "Get back on the phone and tell them yes!!"

Ballast Point was a light attendant station. That is, there was a lot of boat work connected with the job. It was located at the entrance to San Diego Bay and in addition to the lighthouse we were responsible for all the buoys, beacons and fog signals in the harbor and its entrance. The keeper at that time, Herman Engel (father of the author of *Three Beams of Light*) was getting along in years, and the man I was relieving was leaving the service. They needed a young man for the job and as I was the youngest keeper in the service at the time I was elected for the position.

Marie and I packed our little Model A Ford Club Coupe with what we would need until the tender arrived with our furniture, tied the mattress on top and away we went to San Diego. When we got to San Luis Obispo it started to rain so we unloaded what we had on top and sent it the rest of the way by railway express. It took a few days to get to San Diego. When we were shown our quarters, what a sight to see electric cords hanging from the ceilings of the rooms—ELECTRICITY—hog heaven!

As at Año Nuevo, we stood six and six watches, as there were only two men assigned, but the watches were much easier than Año Nuevo. The light in the tower was, of course, electric. The fog signal was run by an electric motor, so even though we had to stand watches we didn't have to be as alert as Año Nuevo where starting the engines took longer than merely flipping a switch. The buoys however, required a lot of attention. The keeper's wife stood the first watch from 6 to 10 every night and the keeper and assistant keeper alternated from 10 to 2 and 2 to 8 a.m. The buoy work and station maintenance went on during the morning until noon. This was a very interesting station because of all the harbor activity. Lots of Navy and merchant ships provided a constant parade in front of our living room window.

During Franklin Roosevelt's time as President he merged different departments to cut government costs. With World War Two looming on the horizon, the draft was started. Because I was a civilian employee I had to report to the draft board and I wound up 1A. Fortunately Roosevelt merged the Lighthouse Service with the Coast Guard and I was sworn in as a Coxswain in the Coast Guard in 1939. The Coast Guard taking over the Lighthouse Service was quite an improvement as many restrictions were lifted. As an example we didn't have to Log ourselves on and off the station when we were off watch. The atmosphere changed for the better.

Although we were still a two man station at the start of WWII, the small station garage was converted into a small barracks for an additional three men to assist with our work and to act as a coastal watch. They were on subsistence allowance like we were and had their own little gallery. The only difference was their quarters was more modern. They had butane gas for cooking and heating and we were still using coal.

On the evening of December 7, 1941 the city was blacked out, there was not a light showing anywhere. I extinguished the light in the tower and was taken by a Coast Guard 83 footer to the

entrance of the harbor. I first extinguished the light of the whistle buoy about a half mile off the entrance. I then worked my way back into the harbor extinguishing all the other lighted buoys. We even secured the whistle signal by tying a burlap over the valve to muffle the sound. At each buoy I left the Coast Guard cutter by small boat and rowed to the aid to secure the gas flow to the light. This was a frightening operation as it was dark and I imagined enemy submarines everywhere. The cutter would drift out of sight and I was never sure I would be picked up again. Operation completed, I was returned to Ballast Point—San Diego Harbor entered World War Two.

The light stations were blacked out for about six months. Radio telephones were installed that put us in communication with the Eleventh Coast Guard District in Long Beach. When the light stations were illuminated again watches were stood with a radio in case of emergency. We were always ready to comply, but the emergency never arose.

When I first arrived at Ballast Point there was no soil anywhere, nothing but sand and cobblestones. The point was named Ballast Point because in the 19th century sailing ships, having delivered merchandise from the east, would depart with only cow hides and tallow. This cargo was not heavy enough and rocks from this point were added as ballast. The cobblestone streets of Boston are said to be paved with stones from Ballast Point.

I enjoyed every bit of my service time and realize how fortunate I was to have been able to serve on the stations I was assigned to. I could mention so many experiences I had and the improvements made only because of the affection I had for, and the respect I received from, the Coast Guard.

I retired as a Chief Boatswain Mate in 1957 after thirty years of combined Light and Coast Guard Service. I now reside with my wife of 60 years in San Diego. Our son, influenced by growing up at Ballast Point, went on to a Coast Guard career, retiring as a Captain.



Ballast Point from a ship's view entering San Diego Bay. The structure on the left is the boat house. The building on the right is the bell fog signal house which had an air horn installed in later years. USLHS photo.



The keeper's house at Ballast Point with tower attached. This building, constructed in 1890, is a duplicate of lighthouses constructed at San Luis Obispo, CA and Table Bluff, CA. The lantern room contained a fixed 5th Order lens. The entire station was razed in 1961. Radford Franke photograph.

OFFICE OF LIGHTHOUSE INSPECTOR
Twelfth District
San Francisco, California

April 17th, 1883

Chairman Light House Board
Washington, D.C.

Sir:

I have the honor to report that upon the 8th instant, the keeper Mr. H. W. Colburn and assistant Mr. B. A. Ashley were drowned while crossing from the island upon which Ano Nuevo Fog Signal is situated, to the main land, together with two farmers who had been visiting the station.

The Str. *Los Angeles* passing the signal at about 4 p.m. heard the whistle in operation, although the weather was perfectly clear, and upon closer inspection saw that the ensign had been hoisted union down for assistance, she sent a boat in and was told of the sad disaster by Mrs. Colburn and Mrs. Ashley and that they lit the fires and started the signal to attract the attention of any passing vessel, the coast was searched up and down and finding no trace of the boat or bodies, the steamer came on to the city and reported the matter to me.

I immediately telegraphed Mr. J.C. Ryan, 1st Asst. at Pigeon Point to go to the island if possible and assume charge, at the same time authorizing him to employ a laborer to act as assistant until permanent arrangements could be made. Mr. Ryan procured a boat and with a hired team conveyed it to a point opposite the island and awaited his opportunity for crossing, which he succeeded in doing at 4 p.m. on the 10th instant, so that the signal was stopped less than 48 hours.

As it was very rough outside and the bar breaking, it looked as if new keepers would not be able to reach the station for several days, I therefore published a notice to mariners in the local papers, as a news item, at no expense, and sent the *Manzanita* to stop at Pigeon Point and take Mr. Ryan to the station, in case he had been unable to get there, and to render assistance to the bereaved women and children. Upon arrival there, the Master found Mr. Ryan in charge and everything in proper order. The families of the deceased keepers expressed a desire to remain for awhile, until they had somewhat recovered from the shock and could make preparations for leaving. They are still there and will be taken off as soon as the *Manzanita* has occasion to be in that locality.

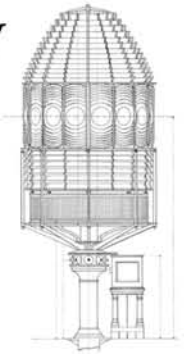
Although the coast has been thoroughly searched, no trace of the bodies or boat have yet been discovered.

Very respectfully

/s/ Geo. W. Coffin
Comd. U.S.N. Inspector



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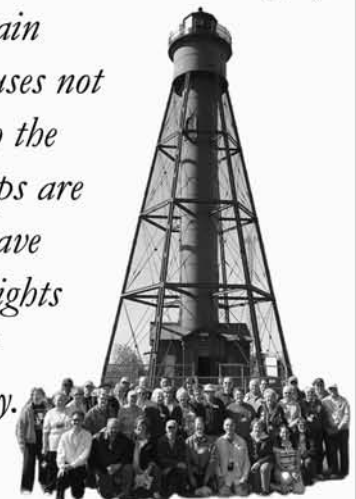
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