
# Humboldt Bay Memories

By David Raube

**Humboldt Bay Fog Signal Station. The fog signal building is on the left and the keeper's dwellings are on the right. This station was constantly threatened by the waters of Humboldt Bay and eventually discontinued. Circa 1930 photograph from U. S. Lighthouse Society archives.**

Our recruit training at the Coast Guard facility on Government Island, near Alameda, California, was completed in early 1954. We were standing in formation in front of our barracks. A yeoman came from the office and handed out duty assignments.

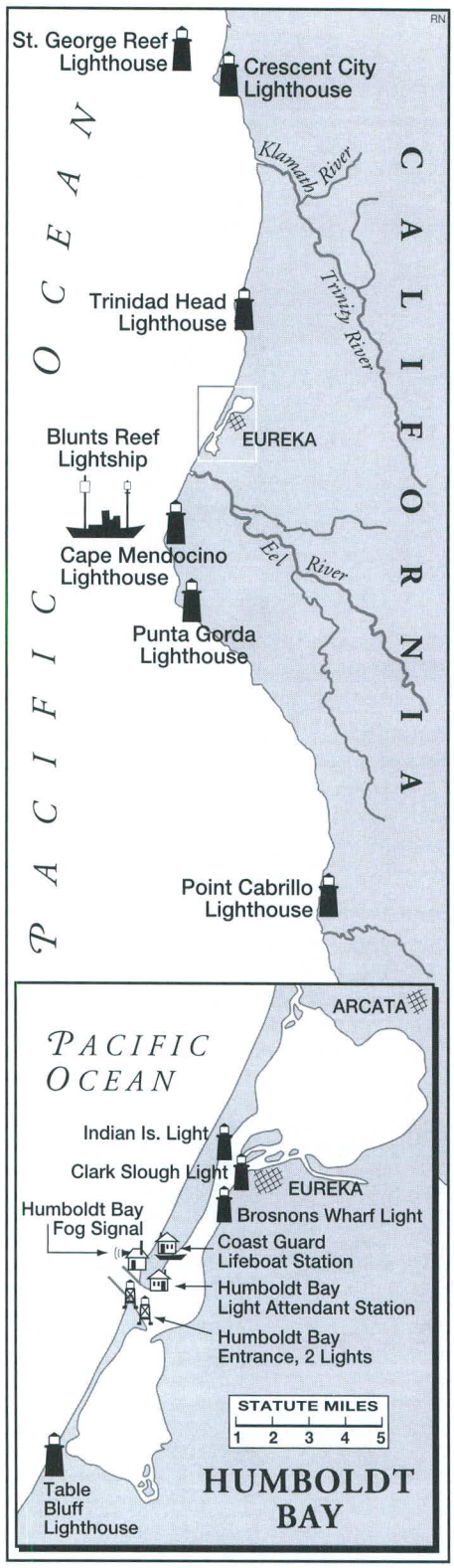
He said, "Raube, we need someone at the Humboldt Bay Light Attendant Station near Eureka. Would you like that?" I said that would be great.

I had been up the Redwood Highway in Northern California to Eureka with my parents some time earlier. I knew it was a city located on Humboldt Bay — a bay formed by two sand spits, one to the north and one on the south. Access from the bay to the Pacific Ocean is through a channel over the bar at the entrance to the bay. The sand spits are stabilized by concrete block jetties on both the north and the south. The local economy in Eureka is based mostly on the lumber industry, but in certain areas there is still quite a bit of dairying.

It is an overnight bus ride from San Francisco to Eureka and a short walk to the ferry landing at the foot of F Street. The passenger ferry I took on that beautiful, clear March morning was the *Madaket*. The *Madaket* was one of a number of passenger ferries that the Cogshell Launch and Ferry Company operated on Humboldt Bay from downtown Eureka to the lumber mill community of Samoa on the north sand spit.

On request, the nearby Humboldt Bay Lifeboat Station would send a vehicle to the Samoa ferry landing for Coast Guard personnel and dependents. This particular ferry run was made by Myron Eliason, an engineman. He was driving a 1948 Dodge panel truck. He took me to the Light Attendant Station, which was about a half mile past the lifeboat station, almost at the very south end of the north sand spit.

The station consisted of two identical five-room, white, Cape-Cod-style houses, each with a garage. There was a compressor building with air compressors for the fog signal, a small workshop with a parts room, an office and watchroom, a carpenter-shop building, and a concrete paint locker. There were boardwalks connecting the buildings. One of the boardwalks had some simple tracks and extended across the sand to the bay side of the jetty. I was told this was for hauling coal to the compressor building when it was powered by steam. There were lawns in front and back of the houses, with cypress hedges for windbreaks, and white picket fences between the houses. The three man light attendant station was well-maintained.




The officer in charge was Boatswain's Mate First Class Stan Adler. He and his wife Audrey lived in one house with their two small daughters, Jeanette and Penny. The other seaman, Ken Ritter, and I lived in the second house. Ken was from Erie, Pennsylvania, but I was surprised to discover that he had relatives in my hometown of Modesto and that I knew them.

The purpose of the Humboldt Bay Light Attendant Station was to operate the fog signal at the entrance to the bay. Fortunately, we did not have to stand our own watches for the fog, as the watch stander in the tower at the Life Boat Station would advise us when to turn the fog signal on and off. Other duties we had were to maintain the fixed navigation lights in Humboldt Bay (not the buoys) and maintain the automated lighthouses at Cape Mendocino, Table Bluff, and Crescent City. At that point in time, there were no resident keepers at Crescent City or Cape Mendocino, and the civil service keeper at Table Bluff, which was just south of Humboldt Bay, was due to retire shortly.

To service the lights in the bay, we had a 20-foot, molded plywood, inboard-powered work vessel, No. CG20662. It was kept on the T-wharf at the lifeboat station and was lowered into the water with a crane when we needed it.

Going out in the bay was something I really enjoyed. Since our schedule was flexible we tried to choose good weather days. Out on the bay we could look forward to an ever changing variety of sights as we made the rounds of our lights. The wildlife — from the porpoises in the water to the slow and low flying pelicans that perched on our light structures — was always of interest. Then there was a variety of ships that came into the bay, from the Standard Oil tankship that made regular calls, to the ships carrying logs and lumber out to far and distant places. One time a Japanese ship came with seed oysters for some oyster beds in the North Bay. A Corps of Engineers dredging ship came on occasion to maintain the ship channels. Often we would see rafts of logs being moved in the bay to one of the sawmill's log holding area. It was always necessary for us to slow down so that the wake of our workboat would not upset the men who were standing on those floating logs guiding them.

One of the most memorable scenes we observed was watching an elderly man bring one of Cogshell's ancient tugboats, alongside a barge loaded with lumber at one of the mills by himself. As he slowly passed next to the barge, he stepped out of the pilot house of the tug and tossed a line over one of the bits on the barge bringing the tug to a gentle halt. He then stepped back in the pilot house, adjusted the throttle and rudder, walked to the stern of the tug and made a second line fast to the barge. Again back to the pilot house for adjustments before walking across the barge to the wharf to release the lines holding the barge. Returning to the pilot house he took off across bay with the barge. It was a magnificant display of single handed seamanship. We "Coasties" were much impressed!

The foghorn, or diaphone, was located near the jetty on the ocean side of the sand spit, while the station was located on the protected bay side. There was a long steel pipeline that provided the air for the diaphone from the compressor building. As a standby, the old sirens were still projecting from the roof of the compressor building. They gave a shrill blast — quite different from what is commonly thought of as foghorns.

The officer in charge at the lifeboat station was Warrant Officer Einar Nielsen. He was also group commander over our station, the Trinidad Head Station, and St. George's Reef Light Station.

The boatswain's mate in charge of our station, Stan Adler, and later Norris Harpin, were both very conscientious about keeping our station looking good, as well as maintaining the bay lights and the automated light stations. Our duties gave the three of us more than enough to do. When extra help was needed, assistance could be requested from the lifeboat station or the cutter *Balsam* at nearby Fields Landing.

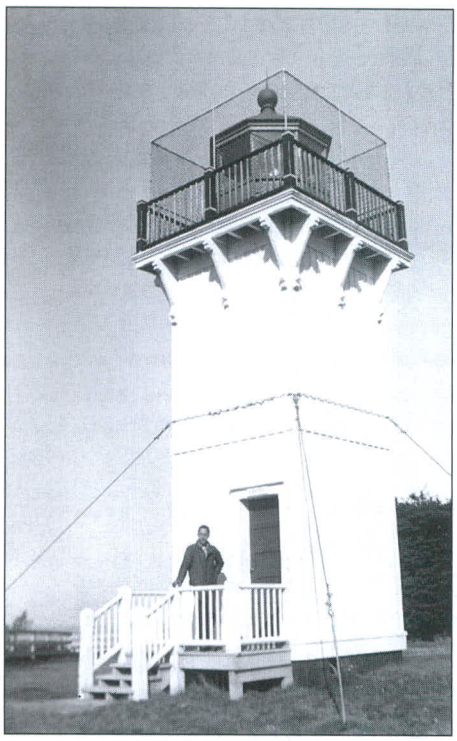
Approximately once a week we went to the Crescent City Light Station. Since it is on a small island connected by a causeway that floods at high tide, it was important to check the tide tables before starting the 80-mile drive to the station. The local historical society was quite interested in this asset to their community and kept the grass cut and did other cleanup work around the station. [Ed. The station was eventually transferred to the historical society.]

The red and green flashing channel markers in the bay were powered by acetylene gas. This acetylene gas came in heavy steel cylinders like those in a welding shop. These fixed channel markers generally consisted of three pilings driven into the bottom of the bay on an angle to form a pyramid. There were two platforms, a lower platform where the cylinders were stored and a small platform on top where the lens was mounted. A large panel on the side of each marker displayed its number.

**Above — Chief Harpin at the Crescent City Lighthouse in the mid 1950s.**

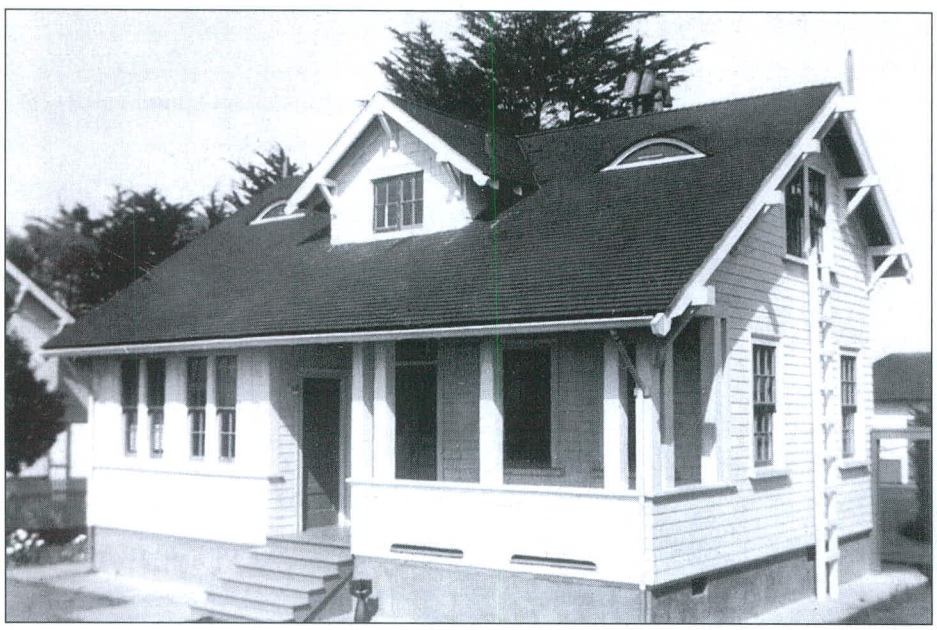

**Right — Author David Raube at Humboldt Bay Light 12. This is a typical Lighthouse Service pile structure supporting a minor light. In this era, the light was fueled by acetylene, the tanks can be seen on the lower platform.**

**Below — A bird's eye view of the Humboldt Bay entrance and the fog signal station located on the corner. The buildings to the right (at the double dock) are a Coast Guard small boat station and, to the right of that station, circa World War II Navy structures. All photographs on this page courtesy of David Raube.**



**Above — Table Bluff Lighthouse. At one time a two story house was attached to the tower. The tower was relocated to Woodley Island in Eureka, California.**

**Below — One of the keeper's dwellings at the fog signal station. Photographs on this page courtesy of David Raube.**



of the south jetty reached this dim condition. However, with the waves breaking over the jetty, it was unsafe to take a fresh cylinder out there. Finally, in the spring, we got some calm, clear days and replaced the cylinder. Mr. Nielsen had a power lifeboat from the lifeboat station stand by in the channel just in case one of the dreaded "sneaker waves" came our way. In this situation, we carried the cylinder out to the end of the jetty on a two-wheeled cart, a distance of 3/4 mile. All of the other channel markers that used the gas were accessible only by boat. We did have electric channel markers at the end of the wharf at Fields Landing and another on a wharf in Eureka at the oil company facility.

From the walk in front of our house, which faced the bay, we were able to see these lights at night. We could check to see that the lights in Hookton Channel down to Fields Landing were functioning, and we could check the channel lights north to Eureka.

An unusual light was located up in the north bay; this was a red light on top of a single pile. It was said that this light was to assist duck hunters. The bay here was not only shallow but also very wide, and with the fog or the mist rising off the water, it would be very easy to lose one's bearings.

The Table Bluff Light Station still had a civil-service civilian keeper. He really had the place looking good. The tower was freshly painted both inside and out. The interior was very clean and impressive, with the varnished railings of the stairs up to the lens. The light had just been automated, and the keeper was due to retire shortly. Our visits to this station were more social than official. This lighthouse tower was a little different in that it was a square wooden tower with a board-and-batten exterior. It was located on a hill so that the tower need not be very tall. Since the tower was made of wood and therefore rather light, it was braced against the wind with four guy-wires.

In high school, I had read a book on lighthouses, and I remembered the fact that the light at Cape Mendocino was the highest U.S. light at 420 feet above sea level. It came as a pleasant surprise to learn I would be going there as part of our regular duties.

We drove there once a week, going around the north end of Humboldt Bay to Arcata, down Highway 101 to Fernbridge, across the Eel River valley with its dairy farms, into the Victorian town of Ferndale, and through the coastal hills to the light station. Cape Mendocino Light Station was on a steep hillside. This headland offered a magnificent view. To the south, the hills dropped off and there was a long, sandy beach with rows of breakers coming in. Directly below the station and out to sea was anchored the Blunt's Reef Lightship. To the north, the rugged mountain coastline continued. It was all very impressive. The keepers' houses were no longer occupied but were locked and in good repair. Often, there would be strong winds blowing around the cape and the sound of the wind whistling around the vacant residences gave me a rather sad and eerie feeling. The tower was made of iron and very solid. There was always cleaning and painting and other maintenance work for us to do. The return trip to the station usually included a stop at the bakery in Ferndale or the coffee shop at Loleta on Highway 101.

Since one of us had to always be at the fog signal station, Ken and I would trade off on going out in the bay or on the run to Cape Mendocino.

The Cape Mendocino Station had perhaps 100 acres of land around it. The last keeper had built up his own herd of cattle from calves he received in trade for helping the neighboring ranchers.

It was impressive how reliable these lights were, providing, of course, that we kept the aids supplied with gas. It seemed to me that one cylinder would power a light for several months. Even then, they would become dimmer and dimmer but still flash. During the winter, the red light at the end

Not long after I came to the station, our officer in charge, Stan Adler, was transferred to the light attendant station at the Carquinez Straits, where he was in charge of all the lights from San Pablo Bay in the northern portion of San Francisco Bay to the junction of the Sacramento and the San Joaquin Rivers, a distance of approximately 20 miles.

Our new officer in charge was Norris Harpin, better known as "Harp." He had been in charge at the Trinidad Head Light Station. Later in his Coast Guard career, after leaving the Humboldt Bay Light Attendant Station, he was in charge at Point Reyes, Point Bonita, and the Farallon Island Light Stations. Mrs. Harpin was from New Zealand; Harp met her there during World War II.

The spring I arrived at Humboldt Bay we had beautiful weather through Memorial Day. Then, with the first of June, the fog rolled in and we turned on the diaphone. It seems to me that it operated almost continuously all summer. Then, with fall, came a gradual let-up.

The most interesting day weatherwise came that winter, when it snowed on the hills behind the city of Eureka across the bay. Early that Sunday morning I noted just a touch of snow in the lee of a building. The snow melted immediately with the sunrise. Later that morning, I went to church in Arcata, and it turned into a gorgeous sunny day After lunch, while working on my car in an old chicken house I had converted to a garage, the wind began to blow and it rained torrents. Then, before sundown, the fog rolled in, and we turned on the diaphone.

Commander Sutter was in charge of the aids to navigation in the district, and several times he came to our station on inspections. He made up a graph of the fog-signal hours of all the stations in the 12th Coast Guard District (Northern California). Needless to say, Humboldt Bay was a clear winner with over 3,000 hours. Point Reyes came in second. Point San Luis Obispo came last with only a dozen or so hours.

The Humboldt Bay Light Attendant Station was really ideal duty. We worked a five-day week with only minimal chores on weekends. We alternated liberty with every third evening or weekend off. We had good quarters and did our own meal preparation. The Coast Guard added 88 dollars a month subsistence pay to our 96 dollars a month seaman's pay, which was really great.

My tour of duty with the U.S. Coast Guard's Aids to Navigation was a most worthwhile experience. And yes! It seems like only yesterday!

**Humboldt Bay Fog Signal Station from left to right: Oil house, storage shed, fog signal building, and keeper's dwellings.**