POINT ARENA LIGHT STATION and the 1906 EARTHQUAKE

By Gregory W. Coan

April 18, 2006 marks the centennial of the great 1906 San Francisco earthquake! Beginning in this issue, The U.S. Lighthouse Society commemorates the historic event with the first in a series of articles about famous American lighthouses and the earthquakes they endured.

The Great 1906 San Francisco Earthquake

5:12 AM – April 18, 1906

The California earthquake of April 18, 1906 ranks as one of the most significant earthquakes of all time. Today, its importance comes more from the wealth of scientific knowledge derived from it than from its sheer size. Rupturing the northernmost 430 kilometers of the San Andreas Fault from northwest of San Juan Bautista to the triple junction at Cape Mendocino, the earthquake confounded contemporary geologists with its large, horizontal displacements and great rupture length. Indeed, the significance of the fault and recognition of its large cumulative offset would not be fully appreciated until the advent of plate tectonics more than half a century later. Analysis of the 1906 displacements and strain in the surrounding crust led Reid (1910) to formulate his elastic-rebound theory of the earthquake source, which remains today the principal model of the earthquake cycle.

At 5:12 a.m., local time, a foreshock occurred with sufficient force to be felt widely throughout the San Francisco Bay area. The great earthquake broke loose some 20 to 25 seconds later, with an epicenter near San Francisco. Violent shocks punctuated the strong shaking which lasted some 45 to 60 seconds. The earthquake was felt from southern Oregon to south of Los Angeles and inland as far as central Nevada. The highest Modified Mercalli Intensities (MMIs) of VII to IX paralleled the length of the rupture, extending as far as 80 kilometers inland from the fault trace. One important characteristic of the shaking intensity noted in Lawson's (1908) report was the clear correlation of intensity with underlying geologic conditions. Areas situated in sediment-filled valleys sustained stronger shaking than nearby bedrock sites, and the strongest shaking occurred in areas where ground reclaimed from San Francisco Bay failed in the earthquake.

As a basic reference about the earthquake and the damage it caused, geologic observations of the fault rupture and shaking effects, and other consequences of the earthquake, the Lawson (1908) report remains the authoritative work, as well as arguably the most important study of a single earthquake. In the public's mind, this earthquake is perhaps remembered most for the fire it spawned in San Francisco, giving it the somewhat misleading appellation of the "San Francisco earthquake". Shaking damage, however, was equally severe in many other places along the fault rupture. The frequently quoted value of 700 deaths caused by the earthquake and fire is now believed to underestimate the total loss of life by a factor of 3 or 4. Most of the fatalities occurred in San Francisco, and 189 were reported elsewhere.

Background courtesy US Geological Survey, Earthquake Hazards Program. For more information on the USGS and the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake see: http://quake.wr.usgs.gov/info/1906.



Above – San Francisco City Hall, April 18, 1906.
Below – Looking south on Howard Street from near Seventeenth Street, San Francisco, April 18, 1906. Photos courtesy US Geological Survey.



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Located at latitude 38° 57' 10", longitude123° 44' 42", Point Arena has long been a prominent point on the California coast. The earliest known European explorers of the area, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo and Bartolomi Ferrelo of Spain, sailed the California coast from Cape Mendocino to Baja California in 1542-43. The expedition was arduous, with disease and death striking the crew. After the untimely death of Cabrillo, Ferrelo took charge of the vessel. It was in these circumstances that Ferrelo spotted a point which "was like a spur of land where the coast turned North Northwest." He named this spur "Cabo de Fortunas" (Cape of Fortune), as a testament to the difficulties encountered on this journey. As Ferrelo observed in his journeys, the land now known as Point Arena is a natural navigational landmark, with the direction of the coast changing from northwest to a more northerly direction as one travels from the south. In the 300 years succeeding Cabrillo's exploration, Russian, English, and American navigators all passed and noted Point Arena. English Captain George Vancouver, while performing a survey of the California coast in 1792, referred to "Punta Barro de Arena" (Point Bar of Sand) as a conspicuous mark on the coast. The Russians referred to the point as "Barra de Arena."

The first known settler in the area that became Point Arena was Rafael Garcia, who received in 1844 "the right to strike a claim" in the area from Mexican Governor Manuel Micheltorena. Garcia chose a 40,000 acre tract from the Gualala River (the current southern border of Mendocino County) to Mal Paso. Garcia built a home on the north shore of the Garcia River, located between Manchester and Point Arena. Garcia started the process for officially gaining title to this property in 1846 from Mexican Governor Pico, but there is no record of him finalizing his claim. This became a problem for Garcia when the United States took control of the area under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, since all Mexican land grants had to be confirmed by the United States government. The grant was originally rejected in 1852 by the Federal Land Commission, confirmed on appeal in 1857 (at which time Garcia sold the property to Don Jose Leandro Luco for $10,000), and again rejected in 1858. The land became United States government property when the U. S. Supreme Court dismissed the appeal of the 1858 rejection. The government thus



Point Arena Light Station circa 1885. Note the keepers and families around the base of the tower and on porch of the dwelling. Photo by A. D. Carpenter courtesy of National Maritime Museum, San Francisco

gained title to Point Arena: a possession it would eventually put to good use.

In the 1850s and 1860s, the ship traffic along the Mendocino County coastline increased greatly. The large portion of these ships were transporting the fruits of the vast redwood forests of the California North Coast. During this period, the lumber mills of Del Norte, Humboldt, and Mendocino counties produced large quantities of timber, much of which was shipped to San Francisco. Lying between the North Coast ports and San Francisco was Point Arena. Heavy fogs, rough seas, treacherous currents, magnetic disturbances, offshore rocks and hidden reefs combined to make the seas in the Point Arena area especially hazardous to even experienced navigators. Of particular note is Arena Rock, a one mile long rock which lies only six feet under the water's surface. This hazard lies in the ocean one-and-one-half miles northwest from Point Arena and has claimed scores of ships over the years. The area's wind, fog, and natural hazards made the need for navigational aids great, and on June 8, 1866, the United States Government issued an Executive Order setting aside the point for the purpose of constructing a lighthouse.

Soon after this order was issued, the United States Congress authorized a survey of the Point Arena area. In 1867, the United States Lighthouse Board noted in its annual report:

> At Point Arena...examinations have been made with a view to determine the proper sites for lighthouses authorized by Congress, and no time will be lost in securing the establishment of proper lights at the earliest practicable day.

The results of this survey appear in the 1869 Lighthouse Board report:

> The point itself is a narrow peninsula forming a plateau from two hundred to three hundred feet in width, for a length of eight hundred feet in an easterly direction, when it suddenly widens. The ground is nearly horizontal, and bounded on the water side by a nearly vertical bluff of fifty feet in height from the water surface. It is composed of an argillaceous stone, the exposed bluff surface of which, acted upon weather, is much cracked, exhibiting a dip considerably to the horizon. The stone is not suitable for building purposes.

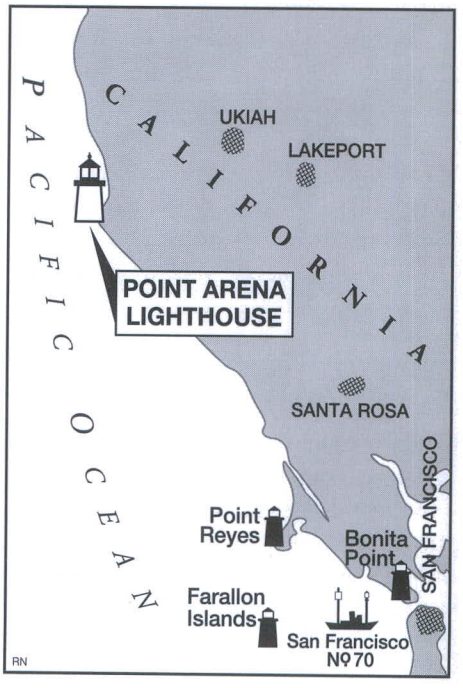
The fact that the local stone was not suitable for building was disappointing to lighthouse officials, since they tried whenever possible to use construction material indigenous to the area in order to save the costs of shipping supplies to remote locations. In the case of Point Arena, sand and the available stone were used in the making of concrete; however, the majority of the construction material was purchased and shipped from San Francisco. The various supplies shipped from San Francisco included cement, lime, iron work, doors, sash, molding, laths, shingles, nails, hardware, as well as construction personnel. The supplies were shipped on vessels to Point Arena Port (Arena Cove), transferred to barges, grounded at the port, and hauled a distance of four miles to the site of the lighthouse. The cost of this transport was $10.50 per ton. The Lighthouse Board contracted a local company to produce 500,000 bricks, to be made on the site. Kilns were erected on the lighthouse site, and all accounts indicate that the contract was honored. The 1869 Lighthouse Board Report states that the first batch of kiln fired bricks produced was not "up to the prescribed standard, and were therefore rejected." The second batch contained "a large number of good quality brick." The report continues, "a third kiln is now in readiness to be burned, and presuming that the contractor will improve on the last kiln, it is hoped that the bricks in it will be of even better quality, and that a sufficient number can be accepted to make up the number contracted for." There is no mention of continuing difficulties with the contracted party in the 1870 report, which details the opening of the lighthouse. For the outside courses of the tower, 114,000 bricks were shipped from San Francisco.

Construction of the lighthouse began on September 30, 1869, and was completed the following April. The lighthouse lantern was lit for the first time on May 1, 1870. The 1880 Mendocino County history contains a detailed description of the completed lighthouse compound:

> This lighthouse is located one hundred yards from the north-west extremity of the point... the light is a fixed or stationary white one, and it can be seen for a distance of nineteen nautical miles... the



Point Arena looking north before 1900. From an old post card.

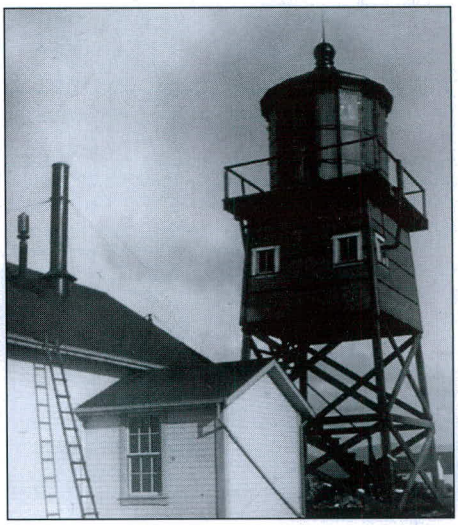






Left – The Point Arena tower being dismantled in January, 1907. The 1896 fog signal building is at left.
Above – The brick fourplex keepers' dwelling being dismantled in 1906.





Left – The remains of the fourplex with the wooden storage sheds that survived the quake in the background.
Above, Right – Immediately after the earthquake, the Lighthouse Service erected this temporary tower using, we believe, the original lantern. A third order lens was installed to provide a light until the new tower was completed. All photos U. S. Lighthouse Society.

light is on a conical brick tower which is white-washed, and from the base to the focal plane is just one-hundred feet, and one-hundred fifty-six from the level of the sea to the focal plane. The light is of the first order... the arc illuminated is from the north one-half east, by westward to south-east three fourths south... the dome of the lantern is painted red, and the gallery, balustrade and barrel is painted black.

The county history also informs its readers that the completed 1870 structure had a thirty-two foot diameter base, and the walls at the tower's base were six feet thick. The keepers had to climb a 126 step winding stairway to reach the lantern room from the top of the oil room. The oil room was located nineteen steps up from the base of the tower.

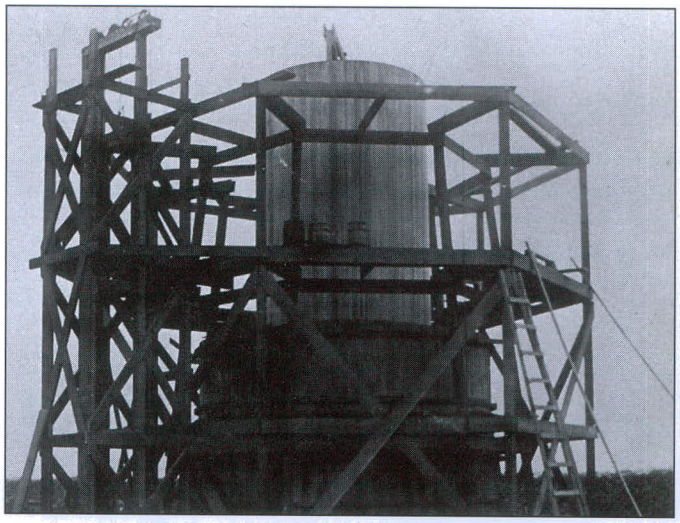
The fog signal building was also built during the 1870 construction, 121 yards west of the tower. This building housed the boilers for the steam operated whistle. A windmill water pump forced water up from two giant, brick lined cisterns, which were located underneath the fog signal building and ran the length of the peninsula. Enormous amounts of wood were consumed in the operation of the fog signal; in especially foggy years, the light station would use in excess of 100 cords of wood. Old photographs of the light station show the large stacks of wood running the length of the point.

The original keeper's dwelling was a large two-story brick building, painted white, and placed sixty feet to the rear of the tower. This building housed four lighthouse keepers and their families. This structure was patterned after the Stick and Gothic Revival styles prevalent at the time.

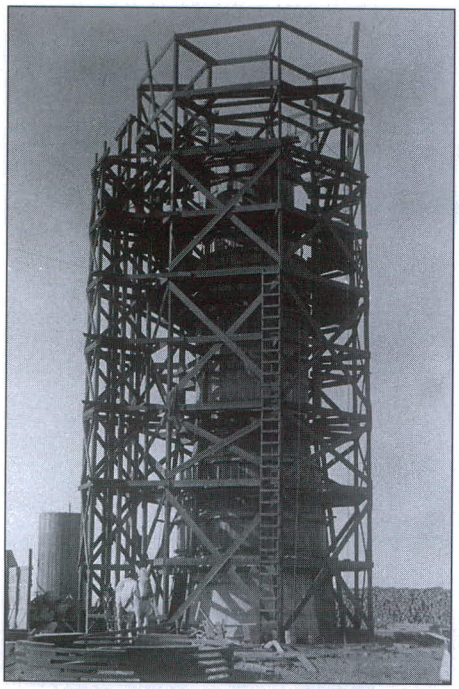
In the early 1880's, the United States government began purchasing the right of way for a road from the main country road (now Highway 1) to the lighthouses. Where the government could not purchase the land from the owners, the government moved to condemn the property. By May of 1882, the final

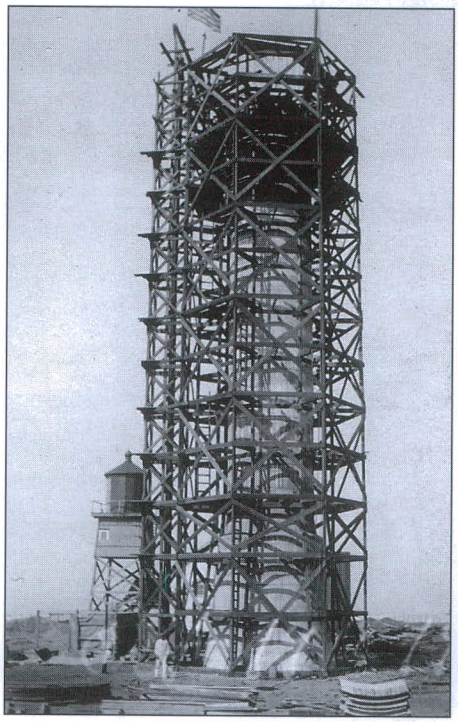
case was resolved, and construction of the road began.

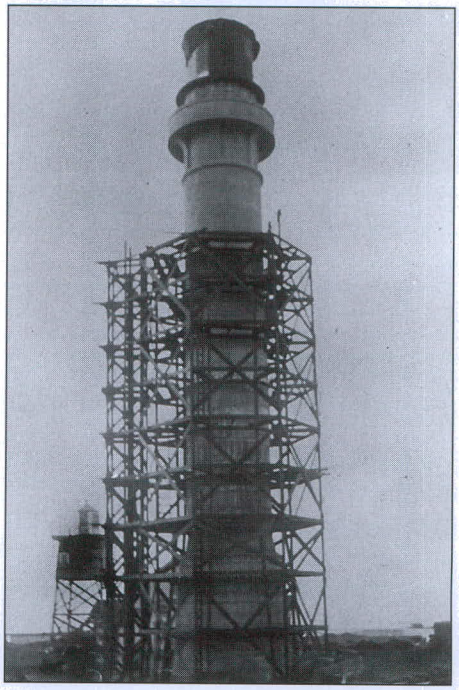
Soon after the start of operations in May of 1870, life at the new lighthouse settled into a pattern. The work days of Point Arena lighthouse keepers often started with the "light-up watch," the first watch of the evening. The keepers, commonly referred to as "wickies," would alternate watches during the night, making sure that the light remained lit and operable. During inclement weather, especially when heavy fog hugged the coast, the wickies would draw the "fog watch," which entailed maintaining the fog signal. Drawing both duties in a day could mean working six-

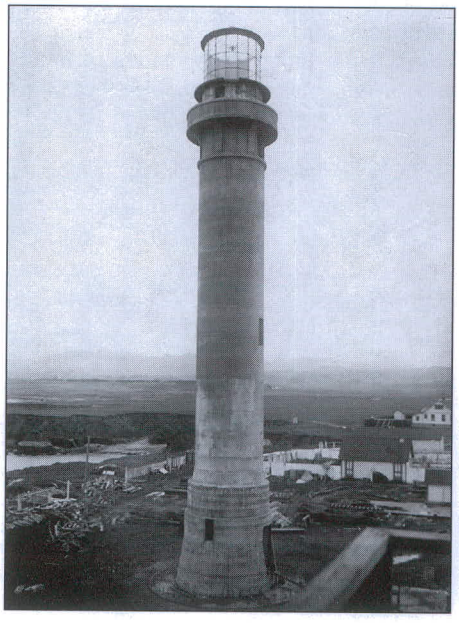


Right – Wooden interior and exterior wall forms ready for the first pour of concrete.











Above, Left – October 2, 1907. The tower is at the 42-foot level. The scaffolding at left contains an elevator powered by the donkey standing at its base.

Above, Center – October 19, 1907. The tower at the 80-foot level. Note the temporary tower and lantern at left.

Above, Right – The lantern has been moved from the temporaty tower to the new, completed tower. Note the small lantern now on the temporary tower.

Right – December 14, 1907. The scaffolding has been removed and a portion of the lantern installed. One of the new keeper's dwellings can be seen at right.

Far Right – A supporting 'donut' is in place around the base of the tower and the lantern has been finished, but the lens has not yet been installed.

teen hours during a day.

In addition to watches, the keepers maintained the grounds and structures on the property. Brass work was regularly polished, and structures were painted. In the lantern room, the oil used for the beacon's lamp regularly needed to be replaced. The lamp wick was regularly trimmed or replaced. When not at work, the keepers hunted albacore on the rocks and speared salmon in the local creeks and rivers. The more ambitious keepers may have hunted the sea lions that inhabited the coast, and whose hides and oil brought handsome profits.

Although the construction and operation of the Point Arena lighthouse did assist navigators traveling the North Coast, its existence did not guarantee safe passage around the point. The treacherous waters, combined with the high volume of shipping traffic brought about primarily by the lumber trade, was a recipe for disaster. By one account, the 1880s saw shipwrecks occurring at a rate of one per day in the general vicinity of Point Arena. The roll call of vessels wrecked off the coast of the point between 1870 and 1900 include the Steamers *Eastport* (7/23/89), *Jeanie* (10/1/00), *Mary Zepher* (1/81), and *San Bonito* (11/22/96), and the Schooners *R.F. Zee* (11/7/70) and *Golden Gate* (5/18/89). The continued wrecks convinced the United States Life Saving Service to establish a life saving station in the city of Point Arena's port of Arena Cove in May of 1903.

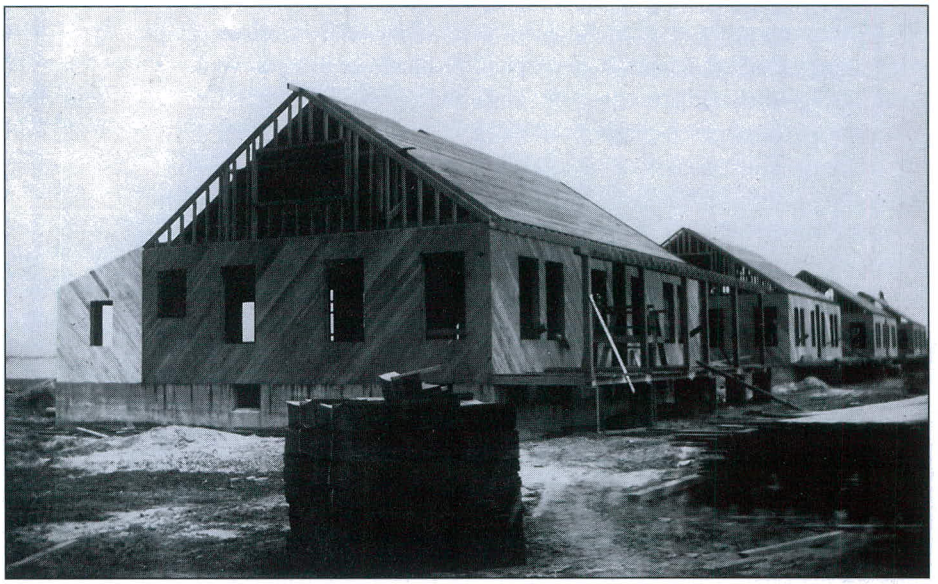
The climate of the California North Coast is not the most hospitable, and the Point Arena keepers often had to cope with its extremes. Gale force winds often howl at the Point; in the winter of 1879-80, a gale blew down all of the fences on the site, requiring their reconstruction. When the winds were not blowing, an extremely heavy fog would often cover the coast. As inclement as the weather could be, the lighthouse keepers and their families found the extremes in weather much more tolerable than the earthquake activity that often rattled the area. The shaking was caused primarily by the San Andreas Fault, which runs by the lighthouse just off the shoreline.

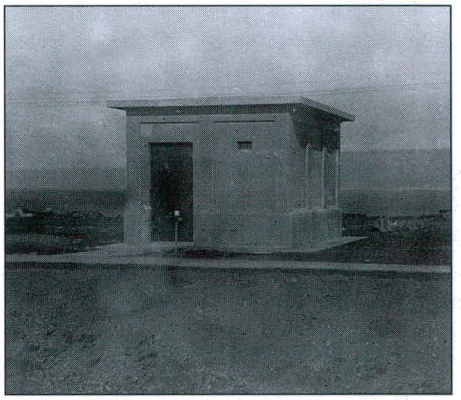
The earliest report located in the keeper's logs concerning earthquakes is noted on June 7, 1880. Keeper Koons was on duty, when at 1:15 A.M. he heard a very low rumble, followed by violent shaking. The keeper then reported a "very sharp shock," which prompted him to leave the tower. This fear was quite justified; earthquakes would eventually claim the Point Arena Lighthouse.

Though not a complete record, it is known that earthquakes were also felt in February of 1888 and in April of 1898. The latter tremor cracked the lighthouse tower and temporarily extinguished the light.

The earthquake of 1906 is most known for the devastating effect it had on the city of San Francisco. Although this earthquake's effect on California's North Bay counties is less known, it was nonetheless devastating. The effect of the 1906 tremor on the Point Arena Light Station was dramatic. The event was described by the keeper on watch during the quake:

A heavy blow first struck the tower from the south. The blow came quick and heavy,





Above – Ther four keeper's bungalows under construction in 1907. Each keeper was provided with a small storage shed behind each house and a common barn was built at the east end of the property.

Right – One of the two concrete oil houses built at Point Arena.

Below – The Point Arena bungalows in the 1930s.

All photos from the U. S. Lighthouse Society.



accompanied by a heavy report. The tower quivered for a few seconds, went far over to the north, came back, and then swung north again, repeating this several times. Immediately after came rapid and violent vibrations, rending the tower apart, the sections grinding and grating upon each other; while the lenses, reflectors, etc., in the lantern were shaken from their settings and fell in a shower upon the iron floor.

The damage done to the grounds was substantial. The light tower, though still intact, had cracks running clear through the structure, and it leaned noticeably to the north. The condition of the tower was beyond repair; the Lighthouse Service Engineer condemned the structure and ordered it to be dismantled. The lens was a complete loss; however, some parts of the tower were salvageable. The keeper's dwelling was badly cracked. Most of the metal work was "bent, broken, or twisted." Although the two chimneys on the structure were not thrown, the one on the north was badly broken. It was beyond repair, and was condemned. The fog signal building which replaced the original structure circa 1900, the only wood frame structure on the grounds, was not affected at all by the earthquake.

The days following the earthquake were especially hard for the keepers and their families. With their living quarters uninhabitable and the wind that often blew on the point prohibiting the use of tents, the keepers scrambled to house their families in the few structures that survived the quake. The Lighthouse Service tried to make the lives of the keepers and their families as comfortable as they could; however, the devastation the 1906 earthquake wrought upon the lighthouses of the California Coast made resources scarce. Several locations incurred heavy damages, but the site at Point Arena suffered the greatest damage. The Lighthouse Service sent word to the keepers at Point Arena to procure whatever was absolutely necessary and to report any liabilities for reimbursement at a later date.

The Lighthouse Board realized that the plight of the keepers was serious. The board also realized that the lumber needed to reconstruct the city of San Francisco would be shipped from the ports up the coast from Point Arena. These vessels would need the aid of a light on the point. On June 30, 1906, the United States Congress approved an appropriation of $72,500 for rebuilding the station and the keeper's dwelling. The Lighthouse Service Engineer Department put the job out to bid, and when the bids received were too high, they decided to do the job themselves.

The job at hand was large indeed. The tower and the keeper's fourplex dwelling were to be razed, and new structures were to replace them. Among the first members of the construction team to arrive was George Hooke, who was the Lighthouse Service engineer who was to oversee the project. Also arriving at Point Arena in the summer of 1906 was Walter White. White was a Lighthouse Service engineer who was transferred from Lime Point Light Station to assist with the project. He assisted in the construction of new Point Arena Lighthouse, but more importantly, later in his life he documented his experiences during his time at Point Arena. His memoir is an informative source for the post-earthquake construction period.

When White and the other four Lighthouse Service employees who were transferred to Point Arena arrived, they took temporary residence in the Point Arena Hotel. Carpenters were hired in San Francisco and in Point Arena, and put under the supervision of Walt Myers. The first task was to build temporary shelters to house the keepers, their families, and the increasing work force. An 80 foot building was constructed for the keepers, and a 60 foot bunkhouse was built for the work force estimated at 30 men. When these structures were completed, the keepers moved into their new quarters, and White and his cohorts left the Point Arena Hotel and joined the balance of the construction crew on the site.

After the shelters had been built, the next order of business was the construction of a temporary light tower. A 30 foot wooden tower was erected by the carpenters on the site. The lantern room (the top room of the lighthouse where the lens resides) from the original tower was dismantled piece by piece and reassembled on the top of the new tower. A temporary third order lens was requisitioned from abroad and installed in the lantern room. On January 5, 1907, the temporary lighthouse began operation.

The next project was the razing of the tower. Everything that could be salvaged from the tower was disassembled and removed. This included the above mentioned lantern room, along with the iron spiral staircase and landings. Jacks, drills, and sledgehammers then began to dismantle the cracked tower from the top down. According to White, "Drills hammered with sledge hammers, jacks were used, and several hundred bricks were loosened and dropped to the ground below, in large chunks, until the whole tower was demolished." By March of 1907, the tower was but a small stump. While the tower was being leveled, the condemned keeper's dwelling was also razed. All of the brick and other material that could not be used was pushed over the cliff. Brick from the original tower can still occasionally be spotted in the surf surrounding this point.

Attention now turned to the construction of the new tower. Engineers, now cognizant of the effects of earthquakes on brick structures, sought a way to build an "earthquake-proof" lighthouse. Their decision was to build the new tower using reinforced concrete. The Lighthouse Service contracted the project to the San Francisco based Concrete Chimney Company. As their name suggests, this company's specialty was the construction of industrial chimneys.

Reconstruction of the tower began with the pouring of the foundation. The new structure was built exactly on the site of the old tower; the center post of the old building was used to mark out the new foundation. Concrete was made with sand and gravel from the nearby Garcia River, and cement was shipped to Point Arena. Iron bars were hand woven in the foundation, and the concrete was mixed and poured by hand. Next, iron bars were woven 100 feet up, and forms were constructed from the base up to contain the concrete while it set. The concrete was mixed on the ground, and carted by wheelbarrow to its base. A mule-powered elevator was built to hoist the wheelbarrow up to the forms to be filled. After the tower was completed, a donut-shaped buttress was built around the base. This buttress, which gives the new tower its unique profile, is designed to provide additional support for the structure during an earthquake. The buttress is twice the diameter of the tower and forms a cylindrical room around the tower's base.

Work proceeded relatively quickly; the concrete was soon poured, and the original stairs were reconstructed in the new tower. After a suspension of work on the site for a few months in the spring of 1908, the remaining work was completed. A new first order Fresnel lens was shipped from the general Lighthouse Depot on Staten Island to Point Arena, and was installed in August of 1908. On September 15, 1908, the new Point Arena Light Station exhibited its light.

Work on the permanent keepers' dwellings commenced after the completion of the tower. In place of one large dwelling, the Lighthouse Service decided to construct four separate bungalows, one for each of the keepers assigned to duty at the point. These houses provided the keepers and their families more room and privacy than in the previous building, and compared to their pre-earthquake accommodations, the new dwellings were grand. Each of the 1908 structures were built on 100 foot lots, 50 feet for the building and 50 feet for the trellis between each building. The cost to build each of these buildings was $6,000. Upon the completion of the new quarters, the temporary shelters built in the summer of 1906 were torn down. After the road to the lighthouse was repaired, the construction at Point Arena was completed. After more than two years of hard work, the light station had recovered from the 1906 earthquake. Like the new tower, the new light works departed in some ways from the original equipment. The new lens, which showed a double flash every 6 seconds, was mounted on a flat plate. This plate floated on top of three gallons of mercury. The mercury provided a nearly frictionless surface for the lens to rotate. The force to turn the lens was provided by a weight which incrementally dropped the length of the tower. The weight needed to be wound back up to the top of the tower for the process to continue. When electricity (for the navigational aids only) was brought out to the station in 1928, the lamp was changed from a kerosene oil-wick lamp to an incandescent oil vapor lamp, and the manual system for rotating the lens was replaced by a small motor.

The new Point Arena Light Station operated quite smoothly throughout the 1910s and 1920s. As before the earthquake, the daily operations included keeping the lens in order, sounding the fog signals when needed, and maintaining the grounds. The painting of the tower was especially difficult, since it had to be done at great height and often in windy conditions. The keepers also hosted "Visitor's Days," which were held for the local Point Arenaites on weekend afternoons.

In 1937, Bill Owens arrived from Point Conception as the head lighthouse keeper. Of the keepers assigned at Point Arena during its history, more is written about Owens than any other family that served at the station. A colorful man, Owens served at Point Arena from 1937 to 1952. His arrival at the point was marked by a shortage of help. For part of his first year, he and his wife were the only two people running the station. During one



Point Arena Light Station looking east in the 1930s. The badly eroded cliffs have eroded even more since this photo was taken. The original fog signal building was 125 feet west of the present structure (foreground). The four houses replaced the 1907 bungalows in the 1960s. The barn, top left, has since been removed. Photo courtesy of the U. S. Coast Guard.

particularly foggy stretch, Owens staffed the light and fog signal for two consecutive days and nights. Without sleep, Owens eventually collapsed from exhaustion. He called his wife, who watched the station in his stead. The next day, Owens called the Superintendent of Lighthouses, and explained that he needed medical attention. He needed permission to hire a temporary assistant, or the lighthouse was to be left unattended. The supervisor capitulated, and a local ranch hand was hired. Three months later, permanent help arrived.

Owens' watch at the point saw many changes, most notably the end of the Lighthouse Board. In 1939, President Roosevelt disbanded the civilian board, and placed America's lighthouses under the administration of the Coast Guard. The reasoning behind this was financial; the government was looking to consolidate costs. The transition did not involve changing personnel; the Lighthouse Board staff continued to man the stations. The transition did involve the painting of all the brass work military gray. At Point Arena, this included the spiral stairway and the lens mechanism.

The commencement of World War II changed the operation of the Point Arena Light Station. Keeper Bill Owens, who was allowed to keep his civilian status after the Coast Guard consolidation, now was required to enlist. He joined the Coast Guard Reserve in October of 1942, under the condition that he could return to a civilian status at the end of the war. The war caused the frequency of the watches to increase, with the keepers required to report all sightings by sea or air. During one of Owens' watches, he thought he spotted a Japanese submarine off the coast of the point. When he reported his sighting to the Navy officer of the day, he was told that there were no subs in the area. The next day, a lumber schooner was sunk just north of Point Arena. The navy eventually confirmed that there indeed was a Japanese submarine off the California coast. Fortunately for the keepers, this sighting was probably the most dramatic event of the war years at Point Arena.

The year 1949 saw Point Arena's most dramatic shipwreck of the twentieth century, when the *Pacific Enterprise* grounded on Arena Rock. On September 9, with a heavy layer of fog blanketing the coast, Bill Owens and his wife, Isabel, heard a ship's horn approaching the point. Bill Owens came out of his dwelling to investigate, only to hear the ship ground itself. The fog eventually began to lift, and the ship could be seen. The crew was evacuated once it became certain that the ship would break up on the rock, and in the following days the *Pacific Enterprise* capsized.

The eventual term of Bill Owens ended when he transferred to Point Cabrillo in 1952. With his departure, Point Arena lost its last civilian keeper. The Coast Guard continued to make improvements to the property; in 1960-61, the dwellings built in 1908 were razed, and modern ranch style buildings were constructed. The Coast Guard operated the light station through the 1960s and 1970s.

Point Arena's light continued to operate with manual assistance until 1977, when it joined the growing number of automated lighthouses. A rotating beacon was mounted on the balcony of the tower, and the 4,000 pound rotating lens was retired from formal use.

In the last fifteen years, the story of the Point Arena Lighthouse is one of public access and historical use. This era began in 1978, when a group of interested local people banded together and contacted the Coast Guard about tours of the station. Public access to the station had been halted after automation. After a significant amount of cajoling, the Coast Guard hosted an open house. The response to this was overwhelming, with attendance well beyond expectations.

The automation of the light made the need for on-site Coast Guard personnel minimal. In 1982, the Coast Guard began to implement a plan to phase out the Coast Guard on the site. With public interest still high at the Point Arena station, the local interests formed the non-profit group, the Point Arena Lighthouse Keepers, Incorporated. This group entered negotiations with the Department of Transportation, and was granted a 25 year renewable lease to take over the station for public access as a historical and recreational area. In December of 1984 the last permanent Coast Guard personnel left Point Arena. The Coast Guard still maintains the navigational aids on the site, flying down from Humboldt Bay every five to six weeks to check the lens, the relay transmitter, and radio beacon still operating on the grounds.

The Point Arena Light Station is now open to the public every day of the year (with the exception of Christmas and Thanksgiving). The Coast Guard houses are now rented out to the public, with the proceeds used to fund the maintenance and development of the light station. The fog signal building is used as a museum, housing old photographs and artifacts from the station. This building also has a whale watching room.

The Point Arena Light Station is a grand example of what all lighthouses endure. The relationship between lighthouse and Mother Nature is tenuous at best. Lighthouses were built to protect navigators in those areas where the elements are harshest – the elements, in turn, try to claim the lighthouses. Many of the older lighthouses in this country are being reclaimed by the ocean; eventually, Point Arena will also erode into the sea. Point Arena faces the additional threat of the San Andreas Fault. In an odd twist, it is not man who threatens this landmark; it is Mother Nature who will determine how long the Point Arena Light Station will be preserved.

Currently, the Point Arena Lighthouse and fog signal building are experiencing significant deterioration, and repairs are needed. With regard to the lighthouse, pieces of concrete on the north side of the tower just below the balcony have recently become dislodged. According to lighthouse officials, the exterior deck of the 115 foot tower is now off limits, and access to the structure has been restricted until further information can be gathered as to the extent of the damage.

With the assistance of Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla 87, based at the Point Cabrillo Lighthouse, wonderful progress has been made in stabilizing Point Arena's lantern housing (1870) which houses its original First Order Fresnel lens, and a regular maintenance schedule is now in place. However, as with many lighthouses around the nation, the Point Arena Lighthouse Keepers are in desperate need of financial assistance so that necessary physical repairs to the tower can be made. This facility hosts over 30,000 visitors a year and it would be a shame to have to have restrictions in place that prevent people from climbing to the top of the second tallest lighthouse in California. In order to make a contribution to this important effort, contact the Point Arena Lighthouse office at 707-882-2809, or via their website at: www.pointarena-lighthouse.com.