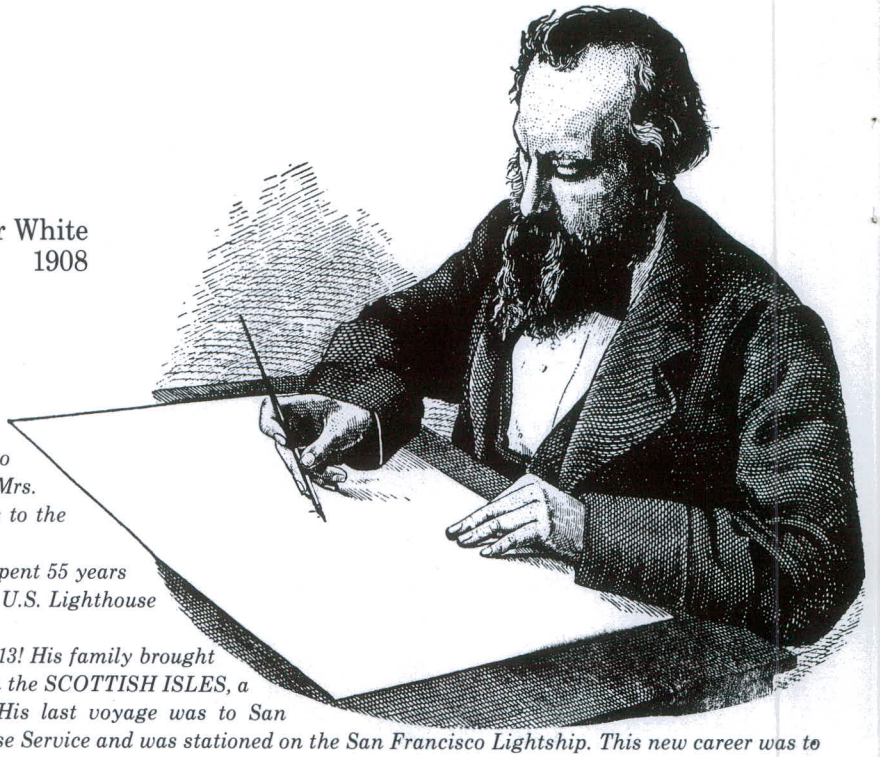
Lighthouse Memories

by Walter White
1908



This memoir was given to us by Walter White's daughter, La Verne Dornberger of Vashon, Washington. She and two other members of her family are members of the society. Mrs. Dornberger recounts some of her experiences in the Letters to the Keeper column of this issue.

Walter White was born in London, England in 1880 and spent 55 years associated with the sea. He served in the British Navy, the U.S. Lighthouse Service and the U.S. Coast Guard before retiring in 1948.

He first went to sea on a four masted sailing ship at age 13! His family brought him out of the Biritish Navy in 1901. He then signed on with the SCOTTISH ISLES, a full rigged sailing ship that sailed around Cape Horn. His last voyage was to San Francisco in 1903. Mr. White then joined the U.S. Lighthouse Service and was stationed on the San Francisco Lightship. This new career was to last more than 44 years.

When Walter White retired he said that he no longer had any interest in boating or the water. "I've had enough of it," he stated. He "crossed over the bar" in 1968 at the age of 88.

Our gratitude to Mrs. Dornberger and her sister Bea Rieneke of Paradise, CA. Both ladies have provided very valuable information to this society.

The San Francisco Earthquake 1906 shook many lighthouses on the California Coast including Point Arena Lighthouse. This 100 foot tower was cracked in four places, at each of the landings, inside the tower, and also outside. The Lighthouse Engineer Department condemned the tower as being unsafe. Contracts were put out to tear down the tower, and rebuild another, also the Keeper's dwellings. Contracts (ed. Bid Prices) were too high so the Lighthouse Engineers decided to do the work themselves. The dwelling which was to be torn down, four Light Keepers lived, it was one dwelling. Men were hired in San Francisco, also half a dozen carpenters and shipped to Point Arena. Mr. George Hooke was in charge of the operation, F. Walter White at that time was working for the Engineer Department at Lime Point Lightstation. I was called at the District Office and was told to proceed to Point Arena to tear down the lighthouse with 4 other men. When we arrived we stayed at the Point Arena Hotel for a few weeks. Every morning we were driven out to the Light Station by a team of horses. Carpenters were hired and Mr. Walt Myers was to be the Foreman over the carpenters, these were local Point Arenaites. The contract was put out for the hauling of material, lumber, cement, etc. Mr. Frank Reynolds had the contract. The first work was done to build temporary housing for the four keepers, an 80 foot building, also 60 foot bunkhouse for the working party, around 30 men. After these buildings were finished the 4 Keepers moved in and we left the hotel and moved in the bunkhouse. The 100 foot tower and dwelling had to come down. I was in charge of the wrecking of the tower. The lantern and lens had to be carefully marked piece by piece so that it could be placed on a temporary 30 foot tower, built by the carpenters. The tower is built of brick, probably a million bricks so jacks, drills, sledge hammers were to be used in tearing it down. The first job was to cut a hole through the tower a few feet from the base, so a mast 25 feet long had to be used to lower the window frames (iron), stairs, and landing, to be used in the new tower, the mast was pulled to the top of the tower inside. 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. Four men including myself wrecked the tower. Work was now to be started on the new tower, the same center post was used in the center of the new foundation. The new tower was to be built 50 feet towards the Point, facing the ocean. The sand and gravel was hauled by Frank Reynolds' mule team from the Garcia River, the cement was hauled down from the Point Arena Wharf. Several hundred sacks were used for the tower, sidewalks, foundations for the four cottages, the tower foundation was crisscrossed with heavy Norwegian iron, concrete was done

by hand. No machine poured the foundation. The reinforced iron was threaded by hand, to the top of the tower. The tower structure was built with an elevator to hoist a wheelbarrow of concrete to the landing. The elevator was pulled up by a mule. I emptied the wheelbarrow into the forms, from the foundation to the top of the tower. I also tampered the concrete in the forms between each barrow load. Outside forms were taken down when the concrete was finished, the tower then was scraped down outside from top to bottom. The stairways and landings were made fast, also the railing inside the tower. The lantern and lens were installed after the building of the tower was completed. Now the four cottages were started (the old dwelling was torn down), carpenters busy building, road crews making a new road from the tower to the main gate and to Rollerville, also several drainage pits along the road, each cottage built on 100 foot lots, 50 feet for the cottage, 50 feet of trellis, between each cottage. After completion of the cottages, the District Office in San Francisco phoned Mr. Hoadley, the supervisor of building the new station, to lay off all hands as the District ran out of funds. So everyone except myself was paid off. I was kept on, to paint the four houses, inside and outside including roofs, fog engines, the stairway and landings inside the tower. I worked nearly two years for the Engineer Department on Point Arena Lightstation. After completion I had a pick of going to Point Cabrillo Lightstation or Alcatraz Island to build a new lighthouse there. I preferred Point Cabrillo Station, Mendocino County, and worked on that (new) station.

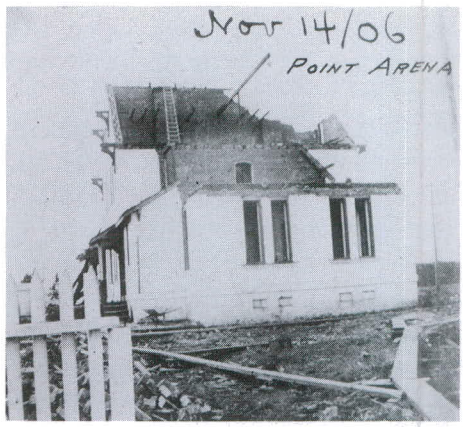
It has been said that the Point Arena Lighthouse fell over during the 1906 earthquake which is not true, so this is the reason why I have written this memory.

All the iron work such as stairs, windows, landings, lantern came from the old tower. The center stake in the tower was used again to measure the circumference so that the stake was just in the ground 1874 and used again 1907. Mr. Hoadly was the Superintendent of rebuilding the new tower and four cottages. The concrete was made by hand and put in a wheelbarrow and hoisted by Frank Reynolds' mule up an elevator. I wheeled the wheelbarrows into the forms from the ground to the top of the tower, that means I wheeled the whole concrete tower in a wheelbarrow!



The original tower was constructed in 1870 and was similar in design to many Atlantic Coast towers of that era. Official U.S. Coast Guard photo.

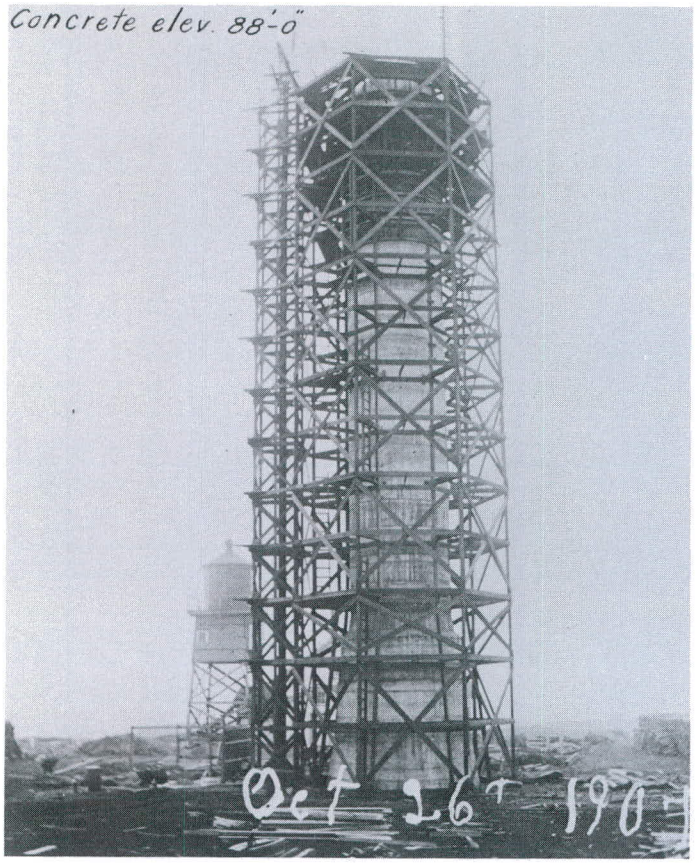


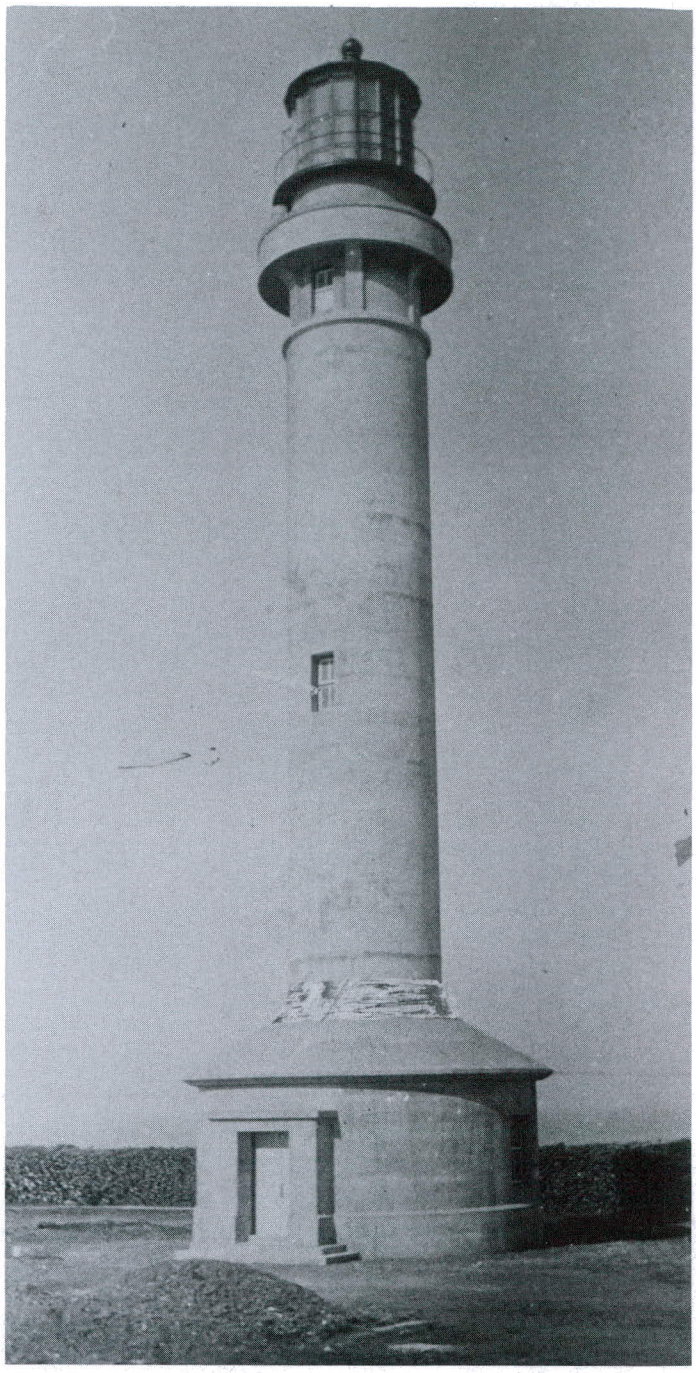


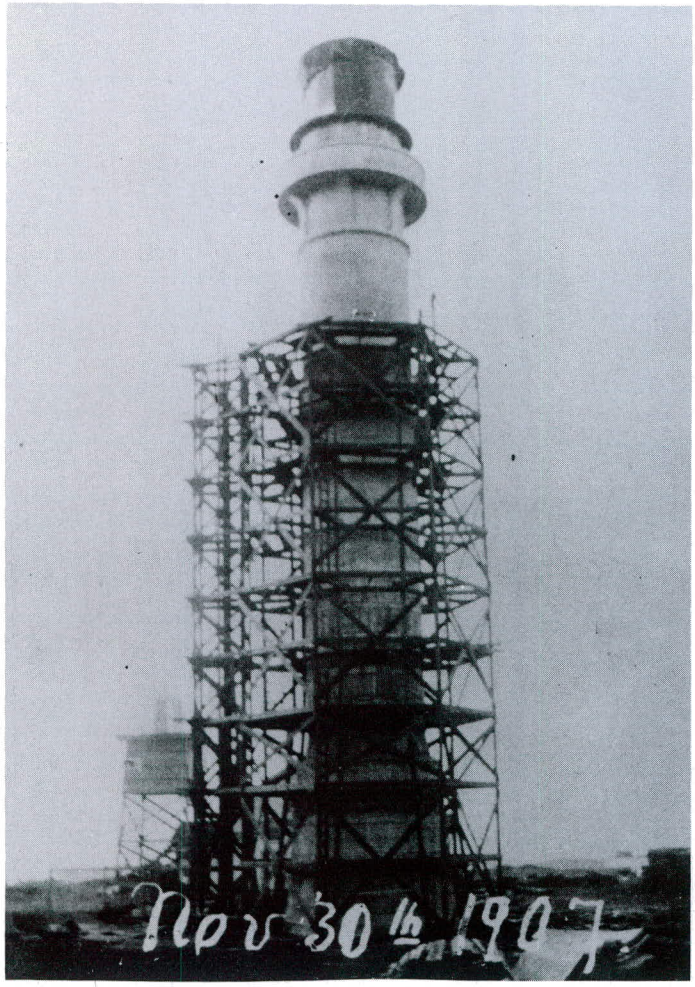
Left photo—temporary tower. Photo above—remains of original brick fourplex which housed the keepers. All the buildings except the wooden fog signal building were damaged to the extent that they had to be replaced. The lower photo depicts the "new" keepers homes which were replaced in the 1960s.

Official U.S. Coast Guard photographs









The Point Arena Light Station tower was rebuilt by a San Francisco chimney company. These photographs show the tower under construction in 1907, the first reinforced concrete lighthouse tower in the United States. In the upper left picture you can see Frank Reynold's mule—which was used to power the elevator that Keeper White speaks of in his story. Note the temporary tower in the lower left photograph. Above is the completed tower with an extra girdle at the base to protect the tower against future earthquakes. Official U.S. Coast Guard photos



John Rankin, Head Keeper of the Fort Point Light Station from 1878 to 1919. U.S. Coast Guard photo