Point Cabrillo Lighthouse graces the coast a mile west of Highway 1 near the colorful town of Mendocino. Amid a pastoral setting, the lighthouse appears to be a white-painted country church. One imagines the strains of *Let the Lower Lights Be Burning* rising from within.

On closer examination, however, one views with fascination the stalwart sentry of another era. Though the big Fresnel lens is still housed in the lantern above the frame tower, automation in the early 1970s saw a large functional reflecting beacon mounted on the structure's roof.

The lighthouse was commissioned in June 1909 and soon became a constant companion to a grand fleet of steam schooners plying the redwood trade, darting in and out of dogholes along the coast. The fearless Scandinavian skippers who manned them blasted their whistles when passing.

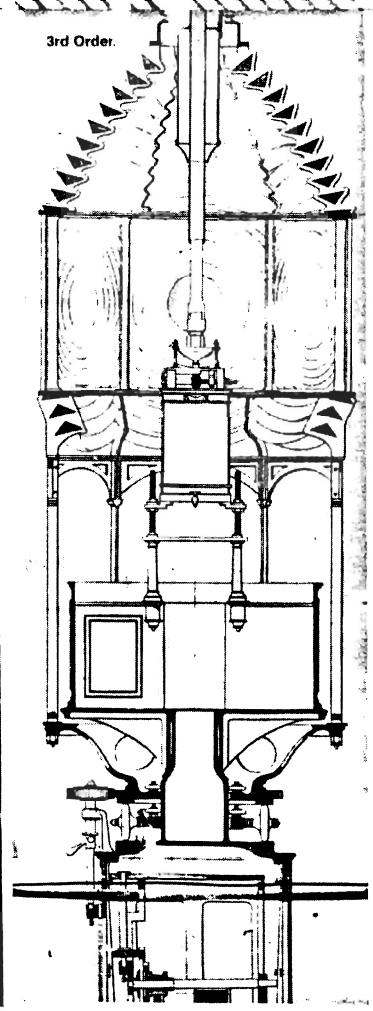
A frequent visitor is octogenarian William Owens, who served eleven of his thirty-three working years as the keeper of the Cabrillo light. Asked about automation, Owens remarked, "Anything automatic always goes haywire just when you need it. We'll have a big wreck one of these days." (60)

What has long been known as the Redwood Coast of northern California is a unique stretch of coastline unlike that found anywhere else. It is a region of heavy breakers, strong winds, persistent fogs, big trees, and rocky bluffs. The shores are peppered with shipwrecks of coastal sailing schooners and steam schooners that in the flourishing era of coastwise shipping hauled the giant redwood logs and lumber out of the dangerous dogholes indenting the hostile coastline.

As a protective measure, a lighthouse was built on the Mendocino shores that was to be of great importance to the coasters. It was placed on Point Cabrillo, three miles from the town of Mendocino and 24 miles north of Point Arena. The light was illuminated for the first time on June 10, 1909, a 47 foot frame tower and fog signal house combined. The lens was of the third order of the system of Fresnel. Though the coastal redwood fleet is no more, the beacon remains a symbol of the past.

The 60 foot high bluff on which the lighthouses stands is riddled with wave tunnels hammered out by the pounding waves which sometimes send scud up to the plateau. In appearance, the octagonal tower and fog signal building from a distance resemble a country church, and it undoubtedly had an aura of the spiritual to tempest-tossed mariners who on stormy nights were warmed by the halo in its crown.





Point Cabrillo Lighthouse was often called the friend of the steam schooner navigators, lumber steamers that hugged the coast. The lightstation was established in 1909 and fitted with a third order lens and lighting apparatus. The structure is still in use, but in the early 1970s when the station was automated, a sizable reflecting beacon was mounted atop the roof, seaward of the tower.

A German named Wihelm Baumgartner was the initial guardian of the light. As fog appeared that first night, he both trimmed the lamp and started up the air compressors that blasted the fog trumpets.

The unstable land on the point where livestock grazed presented problems on occasion. Sometimes the animals got too close to the edge and tumbled to the beach. It was a major job to haul them out. The station, however, was considered one of the more desired duty stations by lighthouse keepers. It was near town where their children could go to school, and where supplies were readily purchased. The station dwellings were roomy and comfortable.

A storm on February 8, 1960 struck with great force sending breakers thundering against the point and tearing out chunks of rock that were thrown great distances. The foghouse doors were ripped off and pieces of wooden siding peeled off. An air compressor and generator were shoved across the room, and debris was scattered all over. Keeper Bill Owens remembered the incident well, he being the last civilian keeper, spending 11 of his 33 lighthouse service years at Cabrillo. He was quoted as saying about automation, "Anything automatic always goes haywire just when you need it. We'll have a big shipwreck one of these days." Somehow time has a way of passing us all by, sort of like ships passing in the night, and new innovations are here to stay.

Coast Guard-manned till the 1970's, the change to automation saw an aero-marine type rotating beacon mounted on the roof, curtains put around the Fresnel, and the foghorns removed in favor of a buoy with sounding apparatus placed offshore.

Part of Cabrillo National Monument operated by the National Park Service, the lighthouse and park are presently open to the public from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. daily and the third order lens is there for all to see.

The lighthouse at Point Cabrillo in design looks like the first lighthouse erected on the West Coast. The lantern of the lighthouse sits atop the Cape Cod dwelling and was lighted in 1909. Today the light of this lighthouse is measured at 700,000 candlepower, and, because its focal plane is but eighty-four feet above the sea, it can be seen only fifteen miles. That distance, however, is adequate to reach out to the main coastal shipping lanes, so that after a vessel has altered course at Point Arena, she may shortly take bearings on the Point Arena and Point Cabrillo lighthouse to determine if she is on the proper course



Historic Point Cabrillo lighthouse is architecturally unique. Twin air sirens can be seen atop the beacon's roof. C. 1915. (Robert J. Lee)

POINT CABRILLO

Point Cabrillo was the light of the steam schooners, those fearless little lumber ships that plied the "doghole" ports of the Mendocino Coast. It is still the sentinel of the commercial fishermen and of coastal freighters. It is a beautiful light station where time has stood still.

At Point Cabrillo, the land and sea become a part of each other. The Pacific surges up inlets on both sides of the lighthouse. Even on moderate days the exposed position of the station is evident as the ocean rushes in and explodes with such force that spray reaches well above the sixty-foot-high cliffs. The wind then takes the tops off the spray and drops of salty rain fall upon the lighthouse. The sea thus becomes a part of the air, the mist blowing about the flat headland with its carpet of wildflowers and hedgerow of cypresses.

Over a dozen ships have met their doom between the neighboring ports of Caspar and Mendocino City. Not only coastwise shipping, but the lumber vessels using many nearby coves needed a guidepost. The need was most acute during easterly and northerly weather when these ships hugged the shore, depending on the lee of the land as protection from wind and sea. In 1909, as a response to the local lumber trade, Point Cabrillo Light Station was built. Carpenters, teams and wagons swarmed about the headland, constructing a dozen buildings. It was to be a true lumber-country beacon with every structure—save the concrete oil house—built of wood.

Almost the entire station was built in a single line, at a right angle to the sea. Closest to the ocean was the lighthouse, a unique octagonal tower, 47 feet high, with an attached fog signal room on the seaward side. The completed sentinel, finished with handsome siding, looked much like a country church, except that the lantern room stood in place of a steeple. The lantern room had a single balcony and held a jewel-like third order lens. The lens was mounted atop four tiers of brass pillars and rotated on ball bearings. The wooden stairs in the tower were steep, resembling ship's ladders. The largest portion of the lighthouse was the spacious fog signal room that held the gas engines and air compressors for the twin sirens that protruded from the room's roof. The entire structure presented a colorful appearance, with black lantern room, red roof, white walls, and gray trim.

The next building landward of the lighthouse was the concrete oil house, a small, flat-roofed structure used to store kerosene, paint, and other flammable liquids. Since the Lighthouse Service had converted its lamps to kerosene, it was no longer considered safe to store oil inside



Point Cabrillo lighthouse under construction. 1909. (U.S. Coast Guard)

the lighthouse. Cement or rock oil houses thereafter became a necessity.

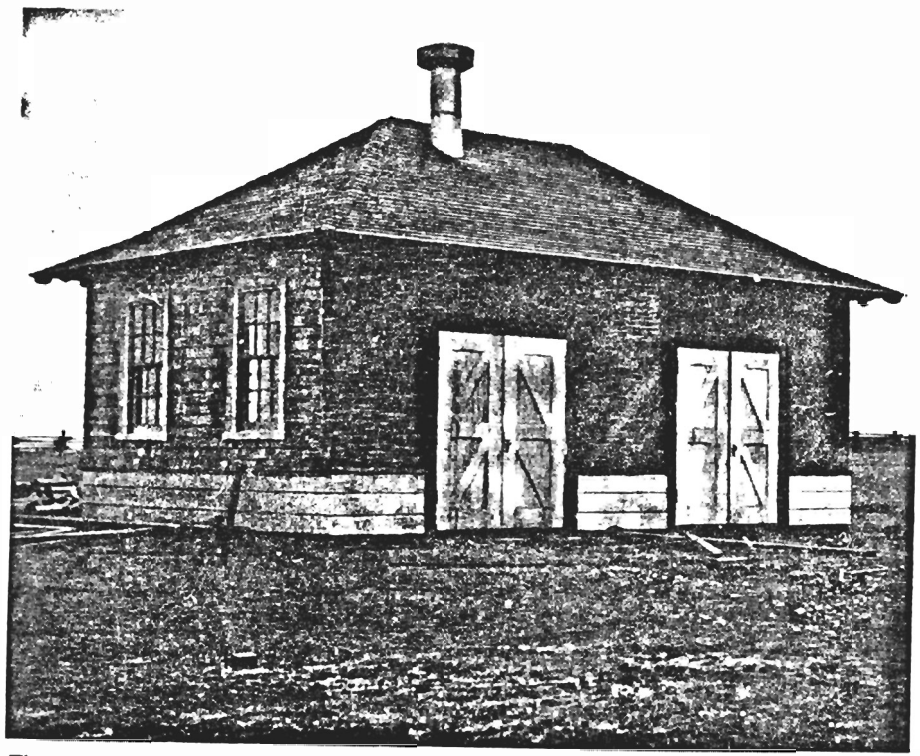
Beyond the oil house were the carpenter shop and blacksmith shop, both housed in one building. Wickies were expected to do most repair work themselves, be it metal or wood work. The navigational aids had to be kept going, storm damage repaired immediately, horses must be shod, windows replaced, and new cabinets built. The station had to have all the tools and materials necessary to remain independent and fully operational for several weeks or months at a time.

East of the blacksmith-carpenter building, three dwellings were built, all in a row, extending away from the sea. The principal keeper's residence was in the center and was perhaps a bit fancier than the other houses. All three were handsome, substantial homes, two stories high, with porches, brick fireplaces, and basements. There were large fenced yards, front and back. In the rear, beyond the gardens, were three fancy sheds, one for each family. Built in a style to match the architecture of the dwellings, each of these buildings served a light-keeping family as a granary, storehouse, coal house, and workshop—all in one. Behind the sheds was the pump house, cistern, and water tank. To the south, some

distance away from the dwellings, was the barn, shared by all. There was nothing compact about Point Cabrillo, it was far-flung and pastoral.

On June 10, 1909, the station was complete and the lamp was lighted for the first time. It was most likely lighted by keeper Wilhelm Baumgartner. There must have been a bit of summer fog that evening, because the keepers cranked up the gasoline engines with their huge belts connected to air compressors and the fog sirens began their warning screams.

The three keepers had a choice station. Save for some heavy fog and occasional storms, Point Cabrillo boasted fine weather. Schools, churches, and stores were close by and the roads were satisfactory. There was plenty of water and good soil for farming. This was to become one of the most popular stations in the Lighthouse Service, particularly for families with school-age children. Assistant keeper Harry Miller had certainly been grateful when he arrived in 1935, after seven years at windy, fog-bound Point Sur light. Point Cabrillo was ideal for him and his family. Each keeper was allowed three cows, several pigs, and all the



The combination blacksmith shop and carpenter shop was an important building at Point Cabrillo. Many light stations had such structures, but today only this one remains in all of California. 1909. (U.S. Coast Guard)

chickens he wanted. Before long, Miller had four hundred fryers clucking in his backyard. If one got tired of chicken, there was game in the hills and fish from the sea. The barn served as a slaughterhouse, and venison and ham hung in the basements of the dwellings. South of the light, there was a boom used to lower a skiff for offshore fishing. Backyards yielded a bounty of vegetables and fruit. Latticework and trellises supported flowers and vines.

Point Cabrillo did have a special hazard. Its high cliffs sometimes became quite soft, for as much as fifteen feet from the edge. Occasionally, a cow or horse strayed too close, the cliff gave way and the animal fell into the sea. One fortunate cow survived and keepers went in after her. They swam her through the surf and led her ashore and up the cliff, using grain as an enticement.

The usual maintenance work of painting, fence-building, roofing, and cabinet-making was similar to any other light station. Cement work, however, had one advantage at Point Cabrillo; gravel from the beach was perfect for making concrete. A little incline railway had been built down the cliff north of the lighthouse during construction of the station to haul gravel up for floors, basements, and walks. Later, it was replaced by stairs, but the beach continued to be used as a source of building materials.

As with all the light stations, there were long watches to be stood; every night for the light, and around the clock during thick weather when the fog signal was operating. Watches were six or eight hours long, and they were spent at the lighthouse in the little watch room that is on the south side of the entrance. Periodically, the man on duty would check the light or step outside to look for fast-approaching fog. (Point Cabrillo was one of those stations which could log over 1,000 hours of fog annually.) Generally, there was plenty of time to just sit at the desk and read the *Saturday Evening Post* by the table lamp. Those serene evenings are among Harry Miller's fondest memories.

In 1939 Thomas Atkinson became head keeper after having spent his earlier years at such lonely posts as St. George Reef and the Farallons. He was a dedicated, hard-working keeper, remembered as a kind and gentle man. He once saved Harry Miller's life.

The basements in the dwellings had been repeatedly flooded, and Miller and Atkinson were determined to dig a deep trench behind the houses to allow the seepage to drain into the ocean. It was necessarily a deep trench, and at about six feet down the men encountered unstable, watery sand. They continued digging, anyway. Miller was in the trench as they reached a depth of eight feet. Suddenly, the first assistant found himself sinking into the sand, unable to lift his feet. A moment later, the entire trench began caving in on Miller. Atkinson had already perceived what was happening. Instantaneously, he reached down and



Point Cabrillo was a spacious and pastoral light station, a favorite of light-keeping families. Dwellings are at right. The entire station remains unchanged today. C. 1930's. (U.S. Coast Guard)

grabbed his partner. Miller's boots resisted, but miraculously his feet slipped out and Atkinson pulled him away from a sandy grave. The boots still lie buried in the yard behind the center dwelling.

The advent of World War II was to make the watches less peaceful than previously, especially during the early months of the conflict when Japanese submarines prowled the West Coast. The Coast Guard Beach Patrol was set up to guard hundreds of lonely miles of California shore. The Beach Patrol usually made their rounds using horses or jeeps, a significant advantage over the "sandpounders" of the early Life-Saving Service patrols, who once walked the coast on foot looking for shipwrecks. The operation was similar, however, and lookout towers and barracks were placed at regular intervals along the coast, often at existing lifeboat or light stations. Point Cabrillo was one of the sites selected, and soon over a dozen men were manning a lookout tower or patrolling the beaches and headlands.

Fears of Japanese spies landing along the Pacific Coast made things a bit jumpy at Point Cabrillo. Keepers began taking their hunting rifles

with them when they stood watch alone at the lighthouse. One night, Harry Miller was relaxing in the watch room. During his spare moments, Miller had made a few improvements in the lighthouse. He had added a built-in medicine cabinet in the lavatory, and in the watch room he had installed a small windowpane that opened like a door to allow fresh air to come in. Suddenly, Miller was shocked to see an Asiatic-looking hand by the little window. He grabbed his rifle, but pulled himself together long enough to use the direct telephone to the dwellings. He told his two fellow keepers that there seemed to be some trouble down at the lighthouse and that they had better come fast. Miller also suggested that they bring their rifles.

Seeing his co-workers appear with rifles at the ready, Miller charged out of the lighthouse door, ready to blast the invader back to Japan. Sure enough, someone was there, but fortuitously, Miller was a man who looked before he shot. There on the ground sat a young Indian woman, the daughter of a neighbor. She had come to the lighthouse seeking help in finding her way home. Thus ended the battle for Point Cabrillo.

In January, 1952, William "Bill" Owens transferred from Point Arena to succeed Thomas Atkinson as head keeper. He would be the last civilian to serve at either station. By this time, changes had occurred at the station. Farming was no longer practiced, and the old sirens had given way to a pair of diaphone fog horns.

Just as the light stations had changed, so too had the type of distress calls the Coast Guard received. Large ships stranding at Point Arena had become a rarity, but large numbers of fishing boats still ran into trouble. Most of the fishing boats were from Noyo harbor, to the north of Point Cabrillo, near the town of Fort Bragg. This meant a delay of several hours while the Arena Cove 36-foot motor lifeboat came north to anwer a rescue call. The Coast Guard decided, therefore, to close Arena Cove Lifeboat Station. A mooring was obtained in Noyo harbor, and the motor lifeboat began serving mariners from there. Later, it became apparent that a larger patrol boat was needed to cover a territory that ran from Fish Rocks in Sonoma County north to Shelter Cove. An 83-foot patrol boat was stationed here, later to be replaced by an "82-footer." Thus, larger and faster boats with greater towing capacity, a longer cruising range, and better accommodations for the crew became the mainstay of Coast Guard search and rescue operations.* With rescue boats on the Mendocino coast now moored at Noyo, Bill Owens found that he could count on a quick response to calls for assistance at Point Cabrillo.

*A similar change later occurred at the Bodega Bay Coast Guard Station during the 1970's, since the station had similar calls and conditions to Noyo. Work in heavy surf has also required that a 44-foot motor lifeboat be retained there. Recently, a 25-foot motor surfboat was added at Noyo for surf work.



The storm of February, 1960 was the worst Point Cabrillo experienced. This aerial photograph was taken after conditions had subsided somewhat, yet the sea is still a complete mass of breaking white water. (U.S. Coast Guard)



Battered Point Cabrillo lighthouse immediately after the February, 1960 storm ended. Notice that the heavy doors have been smashed in, siding torn away, and windows broken. (U.S. Coast Guard)

Owens always kept an eye on the sea. During the 1950's he had spotted a commercial fishing boat drifting onto the rocks off the light. It appeared as though no one was on board. A call to Noyo brought the patrol boat in time to get a line on the fishing boat before it was destroyed in the breakers. A boarding party found that the boat was not abandoned at all. The hapless fisherman had gotten his arm caught in some machinery and was trapped on his own boat.

On another occasion there was even less time to effect a rescue. One day Owens saw smoke and, grabbing his binoculars, he could see a commercial fishing boat afire. This time he could see the crew. Two men were in the water, hanging from the boat's stern where the flames had driven them. Again, a call to Noyo brought the cutter and the mariners were saved.

The patrol boats, like their 36-foot predecessors, went out on rescue calls no matter what the weather. During the particularly fierce storms, the Noyo harbor entrance could be treacherous. One stormy night Owens and a Coast Guard officer heard that the patrol boat was in trouble. They went down to the Noyo entrance to investigate and found the cutter lying on the jetty, nearly turned over, with its side caved in. The crew had climbed off and made their own way safely to shore. The patrol boat was a total loss, and Owens recalls watching it being dismantled. A few months later a second cutter also was thrown against the jetty, although fortunately with less disastrous results.

No place on the Mendocino coast could boast fiercer storm waves than Point Cabrillo. Just two-tenths of a mile offshore the sea is 30 fathoms deep, and there is little to prevent storm waves from hitting the exposed point with full force. Harry Miller had seen waves climb the sixty-foot cliffs and sheer off a wire fence held in place by posts six inches square. But this was nothing compared to what Bill Owens was to witness.

On February 8, 1960 a storm came in from the west, beginning about 8 p.m. There was a westerly wind and the seas became increasingly rough. Soon it became apparent that conditions were going to be much worse than usual. Seas began hitting the bluff with loud and heavy force, and then started to climb the headland, actually washing across the station's flat grasslands high above the sea. The waves were now coming up the bluff, roaring across the headland, and hitting the lighthouse. The light had been turned on earlier, but the fog signal was not operating. The assistant keeper on watch called Owens to say that he could not get to the lighthouse to start the fog horns because the waves were washing past the lighthouse. Owens phoned Coast Guard headquarters in San Francisco to report that there would be no fog signal that night. The sea had become a mass of white water.

During the night the great seas increased, continuing to pound the cliffs. As Isabel Owens remembers, it sounded "like a stampede of cattle." Huge rocks were torn off the cliff face and thrown ashore by the waves. The storm continued all night and well into the next day.

As it subsided, the keepers and their families came out to inspect the damage. Rocks and gravel were everywhere. Two huge boulders, weighing close to a ton each, had been thrown ashore near the barn. Another boulder, weighing nearly two tons, had been thrown about one hundred feet beyond the edge of the bluff. When the crew entered the lighthouse, they found that the large doors at the seaward end of the fog signal room had been smashed open. A generator and an air compressor had been shoved across the room. The generator had been bolted down. On the floor there was up to a foot of gravel, sand, and rock. All of the machinery would have to be dismantled and cleaned, piece by piece. The exterior siding on the lighthouse's seaward wall had been torn off.

The waves had even gone beyond the lighthouse. A concrete walk was torn up as far as the carpenter shop and the shop's windows were broken. The area was strewn with rocks and other debris.

It would be days before the fog signal would be restored. Carpenters, electricians, and machinists all arrived to make repairs. The machinery in the fog signal room was removed, cleaned, and finally returned. A bulldozer and crew cleaned up the area, pushing rocks and boulders into the sea. Doors, windows, and siding were replaced.

After the storm, a lifetime resident of the area, a gentleman nearly ninety years old, came calling on the Owens. He wanted them to know that it was the worst storm he had ever seen along the Mendocino coast. Interestingly, there had been only a moderate wind, but great seas. During the entire storm the third order lens had operated flawlessly.

Bill Owens served at Point Cabrillo until his retirement in 1963, which marked the end of professional, civilian light keeping on the North Coast.

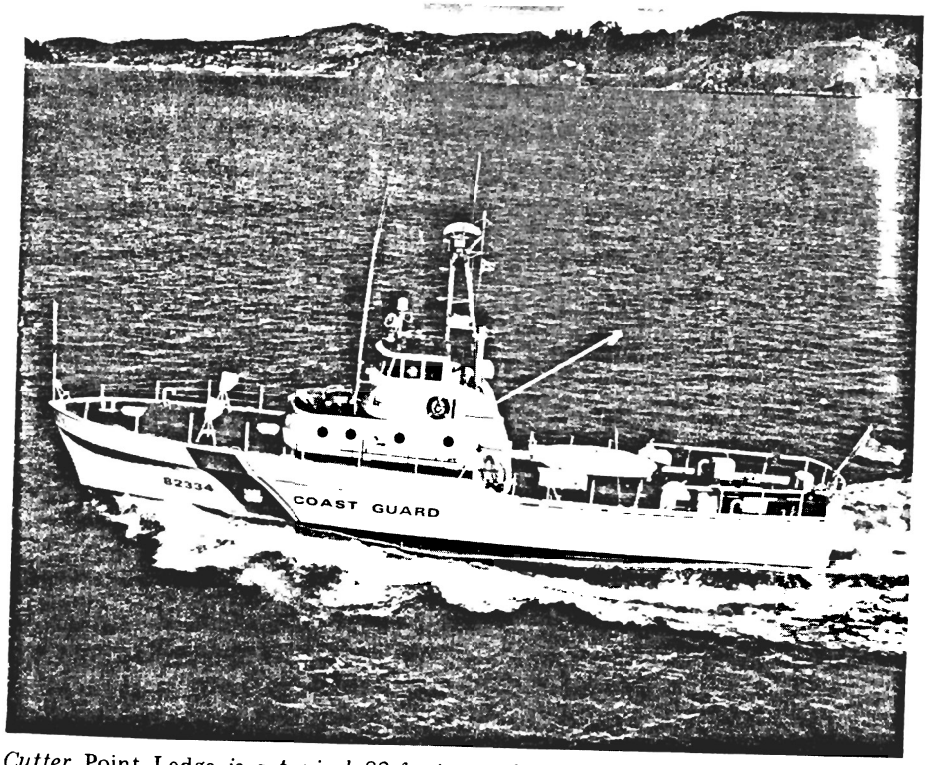
Coast Guardsmen continued to operate the light until the early 1970's. Then the beacon was automated. A large, reflecting beacon was mounted atop the lighthouse roof, just seaward of the tower. The fog horns were removed and a buoy with a sound signal was substituted.

Today, the entire station remains intact, from the beautiful lighthouse to the sheds. It is the best example of a complete, old-time light station in northern California. Each structure should be retained and preserved. The beach area is an abalone preserve where scientists study marine life. The old pastures are a far-flung carpet of native wild flowers.

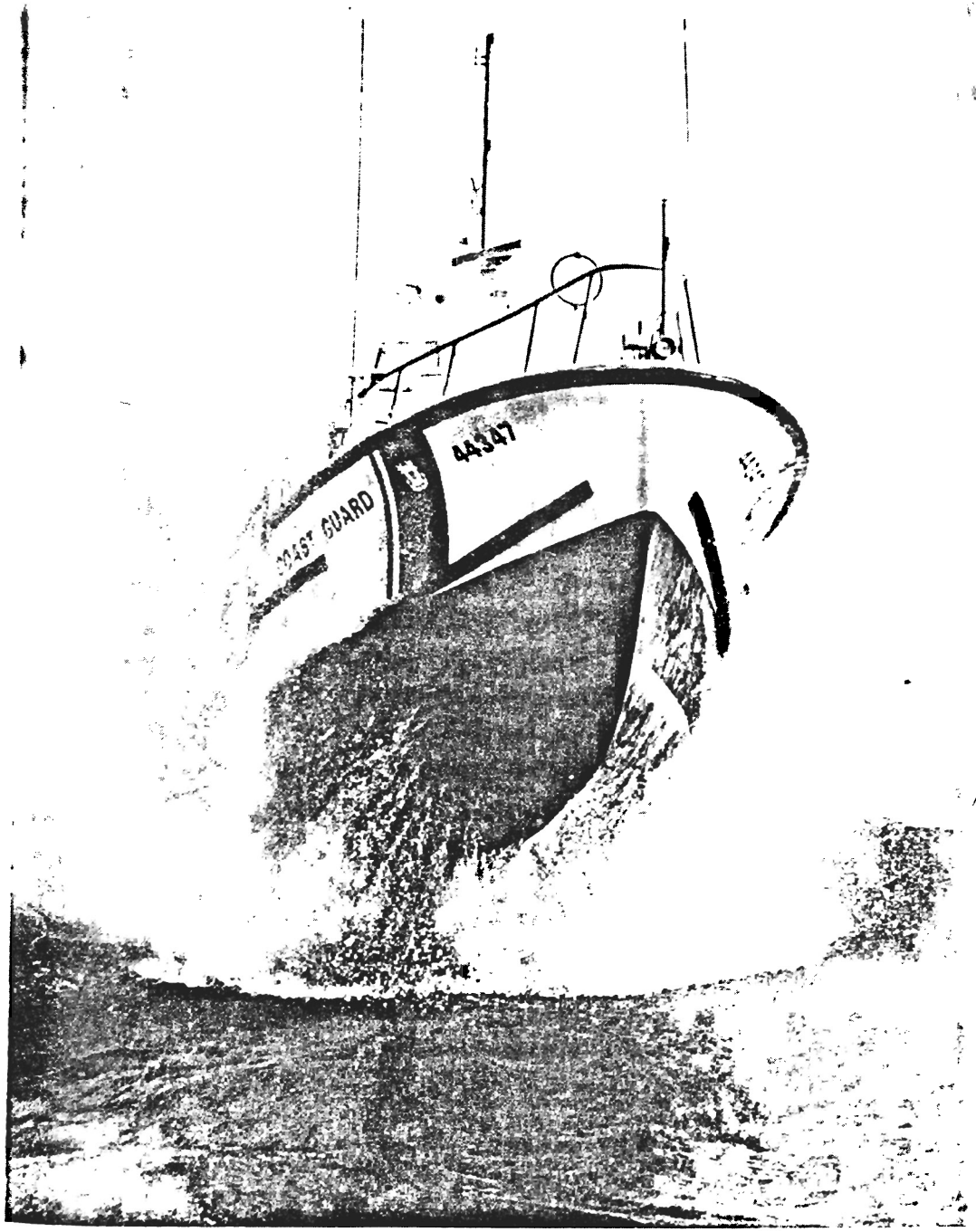
Recently, the Coast Guard refurbished the three residences; and they are now home for some of the officers and crew (and their families) who man the 82-foot patrol boat *Point Ledge*, the current rescue

boat at Noyo. It is fitting that her crew has inherited the old dwellings.

The station is currently closed to the public. It would be appropriate and very worth while if the Coast Guard would again open this historic station to visitors several hours each weekend. For the present, however, the station can be viewed from the seaward end of Heeser Drive at the northwest edge of the town of Mendocino. The lighthouse can also be seen from State Highway 1, about a mile north of the Russian Gulch Bridge. Both offer lovely views but Californians should be allowed to again visit the magnificent grounds of one of the most interesting and beautiful light stations in America.



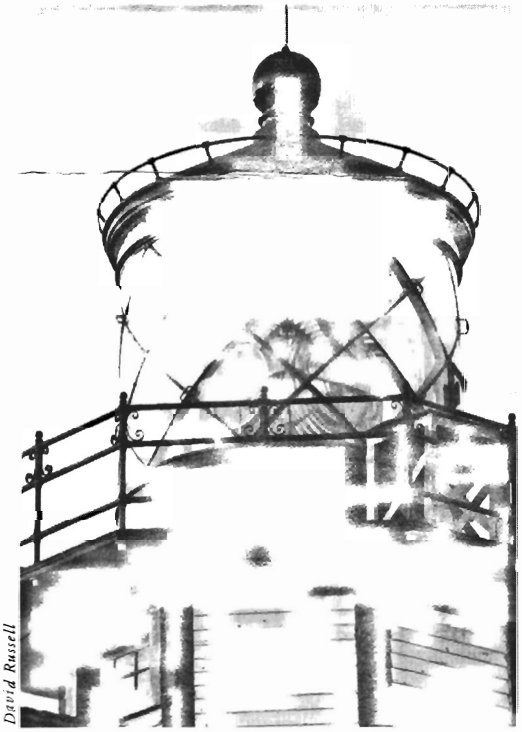
Cutter Point Ledge *is a typical 82-foot patrol boat frequently used in Redwood Coast search-and-rescue operations. Shown leaving San Francisco Bay in 1971, this vessel is now stationed at Noyo Harbor. (U.S. Coast Guard)*



A modern 44-foot Coast Guard motor lifeboat crashes through the Redwood Coast's heavy surf. These rugged, steel lifeboats replaced the wooden 36-footers. Perhaps the finest rescue boat in the world, the "44" frequently handles rescue calls under conditions where no other type of vessel could survive. 1972. (U.S. Coast Guard)

Point Cabrillo
Lightkeeper's Log
The Newsletter of the North Coast Interpretive Association
Vol. IV, No. 1 • Fall 1999

The Lighthouse Restoration


David Russell

After three years of planning and a year of construction, the historic Fresnel lens has been returned to operation. It's been quite a saga, but on April Fool's Day, 1999, the fully restored Lantern room was lifted back onto the tower. The lens, which had been meticulously refurbished, was reassembled and reinstated as the active aid in time for its 90th anniversary. Hooray! Through the dedication of volunteers, staff, and financial supporters, we have realized a triumph for historic restoration unique in the United States, inspiring other lighthouse organizations to pursue the same goal. Everyone who has supported Point Cabrillo through the years should feel very, very proud of this accomplishment. A big round of applause to you all!

The restoration of the Lighthouse fog signal building is progressing steadily, but with unexpected delays and rising costs. Each board removed revealed deeper structural damage than expected, and we learned just how hard it could be to work in the chilling wind-whipped fog of the coldest summer anyone around here remembers! We need approximately $30,000 more than we now have to complete repairs to the building, so opening for public use will be delayed while we concentrate on raising the money and getting the structure protected for winter.

But the progress is visible - the dormer windows, reconstructed from historic photographs, are in place on the new red roof, and the fog horns and vent stack are back, as bright and shiny as they looked in 1909. The rotten studs, corner posts, and sheathing have been exorcised, the all-new siding is primed and ready for mounting, and new windows are ready to install. Weather and construction gods permitting, the siding should be up before the new year. We hope to open the Lighthouse as an interpretive center by summer of 2000, but experience is teaching us not to count our chickens too early, and much depends on funding. □

And what else have we been doing around the place?

Besides work at the Lighthouse, projects recently or soon to be completed include a paved and landscaped visitor's parking area, an upgraded water system that makes the Preserve's abundant water available for fire suppression, a marked trail system and new self guiding brochure, expanded marine science exhibits, and a catalogued lending library of books and videos. Next in line to jump off the planning pages: new public restrooms, replanting the cypress windbreak, shoring up erosion damage to the peninsula, and....


David Russell

Ron Bloomquist puts the final touches on the lantern before it's hoisted back in place.