

# Punta Gorda

- Once a Proud Light Station -  
Virtually Burned to the Ground

By Timothy Harrison



In April of 1970 the Bureau of Land Management ordered every structure made of wood at the Punta Gorda Lighthouse to be burned to the ground. This original photo in the archives of *Lighthouse Digest* shows one of the keeper's homes totally engulfed in flames.

If it were still intact today, California's once beautiful Punta Gorda Light Station could have been the site of a magnificent, although remote, lighthouse bed and breakfast with an interpretive museum that would have provided the visitor with the history of the lighthouse and the rugged coastline where lighthouse keepers once served in hardship, but faithfully, for the benefit of others. But, it was not meant to be.

By most lighthouse standards, the Punta Gorda Lighthouse had a short life span as a staffed station: only 39 years. Built in 1912, by 1951 the light station, in one of the most rugged lighthouse locations on the west coast, had been de-staffed and abandoned to the elements. Access to the Punta Gorda Lighthouse was so difficult that, even in its last years of operation, horses were still used to get supplies and mail from the nearest town, the small community of Petrolia, California.

The fog signal building at Punta Gorda Light Station was completed in 1911 and began sounding its signal on June 22nd of that year. The lens was finally installed in the tower in January of the following year and was lighted for the first time on January 15, 1912.

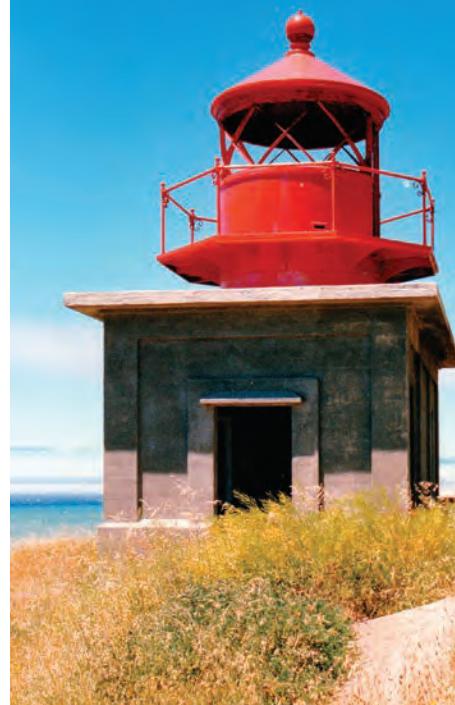
The Punta Gorda Light Station originally consisted of 22 acres in one of the few areas along this part of the state where there was enough room between the high bluffs and the sea to construct

the buildings that would serve as the light station. Because of various conditions, there was absolutely no place to build a dock, so supplies had to be landed by boat at quite a distance from the site and then dragged down the beach by horse drawn sleds or wagons.

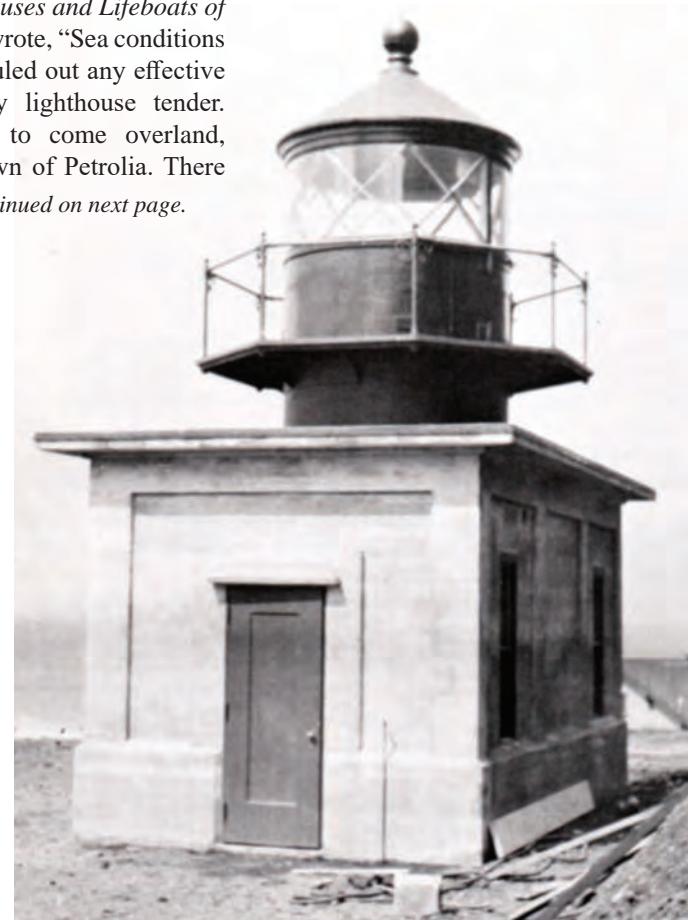
The concrete light tower itself was short by many lighthouse standards, only 27 feet tall, but it sat high on the bluff. Three beautiful keeper's homes were constructed, all of the same basic design to those being constructed at the time at Point Cabrillo Lighthouse in Mendocino, California. Also built at the same time, were, as mentioned previously, the wooden fog signal building and a blacksmith/tool shed building, a concrete oil house, and some storage sheds.

Although the construction of the Punta Gorda Lighthouse was a major project in itself, maintaining it was just as difficult, if not more so, and because of its remote location, some of the early keepers called it the "Alcatraz of Lighthouses." Ralph Shanks Jr. and Janetta Thompson Shanks in their book *Lighthouses and Lifeboats of the Redwood Coast* wrote, "Sea conditions and offshore rocks ruled out any effective supply operation by lighthouse tender. Most supplies had to come overland, through the little town of Petrolia. There

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Modern era photo of the Punta Gorda Lighthouse without a lens and when its lantern was painted red. (Photo courtesy Bob and Sandra Shanklin, The Lighthouse People.)



The Punta Gorda Lighthouse when it was under construction. (Lighthouse Digest archives.)

This photo was taken in 1912 immediately after the Punta Gorda Lighthouse tower was completed and before the lens was installed in the lantern. (Photo courtesy U.S. Coast Guard.)

are two routes between Punta Gorda and Petrolia. One is a long, overland trail up and down high, rugged mountains. The other route is by way of the beach and the Mattole River, a distance of eleven miles. The beach route had two advantages; it was a shorter trip and during good weather the horse or mule drawn wagon could make the journey. However, during the winter months, with common wind gusts up to 70 miles per hour, the beach route would often be impossible so the keepers would ride a horse to town for fresh provisions, carrying back only what would fit in the saddlebags."

The light station had at least three horses at any given time. One of the last horses and the one with the longest tenure to serve at Punta Gorda Lighthouse was a steady steed name "Old Bill," who was very gentle but often had a mind of his own, and was not keen on walking through any type of water or puddles.

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Paschal "Pass" Hunter proudly posed for this photo in 1905 when he was the 1st assistant keeper at California's Cape Mendocino Lighthouse where he served from 1903 to 1911 when he transferred to become the very first 1st assistant keeper to serve at the newly established Punta Gorda Lighthouse. He was born on July 13, 1856 in Mattole, California. He did not serve long at Punta Gorda Lighthouse. Unfortunately he died of a heart attack at the lighthouse on April 6, 1912. (Lighthouse Digest archives.)



In 1911 Frederick Arthur Harrington, shown here on the left, became the first head keeper of the Punta Gorda Lighthouse. Frederick A. Harrington was no stranger to lighthouse life; born at California's Point Reyes Lighthouse, he was the son of veteran lighthouse keeper Frederick L. Harrington who had served at Trinidad Head Lighthouse, Cape Mendocino Lighthouse, and Piedras Blanca Lighthouse. In 1919 Frederick A. Harrington transferred from Punta Gorda Lighthouse to become the head keeper at the Alcatraz Lighthouse on Alcatraz Island in California where he served until 1939. He is shown here at the Alcatraz Lighthouse with Patrick John Ashford in the middle and Leo Jordon on the right. You can learn more about the life of Frederick A. Harrington in the book *Alcatraz Unchained*, by Jerry Lewis Champion, Jr. that is mostly taken from the memories of his granddaughter Wanda (Harrington) Hart. (Photo courtesy U.S. Lighthouse Society.)



It is believed that this is Paschal "Pass" Hunter, the first 1st assistant keeper, and Frederick A. Harrington, the first head keeper of the Punta Gorda Lighthouse, posing for a photo at the top of the newly completed light tower. (Photo courtesy Bureau of Land Management.)



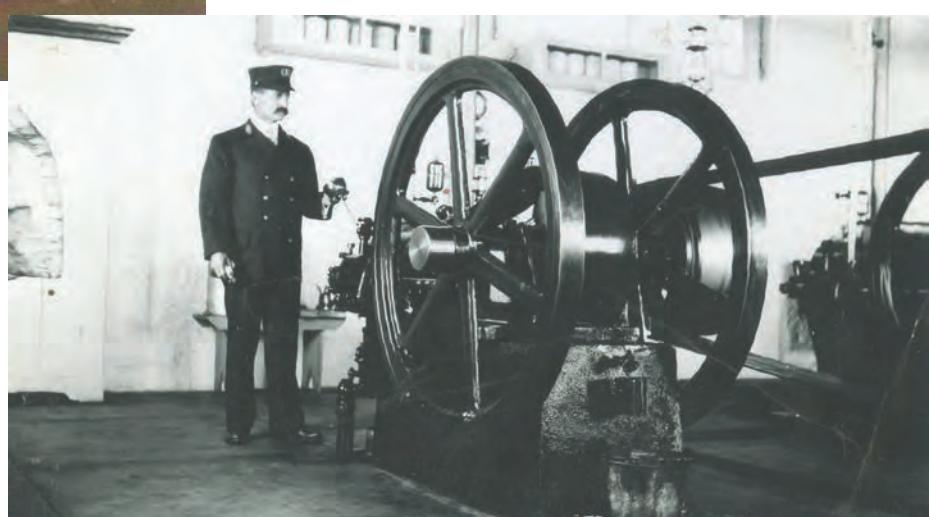
This view of the Punta Gorda Light Station shows the wooden fog signal building, the concrete oil house, and the light tower. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives, circa 1916.)



Punta Gorda Lighthouse 2nd assistant keeper Fletcher Wills is shown with the fog signal equipment in 1913. He had previously been stationed at Point Sur Lighthouse. After serving at Punta Gorda Lighthouse, he was stationed at Table Bluff Lighthouse from 1917 to 1920.

(Photo courtesy of the Bureau of Land Management.)

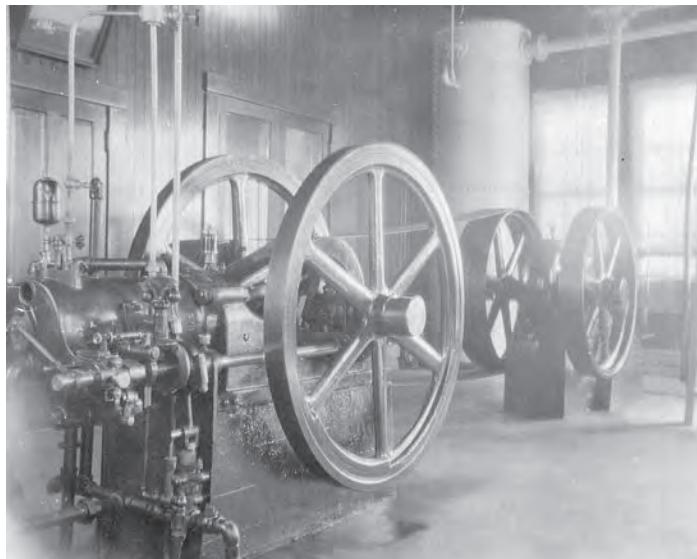
Before he became the head keeper at Punta Gorda Lighthouse, Frederick A. Harrington was an assistant keeper at Point Reyes Lighthouse from 1903 to 1905. While stationed at Point Reyes lighthouse, he married Edna Mae "Teddie" Hunter (born October 31, 1880) who was the daughter of Paschal Hunter, who would become Harrington's first assistant keeper at Punta Gorda Lighthouse. She was the brother of Perry S. Hunter who was the assistant keeper at Point Reyes Lighthouse from 1902 to 1904 and later also went on to serve at the Punta Gorda Lighthouse. Interestingly, Perry S. Hunter married Maude Harrington, who was the daughter of lighthouse keeper Frederick L. Harrington and sister of lighthouse keeper Frederick A. Harrington. This is the wedding photo of Frederick A. Harrington and Edna Hunter Harrington taken in 1904 at Point Reyes Lighthouse. (Photo courtesy W. Hart collection, Mattole Historical Society.)



When World War II came, the light station finally received some modernization, thanks mainly to the Coast Guard Beach Patrol station with barracks that were built at the mouth of the Mattole River to guard the shore to the north. The Coast Guard built a road along the foot of the bluffs, and the station received a jeep and a bulldozer tractor capable of pulling a large sled loaded with supplies. But winter storms often closed the road, and once again, the only way to reach town and get supplies was to saddle up the horse. Although electricity had finally reached the remote station, it was unreliable and the back-up generators saw constant use.

Other than the horses, as with many

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The interior of the fog signal building at Punta Gorda Lighthouse showing the engines and air compressors as they appeared in 1916. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Lighthouse Society.)



The newly completed barn at Punta Gorda Lighthouse as it appeared in 1912. The keepers' homes in the distance give the appearance of being a large estate. Notice the horse drawn cart and the lighthouse keeper walking. (Photo courtesy U.S. Coast Guard's Historian.)



Another view of the barn at Punta Gorda Lighthouse Station. A lighthouse keeper is shown on the far right with a young boy near him, who was most likely the son of one of the lighthouse keepers. The man on the far left was probably a visitor or a Lighthouse Service employee, such as the Inspector. (Photo courtesy U.S. Lighthouse Society.)



Shown here is Constance "Connie" Muriel Lindley, wife of Charles W. Lindley, who served first as an assistant keeper at Punta Gorda Lighthouse, and then as the head keeper from 1928-39. It is not known when or where this photo was taken, but it was probably taken at the Punta Gorda Light Station when the keepers tried using a truck to travel the beach. (Photo courtesy Bureau of Land Management.)



The wooden fog signal building at Punta Gorda Lighthouse gave the appearance of a nice looking, well-kept home. But inside was all the heavy machinery that operated the fog horns. It was stated that between all of the brass oil cans of many different styles, brass boxes, and brass on the machinery, there was more brass at the Punta Gorda Light Station than at any other lighthouse on the west coast. However, it was also reported that some of the interior walls of the fog signal building were decorated by beautiful oil paintings, purportedly painted by some of the early keepers and their wives. It is unknown what happened to those paintings or when they were removed from the building.

Two of the three men shown in this photo were definitely lighthouse keepers, identified by their lighthouse hats. The third man may have been a Lighthouse Service employee or a visitor. Mostly likely the dog belonged to one of the keepers. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)



Shown here in his younger years is Charles W. Lindley (Jan. 12, 1874 – Mar. 4, 1957) who was the head keeper at Punta Gorda Lighthouse from 1921 to 1939. Charles W. Lindley was born in Connecticut and took Horace's Greely's advice of "Go west young man, go west." (Photo courtesy Bureau of Land Management.)

This image provides an excellent view of all three of the magnificent keepers' homes. The head keeper lived in the middle house and the assistants lived in the other two homes. If you look very closely at the bottom left of the photo, you will notice that there are clothes hanging on the line from the assistant keeper's house. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)



remote light stations, Punta Gorda had its share of other animals. There were cows, goats, and chickens, all raised for food. In the early years the keepers even grew their own hay for the cows and horses to supplement feed shipments. And of course there were the other family companions such as dogs and cats.

Ed Neumeier, a newspaper reporter who visited the Punta Gorda Lighthouse just as it was about to close up said that the trip just to get to the lighthouse was an adventure unto itself. After the 11 mile journey from the community of Petrolia that took close to two hours, using all kinds of transportation - car, horse, jeep, and lots of walking to get to the lighthouse - he wrote, "And you come around another small point and the station is in sight, a

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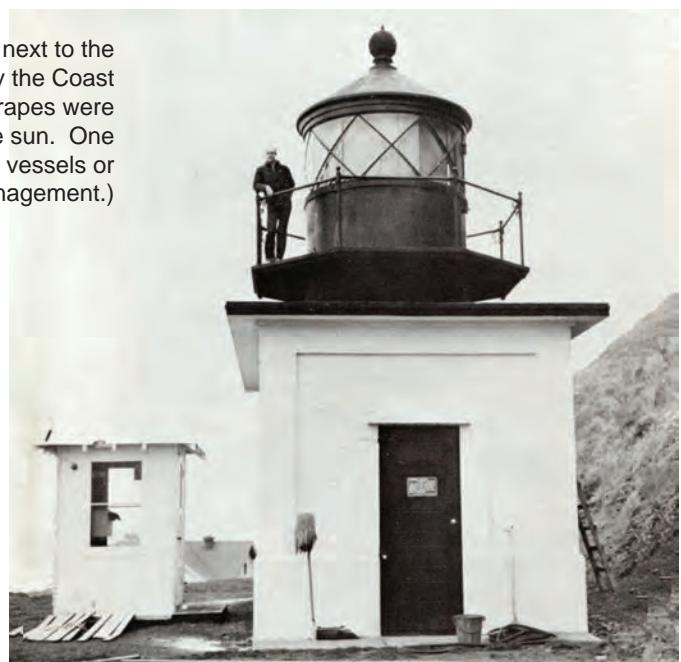


Close-up view of the keepers' homes. The keepers and their wives complained about the number of window panes that constantly had to be cleaned and always ready for inspection. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)

During World War II the Coast Guard built this small structure next to the Punta Gorda Lighthouse to be used in inclement weather by the Coast Guard's Beach patrol. This image shows that the curtains or drapes were drawn in the lantern to protect the lens from the harmful rays of the sun. One Coast Guardsman stood watch at all times looking for enemy vessels or enemy landings. (Photo courtesy of the Bureau of Land Management.)



Coast Guard lighthouse keeper Lester O'Neil, with his wife Harriett Idell, at the Punta Gorda Lighthouse. The couple was married in 1945. (Photo courtesy Mattole Valley Historical Society.)



According to the book *California Light Stations*, the wife of Coast Guard lighthouse keeper Lester O'Neil wrote describing this photo that shows the horse Old Bill "On the beach out, by horse and buggy, after rounding Windy Point. Reaching town entailed travelling north on the beach for about three and a half miles, then following a crude road along the bank of Mattole River for another six miles." (Photo courtesy of the Bureau of Land Management.)



pretty sight out of this wilderness, a sort of Shangra-La . . .”

Samuel “Hank” Mostovoy (10/10/1907-7/15/1988) was the last head keeper or OIC (Officer in Charge), as it was called by then, of the Punta Gorda Lighthouse. As well as the assistant keepers who lived at the lighthouse, Hank Mostovoy lived there with his wife Audrey and his daughter Donna Mostovoy Clark, and her children Richard “Dick,” and Ron Clark. The two boys recalled that life was good at the lighthouse, especially with all the spacious freedom they had as their play area.

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This undated photo taken by one of the keeper's homes at the Punta Gorda Lighthouse was labeled as follows, “Aharonian (top), Hank Mostovoy (bottom) on left; Riley (top) and White (bottom) on right, Thomas, far right, AND THE GOOD OLD SCOUT CAR.” (Photo courtesy Mattole Valley Historical Society.)



A bulldozer tractor is shown here hauling a sled loaded down with barrels of fuel across the sand to the Punta Gorda Lighthouse during the Coast Guard era. The last head keeper “Hank” Mostovoy said, “We had to bring about 96 drums, twice a year. The duck boat brought them in from ‘Frisco, landed them at Humboldt, and then we had to manhandle it to the lighthouse, every drum of it.” (Photo courtesy Bureau of Land Management.)

When he came to Punta Gorda Lighthouse as a 2nd assistant keeper, and was later promoted to the 1st assistant keeper, Leander W. Holmes had previously served in 1915 at California’s Point Sur Lighthouse. Before joining the Lighthouse Service, he had been in the U.S. Navy and received a medical discharge after losing four toes. He had served in the Navy for over 6 ½ years and was discharged as a Petty Officer. At the age of 33, on February 28, 1920 he died while on duty at Punta Gorda Lighthouse. He is buried at the Oak Hill Memorial Cemetery in San Jose, California. Perhaps the day will come when a U.S. Lighthouse Service Memorial Grave Marker will be placed at his gravesite. (*Lighthouse Digest* archives.)



Coast Guardsman Ronny Thomas is shown driving the Scout Car at Punta Gorda Lighthouse around 1949. Coast Guardsman Harold Schoelen (1931-2013) is shown standing at the entrance gate to the lighthouse and a local girl, Audrey Rackliff, is riding in the Scout Car. Being assigned to Punta Gorda was much different from the type of assignments that these young men had anticipated when they joined the Coast Guard. (Photo courtesy Mattole Valley Historical Society.)



Punta Gorda Lighthouse Coast Guard keeper Lester O'Neil is shown with what would soon be dinner for the lighthouse family. O'Neil was a native of Garfield, Utah who joined the Coast Guard on October 28, 1947. (Photo courtesy of Mattole Valley Historical Society.)

### Out to Pasture

But time caught up with the Punta Gorda Lighthouse Station. It was an expensive light station to maintain, especially at its remote location. And with newer modern aids to navigation, and the fact that the lighthouse was no longer needed by the big ships, meant the end for the lighthouse. Samuel "Hank" Mostovoy, who took extreme pride in the station, was its last head keeper, or OIC (Officer in Charge) as the Coast Guard referred to it,

was there right up until the very last day when the lighthouse was replaced by a lighted whistle buoy in the water off-shore from the lighthouse. Amazingly, when the Coast Guard closed the Punta Gorda Light Station in February of 1951, Old Bill, the lighthouse horse, was still there.

In the final days before closing up the lighthouse for good, Mostovoy talked about Old Bill, saying "He's pulled many a wagon and buggy to the nearby town of Petrolia in his day. For 20 years he was the only transportation in and out of here." In 1943 Old Bill was joined by Tom and Jerry, who were purchased from the U.S. Army for \$165.00 each. But Tom and Jerry were not as cooperative as Old Bill. One time, the two steeds sent a couple of Coast Guardsmen to the hospital after overturning the buckboard on the cliff road. Mostovoy went on to say, "Old Bill's just as independent as they make 'em. He's a senior citizen of the community of Petrolia. You just take him up to the head of the road, turn him loose, and he'll go right back to the lighthouse." One time when a young newly assigned Coastie arrived at Petrolia, they loaded his gear onto Old Bill. As the horse disappeared, the young Guardsman thought he'd never see his gear again. But Old Bill showed up at the lighthouse with the gear, ready to be unloaded and given some hay to munch on.

Mostovoy recalled the time when Commander H. F. Stolfi, Chief of Aids to Navigation if the 12th Coast Guard District, had arrived. Commander Stolfi had never been on a horse before, but he boarded Old Bill and with brief case in hand, tucked under his arm, away the two of them went, and in due time they arrived at the lighthouse. Old Bill had been gentle with him.

When it was announced that Punta Gorda was to be closed for good, new homes were found for Tom and Jerry. But Old Bill stayed until the bitter end when he left the lighthouse for the last

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Donna Clark, daughter of Punta Gorda Lighthouse keeper Hank Mostovoy, with one of the dogs at Punta Gorda Lighthouse in 1950. After her husband abandoned her and her two sons Dick and Ron, she went to live at the lighthouse with her parents. After the Punta Gorda Lighthouse was closed up, Hank Mostovoy was transferred to Point Reyes Life Boat Station in Drakes Bay, and Donna Clark and the boys went with them. However, during the time they were at Point Reyes, in 1952 Donna became ill and passed away leaving the boys to be raised by Hank and his wife Audrey. (Photo courtesy Ron Clark.)

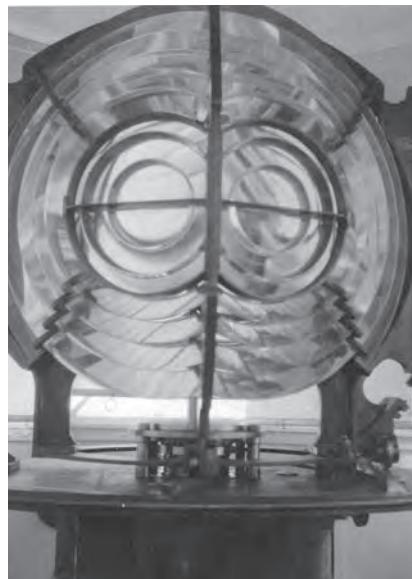


Audrey Mostovoy, wife of Hank Mostovoy, was captured in this 1950 photo that she was unprepared for by the keeper's house at Punta Gorda Lighthouse. Audrey did a lot of work in maintaining a garden for fresh vegetables. Her grandson Ron recalled one of her nearly daily morning rituals was remembered as "Pop Goes the Weasel," where she would sit outside of the chicken coup at dawn and wait for the weasels to come out from underneath it whereupon she would pop them off with her 22-caliber 1922 Remington model 12 pump rifle. The weasels were the only real predator of the chickens at the lighthouse. (Photo courtesy Ron Clark.)





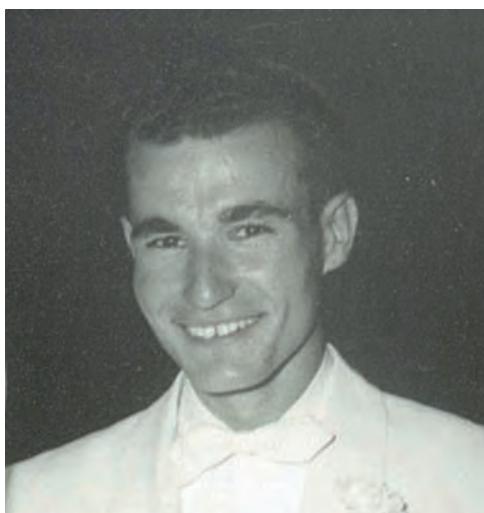
Coast Guardsmen Paul Blossfield (l) and Ron Thomas (r) who were stationed at Punta Gorda Lighthouse when Hank Mostovoy was the head keeper. This photo was taken in 1951, shortly after Paul Blossfield (1929-1998) signed up for his second enlistment in the Coast Guard. Blossfield served in the Coast Guard until May of 1974. (Photo courtesy Ron Clark.)



The 4th order double-flashing bivalve lens at Punta Gorda Lighthouse, shown here, was lighted with an oil-vapor lamp producing a white group flash every 15 seconds. The light flash was visible for 14 miles. When the Coast Guard closed up and abandoned the Punta Gorda Lighthouse in 1951, the lens was removed from the tower. What happened to it remains a mystery to this day. (Photo courtesy U.S. Lighthouse Society.)



Samuel "Hank" Mostovoy is shown here in his Coast Guard uniform. He was the last keeper of the Punta Gorda Lighthouse and he closed the station in 1951. After Punta Gorda Lighthouse, he became the OIC of California's Point Reyes Life Boat Station. (Photograph courtesy of Patty Hickman.)



After being stationed at Punta Gorda Lighthouse, Harold Schoelen went on to become the OIC of the Point Arena Lighthouse Station where he married his longtime sweetheart Marie DeRoest. This photo is from his wedding day. When he left the Coast Guard, he spent 32 years in law enforcement, finishing his career as a Lieutenant with California's Red Bluff Police Department. (Photo courtesy Marie Schoelen.)



Coast Guardsman Jack Evenden on the horse drawn wagon at Punta Gorda Lighthouse with supplies for the lighthouse. The wagon was pulled by horses Tom and Jerry. Notice how deep the wagon's wheels were in the sand. (Photo courtesy of Mattole Valley Historical Society.)



While living at Punta Gorda Lighthouse, Hank Mostovoy's grandson, Dick Clark, was playing around with a rock, throwing it up in the air, catching it in his mouth until he accidentally swallowed it. The family quickly went into emergency mode and unhitched the horses and hoisted up and rode as fast as they could to Petrolia where the cars were parked and took him to the St. Joseph Hospital in Eureka, which was the nearest hospital. But they couldn't do anything for him there, so they took him to the nearby Arcata Naval Air Station where he was loaded onto the U.S. Navy Landing Aids Experiment Station airplane (shown here) to be flown to San Francisco. Pilots E.C. Marlin and B.B. Clark volunteered to fly the plane for the emergency trip, which was begun under extremely adverse weather conditions with a ceiling of "almost zero" at midnight when they took off. The youngster was practically comatose by the time they reached the Stanford-Lane Hospital in San Francisco where an emergency procedure was performed to remove the rock. The pilots of the aircraft gave Dick Clark this photo of the plane, which they autographed for him. (Photo courtesy Richard Clark.)



A work crew is shown here preparing to burn the Punta Gorda lighthouses keepers' homes to the ground. (Photo courtesy Bureau of Land Management.)



Punta Gorda Lighthouse head keeper Charles W. Lindley with his wife Constance and a small child at the lighthouse where he served from 1921 to 1939. (Photo courtesy of the Mattole Valley Historical Society.)



Lighthouse keeper Perry S. Hunter with his aunt Lucy Wright Hunter; she was a fixture around downtown Petrolia for many years. Lucy had an amazing life. She came from Wisconsin on a wagon train around 1860 when she was little girl. Perry Hunter was the son of veteran lighthouse keeper Paschal Hunter. Perry Hunter was also a veteran lighthouse keeper by the time he arrived at Punta Gorda Lighthouse, having served previously at Pigeon Point Lighthouse and Cape Mendocino Lighthouse. He served as the 1st assistant keeper at Punta Gorda from 1931 to 1939 and then as head keeper from 1939 to 1940. Perry Hunter married Maude Harrington, daughter of lighthouse keeper Frederick Harrington. He left Punta Gorda to become head keeper at Trinidad Head Lighthouse, also in California, where he served until 1946. (Photo courtesy Bureau of Land Management.)



Dick Clark, grandson of keeper Hank Mostovoy, rides on Old Bill at the Punta Gorda Lighthouse in 1949-1950. Ron Clark recalled that he was a good old horse and didn't mind us kids at all. Dick Clark said, "We could ride him around the compound because he would just walk along. We could kick him all we wanted and he'd never go more than a walk. We couldn't ride the other horses because they were too spirited." Because of all the horses and wagons at the lighthouse, Dick and his brother Ron often pretended that they were cowboys. (Photo courtesy Ron Clark.)



Samuel "Hank" Mostovoy (l), the last head keeper of the Punta Gorda Lighthouse, is shown here with an unidentified Coast Guardsman at the lighthouse. (Photograph courtesy Patty Hickman.)

Coast Guardsman Fernal W. Teeple, a native of Michigan who was previously stationed in Marblehead, Ohio, is shown here at Punta Gorda in the late 1940s. It is believed he was in charge of the Coast Guard's Beach Patrol Station. Fernal had followed in the footsteps of his father, Wallace Teeple, who was a Coast Guard surfman at the Sturgeon Point Life Boat Station and later at Tawas Point Life Boat Station, both in Michigan. Born on October 28, 1914, Fernal W. Teeple died on September 4, 1952 at the young age of 38. (Photo courtesy Mattole Valley Historical Society.)



time and went to a new home in nearby Ferndale where he spent his final days grazing to his heart's content in the open pastures south of Humboldt Bay.

The Punta Gorda Light Station, with its numerous buildings, was then abandoned to the elements, and the lighthouse station and its property was turned over to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Much like a ghost town of the old west, the Punta Gorda Light Station sat silent, void of human life: no more sounds of human work, no more laughter, and no more family dinners with the aroma of a fresh baked pie or a pot of stew coming from the keepers' homes. There were no more sounds of dogs barking, no more horses, even the fog horns went silent, replaced by a whistling buoy that was positioned offshore.

The Shanks probably described it best in their book when they wrote the following: "The facility thus stood intact but abandoned. Occasional hikers and sheepherders visited the place. The three spacious dwellings still gave a genteel, turn-of-the century feeling to the place. Their peaked, red roofs, fine brick fireplaces, and pleasant porches gave the white, two-story houses a reputation as the loveliest old homes along the southern Humboldt coast. White picket fences

and wildflowers surrounded the houses. The old fog signal building was equally picturesque. It looked much like an old, one-room schoolhouse. However, in place of a bell on top, a rooftop platform held a pair of trumpet-like fog horns, now mute. Hikers stumbling upon the station considered it one of the surprising treasures of coastal California."

### The Unwarranted Destruction

Those who are old enough to remember, or those who have studied modern history, are keenly aware of the tumultuous countercultural movement of the 1960s. Somehow a group of young people, who some called hippies, were looking for an alternative life style and found their way to the abandoned and remote Punta Gorda Light Station, and they took up residence in the abandoned buildings. Reports indicated that they actually started to clean up the place and started making long overdue repairs.

However, the BLM was not happy about this, stating that people could get injured or even killed living in the abandoned structures, and if that should happen, the federal government could be held liable. The BLM asked the local Sheriff to evict the unwanted squatters. The Sheriff's office complied and the young people left, only to return later.

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This dramatic photo taken in 1969 by Ron Hagg clearly shows the shameful deterioration of one of the keeper's homes at the Punta Gorda Lighthouse. If only the government had used some common sense to have the foresight to maintain the structures, they might still be standing today. (Photo courtesy Mattole Valley Historical Society.)

Again, the Sheriff's deputies chased the unlawful residents off the property. But by this time some of the higher-up bureaucrats at the BLM decided that it would be in the government's best interest to burn the buildings down, claiming the abandoned structures had become a nuisance and a potential liability. John Lannz, the district manager of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in Ukiah, was quoted in a San Francisco Examiner newspaper story as saying, "We had to get them out before someone got hurt, we couldn't be responsible for them."

Then, over the objections of many maritime historians, some locals, and even some of the employees of the BLM, the decision was made final; the buildings would be destroyed. And in the first week of April in 1970, every wooden structure at the once majestic Punta Gorda Light Station was set on fire and burned to the ground. The historic buildings were wiped off the face of the earth. The ruins were then bulldozed into the basements and covered up. Later, BLM officials admitted that their decision had probably been a mistake.

Today the lonely tower with an empty lantern and the shell of the concrete oil house are all that remain of the once majestic Punta Gorda Light Station. The lighthouse property is now within the boundaries of the 42,000 plus acres of the coastal wilderness of the King Range National Conservation Area, and it can only be reached by a 3½ mile hike from a parking lot. However, this hike can only be done safely at low tide.

Look closely at all the accompanying photos with this story and let your mind drift back in time and imagine what it was like to know the lighthouse keepers and their families and what life must have been like while living at the once proud Punta Gorda Lighthouse Station. Would you like to have lived as they once did at the Punta Gorda Lighthouse?



Left: This modern photo shows the Punta Gorda Lighthouse with its lantern painted black. (Photo by P.D. Patel.)



Above right: Ron Clark, grandson of keeper Hank Mostovoy, with one of the three cows that were supplied by the Coast Guard at the Punta Gorda Lighthouse. The boys thought that the chocolate milk came from the one cow that was brown. The cows supplied all the keepers' families with fresh milk, and they churned their own butter. When Hank milked the cows, the lighthouse cats would usually show up for a treat. The cats would sit up and Hank would squirt milk into their mouths. One time, one of the cows had a calf, and Dick Clark had the bright idea to climb the fence and try to ride it. He was immediately bucked off and everyone who was watching had a good laugh at his expense. In addition to the chickens for eggs and food, the keepers also raised rabbits for meat. (Photo courtesy Ron Clark.)



Although this photo is damaged, it clearly shows the abandoned keepers' homes at Punta Gorda Light Station. Where lighthouse keepers and their families once took immaculate care, the abandoned station was now falling into a rapid state of deterioration. Even some of the fences had fallen over. (Photo courtesy of the Bureau of Land Management.)