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The San Mateo County Coast
Surfing and Shipwrecks

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To discover the past and
imagine the future.

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To enrich, excite and
educate through
understanding, preserving
and interpreting the history
of San Mateo County.

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Maverick's

by Bruce Jenkins



Maverick's. Photograph courtesy of Doug Acton/insidemavericks.com.

A surfer's dream is that rare combination of perfection and isolation. If the waves happen to be nearby, all the better. Therein lies the wondrous mystery of Maverick's, the big-wave surf spot off Pillar Point near Half Moon Bay. Many decades passed before Northern California surfers discovered one of the world's richest treasures in their own back yard.

Maverick's isn't for everyone. Over the course of some 18 years, only a handful of surfers could claim to have ridden the spot well. The very mention suggests giant waves, wicked currents, freezing water, looming rocks, fast-approaching fogbanks and sharks. Lives have been lost in this wild, open-ocean setting. Many surfers have left the place shocked and ashen, never to return. As such, the Maverick's mainstays are an elite group, representing the height of extreme-sports performance.

To grasp the miracle of Maverick's, consider that big-wave riding essentially began in the 1950s. California's most fabled arena was Steamer Lane, in Santa Cruz, where the best winter days offered wave faces up to 25 feet, but the real challenge was in Hawaii, where the waves of Makaha and Waimea Bay reached twice that size. Hawaii was mecca; there was no other suitable destination for those

Bruce Jenkins

Bruce Jenkins has been with the San Francisco Chronicle since 1973 and a columnist since 1989. He graduated from Cal Berkeley, class of 1970. He is a staff writer at Surfer Magazine and a contributor to The Surfer's Journal, as well as the author of North Shore Chronicles, published in 1990, about big-wave surfing in Hawaii. He also edited and partially wrote Maverick's, which was released in 2007. Jenkins was an advisor for the San Mateo County History Museum during the development of the museum's new exhibit, Maverick's. He lives in Montara with his wife, sports photographer Martha Jenkins, and their daughter, Molly.



Jeff Clark at Maverick's, 1992. Photograph courtesy of Doug Acton/insidemavericks.com.

willing to test their limits. Northern California-based surfers were among the earliest to successfully make the pilgrimage: Jose Angel, Fred Van Dyke, Peter Cole and Ricky Grigg, to name a few. The landscape gradually broadened over the years, to include spots in Mexico and South America, but until the mid-1970s, California was strictly a minor-league setting for big surf.

And then came Jeff Clark.

Clark was a hardy, Half Moon Bay-raised teenager who loved large surf with a passion. When conditions truly got treacherous, sending most to shelter, Clark was in his element. He satisfied his thirst at spots from Santa Cruz to Point Arena, but he wanted more. It took someone of Clark's character to get a look at Maverick's and actually consider the possibilities.

Maverick's is remarkable in that it can barely be examined from land, let alone the major thoroughfares. To this day, people travel Highway 1 without the slightest clue of what's happening out there. Stark and remote, housing only the Pillar Point Air Force Tracking Station, the area seems to hold no appeal whatsoever.

Even for those willing to drive through the industrial streets of Princeton, park the car and make the 15-minute walk along a quiet trail to Pillar Point, there isn't much to see, at least at ground level, of a spot that breaks a half-mile out to sea. A short, steep hike up the nearby hillside offers some perspective, but room exists only for a few dozen observers. Although the point was once open to visitors willing to wrap

their bodies around the edge of a chicken-wire fence, then walk out to the westernmost edge of the cliff, that area has been closed by Air Force officials wary of injury-related liability.

When Clark and other surfers got their first look at Maverick's, they invariably viewed it from the area slightly to the north, above Ross' Cove. It's an incomplete view, at best, suggesting that the wave is a "left," in surfers' terminology (riding in a right-to-left direction). The real story of Maverick's is the "right," a much longer and manageable ride, but considering the forbidding Air Force presence, and the fact that big surf only comes to life at certain times, it was a spectacle that went largely unwitnessed. Moreover, the place looked dangerous beyond words.

"I mean, a lot of people looked at Maverick's over the years," says Grant Washburn, one of the spot's top surfers today. "But it was almost like a cartoon setting. With a real stretch of the imagination, you could imagine yourself out there, in the perfect spot, riding that spot without being killed, or eaten. But it was just a dream, nothing you'd actually attempt. Until Jeff came along."

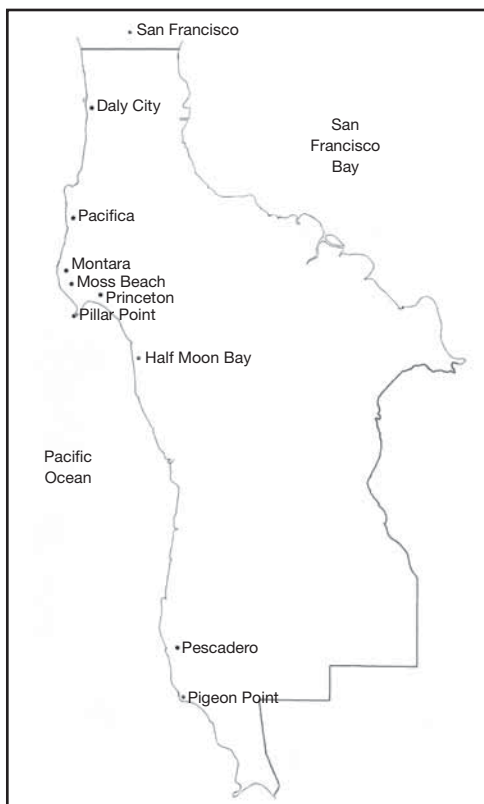
Clark stood captivated at the edge of Maverick's until he could take it no longer. He prodded his friends to join him on a test run, but there were no takers. It seemed no one was quite as crazy as Jeff. So he tackled the place alone one afternoon in 1975, lived to tell about it, and essentially fell in love. For the next 15 years – and this is a feat that makes Clark a veritable Sir Edmund Hillary of surfing – he rode Maverick's by himself. Sometimes months would pass between sessions, but on those magical days when big surf was greeted by favorable tides and winds, Clark made it his No. 1 option.

Even now, at a time when hundreds of surfers have attempted Maverick's, few would even consider going out there alone. Too many things can go wrong, and without the company of fellow surfers, one's mind tends to dwell on the negative – like the massive great white sharks that regularly patrol the area.

Clark was, in essence, a maverick. (The place was aptly named, thanks to a Hawaii-raised local named Alex Matienzo, who had attempted to surf it with two friends back in 1961. They had brought along a German shepherd named Maverick, and as they hastily retreated from waves that were well beyond their ability, they named the spot after the dog.) Still, Clark yearned to unveil this godsend to his friends. The breakthrough occurred on January 22, 1990. Clark was checking Ocean Beach, at the foot of the "Avenues" in San Francisco, when he told Mark Renneker (a local mainstay) and Santa Cruz surfers Tom Powers and

"With a real stretch of the imagination, you could imagine yourself out there, in the perfect spot....But it was just a dream, nothing you'd actually attempt. Until Jeff came along."

Grant Washburn



Map of the San Mateo County Coast.



Maverick's is located off Pillar Point near Half Moon Bay. Pillar Point, 1961.

Dave Schmidt about the epic surf a few miles to the south. Renneker opted to surf Ocean Beach, but Powers and Schmidt became the first to join Clark at Maverick's – and Northern California surfing was never quite the same.

Schmidt's brother, Richard, was at that time unquestionably the best and most accomplished big-wave surfer from California. He'd been in Hawaii, surfing in the prestigious Eddie Aikau contest at Waimea Bay, and he could hardly believe Dave's rave review of a spot in ... Half Moon Bay? "I thought he was crazy," said Richard. "I mean, that just wasn't possible."

Before long, Richard was surfing Maverick's and, by his mere presence, lending credibility to Clark's claims. Even as more local surfers joined in, though, there was an element of the surreal. "We just couldn't bring ourselves to claiming 20-foot surf," said Pacifica's Matt Ambrose. "It was like, nobody would believe us." As described by author/surfer Daniel Duane, "To understand the discovery that the world's greatest big-wave break lay just outside San Francisco, imagine a climber stumbling upon a mountain bigger than Everest, and harder to climb, right outside Denver."

Before long, some of Hawaii's best big-wave riders – notably Paul Moreno, Ken Bradshaw and Keoni Watson – came over for a look. All of them pronounced the waves not only as big as Waimea Bay, but of higher quality. When *Surfer* magazine announced Maverick's glory to the world in a 1992 article, the secret was out. Half Moon Bay, previously known for its pumpkins, seafood restaurants, expansive farmlands and touristy shops, was suddenly a must-see destination for anyone who considered himself a big-wave rider.

Maverick's is unique among open-ocean settings because of the distinct nature of its topography. As giant swells move down the coast from the North Pacific (the biggest tend to originate off Japan and the Aleutian Islands), they tend to be wild and unmanageable so far out to sea. Maverick's offers a long, northwest-facing underwater valley that tends to define the swells, maximize their size and draw them onto a reef that sets up a peeling, well-shaped wave in tandem with mind-boggling power.

It wasn't long before the "left" at Maverick's became a novelty, a dangerous but all-too-brief ride enjoyed by Clark and a few others. This reef is all about the "right," considered by many big-wave surfers to be the most challenging in the world. Open-ocean swells are thicker, and infinitely more lethal, than the ones we see breaking on shore. Maverick's initial thrust is a wave so hollow, "You could drive a

truck through it,” Clark says. As such, it creates a very narrow takeoff zone, commonly known as “the ramp,” for surfers to negotiate. Most anywhere else in the world, the best surfers tend to take off directly on the peak, or even a bit behind it, to experience the maximum thrill and build their reputations. No surfer goes near the peak at Maverick’s on a big day.

“At first, just looking at the photos, I couldn’t understand that,” said Bradshaw, who has devoted his life to riding the biggest waves in Hawaii. “Why is everyone sitting out on the shoulder off that wave? Then I went out there, and I understood. The peak is simply unmanageable, much too violent. Nobody tries to take off there, and nobody ever will.” For anyone sitting in the channel, either on a surfboard or in a boat, the sight and sound of a crashing Maverick’s wave is terrifying to behold. It’s a feat for any surfer to make that drop, no matter how many times he has pulled it off before, and that’s when the wave’s true glory is revealed. The Maverick’s reef continues in a series of multi-layered shelves, creating a wave that constantly builds upon itself and creates lively new “sections” for surfers to ride. On the really good days, with just the right swell direction and size, surfers have been known to enjoy one-minute rides from the outside takeoff zone to the point of expiration near Mushroom Rock.

It takes a certain type of surfer to really want Maverick’s, and despite the early visits by Hawaii-based surfers, it never turned into a full-blown migration. One after another, the majority admitted they wanted no part of Northern California’s frigid water, known to drop into the 40s on the really cold days. In the words of Charlie Walker, a legend for his feats on the North Shore of Oahu, “The cold water’s just so heavy. You’re under for two seconds, you get the ice-cream headache, and you can’t even see straight. In Hawaii, you can reach the Waimea lineup in seven minutes if you time it right. At Sunset Beach, you don’t even have to paddle; the rip takes you out, and the waves take you in. We’re in Jacuzzi Land over here.”

The Hawaiian perspective was hardly brightened by the tragic tale of Mark Foo. A travel-minded adventurer bent on experiencing every good big wave in the world, Foo came to Maverick’s from Honolulu in December of 1994, during a swell that still ranks as the longest and most aesthetically pleasing on record. Day after day, the place was graced by huge surf, favorable winds and gorgeous weather. It was a time of epic deeds and horrifying wipeouts, notably one that nearly killed 16-year-old Jay Moriarity and became known as the most spectacular ever witnessed in California. (Undaunted, Moriarity went on to become



Peter Mel at Maverick’s, 1999. Photograph courtesy of Doug Acton/insidemavericks.com.

“The peak is simply unmanageable, much too violent. Nobody tries to take off there, and nobody ever will.”

Ken Bradshaw



Pillar Point in the 1930s, decades before it was discovered by surfers.

one of the best-ever surfers at Maverick's; he passed away in 2001 on a free-diving expedition off the coast of India.)

It all came to a head on a Friday, two days before Christmas. Maverick's has seldom seen such beautiful conditions, a combination of shirtsleeve weather, gentle winds and a picturesque, 18-foot swell that represented a relatively mild day when compared to the harrowing sessions that had taken place earlier in the week. (Swell is measured from the back of the wave; the actual wave face tends to be nearly double that size.) The area was packed with media, knowing Foo had arrived along with Bradshaw and Hawaiian standout Brock Little, among others.

This was Foo's first trip to Maverick's, and his last. On a relatively tame-looking wave, Foo suffered a mid-face wipeout shortly after takeoff, then got sucked up the back of the wave and thrown violently into the depths. This is hardly a pleasant experience, but it's the type of wipeout experienced almost routinely by the best big-wave riders, accustomed to holding their breath for great lengths of time. If it happens to someone of Foo's caliber, it causes no concern whatsoever. Even in the circus-like atmosphere of December 23rd, no one noticed that the great Mark Foo had not come to the surface.

"When he didn't come back out for another wave, we just figured he'd lost his board, or gone in, or something," said Washburn. "With a guy that good, nobody figures he's drowning."

It was Foo's death that triggered the presence of the Maverick's Water Patrol, and recent years have witnessed the arrival of Jet Skis, both for photographers and watermen interested strictly in rescue missions. But these elements were not in place in 1994. Nearly an hour passed before surfers discovered Foo's body, and by then it was far too late.

The irony of Foo's passing is that it had little to do with Maverick's most feared elements. Clark, Washburn and many others had predicted with great conviction that surfers would die out there, but these would be the most likely circumstances:

- Being held underwater for so long, a *second* wave passes over your head. On a massive day in 1997, Santa Cruz surfer Neil Matthies took a terrible wipeout, and onlookers watched in horror as his board came to the surface – "tombstoning," as surfers call it – with no sign of a body. Then the next wave came crashing down. Some 45 seconds passed, an eternity for someone in such peril, before a badly shaken Matthies appeared. Later, he found it incomprehensible that he'd actually survived such a violent

thrashing.

- Going through the formation of massive, jagged rocks inside the break. There are four passable openings, allowing endangered surfers to glide into the safety of a lagoon, but only the most experienced surfers know those gaps, and how to approach them through the disturbance of currents and onrushing whitewater. Clark once found himself perched on a rock, holding on for his life through a series of waves that never seemed to end, and nearly an hour passed before he was able to leap off and swim to safety.
- Being “caught inside,” as they say, on a big day. This is the crisis of having wiped out, on a wave so forceful it snapped the leash attaching a surfer’s board to his ankle, and having to face the consequences as a swimmer. Washburn once witnessed his good friend John Raymond in such a predicament, surfacing on his very last breath, only to face another thunderous avalanche -- wave after wave. “I really don’t know how he lived,” said Washburn. “I was shocked at the ferocity, the gravity, the mercilessness.”
- Being devoured by a shark. There have been countless shark sightings in the Maverick’s area, and some disturbing incidents. Two years ago, Half Moon Bay surfer Tim West tried to keep his wits about him as a shark took a bite out of his board. In 2000, a shark tore into the underside of Peck Ewing’s board (he was spared), and the following year, two surfers on a Jet Ski came to shore and discovered gigantic teeth marks on their rescue sled.

The waters in and around Maverick’s have long been the scene of nautical disasters, some of them occurring in recent years. During a giant, fog-shrouded swell in December of 2007, a crab-fishing boat disappeared with two men on board (one of the bodies washed up on shore; the other was never found). In early October 2008, two men were killed when a set of big waves capsized their fishing boat and sent it into the Maverick’s rock formation.

Clark puts it very simply, saying, “Maverick’s will always take of itself.” As such, the surfing circus never stays in town for long. There are crowded days, and those well documented by the surf media, but the essential Maverick’s is a late-afternoon session when the photographers have gone home, the northwest winds put a bit of texture on the water, and only a few hardcore types – the likes of Washburn, Raymond, Renneker and Bob Battalio – are out there by themselves. Sometimes, on rideable (if admittedly marginal) days, there is no one out there at all.

Tourists constantly express their curiosity about Maverick’s, asking locals exactly how to find the place, but surfing knows no

*“Maverick’s will always
take care of itself.”*

Jeff Clark



Sarah Gerhardt (left) in the line up at the ceremony starting the 2000 contest. She was the first woman to surf Mavericks in 1999. Photograph courtesy of Doug Acton/insidemavericks.com.

calendar. Unlike the major sports, you can't say there will be riveting action on, say, January 16th. It's all about swells traveling as far as 3,000 miles from the west or northwest, and the hope that rain or contrary winds won't spoil the day. In a time frame running from October through April, there are years in which Mavericks' action is quite scarce. Then again, there have been seasons with as many as 80 rideable days.

Even the arrival of contests (in 1999) hasn't spoiled the rich, natural beauty of Mavericks. The annual event becomes a showcase for the locals who truly respect Mavericks and surf it well, such as Ambrose, Washburn, Darryl "Flea" Virsostko, Peter Mel, Kenny Collins, Shaun Rhodes, Anthony Tashnick, Ion Banner, Shane Desmond and Zach Wormhoudt. Kelly Slater, who recently won a record ninth title on the professional surfing tour, came to Mavericks in 2004 and finished second in some harrowing conditions. In recent years, it has become a regular stop for such international stars as Greg Long, Grant Baker, Garrett McNamara, Jamie Sterling and Nathan Fletcher. It has also become the province of a few brave women surfers, notably Sarah Gerhardt, Jenny Useldinger and Jamilah Star.

Perhaps the most significant innovation in Mavericks' history has been the arrival of "tow-in" surfing. Until the early 90s, big-wave surfing was all about paddling into a wave on your own power, invariably requiring huge boards to summon the necessary paddling speed. Tow surfers get whipped into waves, water-ski style, by grabbing a rope and riding behind a Jet Ski or other brands of watercraft. This not only allows

surfers to match the wave's speed, completely removing the difficulty of takeoff, but they can ride much smaller, more maneuverable boards with footstraps.

Getting into the wave certainly isn't a problem. "You could tow your grandmother into a giant wave," scoff those among the anti-tow faction. But you still have to surf the wave, and towing has enabled surfers to ride the biggest waves on the planet – waves that literally cannot be negotiated by anyone attempting to paddle. It so happens that the Maverick's reef can handle waves of any size – at least anything we've seen so far -- and recent sessions have witnessed successful rides on wave faces up to 80 feet.

Spend a fair amount of time around the Maverick's regulars, and you realize you're far, far away from the tedious surfing stereotype: a no-account, dope-smoking slacker with long, white-blond hair, along the lines off the Jeff Spicoli character in *Fast Times in Ridgemont High*. Northern California's big-wave riders run the spectrum of lifestyle and personality, but most of them have families, respectable jobs and a sense of perspective. They aren't the type to win some small-wave contest at a local break; they tend to come out of the woodwork when the surf gets big, suddenly free to pursue a passion they share with precious few others.

If they have one thing in common, it's a sense of calm under duress. There isn't a sport in the world that can compare with being held underwater for nearly a minute, twisted and turned until you don't know which way is up, finally sensing a narrow window to swim to the surface for a desperate gasp of air – then being forced right back down, for another round, by the next massive pile of whitewater. It's not so much their surfing ability that sets Maverick's surfers apart, rather the resolute knowledge that they will survive a worst-case scenario through sheer fitness and experience. In a sport often plagued by overcrowding and territorialism, Maverick's always has the final word.



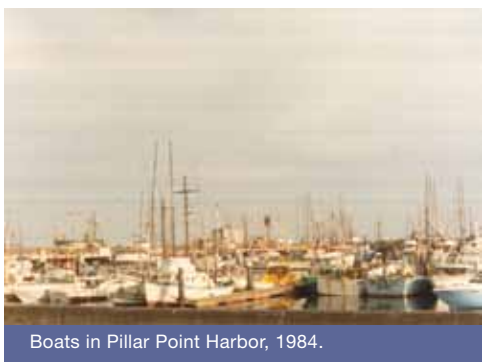
Hideshiro Minami, a San Mateo acupuncturist, surfing Maverick's in December 2006. Photograph by Frank Quirarte, courtesy of Hideshiro Minami.

Maverick's Timeline

Though the location of Maverick's has a long history, surfers have only known about it and surfed the spot successfully for a short period of time. Other big-wave surf spots, especially in Hawaii, had to be conquered first and techniques for riding big waves developed before Maverick's could be attempted.



Gaspar de Portolá explored the California coast in 1769. Painting by Morton Kunstler.



Boats in Pillar Point Harbor, 1984.

- **Before Spanish Arrival.** For thousands of years, a triblet of Ohlone people lived in the area around Pillar Point. They called their main village *Shatumnumo*.
- **1769—Portolá Expedition.** While searching for Monterey Bay, Gaspar de Portolá's expedition happened upon Pillar Point. They called it *Punta de los Angeles Custodios*.
- **1860—Whaling Industry.** Portuguese whalers launched their boats from the cove just below Pillar Point until the 1880s.
- **October 17, 1876—Shipwreck.** In the treacherous water a half-mile off the coast of Pillar Point, the three-masted Welsh ship *Rydal Hall* sunk—one of many that went down at this location.
- **1919-1933—Bootleggers Along the Coast.** During Prohibition, bootleggers smuggled alcohol into California via ship. They used little-known coves and beaches to bring their merchandise to shore.
- **1940—Military Presence Begins.** The U.S. Army purchased land at Pillar Point as a harbor defense facility for San Francisco.
 - **1961—Naming Maverick's.** Alex Matienzo and several friends paddled out at Maverick's, found it "too spooky" to surf, and named it after a friend's dog.
- **1961—Harbor Construction.** Pillar Point harbor completed by the Army Corps of Engineers.
- **1975—Jeff Clark's First Ride at Maverick's.** San Mateo County native Jeff Clark, 17, paddled out into 15-foot Maverick's and became the first person to challenge it.
- **January 12, 1990—Maverick's Introduction.** After riding it alone for 15 years, Jeff Clark finally got Santa Cruz surfers Dave Schmidt and Tom Powers to try out Maverick's.
- **January 29, 1992—A Barrier Broken.** Photos of Richard Schmidt's 25-foot Maverick's wave, at that time the biggest ever ridden on the West Coast, sent shock waves through California and Hawaii. Late that year, *Surfer* magazine unveiled Maverick's to the world.
- **1992—Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary.** The federal government established the sanctuary to protect and provide public access to coastal resources. Maverick's fell within its boundaries.
- **1993—Hawaiian Surfers at Maverick's.** Ken Bradshaw, famous for his big-wave exploits, was the first well-known Hawaiian surfer to try Maverick's. His arrival confirmed that Maverick's was a genuine big-wave surf spot.
- **1994—Maverick's Tow-Ins.** Santa Cruz surfer Vince Collier led the first tow-in surfing expedition at Maverick's.

- **December 1994—Swell for the Ages.** During an 11-day run of large, perfect surf, 16-year-old Jay Moriarity took what is described as the worst looking wipeout in the history of California surfing. He survived to become one of Maverick's all-time best surfers.
- **December 23, 1994—The First Death.** The Maverick's crew was devastated by the death of Hawaiian big-wave surfer Mark Foo.
- **1994-1995—Safety.** In the wake of Mark Foo's death, Jeff Clark and photographer Frank Quirarte created the Maverick's Water Patrol to watch over the lineup.
- **February 1999—A Woman Conquers Maverick's.** Sarah Gerhardt, a Santa Cruz surfer with big-wave experience in Hawaii, became the first woman to take on Maverick's.
- **February 17, 1999—First Maverick's Surf Contest.** Sponsored by Quiksilver and dubbed the "Men Who Ride Mountains," the first-ever Maverick's contest earned Darryl "Flea" Virostko the \$15,000 first prize.
- **October 28, 1999—Biggest Day of the Decade at Maverick's.** Jeff Clark, Peter Mel and Kenny Collins orchestrated the first successful tow-in mission in giant Maverick's surf, a swell delivering 35-foot sets.
- **March 3, 2000—2nd Maverick's Surf Contest.** In epic 20-25-foot conditions, Darryl "Flea" Virostko held off legendary pro surfer Kelly Slater to again capture first place.
- **November 21, 2001—Biggest Day Ever at Maverick's.** On a stormy swell dubbed "Hundred-Foot Wednesday," a handful of land observers claimed to have witnessed a set with 100-foot faces.
- **February 27, 2004—3rd Maverick's Surf Contest.** This year's contest garnered huge media coverage, and Darryl "Flea" Virostko won for the third consecutive year.
- **2004—Maverick's Goes Hollywood.** *Riding Giants*, a big-wave surfing film devoting significant time to Jeff Clark and Maverick's, opened at the Sundance Film Festival and drew rave reviews.
- **March 2, 2005—4th Maverick's Surf Contest.** Anthony "Tazzy" Tashnick of Santa Cruz won the \$25,000 first place prize.
- **February 7, 2006—5th Maverick's Surf Contest.** Some 50,000 spectators watched South African Grant "Twiggy" Baker become the first non-Californian surfer to win the Maverick's contest.
- **December 2007—Kite Surfing at Maverick's.** Popular in smaller surf along the Northern California coastline, kite surfing made its Maverick's debut. Jeff Kafka rode the biggest waves ever kite-surfed.
- **December 2007—Hidden Horror.** Heavy fog obscured much of the action during an historic swell that ranked with the largest ever at Maverick's. A wipeout by Darryl "Flea" Virostko, horrifyingly embedded in the lip of a 70-foot face, made news around the world.
- **January 13, 2008—6th Annual Maverick's Surf Contest.** Greg Long of San Diego won, but the top six competitors agree to split all the winnings equally.



Darryl "Flea" Virostko at Maverick's, 2000.
Photograph courtesy of Doug Acton/
insidemavericks.com.

Editor's Note

The Maverick's timeline in this issue of *La Peninsula* is based on material written by S2 Associates, Inc. for the exhibit *Maverick's* at the San Mateo County History Museum.

The Storied Waters

of Pigeon Point

by JoAnn Semones

JoAnn Semones

JoAnn Semones, Ph.D., boarded her first ship at age three and has loved sea sagas ever since. Her book, *Shipwrecks, Scalawags, and Scavengers: The Storied Waters of Pigeon Point*, charts the area's maritime history from 1853 to 1953. She also wrote the text for Pigeon Point's Interpretive Center. JoAnn's stories have appeared in many publications, including *Mains'l Haul*, *Professional Mariner*, *Lighthouse Digest*, *Anchor Light*, *A Light in the Mist*, and *Surviving Magazine*, as well as in Stanford University's anthology *Learning to Live Again*, and in the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* international book series. Visit her website at: www.gullcottagebooks.com



Pigeon Point was named after the wreck of the clipper ship *Carrier Pigeon*. Image courtesy of Harper's New Monthly Magazine.

Located along the San Mateo County coast, Pigeon Point is the site of an historic lighthouse and a rich maritime heritage. Originally named *Punta de las Balenas* or Whale Point by Spanish mariners, the cove was a whaling station and small shipping center in the 1820s.

In 1848, the Gold Rush dramatically increased the number of ships sailing along California's shores as well as the number of shipwrecks. After the loss of many lives and much public outcry, a lighthouse was built at Pigeon Point. Unfortunately, even the lighthouse could not prevent other mishaps.

These shipwrecks give us a glimpse into local culture and maritime commerce. They are important portals to our past, linking us to unforgettable times, noteworthy places, and remarkable people.

An Enduring Legacy

Between 1848 and 1869, nearly all commercial trade between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans was conducted by swift ships known as clippers. Built at Bath, Maine, in 1853, the *Carrier Pigeon* was on her maiden voyage from Boston to San Francisco when she was thrown off course near Whale Point.

On June 6, 1853, lost in heavy fog and besieged by strong northwest winds, the wandering clipper came to grief on a craggy out-cropping of rocks just 500 feet from shore. Curiosity seekers and plunderers alike swarmed the beach. Some offered help to the crew. Others, bobbing about the surf in small rowboats, stripped copper from the ship's hull and carried away valuable cargo. Many camped on nearby bluffs, feasting on food from the ship's larder.

Two days later, the steamer *Active* was dispatched to redeem the *Carrier Pigeon's* payload. However, bickering ensued between the ships' captains over salvage rights. The following day, the steamer *Sea Bird*, arrived. Within hours heavy swells snapped her anchor chains, then her anchor, pitching her onto the rocks.

On June 11th, Captain Robert Waterman, commanding the steamer *Goliah*, arrived to bring order to the chaos and save as much

cargo as possible. A storied ship master, Captain Waterman had earned the infamous moniker of “Bully” after being charged with brutality on another vessel. Although controversy over his reputation continued to hinder the salvage effort, over 1,200 packages of merchandise were retrieved.

The incident was so unforgettable that Whale Point was renamed. According to one story, when the next shipload of locally grown potatoes reached San Francisco, someone reported that it was arriving from Carrier Pigeon Point. Before long, the name was shortened to Pigeon Point.

Another account insists that the point was named by Captain Waterman and an unknown resident. According to this story, in sending a letter to San Francisco, Waterman inquired about the site's identity. “I told him it had none but said it was in the neighborhood of New Year's Point,” the resident recalled. “To this he objected and proposed dating his letter from Carrier Pigeon Point. Deeming this title good enough but somewhat lengthy, I proposed he drop the Carrier and call the point Pigeon Point,” the man continued. “This satisfied the captain and it was so named.”

Liverpool Packet

Built at Baltimore, Maryland, in 1854, another clipper, the *Sir John Franklin*, served first as a “Liverpool Packet.” Packets were the first regular line of ships adapted to passenger as well as to freight traffic between the United States and England. They carried timber and cotton to Britain and returned with manufactured goods and immigrants. Until steam started to replace sail in the 1860s, packets were one of the mainstays of the sailing industry.

With the loss of the packet market, the *Sir John Franklin* was pressed into service to meet more promising business opportunities on the Pacific Coast. On the misty evening of January 17, 1865, believing his ship to be far from shore, Captain John Despeau headed inland unwittingly. The misguided vessel crashed against the rocks, breaking the ship in half and spilling the cargo and crew into the treacherous surf.

After two grueling hours of struggling in dark, icy water, three officers and five crew gained the shore. Sadly, the strong undertow carried Captain Despeau and eleven men out to sea. One of them was only sixteen years old. “This is the second ship lost at the same point,” local newspapers declared, “and is by far the most disastrous shipwreck which has ever happened on our coast.”

“To this he objected and proposed dating his letter from Carrier Pigeon Point....I proposed he drop the Carrier and call the point Pigeon Point.”

Unknown Resident



After the *Sir John Franklin* foundered, a stone monument was erected in memory of her lost crew.

“No other place on the Pacific Coast has proved so fatal to navigators as this locality.”

***H.A. Scofield, Editor
San Mateo County
Gazette***



The loss of the *Coya* and the *Hellespont*, along with the death of many passengers and crew, stirred a public outcry that resulted in a lighthouse at Pigeon Point. Photograph courtesy of JoAnn Semones.

Hoping to salvage some of the \$350,000 cargo, the *Sir John Franklin*'s owners dispatched a sheriff and six policemen to the scene. Hundreds of scavengers gathered in floating packages of clothes, dry goods, tins of food, and barrels of liquor. The bodies of four seamen were also recovered and interred on a sandy bluff near the wreck. A stone monument, now missing, was erected in memory of the lost crew. Today called Franklin Point, the site is part of Año Nuevo State Reserve.

From Darkness into Light

In spite of these shipwrecks, it took years of petitioning the U.S. Lighthouse Service Board before money was allocated for a lighthouse at Pigeon Point. The most significant events influencing this decision were the wrecks of the *Coya* and the *Hellespont* in the 1860s.

The two barks were colliers which delivered coal from Australian mines. Coal was an important fuel for California's growing cities and industries. Ships from Australia arrived in Pacific ports ahead of those from the north Atlantic, which sailed around South America.

The *Coya*, built in 1863 at London, England, and the *Hellespont*, built in 1856 at Bath, Maine, were both lost under similar circumstances. Blinded by steel gray skies filled with heavy mist, plagued by forceful winds and heavy seas, the meandering barks labored up a shadowy coast. For days before the disaster, the ships' captains were unable to take reliable readings or soundings.

The *Coya* wrecked on November 24, 1866, and the *Hellespont* wrecked on November 18, 1868. Lost in the two wrecks were thirty-seven passengers and crew. One *Hellespont* survivor reflected, "I could hear the cries of my shipmates in the water about me. One after the other, the cries stopped."

The magnitude of the combined tragedies generated an impassioned public outcry. H.A. Scofield, editor of the *San Mateo County Gazette*, was particularly ardent. "Pigeon Point is the most extensive promontory on the coast south of the Golden Gate, and the point seems especially adapted for a lighthouse," he stressed. "No other place on the Pacific Coast has proved so fatal to navigators as this locality."

At the end of 1868, Congress appropriated \$90,000 for the purpose, and two years later the site was purchased. In 1871, before the lighthouse became functional, the fog signal went into service. In 1872, when Pigeon Point Lighthouse was built, a fog signal



Año Nuevo, or New Year's Point, is located five miles south of Pigeon Point. Photograph courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.

station with a steam whistle was also placed at Año Nuevo Point. A small lighthouse was erected at Año Nuevo Point in 1890.

Bad Year at New Year's Point

Several shipwrecks occurred between Pigeon Point and Año Nuevo Point, located just five miles apart. Such was the case in 1887 when two disastrous shipwrecks punctuated the year.

Built at Somerville, Massachusetts, in 1859, the *J.W. Seaver* spent her initial years in the New England-West Indies trade. She ventured out with goods such as butter, fish, flour, and timber, and returned laden with exotic payloads of mahogany, molasses, indigo, and rum. In 1863, she entered California's bustling coastal trade, calling on innumerable West Coast ports and delivering tons of freight each year.

On April 10, 1887, the aging vessel was bound for Astoria, Oregon, from Santa Cruz, carrying sixty tons of hay and ten tons of salt. After years of slapdash repairs, she started leaking and foundered. Although three crew were lost, most made their way to shore on pieces of the wreck.

The *San Vicente*, built in 1875 for the Reis Brothers of San Francisco, was designed for the coast's brisk lime trade. Lime was used for mortar, plaster, and whitewash in the state's active building industry. Bound for Santa Cruz on December 20, 1887, the *San Vicente* erupted in fire. Empty wooden lime barrels below deck acted like kindling, spreading the blaze.



The decks of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company's newest steamer, *Colombia*, provided passengers with ample opportunity for leisure pursuits. Image courtesy of JoAnn Semones.

Twelve of the panic-stricken seamen drowned when they disobeyed orders and jumped overboard. A passing steamer arrived just in time to save the captain and a handful of crew. From the deck of the steamer a distraught Captain Charles Lewis noted, "We laid by the burning vessel until daylight and saw the wreck sink."

Mistaken Bearings

The *Colombia*, built in 1892 at Chester, Pennsylvania, was the newest steamer on the Pacific Mail Steamship Company's Panama route to San Francisco. The steel-hulled vessel offered a refined way to make the voyage. "Once on board, the traveler is shut off from all communication, with the world left behind," the passenger handbook professed. "The other travelers are pleasure bent, and among them one can find congenial friends in whose company the time will fly all too quickly."

On July 13, 1896, the evening before the *Colombia*'s misfortune, fog was so dense that it was impossible to see a hundred yards ahead. Captain William A. Clark, making his first trip as *Colombia*'s master, stood watch throughout the night. Some speculated that he was intent on setting a speed record. When morning came, the captain turned eastward, nearly driving his ship into Pigeon Point's tower.

Initially, few were aware of the sixty-foot gash in the vessel's hull. Throughout the day, meals were served, and travelers spent their time as if leisurely at sea. Eventually, two tugs arrived to ferry passengers ashore. As they departed, scavengers descended upon the ship. Tons of white lead supplied local homes with a fresh coat of paint and copper wire furnished new clothes lines. Limes by the dozen were scooped up from the sand and surf. Sightseeing ships even took excursionists aboard the crippled steamer to forage for souvenirs.

Pacific Mail sent several vessels to salvage the \$250,000 cargo. They returned again and again for silverware, furniture, bedding, and foodstuffs. In addition to 700 tons of general merchandise, there were 2,700 sacks of coffee, and hundreds of cases of cloth, Panama hats, fish oil, soap, and canned sardines. Left in ruins, the once grand steamer was dynamited three months later.

Workhorse of the Pacific

The *Point Arena* was one of 225 wooden steam schooners produced on the West Coast between 1885 and 1923. These versatile vessels



The schooner *Point Arena* is shown after she wrecked while loading cargo in 1913. Photograph courtesy of Frank Perry/Frank Davis.

were agile enough to maneuver well in small, hazardous “dog-hole” ports like Pigeon Point, yet sturdy enough to carry sizeable loads of cargo to larger ports. The schooner made countless runs up and down the Pacific Coast delivering timber for the Beadle Steamship Company.

A.W. Beadle, managing partner of the firm, kept the *Point Arena*, and her master, under perpetual pressure to transport heavier payloads. Sometimes, the loads were piled on until the deck itself was under water. When the captain protested over the vast quantity of timber cast aboard the little vessel, Beadle’s crusty reply is said to have been, “Hell, it’s just lumber. You’ve never seen wood sink have you?”

In the early morning hours of August 9, 1913, despite strong southeast winds and choppy seas, the *Point Arena* began loading her usual cargo of tanbark manifested for San Francisco. Unexpectedly, the schooner fouled a mooring line in her propeller. The defenseless ship lurched violently, slamming broadside into the rocks. As the sea foamed over the deck, the captain ordered his eighteen-man crew to abandon ship.

Later, the broken ship was burned as a potential hazard to navigation. In 1983, fierce storms exposed a five ton fragment of the *Point Arena*’s starboard bow which is now on display at Año Nuevo State Reserve. Although the Beadle Steamship Company prospered into the late 1930s, it became less expensive to haul freight by truck. By the mid-1920s Pigeon Point was no longer used as a port.

*“You’ve never seen
wood sink have you?”*

*A.W. Beadle, Partner
Beadle Steamship Co.*

“They were quite ruthless men. We’d watch for them. They always came on moonlit nights, so we could see them quite clearly.”

Jessie Mygrants Davis



Assistant Keeper Jesse Mygrants caught rum runners unloading their cargo under Pigeon Point's tower. Photograph courtesy of Frank Perry/Frank Davis.

Decks Awash

Throughout the 1920s, when Prohibition was in full swing, waterborne smugglers flocked to Pigeon Point's secluded coves. With its many landing spots, proximity of good roads, and relatively sparse population, the area was a perfect place for clandestine operations.

In the pre-dawn hours of May 22, 1925, the schooner *Pilgrim* came to grief on the rocks near Pigeon Point. Aboard was a cargo of 175 cases of whiskey and 100 barrels of beer valued at \$10,000. Much to the chagrin of many thirsty souls, Coast Guard patrol boats reached the scene quickly and confiscated the spirits after the *Pilgrim* drifted from the rocks onto a sand bar.

Owned by Enoch Olson of Astoria, Oregon, the *Pilgrim* was operated “by a young scion of a prominent bay area family who was in the game for adventure.” The vessel was not alone in finding Pigeon Point's isolated beaches a perfect setting for illicit activity. One night, Assistant Keeper Jesse Mygrants interrupted a band of rum runners. At gunpoint, he was forced to drive them eight miles down the coast to their next destination.

“They were quite ruthless men,” his daughter, Jessie Mygrants Davis, remarked. “We’d watch for them. They always came on moonlit nights, so we could see them clearly. They sailed in on the south side of the tower and were audacious enough to use the lighthouse derrick to unload their ships. Once, one of the dories hit the rocks and the cargo was lost. There were lots of divers in the area after that.”

A Tragic Voyage

Pigeon Point's worst shipwreck occurred on August 29, 1929, when the passenger steamer *San Juan* collided with a Standard Oil tanker twice her size. Within five minutes, she sank stern first taking seventy-five men, women and children to a watery grave.

Built at Chester, Pennsylvania, by John Roach and Sons in 1882, the *San Juan*'s maiden voyage was as part of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company fleet. For forty years she carried passengers and mail from Atlantic to Pacific shores via the Panama Canal. Later, she was purchased by the Los Angeles-San Francisco Navigation Company's White Flyer Line to ferry passengers along California's coast.

One of the people lost was Mrs. Willie Jasmine Brown, age twenty-nine. Her last letter explained, "I'd really rather take the train, but the boat is cheaper. The children need shoes." The fare from San Francisco to San Pedro was, indeed, attractively priced. The cost for journeying between the ports was \$8 to \$10 per person.

A sensational scandal followed the collision. Officers and crew of each ship blamed the other for changing course and causing the accident. A trial was held charging the tanker's captain with inattention to duty. Families and relatives of those aboard the *San Juan* flooded the District Court with lawsuits. Ultimately, Captain Adolf Asplund, who had been filling in for the *San Juan*'s regular master and went down with the ship, was found at fault for running his vessel at full speed in the fog.

Sardines and Sorrows

During the 1930s, the waters off Pigeon Point were popular fishing grounds known for their vast offshore harvest of salmon and sardines. Vessels known as purse seiners, part of Monterey's renowned sardine fleet, fished there often.

Built by Western Boat Building Company of Tacoma, Washington, around 1926, the *Western Spirit* had weathered her share of rough seas. On February 2, 1932, she was caught in the worst storm in twenty years and crashed under Pigeon Point's tower. Lighthouse keeper Gerhard W. Jaehne heard the vessel's distress signals, ran to the rescue, and threw a line aboard. Guided only by a hand lantern and the flashing beam of the lighthouse, he dragged the crew to safety.

"Eleven haggard and exhausted men stood in the pouring rain at 5:00 a.m. and solemnly shook hands with Keeper Jaehne," a local newspaper reported. "They had just escaped a harrowing experience



Mrs. Willie Jasmine Brown, a passenger who perished aboard the *San Juan*, took the ship because it was cheaper than the train. Photograph courtesy of JoAnn Semones/Lorraine Spinelli.



Sardine fishermen, hauling their catch aboard using large nets, were drenched in a shower of fish and saltwater. Photograph courtesy of the Maritime Museum of Monterey.



The *BARC 1*, the first of four amphibious prototypes, looked somewhat like a boxcar taking to sea. Photograph courtesy of U.S. Army Transport Museum.

Editor's Note

Some of the information contained in this article was obtained from rare oral histories and personal interviews with members of keepers' families and local residents. Other information is excerpted from the author's book, *Shipwrecks, Scalawags and Scavengers: The Storied Waters of Pigeon Point* published by Glencannon Press Maritime Books.

that goes down in coast marine history as an epic of the fishing industry."

The *Ohio No. 3*, built in 1929 by Anderson and Christofani of San Francisco, was the first Japanese owned purse seiner in Monterey. The vessel's owner and captain was twenty-three-year-old Frank Manaka. On September 18, 1934, Manaka nearly lost his ship and his crew, when the *Ohio No. 3* ran up on the rocks 200 yards north of Pigeon Point.

Seaman S. Nojima risked his life to save the seiner and its twelve men. When a line, taken ashore by a skiff, parted, he dove into frigid water, fought the breakers, and swam to shore with another line. "Except for the new line," Manaka asserted, "We would have been washed into deep water and sunk." The wrecks left no doubt that fishing is a hazardous occupation.

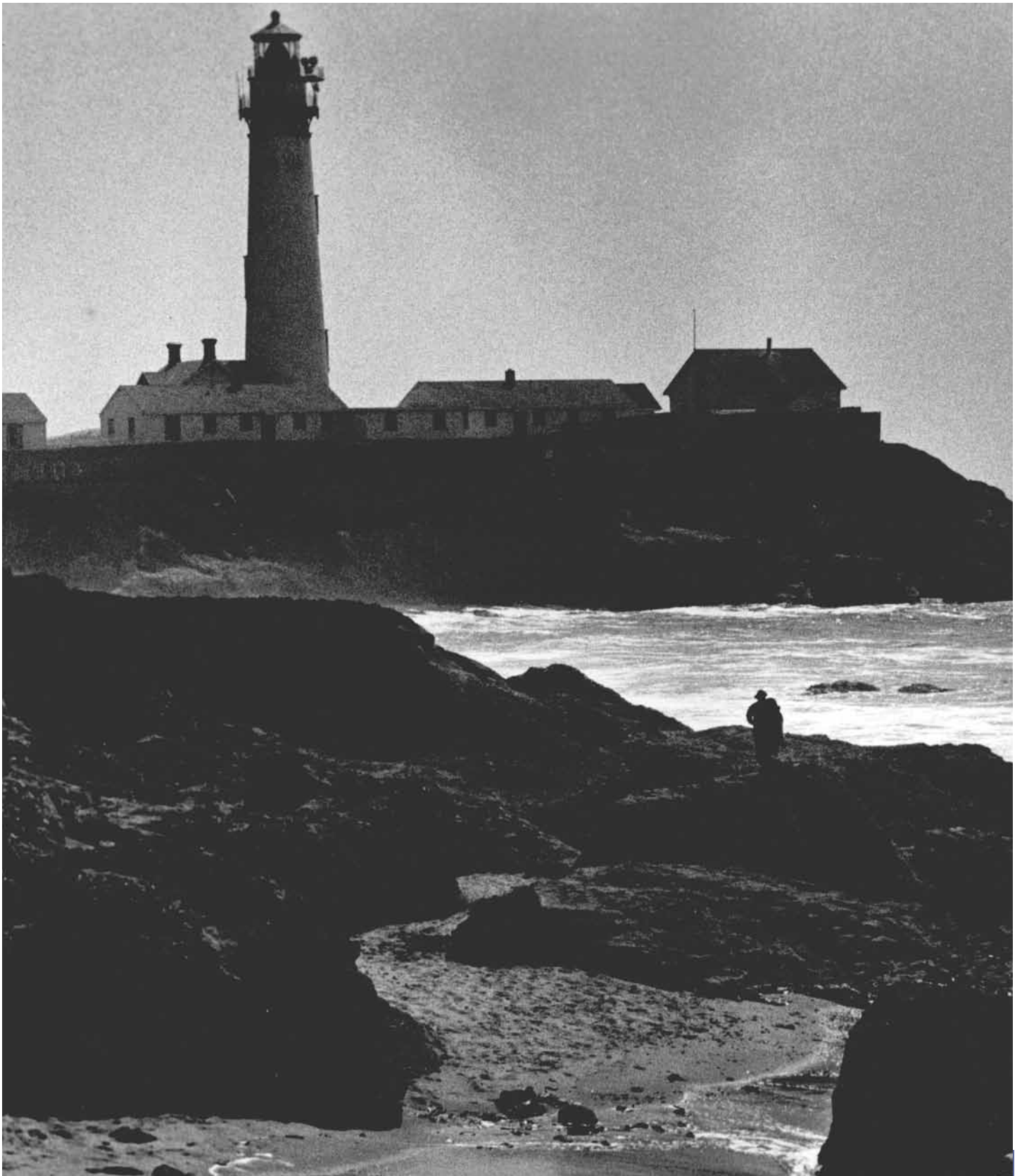
Ocean-Going Boxcar

Perhaps the most unusual vessel to cross Pigeon Point's shores was the *BARC 1*. The "barge amphibious resupply cargo" craft was the first of four prototypes developed by the Army to deliver freight in harbors without piers. It was the only amphibious craft capable of landing on a beach through breaking surf, carrying enormous loads of equipment and supplies. One observer commented, "She looked somewhat like a boxcar taking to sea."

After completing final evaluation tests in Monterey Bay, the *BARC 1* was scheduled to proceed to San Francisco for a public demonstration. On March 17, 1953, under tow by a large Army tug, the *BARC 1* was swamped by heavy waves and towed beneath the sea. The tug's captain saw nothing amiss until the cable parted. Coast Guard rescue ships found three crew floating lifelessly amid the waves, still clad in their life jackets.

The tug boat captain was dismissed from duty. Three months later, the missing barge was raised from 220 feet of water, three miles off Pigeon Point. Buoyed to Oakland, she was dismantled for investigation. Eventually, other BARCs were built and used successfully in the Arctic, Europe, and Viet Nam.

Once, lofty sailing ships, spunky schooners, and grand steamers alike traversed the legendary waters of Pigeon Point. The passage of *BARC 1* signaled the end of an era, and the beginning of a new one.



Pigeon Point Lighthouse. Photograph by Norbert Von Der Groeben.




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