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Shining softly : Maritime museum restores Point Conception Lighthouse Fresnel lens

By ELIZABETH HAMILTON, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT
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After 13 years in the dark, the Point Conception Lighthouse first-order Fresnel lens glowed again Saturday night as the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum's new exhibit.

The museum held a reception to celebrate restoration of the lens, honoring lens experts who worked on the project, donors, and former Point Conception Lighthouse keepers.

"Cinderella has come to the ball," said Willard Thompson, president of the museum's board. "And what a beautiful glass slipper she has."

Built in 1854, the Fresnel lens is the brainchild of French physicist Augustin-Jean Fresnel. In its glory days, kerosene or oil flames lit a beam that shot 26 miles out to sea. The mechanism that moved the lens was cranked by hand until 1978, when electricity reached the lighthouse.

In 2000 the lens was taken out of service and replaced with a modern beacon.

The U.S. Coast Guard chose the Maritime Museum as the home of the lens in 2012. Since then, it has been undergoing restoration under the guidance of James Woodward, one of five people in the U.S. licensed to restore Fresnel lenses, and two other lampists, Kurt Fosburg and Jim Dunlap.

"This is the hardest, most difficult project of my entire career," said Mr. Woodward, who has worked on more than 200 lenses of this kind.

Before restoration could begin, the lens had to be disassembled and carried by helicopter up the 200-foot cliff at Point Conception. The parts were then trucked to the Maritime Museum, where restoration took place over a five-week period.

The lens towers 18 feet and weighs 6 tons. It is made of glass prisms arrayed in three sets of 16 panels. Each panel is constructed of bronze and weighs close to 50 pounds.

"First we had to do a cursory cleaning," said Mr. Woodward. "The lens hadn't been touched for 13 years and there was dirt, bird droppings and moisture."

The three men worked seven-day weeks restoring approximately a panel-and-a-half per person per day.

"For each panel, we had to do restoration on the bronze and every joint, which has wood and glaze to hold it in place," said Mr. Woodward.

The lens is the focal point of a permanent two-story exhibit that illustrates the lighthouse history and explains the impact of lens technology on science today. Included are descriptions of the life of



The Fresnel lens stands in its new home at the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum. The lens, honored by a gala Saturday, beamed light from the Point Conception Lighthouse from 1856 until 2000.

MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



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Lighthouse keepers, the history of the Point Conception Lighthouse, weather patterns and shipwreck tales.

Bruce Drugg of Gresham, Ore., worked as the Point Conception Lighthouse keeper with his wife, Sandi, from 1969 to 1971. The couple were present at the opening exhibit Saturday night.

"We only had one dark and stormy night," said Mr. Drugg. "The wind was blowing and the waves were coming in so hard the spray would go over the top, more than 220 feet high."

Mr. Drugg described the Point Conception Lighthouse as beautiful and isolated.

"The foghorn would blow every 30 seconds. It was down below and we lived over the other side so it sounded like white noise. You could sleep to that."

Mr. Drugg recounted blissful days of hunting, fishing and surfing.

His wife said the isolation was lonely at the time, though she would love to live there now.

"I was 20 years old and the only female with no telephone and no TV. It was lonely because I didn't hunt or fish," Mrs. Drugg said.

Rattlesnakes, scorpions, coyotes and other critters that roamed the area made hiking without a gun impossible, she said.

A little over a year into their stay, Mrs. Drugg became pregnant. Her son, Mark, was born in Lompoc, the town closest to the lighthouse.

In June the family visited Point Conception for the first time since living there.

"That was a thrill," said Mr. Drugg.

The couple said they were glad to see the lens restored.

While working at Point Conception, Mr. and Mrs. Drugg counted approximately 150 visitors who came to see the lens, most of them

schoolchildren.

"How many people do you think are here tonight?" he asked, looking around.

The answer: close to 300, all in awe of the glowing lens.

For more information about the Maritime Museum, call 962-8404 or visit www.sbjmm.org.

email: ehamilton@newspress.com



Built in 1854, the Fresnel lens stands 18 feet tall and weighs 6 tons.



A view of the inside of the lens.



Sandi and Bruce Drugg kept the Point Conception Lighthouse from 1969 to 1971. The photo on the phone shows the couple in 1969.

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