



The Historic Life-Saving Service and G Ranch Cemetery



Continuing Their Watch

In 1890, the United States Life-Saving Service (USLSS) established a station at Point Reyes with a keeper and a crew of seven surfmen on a lonely stretch of the Point Reyes Beach, which was notorious for its pounding surf and bad weather. During the first few years of operation, four surfmen died and were ultimately buried at this cemetery, where they continue their watch over Point Reyes.

The Claussen Family

By 1870, almost the entire Point Reyes peninsula was owned through a three-way partnership by the brothers Oscar L. Shafter and James McMillan Shafter, and Oscar's son-in-law, Charles Webb Howard. The partners split and divided up the land into thirty-two ranches, many of which were assigned a letter from the alphabet.

Howard took the lead in improving his section by hiring a Swedish immigrant carpenter/dairyman named Hinrik Claussen to oversee the completion of his dairies. Claussen lived at G Ranch, one of the first two to be completed.

Hinrik's son, Captain Peter Henry Claussen, arrived at the ranch in 1871 after a short career at sea, and became an active dairyman, served on the school board, and was very active assisting USLSS personnel during many maritime emergencies.

"Captain Claussen plunged into the sea again off Point Reyes Beach when the full-rigged English ship Haddingtonshire ran aground, swam through the breakers... Rigging up a breeches buoy..."
--Jack Mason.

Hinrik died at age 56 in September 1872 and was buried in a small cemetery he had set aside on a knoll east of the ranch house.

The U.S. Life-Saving Service Arrives at Point Reyes

The surfmen assigned to the Point Reyes Life-Saving Service Station patrolled the Point Reyes Beach (aka, the Great Beach and Ten-Mile Beach) and Drakes Beach with an ever-vigilant eye, looking for shipwrecks and their desperate crews. They walked the beaches day and night, with the fog chilling them to the bone and the wind blasting sand at the unprotected skin of their faces. The surfmen's positions were poorly paid, difficult, and full of danger.

The station's first keeper was William L. Loch, who faced a difficult two years at the station. Three of the first seven surfmen assigned to the station left immediately after arriving, finding the conditions at Point Reyes Beach too rough and dangerous. Later, one surfman charged that Loch had tried to kill one of the surfmen; fellow surfmen attested to the fact that "we found the treatment of Captain Loch unbearable."

Early Losses

On December 12, 1890, while the surfmen brought the station's surfboat to shore after more than an hour's drill at sea, a "heavy breaker came in suddenly and turned her over with all hands. ..." Andrew Anderson and Fred Carstens were caught under the boat and crushed. One of the crew was sent to get a doctor, but both men died an hour later.

On March 4, 1891, surfman John Korpala died after a long illness. Korpala had signed up for duty in San Francisco two months before, and had hidden a two-year-old lung illness from Keeper Loch. Loch attempted to treat the illness using a number of home remedies, including whiskey punch, which may have quickened the surfman's demise.

Anderson, Carstens, and Korpala were buried in an unmarked, unfenced plot in the dunes 500 feet from the station. According to the first surfman to

resign from the station in 1891, Loch considered that "[the dead surfmen's] people would not assist and therefore he thought he would not do so himself."

On March 1, 1893, a tragedy similar to that of Anderson and Carsten occurred when, in completing a boat drill on a moderate ocean, an unexpected heavy breaker came in and overturned the surfboat. Surfman George Larson was struck by a gunwhale and killed instantly.

By 1893, there was "much unfavorable comment" from visitors and "a very unpleasant impression" made on the crew by the unceremonious conditions under which Anderson, Carstens, and Korpala were buried. The surviving surfmen exhumed and gave the bodies to Captain Claussen, who took the remains to the Claussen family cemetery, where they, along with Larson, received a proper reburial.

Significant Shipwreck: The *Samoa*

The wreck of the steamer *Samoa* on January 28, 1913, provided the surfmen at Point Reyes with their greatest rescue, one that became known as among the most effective breeches buoy rescues in USLSS history. The *Samoa* was en route to San Francisco from Eureka with a load of lumber when she ran aground in a thick fog 600 yards south of the life-saving station. At 8 am, the crew of the station heard the *Samoa's* fog signal, which sounded very close to shore. At 8:15 am, she blew a distress signal and

Keeper Christopher Hunt headed for the beach, his crew following closely with the beach cart. By 8:30 am, they had located the *Samoa*, despite the dense fog, "with her bow in for the beach, in the breakers with the sea going over her." Despite working "under great difficulties" with "the mess of drifting lumber and heavy timbers that was thrown up by the rough sea," the USLSS crew was able to rescue all twenty-one men on board using the breeches buoy with "no one...lost or seriously injured."

Transitions

In 1914, the the USLSS merged with the US Revenue Cutter Service to form the U.S. Coast Guard. Very little changed in the first years under Coast Guard management, but, in 1927, operations moved from the Great Beach to the protected waters of Drakes Bay near Chimney Rock. At Chimney Rock, a new station

was built as longer, heavier, motorized lifeboats replaced the old, human-powered, surfboats. The Coast Guard carried on the tradition of the USLSS at Point Reyes until December 16, 1968, when the Point Reyes Lifeboat Station was decommissioned and transferred to the National Park Service.

Significant Shipwreck: The *Richfield*

The *Richfield* was one of the largest oil tankers when the Richfield Oil Co. purchased her as the flagship of their fleet in 1925. On May 8, 1930, the *Richfield* encountered heavy fog and a strong northwest wind off the Marin Coast while carrying 25,000 barrels of high-grade gasoline. Around noon, the *Richfield* struck a submerged reef about 500 yards off Chimney Rock and began to spill gasoline into the sea. Captain

Henry Lee ordered his crew to the lifeboats, which were quickly located and towed away from the rapidly expanding gasoline slick by the USCG motor lifeboat. A tugboat later arrived and pumped the remaining 23,000 gallons of gasoline off the ship to lighters. Sightseers crowded the bluff overlooking the wreck, hoping to see the tanker explode, until the USCG placed the area off-limits.

The Tragedy of Lifeboat #36542

On the night before Thanksgiving in 1960, USCG crewmen Anthony Holmes and Hugh McClements left in Coast Guard Motor Lifeboat #36542 from Chimney Rock for a routine assist of a fishing boat near Bodega Bay. After securing the civilian vessel in her port, the crewmen radioed the lifeboat station that they would be returning in less than an hour. When they did not return on schedule, the rest of the crew initiated a search.

The lifeboat was found the next morning, having run aground on the Great Beach with the motor still running. Five days later the body of Holmes was found further south on the beach. On December 16, 1960, the body of McClements was found.

Coast Guard Motor Lifeboat #36542, now retired from duty, stands in quiet memoriam at the Historic Point Reyes Lifeboat Station at Chimney Rock.