

Life At The Lighthouse -- Family Memories

My great grandparent's home

by David & Jeanne Israel



The Old Point Loma Lighthouse was not just the housing for a light; it was the home of the people who took care of the light. It's a light and a house in one.

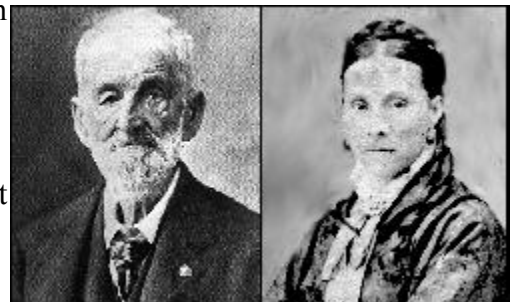
Where did your grandfather grow up? Mine grew up in a lighthouse. The day he was born, June 2, 1871, his father (my great grandfather), Captain Robert Decatur Israel, was appointed Assistant Lighthouse Keeper at the Old Point Loma Lighthouse. When my grandfather was three years old, his father was promoted to Keeper, and his mother (my great grandmother), Maria Arcadia Machado de Alipas Israel, was appointed Assistant Keeper. The Lighthouse was a bustling family home, with the Israel's three boys and a niece all growing up there. In the yard lived three horses, chickens, pigs and goats. The Israel's lived and worked on Point Loma for 18 years, where they watched their children and grandchildren grow up. One of the Israel's grandsons was born at the lighthouse. Maria and her mother, Juana Machado, of Old Town San Diego, delivered the baby.

Life on the isolated Point was, at times, an adventure. My mother remembers, as a child, complaining to my grandfather about having to walk to school, and him telling her, "How would you like to have to ROW A BOAT across the bay to school?" That's how he and his two brothers got to school in Old Town San Diego from the Lighthouse.

Not only was their home one of the first lighthouses on the west coast of United States, it was also the highest in the country, the light being 462 feet above sea level. It was so high that ships often couldn't see the light through the fog and clouds. At such times, because there was no fog horn, Captain Israel would fire a shotgun to warn ships away from the treacherous rocks below. Eventually the lighthouse was replaced by the "New" Point Loma Lighthouse, built at the end of the point at a lower elevation.

My great grandfather kept the Old Point Loma light longer than any other keeper, and he was also the last keeper. He extinguished the light for the last time in March 1891. In 1984, the light re-lit again by the National Park Service for the first time in 93 years, in celebration of the site's 130th birthday.

Approximately 3,000 people and over 100 descendants of the Israel's attended. It is always a thrill for me to look up at night from anywhere in San Diego and see the light shining as it did over 100 years ago. It's as though my great grandparents still live there.



Recently it has been our pleasure to volunteer our time,

effort, and memories at the Old Point Loma Lighthouse. On special occasions the Park opens the very top of the tower to the public. The 360 degree view is breath taking. We are there, in 1880's attire, to show visitors through the house at times. We can almost hear the footsteps of the children who once lived there, and glimpse in our imagination Maria knitting by the fire or the captain rushing upstairs to re-light a blown out wick. You may also see us recreating a kitchen garden beside the lighthouse, and helping park staff to reintroduce native plants to the area surrounding it. We are helping put the past back into place, for the enjoyment of future generations.



The National Park Service, by preserving this historic lighthouse, gives us all a special place to step back in time, a wind swept retreat from our busy modern world, a place to remember the people and times that went before us. Over 100 years ago, people drove out by horse and buggy, over steep and rutted dirt roads, to visit the Israel's, to picnic, and to enjoy the spectacular view that visitors still come to enjoy today.