

THE LADY LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER OF ANGEL ISLAND

By Susan Cluff

As any mariner knows, fog in San Francisco Bay can be treacherous, rolling in without warning, blanketing islands, hills and shallows, shrouding landmarks, rocks and ships, and bouncing light and sound off water. After the Gold Rush, shipwrecks and collisions were common and as more merchant ships, steamers and ferries traveled the bay, new lighthouses, fog bells, horns, and buoys were added to aid navigation.

In October 1886, the *Daily Alta* reported, "The new fog signal recently built on the southwest corner of Angel Island is ready for use and will go into operation on Wednesday next... The bell at the station, during fogs, will be struck twice in quick succession at 15 seconds intervals."

To keep the fog bell working, a lighthouse keeper was retained and a residence built high up on Point Knox that was reached by a narrow footbridge. A separate building jutting over the rocky cliffs housed the huge 3,000 pound fog bell operated by a Gamewell bell striking machine with a heavy weight suspended below to power the mallet striker. Once the mechanism was wound, it would operate for several hours.

From 1902-1914, the fog bell keeper at Angel Island was Juliet Fish Nichols, widow of a former lighthouse inspector. In the early morning of July 2, 1906 with heavy fog rolling in, Juliet woke to the warning blasts of the Lime Point foghorns at the Golden Gate and went to turn on the striking machine. It failed. She tried again. Knowing the importance of the Angel Island fog bell to the Tiburon steamer ferries

passing Point Knox, and with no way of summoning help, Juliet began ringing the bell by hand - two blows every 15 seconds. The fog persisted and she kept banging for 20 hours and 35 minutes!

Just two days later the machine broke down again. Juliet later recorded in her logbook: "On the night of - 4th of July, the machine went to pieces, the great tension bar broke in two and I could not disconnect the hammer to strike by hand. I stood all night on the platform and struck the bell with a nail hammer with all my might..." During her tenure at Point Knox, she reported at least eight striking machine failures. For her outstanding service, she received a medal from the Lighthouse District and her salary, which in 1912 was \$500, a year plus 20 cents per diem for rations.

In 1961 a new, more modern lighthouse and fog station opened at Point Blunt on Angel Island and the Point Knox lighthouse and bell structures destroyed. Today, the only thing left is the big bronze bell still showing the hammer marks Juliet made to keep the ships in the fog from running aground.

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1. In early 1900s, Tiburon was a busy railway and ferry terminus with huge sidewheel ferry steamers like the Ukiah and James M. Donahue carrying passengers and cargo to San Francisco.

2. The Angel Island lighthouse keeper's residence at Fort Knox was an isolated and lonely spot with its fog bell housed in a separate building over the cliffs.

3. In 1961, the huge 3,000 pound fog bell was abandoned on the foundation of the old lighthouse station facing the Golden Gate.

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