

THE **2** ND

WATCH

FALL 2024



**John Gibbons and Bob Hachmeister,
former keepers Saint George Reef Lighthouse**

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Please call us at 707-273-1905
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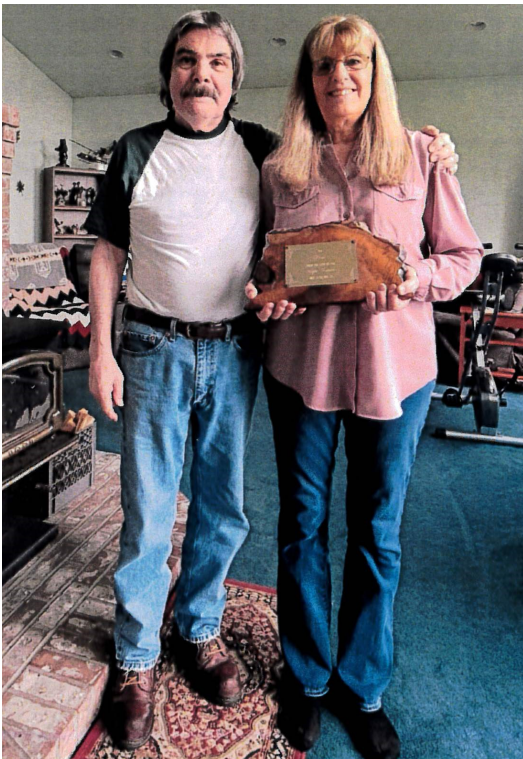
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NEW EMERITUS MEMBERS

Board members Russ and Marshann Burnette have stepped down from the board of directors. They have been given Emeritus status for their contributions to the society.

WINNER LABOR DAY RAFFLE

For overnight stay at
Saint George Reef Lighthouse
Barbara Lynn Jeffrey
Congratulations!



TOURS

We canceled our Labor Day tour due to transportation issues. While it was a major disappointment the weather was foggy that weekend and it was doubtful we could have made it out anyway. We will keep you posted regarding future tour dates.

MEMBERSHIPS

2024 is rapidly coming to a close. Supporters of our organization are strongly encouraged to renew memberships as basic expenses such as printing, website expenses, insurance and storage all must be paid. Please consider giving a little extra as our needs are many. You can be assured the funds are spent wisely.

CORRECTION! Retired Coastguardsmen's Tom and wife Mary Matthews far left. Mary was mistakenly identified as Pam Matthews in our Summer 2023 newsletter.

Message from the President: John Zimmerman



It has been a productive year for Saint George Reef Lighthouse Preservation Society. Our board of directors have been engaged in bylaw updating to better reflect our organization activities. Also, our membership lists are being updated and we ask our members to let us know if they are not getting our newsletters by email. (Our phone number is listed in our contacts on page 2.) Our organization provided a booth at both the Independence Day Festival and Del Norte County Fair this year for public outreach. Lectures, radio spots, podcasts and articles in lighthouse magazines have also been published. Our website and Facebook page are getting new posts often. Photos, keeper interviews and videos are being posted as well. We have received a draft of an engineering report from our consultants outlining project priorities regarding restoration of the lighthouse. A great deal of money will be required to fund this project. (Over \$9,000,000 is projected so far) While this figure is daunting, other lighthouse organizations have raised sums larger than this. We can do this as well. We are currently working on grant applications. Expertise in this area is needed. Please contact us if you are interested in getting involved with this or any other activity. There is always plenty to do!

Let's celebrate Saint George Reef Lighthouse's 132nd birthday (October 20th, 1892) by dedicating ourselves to this important restoration project.



**Top: John Gibbons,
Bob Hachmeister**



**Bottom left: John Gibbons,
Bob Hachmeister, and Bob's
lady friend Rose Mustard,
September 25, 2024**

A visit with John Gibbons and Bob Hachmeister

It was an honor to have the opportunity to meet with John 'Gibby' Gibbons and Bob Hachmeister, both living near Denver Colorado. The editor spent the afternoon with both of them September 25th, 2024. I interviewed both of them back in May 6th, 2022 and wanted to speak with them again. It was amazing to listen to them both recount stories of 68 years ago and find that they both recall their time at Saint George serving together as a challenging and fulfilling post. I asked Gibby a question regarding how the fog equipment operated and he corrected his response the next day because he said he answered the question incorrectly. To be able to do that after 68 years passed since doing the job! Bob Hachmeister recalled being out there as a good posting. While much of the work was routine, tasks such as keeping the foghorn going was challenging. Problems with the foghorn or any other equipment repairing it on site without outside help. Bob recalled having to repair the winch cable because a kink had developed. After cutting out the kink he had to mend the cable by hand, one strand at a time. Gibby recalled painting the dome of the lighthouse on his belly with nothing but a rope around his waist. If the foghorn needed repairs during windy weather, Gibby would tie a rope around his waist and other keepers would hold it so if he was blown over the side of the caisson, he could be pulled up. During storms the building would shake and water would seep around the lantern panes and window casings. In the 1950's the launch was still pulled out of the water. It took two tanks of air to pull the boat up all the way. The launch would dangle in the air just above the waves until sufficient pressure was built up to pull the boat the rest of the way up. Showers were infrequent and the water lukewarm at best. Gibby often said that serving out there made shore duty seem easy. Despite all the hardships, both Gibby and Bob enjoyed their time there.

A Lighthouse Christmas

By John "Gibby" Gibbons

The following is an actual eyewitness account by a Coast Guardsman stationed at St. George Reef in 1955.

We were not planning on spending Christmas on "The Rock" that December, but our plan started to change real fast.

The year was 1955. The lighthouse was St. George Reef, better known as "The Rock" to the men who served on this lighthouse. St. George Reef is located 6 miles off Point St. George in northern California, almost on the California and Oregon border. The nearest city is Crescent City, California, which is about 12 miles away.

This is not only the most isolated lighthouse on the West Coast, but it was also the most dangerous lighthouse to get on and off. It took 10 years to build this lighthouse. At a cost of \$704,000, it was the most expensive lighthouse ever built. The light was put into operation in 1892.

Back in 1955, there were seven men assigned to St. George Reef Lighthouse, with three men on each watch. As I understand, in later years, it went to a four-man watch. We would spend 15 days on "The Rock" and then spend 15 days at Humboldt Bay Lifeboat Station. I was a second class engineman in charge of one watch. With me I had two first class seamen, James "Red" Griffin and John O. Jones. They were also first class lighthouse keepers. We were all single men.

On the other watch, there was Bill Hoffman, a second class boatswain mate who was in charge of the watch. With him were Duane "Fergy" Ferguson, a second class machinist mate, and Donald L. Pinion, a seaman. Both Hoffman and Ferguson were married and lived at Humboldt Bay Lifeboat Station.

Chief Boatswain Mate F.E. Swanson was in charge of the lighthouse. He was also married and lived at Humboldt Bay.

A few weeks before Christmas, Fergy was feeling sorry because his watch would have to spend Christmas on "The Rock" and we single men would be on shore. I told Fergy we would think of him when we sat down to a delicious Christmas dinner cooked by Bill Winsett, the cook at Humboldt Bay.

We relieved the watch on December 3,

1955. There were five of us together. Chief Swanson had decided to spend a watch with us, thinking he would be home by Christmas with his family. I also had a man by the name of McQuaw whom I was training to be an engineman.

We always liked having extra men on "The Rock" to talk to and play cards with. When there were only three men, you could soon run out of things to talk about. Red and I took turns cooking. There was plenty of food, and we served good meals.

I would call this one of the better watches that I spent there. I had no equipment breakdowns, the weather was good for that time of year, and we had very little fog—which meant no fog horns.

On December 17, we were all in a happy mood as we starting cleaning up the lighthouse from top to bottom in preparation of relief day the next morning. It was raining and the wind had started to blow

that morning. The rain and wind increased throughout the day, and the barometer fell faster than I had ever seen it fall. I knew we were in for a storm, but I did not know how big it would be.

By 1600 hours, we had unfavorable landing conditions, and we knew we would not be getting off the next day. At this time I had been stationed at "The Rock" for about 30 months. I had seen many storms, and I had been stuck out there a few times, but only for two or three days. I thought this would be no different; how wrong I was.

This would be the worst storm to hit the Northern California coast in a decade. Towns like Klamath, California, were completely destroyed. The men at Humboldt Bay were out on patrol and rescue day and night for two weeks.

Back then each watch was required to have an extra 10 days supply of food for three men; we had five men out there. After five



The St. George Reef Lighthouse circa 1955. Photo from author's collection.



Johnny Webb (left) and James "Red" Griffin (right) in galley at St. George Reef circa 1953. Author's collection.

days, Red and I took an inventory of our food; we had used up eight days of food in five days. When we told Chief Swanson this, he gave the order to go to one meal a day. The only thing we had left in the freezer were some loaves of old bread. When they were thawed out, they were all moldy. We found out that if we picked off the big mold pieces and then toasted the bread with a little

peanut butter, it was not too bad. We had one box of World War II C rations. In it there was some hard chicory that we boiled for coffee. There were a few other things as well that were fit to eat.

On Christmas Eve, the storm was still raging, and we knew we would be spending Christmas on "The Rock."

At the 1600-hour traffic check, Fergy got on the radio and wished us all a Merry Christmas. Then he said how sorry he was that we had to spend Christmas on "The Rock," and then we could hear him laughing.

Fergy told us to listen to the Crescent City radio station that evening.

That night we turned on the radio and the DJ told about us being stuck on the lighthouse and about the food supply getting low. He then mentioned all

of our names and dedicated a half hour of Christmas music to us.

With the wind still howling, the sea still pounding us, and the main light shining bright, we sat around and listened to the music. We were probably thinking of our families at home and wondering what they were doing that Christmas Eve.

When the station played the last song for us, it got very quiet in the galley that night, and there might have been a few wet eyes. The song was "Silent Night."

I cooked the Christmas dinner. We had not had any meat for two or three days. I had a surprise for the men. I had found a can of Spam and, to go along with that, two kinds of vegetables and, of course, our moldy bread. This was our Christmas dinner.

The storm finally let up on January 3. The other crew came aboard. We had been on "The Rock" for more than 30 days. We had about two days of food left.

The first thing we did when the other watch came aboard was to get a fresh loaf of bread and some bologna and make a sandwich.

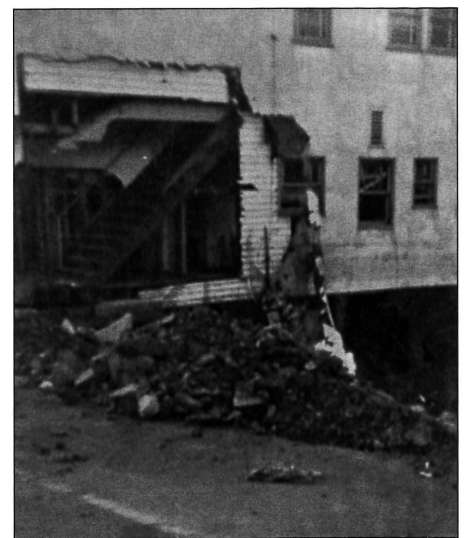
I left "The Rock" on November 4, 1956. I was supposed to leave on November 2, but a storm came up and I could not get off.

I spent a total of 39 months on "The Rock." This was the longest any Coast Guardsman ever spent on St. George Reef Lighthouse.

Many Christmases have come and gone, but I will always remember the Christmas I spent on "The Rock."



The author, in 1956, on the controls of boom landing men and supplies on the lighthouse. Author's collection.



Klamath, California in 1955, after the storm. Author's collection.

We heartily recommend membership to the U.S. Lighthouse Society
www.USLHS.org

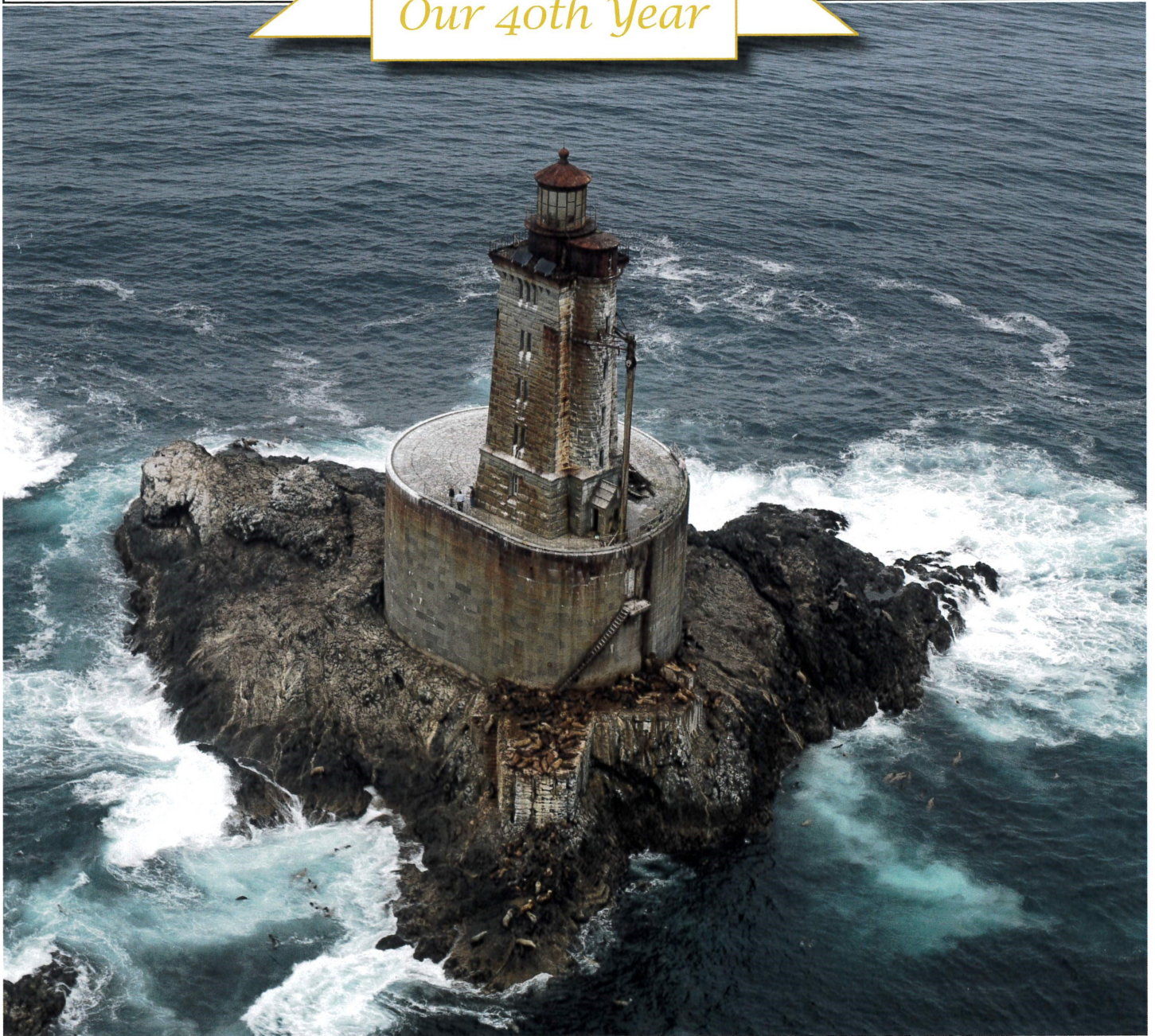
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L O G
T H E K E E P E R ' S

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Our 40th Year



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