



CENTRAL COAST LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS

WINTER 98-99



[South Rail and Wharf at Point Sur-1934](#)

When planning the construction of the Pt. Sur Lightstation, the engineers decided to build a railway system to the top of the moro rock instead of a road. A road to the top would have meant “heavy cutting and trestle work.” A rail system would not only allow supplies for construction to be hauled to the top via a steam engine, but it could be left in place for the future resupply of the lightstation.

With an engine in place at the crest of the rock by September 1887, supplies were hauled up the east side rising 318’, between the two buildings at the top, then lowered over another incline of 90’ on the west side of the rock to a turntable. The turntable was the starting point for tracks going out to the lighthouse, constructed at such a slope that loaded cars could be braked down before reaching their destination. That track bed involved cutting 30’ into the rock and constructing trestles that had 40’ high legs.

The railway at Pt. Sur was technically an incline railway, consisting of a single track and flat bed cars raised and lowered by cable lying on the rail ties. It was similar to systems used in underground mining, though it used the latest technology. The wire cable that hauled the cars was invented in Europe in 1820, and first produced commercially in 1841 by John Roebling, who later engineered the Brooklyn Bridge which was heavily dependent on wire cable.

The steam donkey, which consisted of a boiler and hoisting engine, was brought from San Francisco and landed using "surf boats" at the mouth of the Big Sur River. Donkey engines were first patented in 1882 by John Dolbeer using the concept of steam winches on ships. Steam donkeys were often used in logging operations where they were put into place by mounting them onto a heavy framework and then upon two log skids so that the winching power of the machine could be used to move itself. They were often set up on ridgetops for pulling loaded railcars up inclined railways from steep canyon bottoms previously inaccessible. We can only suppose that they were able to get the steam donkey to the top of Pt. Sur using the same technique. One large steam donkey, called a "bull donkey" could replace a 10 bull team and reduced costs in the logging industry by half. Unfortunately, there were constant and costly maintenance problems with the railway at Pt. Sur. Custom-made rollers were immediately ordered to “prevent the wire rope from dragging over and cutting the wooden ties.” Rather than saving money, the railway was in need of constant repairs. Over its 13 year useful life, it required new steel-wire cable, a new whistle bell, boiler tubes and smokestack. The track needed to be straightened, and the trestles and bridges replaced. Even a new base had to be built for the hoisting engine. The Lighthouse Board decided to build a roadway for teams around the rock to the tower and dwellings. Work started in the fall of 1899. Heavy storms and problems with the rock caused construction to stop in January 1900 and the road wasn’t completed until August 1900. Ethel Bonney, teacher at the Big Sur School who boarded on the rock with the head keeper, had the honor of being the first to drive up the new road. (See the Fall ’98 Lighthouse Quarterly.)

Supplies over the next several years were landed on the beach by the lightstation tender surf boats. "As the surf breaks badly at this locality, tenders are often obliged to wait several days before effecting landings and surf boats are frequently swamped and damaged, men are drenched, and supplies often damaged and lost." Several different schemes for improving this situation were suggested. A system with a cable running from the top of Pt. Sur to a tower on the beach was suggested. The cable would hang over the water where a surf boat could unload its cargo directly onto a hook hanging from the cable. The surf boat could lie safely outside the surf line to unload. Hauling supplies from Monterey was deemed cheaper than this proposed system.

In 1909, a new compressed air fog signal system was installed at Pt. Sur. With the old steam whistle, the wood to fire the steam plant was secured locally in Big Sur and delivered by wagons driven across the dunes via a corduroy road and up the road around the rock. The compressed air system required oil in barrels to be delivered by lightstation tender. A new landing was constructed by the summer of 1911 consisting of a huge berm to provide shelter to anchoring ships, a one-ton hydraulic lift and a derrick with a 40 foot boom placed at the end of the berm. It was located somewhere on the southside of the rock. (Though originally planned for the Northwest or windward side of Pt. Sur!!) By June 1912, the landing was already described as "incomplete and inaccessible." The hoist could only be used in "very calm seas."

A new wharf and railway were planned, the blueprints containing a note that they "may be altered to fit the margin of the cliff." The new landing system also would be on the south side of the rock, but "west of the present point and out of the breakers." The new wharf was about 40' up from the water and had a tripod derrick which pivoted over the ocean to hoist supplies from the surf boats. A railway ran from the wharf on low trestles, crossing the road on a higher trestle, then to the top of the rock laying against the rock itself. According to Pt. Sur resident George Henderson, in the early 1930s, a "sump" or pipeline ran from the top of the railway to the tanks in the oilhouse down by the light tower. Oil could be poured directly from the top of the railway into the sump system and transferred directly into the oilhouse tanks. The new landing system was in use well into the 1930s, possibly until 1939 when the Coast Guard replaced the Lighthouse Service and made major changes to modernize Pt. Sur.

(Quoted material is from official Lighthouse Service reports and letters.)