



**“Life-Saving” was Dangerous Work**  
**By Scott Fletcher**  
**Marin History Museum Volunteer**

If you drive or bike out Sir Francis Drake Blvd towards the ocean you will pass an intriguing and somewhat ironic sign that reads, “Historic Life-Saving Station Cemetery.” It is just past the intersection with Oyster Rd., a short distance up an unnamed lane on the right. A small footpath sign on the left will lead you up to a grove of trees on a nearby hill. There, laid to rest, are four Pt. Reyes Life Saving ‘surfmen’ who lost their lives in the line of duty over 100 years ago.

The Pt. Reyes Life-Saving Station was built in 1890 to house the newly formed United States Life Saving Service (USLSS). The station was manned by seven surfmen and one keeper; the leader of the group. Their duties were to help vessels foundering on the dangerous beaches and rocks of the Pt. Reyes Peninsula and provide life-saving aid to the crews and passengers. The station was located on what was then called ‘10-Mile Beach’ between present-day Pt. Reyes Beach and Abbotts Lagoon. The Pt. Reyes peninsula thrusts ten miles out into the Pacific Ocean’s southerly currents, and the shoreline is often shrouded in dense fog and whipped by howling winds that combine to wreak havoc for ships sailing along the coast. Many of the first surfmen to serve at Pt. Reyes quit within weeks as the forbidding conditions and strenuous training was too much to bear.

The first surfmen deaths were Fred Carstens and Andrew Anderson, both crushed under their rescue boat that was tossed by a rogue wave just yards offshore during a training exercise. A year later, another surfmen, John Korpala, died from exposure after receiving scant medical care, that included a “whisky punch” at the station. The keeper, Captain Loch, was known as a very harsh man and had the three men buried in a nearby sand dune in unmarked graves. A fourth surfmen, George Larson, died from injuries two years later on a similar training exercise. After his death,

the surviving surfmen did not want the same fate to befall their comrade as those of Carstens, Anderson and Korpala. They exhumed the bodies and gave all four to Peter Henry Claussen, the tenant of nearby G Ranch, who provided them all a proper burial in the Claussen family cemetery.

The life-saving station continued to operate from its original location and in 1915 the USLSS and the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service were merged to form the newly created U.S. Coast Guard. Plans to move the station to a more protected spot were delayed by the First World War, but in 1927 it was relocated to Drakes Bay near Chimney Rock. It had a marine railway for launching the new motorized lifeboats, a long wharf, improved crew's quarters and an Officer-in-Charge quarters nearby. The new station was active from 1927 to 1968 when the property was transferred to the Point Reyes National Seashore. After restoration, the Point Reyes' lifeboat station is the only one on the Pacific Coast with an intact marine railway.

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