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Sweet Memories of San Diego

Photos courtesy of James W. Sweet

By [Jeremy D'Entremont](#)

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[James Relue Sweet lighthouse keeper, gold miner, ...](#)



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[James and Celia Sweet in 1957.](#)



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[Ballast Point Lighthouse, 1908. Keeper James ...](#)



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[The Ballast Point Lighthouse, San Diego, CA.](#)

Despite his success in the building trade, Sweet longed for steadier employment and felt drawn to the sea. This led him to the Lighthouse Service in 1898, at a salary of \$500 per year. He soon served brief periods as a relief keeper (approximately 30 days each) at several California light stations: Point Arena, Battery Point, rugged St. George Reef, Point Bonita, Point Conception, Pigeon Point and Point Pinos. He then served as assistant keeper at Oakland Harbor

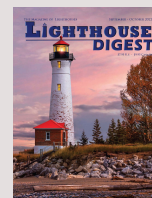
The life of James Relue Sweet reads like an epic novel with one exciting chapter after another. With an education that went only to the fourth grade, Sweet achieved success as a construction worker, California lighthouse keeper, gold miner, inventor, boat builder and racer, and violinmaker. His wife, Celia Rogers Sweet, was the first woman pilot boat captain on San Diego Bay. The family's incredible journey has been well chronicled by two generations of Sweets, Alton, now 96 years old, his son, James W. Sweet, and daughter, Janet Verla Corey.

James Relue Sweet was born on May 23, 1875 on a Monterey, California farm owned by his parents, Calvin R. Sweet and Marie de los Angeles de la Torre Sweet. Three years earlier, his father had caught a case of gold fever and traveled around Cape Horn to the west coast from Michigan.

James Sweet's working career began at the age of 14. His formal education was brief, but he completed a number of correspondence school courses including one in building construction. As a result of this course he established a reputation as a builder before his 20th birthday.

Sweet also became one of the top amateur boxers in Monterey County as a teenager. Boxing was considered a vulgar pursuit at the time, and James' father virtually dragged his son home just before the county championship match was about to begin. This ended his pugilistic career on an embarrassing note.

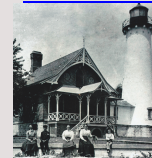
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[>> Click to enlarge <<](#)
[Celia Sweet holds their son Alton Relue Sweet.](#)
 ...



[>> Click to enlarge <<](#)
[James Sweet's son Alton and his wife Carol, in](#)
 ...



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[Alton Sweet and his son Jim.](#)

dwelling at Ballast Point. Sweet moved into one, while the head keeper, Captain David R. Splaine, an Irishman and Civil War veteran, lived in the other.



[>> Click to enlarge <<](#)
[The Ballast Point Lighthouse Circa 1908. At left](#)
 ...

according to the tides, but there were times when emergency runs were necessary and Sweet would have to wait out a tide at North Island.



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[The Ballast Point Light Station, circa 1909.](#)

his favorite dancing partner. At noon on July 4, 1905, James and Celia were married on a vessel offshore from Point Loma.

James and Celia Sweet's son Alton wrote in a 1995 article, "In recent years it has been my pleasure to take my family and friends to the Juan Cabrillo National Park on Point Loma overlooking the Ballast Point Light and San Diego Bay, and with tremendous pride and joy I let my mind wander back to the days when Mother and Dad were so active with their lighthouse service and boating... What a wonderful and romantic place to be born on and this is exactly where my sister and I first saw light in 1908 and 1906 respectively." Alton Sweet was born three days before the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

Light (1899-1900), San Luis Obispo Light (1900-1902) and Point Sur Light in Monterey (1902-1903).

During his stint at St. George Reef Light, James Sweet had a harrowing experience later described by his son Alton: "It was there that Dad and another assistant had to tie up the keeper to prevent him from jumping into the sea. Dad never fully explained to me why the keeper wanted to jump into the sea, but he did say that a ninety-day duty on St. George was a tremendous factor."

According to Alton, James Sweet's "joy knew no bounds" when he received an appointment to be keeper of the beacon lights off Ballast Point Light in San Diego in 1903. Ballast Point, as described by Norma Engel, daughter of a later keeper, "stretches out into the entrance of San Diego Bay like a huge thumb extending from the hand of Point Loma." There were two Victorian

Sweet's new job was tending seven oil-burning beacons a half-mile offshore in the vicinity of North Island, an uninhabited, narrow strip of land (later home to a Naval Air Station) separating the Pacific Ocean from San Diego Bay. The offshore beacons were a challenge to maintain. The boat provided, named the Sea Lion, achieved a top speed of only six knots, compared to the bay's swift tides that exceeded nine knots. Sweet had to develop a tight schedule

After he settled into his life at the light station, Sweet managed to find time to attend local Army dances at Fort Rosencrans. It was at the Saturday night dances that he met Celia Rogers, a young telephone worker who became

The Sweets had no electricity or running water at the Ballast Point Light Station, but they made many improvements during their years there, including the addition of a new fresh water system, several storage sheds and a Victorian-styled doghouse designed to match the main buildings.

Alton remembers some details of life at Ballast Point, like the lighthouse inspector who would wipe the tops of the doors with his white gloves, looking for dust. He remembers that his mother hated it when his father would boil live crawfish. If inspectors were coming, she would mask the crawfish smell (this was before room fresheners were invented) by baking brownies. And he remembers that his parents had to hire a tug and barge to bring soil from Point Loma to the station. The dirt was meant to provide a flower and vegetable garden for the family. Unfortunately, not long after Keeper Sweet spread the soil over the rocky ground, several large destroyers sped past Ballast Point and washed the would-be garden into the sea.

As time allowed, Keeper Sweet looked for ways to supplement his income and exercise his creative talents. He began to design and build boats, and he also constructed a system at Ballast Point that allowed boats up to 40 feet in length to be brought up on rails, where he could work on them. Sweet built a fast 28-foot motorboat, the Relue, which cut the trip to San Diego down to a half hour. Prior to that, visits to the city were usually once a month. A contemporary newspaper story described the "speedy Relue slipping over the bay, the yeast at its bow, whipped froth white and flinging the brine on each side in a snowy cloud." The Relue set a Pacific coast speed record of 22 knots.

Sweet eventually was contracted to build the first motorized pilot boat on San Diego Bay, the 32-foot Pilot, christened on May 3, 1907. The harbor pilots were quite pleased that they no longer had to worry about the tides and wind when meeting incoming ships. Sweet even designed the complete living quarters on board. The boat was christened in a gala affair, with Celia Sweet smashing the traditional champagne bottle against its bow. Soon after this James Sweet became a licensed harbor pilot.

The San Diego Yacht Club had no ladies' race in their 1910 schedule because there was only one woman who wanted to race. "That was Mrs. Captain Sweet of Ballast Point and of the Relue," a newspaper reported. "Mrs. Sweet is hoping that by the next season, she can have someone of her sex with whom to compete." Celia Sweet did eventually compete against some of the local male boaters. She won a racing game against local yachtsmen, an accomplishment that helped her become the first female licensed harbor pilot in San Diego Bay in 1912.

Alton Sweet recalls a memorable boat race on July 1911. His father was serving as a race official and was dressed in his best immaculate white suit, including a vest, tie and cap. Alton and his sister Verla were on board the Relue, which was tied to a float. The Sweet children were eating popcorn as they watched the festivities. Alton emptied his bag first and was soon reaching for his sister's popcorn. As the two tussled, Verla fell off the boat and slipped under the float.

Their father, Keeper Sweet, dashed to the scene and dove into the bay, best suit or not. He quickly snatched up his daughter and brought her to the surface, alive and well and still clutching popcorn in both hands.

According to Alton Sweet, his parents gave up their lighthouse life in 1911 largely because their children had reached school age. It would have been a seven-mile trip by water to attend school in San Diego. "My sister Verla and I were too young to realize we were leaving our 'Shangri La,' our first home and nearest thing to a paradise," says Alton.

James Sweet's success building and repairing power vessels also led him away from the Lighthouse Service. He launched a new company with two other boat builders. He also became the Vice Commodore of the San Diego Yacht Club, where Celia chaired a number of races and other events.

In 1913, in the midst of his success in the boating world, James Relue Sweet appears to have been infected with the same gold fever that brought his father west from Michigan many years earlier. He moved his family to Gold Beach, Oregon and set up a machine shop with his brother Jerome. The Sweet brothers built several gold separating machines. James Sweet also spent a good deal of time prospecting for gold and platinum. He walked so far on one expedition that his feet swelled and he had to cut the boots off his feet.

James eventually bought out his brother's interest in their machine business. Not long after this, Jerome Sweet died near Monterey, California when a safety line broke while he was diving for abalone.

James Sweet's tinkering led him in many directions, such as when he bought a used Model T Ford and converted it into an early station wagon. His prospecting career ended in 1916 when a camp he had set up with several other men was hit by a tidal wave, destroying much equipment. With some help he gathered what was left from the camp and held what may have been one of the first West

Coast yard sales in Gold Beach, Oregon. He then gathered the family in the Model T "station wagon" and headed south to Vallejo, California.

After wartime work in a navy yard and some construction work, Sweet took up violin making and made about 100 violins in the ensuing years. After a move to Los Angeles, he again worked as a boat builder while his wife Celia and daughter Verla opened a beauty shop. Sweet went on to build a speed record breaking hydroplane and other record holding boats.

In later years the Sweets often vacationed at Clear Lake, California. On July 4, 1956, their 51st anniversary, James and Celia Sweet were the guests of honor in the annual Lake Parade. They sat in a boat under an arch of roses, and Alton Sweet wrote that his father "tipped his hat and beamed all over" as the boat passed the grandstand. After his retirement, James Sweet still repaired furniture and violins, and even built a replica of one of his early gold separating machines. James Relue Sweet died in Jackson, California in 1962.

The beautiful Victorian buildings at the lighthouse station at Ballast Point were razed in 1960. Celia Sweet visited Ballast Point in 1972 at the age of 86. She said she missed the lighted beacons that once marked the bay and were once the responsibility of her husband. She recalled her pilot's license proudly, saying, "I was Number One. I had a government pilot's license for the bay and I used to take out parties for hire." Celia Sweet died in 1974 in Sacramento, where she was living with her daughter Verla.

James Relue Sweet's grandson James W. Sweet says, "Three generations of Sweets have carried on the name of James, including myself, my son, Joseph James Sweet, and two of my grandsons, Forrest James Nunn and James Joseph Sweet. My grandfather's legacy lives on in our family." Jim has devoted much of his time since his retirement to researching and preserving the family history. Two years ago he lived aboard his 25-foot sailboat for a month in San Diego Bay as he searched out his roots, and he has spent countless hours poring through records in the city's historical archives.

In a poignant reminder of the past, a 1991 excavation at Ballast Point uncovered toy marbles that apparently belonged to Alton Sweet as a child at the light station about 80 years earlier.

Keeper Sweet's granddaughter Janet Verla Corey has located the lantern room, lens, bell tower and fog bell from Ballast Point Lighthouse. The bell tower, now privately owned, is being used as a ham radio shack in the San Diego area. The lantern room and bell are also privately owned. The lens is in the hands of the National Park Service and is currently in storage.

The family is hoping that the San Diego Maritime Museum will obtain and preserve these important relics. Displaying these items for the public would serve as a memorial to the Sweets and the other families who played such a vital role in the development of the area.

This story appeared in the July 2002 edition of Lighthouse Digest Magazine. The print edition contains more stories than our internet edition, and each story generally contains more photographs - often many more - in the print edition. For subscription information about the print edition, [click here](#).

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