The Last Lighthouse

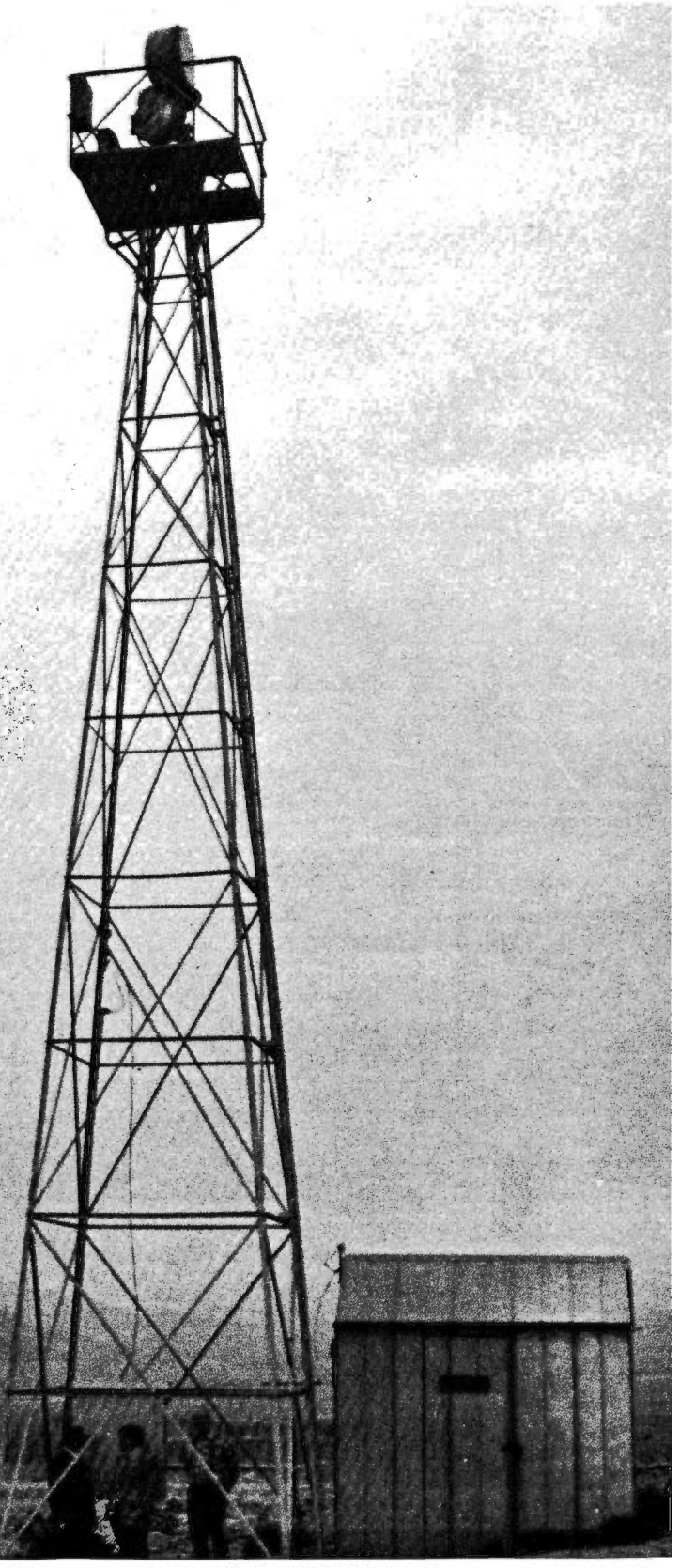
Airway beacons, those venerable sentinels of the airways, succumbed last year, unable to survive in an electronic world. The last of the species died on Whitewater Hill near Palm Beach, Calif. Its epitaph was a one-line entry in the log, "Decommissioned this date."

These dinosaurs of air-navigation equipment flashed their two-million-candlepower beams through aviation's primordial night skies to guide, comfort and many times save those early birdmen who challenged the darkness on wings of wood, cloth and wire. These simple but efficient and dependable beacons, with their Swiss-built astronomical time-switch brains, began their night vigils 15 minutes before sunset and ended 15 minutes after sunrise. During an average night, one would stab the darkness through 4,320 revolutions with its piercing light. They were really lighthouses for airships. It was no wonder, then, that the first ancestor of FAA was the Aeronautics Branch of the Lighthouse Service.

For 47 years, they could be seen almost everywhere in the country—from mountain peaks, across the sagebrush flats of Nevada and the deserts of California and Arizona, through the Midwest prairies to the forests of the Northeast and Northwest. They were the first air-navigation aids along the airways, usually spaced at 10-mile intervals. Even into the 1940s, when low-frequency radio ranges and the new VHF ranges provided electronic guidance over much of the country, airway beacons were still a primary aid. Their highwater mark was 1946, when 2,112 of them served 124 numbered airways.

Their maintenance from the 1920s to 1954 was accomplished by a small band of hardy souls called Airway Mechanicians. They tended their string of beacons alone, enduring long hikes with heavy back packs and dodging mountain lions, rattlesnakes, mad bulls and bears. They skied and snowshoed through snow, fought floods and fire and climbed desert mountains.

The rapid changes in electronics technology in the late 1950s signaled the beginning of the end for beacons, and today's sophisticated radar, computers and high-performance aircraft made obsolete even

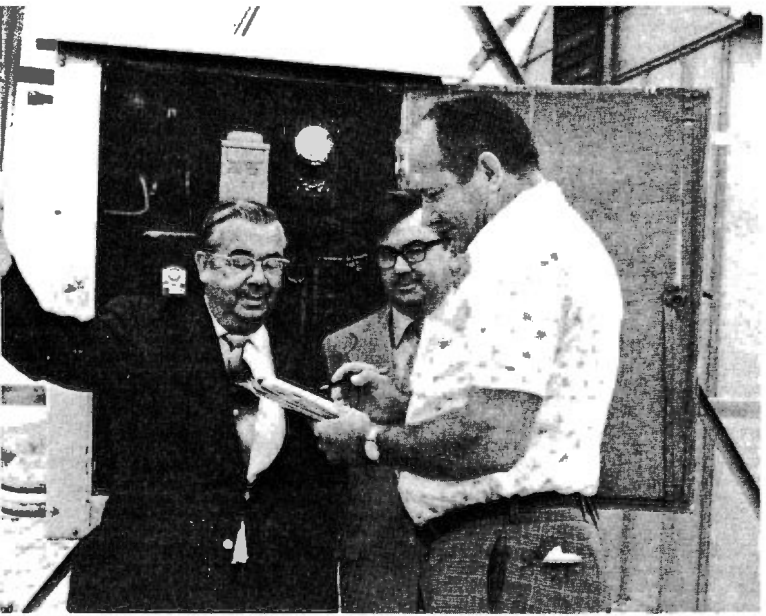


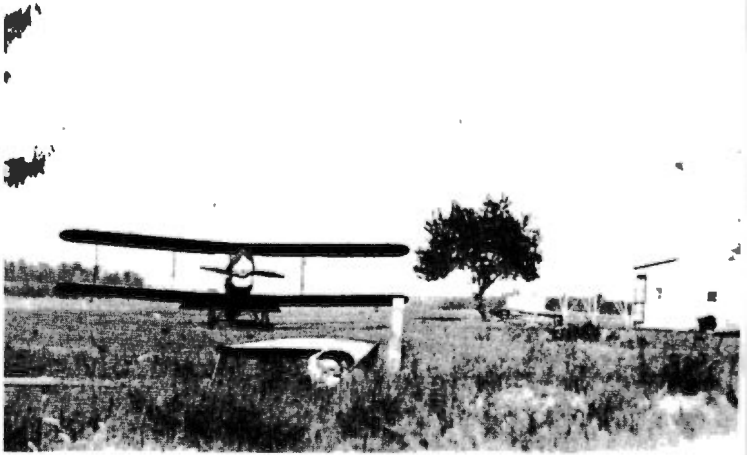
the few survivors guarding mountain obstructions or strategic passes.

Although beacons are continuing to serve at airports, they will never again carry such distinctive names as Clipper Gap, No Powder, Freezeout Mountain, Wigwam, Rattlesnake Ledge, Buffalo Valley and Locomotive Springs.

Ah, progress!

—By Larry Cheskaty





In the early days—the late 1920s—this beacon kept company with a grass auxiliary landing field.

Presiding over the decommissioning were (left to right) Dillon Giles, Western Region supervisor of Field Maintenance Parties; Pat Kerly, Environmental Unit chief of the Ontario AFS; and Larry Cheskaty, San Diego Environmental Support Unit chief.