

Fun and Education for Younger Sailors

Catherine of the Farallons

In our park's visitor center is the enormous Fresnel lens used in the Farallon Island lighthouse. The Farallon Islands are located about 26 miles west of San Francisco. In the late 19th century, the lighthouse keeper, his assistants and their families, including 10 children, made the island their home.

It's not for everyone, life on the Farallons. Catherine O'Caine, the daughter of a lighthouse keeper there, remembered the fog and wind and the rocky terrain covered with many kinds of nesting birds. The big excitement for the children who lived there was the arrival once every three months of the supply boat carrying food and mail.



NPS Photo

Catherine's father tended this lighthouse on the Farallon Islands. The lightning rod at the very top of the lighthouse is on exhibit in the park's visitor center. Next time you are there, see if you can find it!

Make a Lighthouse Shape Poem

A shape poem combines artwork and poetry. Using the illustration below as a guide, draw a picture of a lighthouse.

Next, think of words that describe what it must have been like to live on the Farallons. Using those words, write a poem that describes how Catherine might have felt living on the island.

Once you've written the poem, copy it along the outline of your drawing. Voila! A poem in the shape of a lighthouse!

The island was so isolated that its small school eventually failed because few teachers wanted to live so far from civilization. There were no doctors or hospitals there and if someone got sick, the families had to build a huge bonfire in hopes of attracting the attention of a passing ship.

But Catherine liked to remember the times she and the others spent exploring the island, collecting bird nests and eggs, and enjoying the colorful sunsets at the end of the day. On the rare days when the fog cleared, the children liked to look through a telescope at the beaches of San Francisco. "You could see the people moving," she said. "They looked like little ants running around."

For Catherine, the isolation of the island was part of what she loved about it. "I used to come to San Francisco to get my teeth looked over," she said, "and oh, I thought it was terrible, and oh, I wanted to get back home. There were so many people on the street. I wanted to get back to the silent night."

Which would you prefer? Living in the city or on an island out at sea? The next time you go to Ocean Beach or cross the Golden Gate Bridge, look for the Farallons way out on the horizon. Imagine Catherine at her telescope, looking back at you.

Sources: Catherine O'Caine Strittmatter Oral History, Anne T. Kent California History Center, Marin County Free Library: <http://www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/lb/main/crm/index.html> and San Francisco Maritime N.H.P. "Voyages" curriculum: <http://www.nps.gov/safr/local/education/education.htm>

