

Yes, Livermore had a 126-foot tower—as tall as our original flag pole—with eight-foot high red neon letters spelling vertically the name RICHFIELD. The tower was shaped like a giant oil derrick with a high-powered beacon on the top. One of a series of 36 towers erected from Mexico to Canada in the West Coast, ours was near the site of the original Livermore airport south of old Highway 50 (today's Portola Avenue) just west of Rincon Avenue. A group of Los Angeles businessmen had formed a corporation known as Highway Communities, Inc. They worked in conjunction with the Richfield Oil Company to fill the needs of early automobile and airplane passengers.

Their program started officially on December 17, 1928, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Wright brothers' historic flight. In Palm City, California, as Navy and commercial planes flew overhead, Admiral Ashby H. Roberson threw a switch that illuminated beacons at the top of the first six finished towers—one of them in Livermore. The towers were called a "Lane of Light" or sometimes "The Great White Way." The plan was to help motorists by locating service stations, eateries, and hotels near the towers. In those days not many people traveled on the highways. They appreciated being able to follow the beacon's glow to fill up their vehicles, use restroom facilities, or find a place to spend the night. Each tower near an airfield held an 8,000,000-candlepower revolving beacon.

A Richfield service station opened next to the Livermore tower in March 1929. Like the other stations in California built next to the beacons, its architecture was Spanish revival style, with cream colored cement reminiscent of adobe brick capped

by a red tile roof. The deluxe lavatories, according to the *Herald*, were "in white enamel and are fitted with antique furniture. The women's compartment included a built-in dressing table and full-length mirror." Bill Bonetti and Ray Henry were station assistants; by June 1930, Bonetti was the manager; in 1959 he was the owner. There were two gas pumps, air and water hoses, a drinking fountain, and an automatic lift for raising cars for greasing service. The original plan was to also build a hotel at the site.

In March 1943 the huge tower was torn down at the request of the Navy because it was a hazard to young fliers in training who used the Livermore Airport and the Naval Air Station. The gas station remained until some time in the 1970s, according to Anita Gandolfo, when new housing developments engulfed the old

Do You Remember?

By Anne Homan
Livermore City Historian



Towers of Livermore

structure.

Early pilots flew visually by checking out their open cockpit windows for highways or railroad tracks or other landmarks during the day. This worked for daylight flying, but airmail operated around the clock. In 1921 an airmail pilot experimented by following bonfires lit by Post Office staff and farmers across the dark prairie to Chicago. Beginning in 1923 the Post Office worked to complete a transcontinental airway of "lighthouses"—tower beacons spaced 15 to 25 miles apart, each with enough brightness to be seen for 40 miles in clear weather. In 1926 the Department of Commerce took over this project.

Here in our area, Richard C. Sweet was caretaker in the late 1920s and the 1930s of a government searchlight beacon located on a 50-foot galvanized iron tower at the top of Patterson

Pass, labeled Site #32. Sweet was paid \$40 a month to crank up the generator and light the beacon each night. Mounted on a base containing a motor that drove the searchlight around the horizon at six revolutions per minute, the beacon was fitted with a parabolic mirror and a 1,000-watt projection type lamp. A shed sheltered the generator. Its roof was painted with the number 32. It was first lit in May 1928. A week later, a similar tower was lit at the Livermore Airport. The Sweets cannot remember when their tower and shed were torn down, but the last airway light beacon in the country came down in 1973. The development of radio and radar eliminated the need for visual confirmation.

A third tower beacon was built at the summit of Mount Diablo. Seventy-feet high, it was erected by the Standard Oil Company at the suggestion of the

U.S. Department of Commerce. Construction of the 20,000,000 candlepower beacon began in January 1928. The *Herald* reported that it would be "the only one of its kind in the world and will serve as a guide to airplanes flying to the San Francisco Bay district at night. The beacon will be so powerful, it is believed that it will penetrate heavy fogs to a great distance." On 15 April 1928, Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh pressed a telegraph key that started the beacon in operation, as well as a similar one in the Merced hills near Los Angeles. Each beacon revolved six times per minute and were visible for 100 miles.

As a part of the blackout on the West Coast after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, any surviving beacons were turned off. The old Standard tower on Mt. Diablo was torn down. The beacon was replaced on top of the Summit Building, built by the Civil Conservation Corps in 1939-42. The beacon is aging; replacing its fragile parts is difficult. But so far, on Pearl Harbor Day, the beacon is lit at dusk and remains lit until the morning. This custom began in 1964. There are still some WWII vets who attend the ceremony.

(Readers can reach me at am50homan@yahoo.com.)



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