CHAPTER VI

COQUILLE RIVER STATIONS

The Coquille River is considered one of the most dangerous river entrances on the Oregon Coast (Figure 85). During a 20-year period from 1891 through 1910, the *Annual Reports* recorded 55 strandings at the mouth of the Coquille River. In comparison, the Coos Bay area reported only 41, the Umpqua River had 14, and the Tillamook Bar had 11. In fact, the Coquille River was second only to the San Francisco Bay area (with 71 groundings) on the entire Pacific Coast during this same time period, and the Coquille River's shipping volume was far less. Part of the difficulty at Coquille River is that the distance between its two jetties is only 500 feet, with the channel itself narrowing to 100 feet. Prior to the construction of the jetties, however, the bar was even more dangerous. The only deaths of Oregon life-savers occurred during a boat drill on the Coquille Bar in 1892. Groundings occurred constantly due to shifting winds, cross currents, engine breakdown, steering failure, and broken tow lines. The life of a surfman at Bandon was a busy and risky one.

The Coquille River principally serves the town of Bandon located on the south side of the river's mouth (Figure 86). The first settlers in the area arrived in 1853, though Hudson Bay Company trappers had been in the area as early as 1826. The native Coquille Indians had, of course, lived in the area long before that. The river was the highway for such settlements as Coquille, Myrtle Point, Prosper, and Powers. Bandon

Figure 85. Tug Towing in a Schooner Over the Coquille River Bar, Circa 1910. Source: Author's Collection.

received a post office in 1877, and quickly formed into a community based on lumber, salmon, and dairy products. Bandon was located only 20 miles from Empire City on Coos Bay, yet almost all of the traffic went by water; as late as 1886, there was not even a wagon road between the two areas.[134]

The Coquille River entrance was recognized early on as extremely dangerous. The first schooner to finally make it across the bar came down from the Umpqua River on 25 August 1859. Reportedly, the locals lined the banks to greet their economic salvation.[135] An initial $4,000 was raised by the community in 1880 to finance a feeble attempt to confine the river to one channel. In 1884, the federal government kicked in

---

[134]Gibbs, *Oregon's Seacoast Lighthouses*, 49.

[135]Jerry Winterbotham, *Umpqua: The Lost County of Oregon* (Brownsville, OR: Creative Images Printing, 1994), 122.

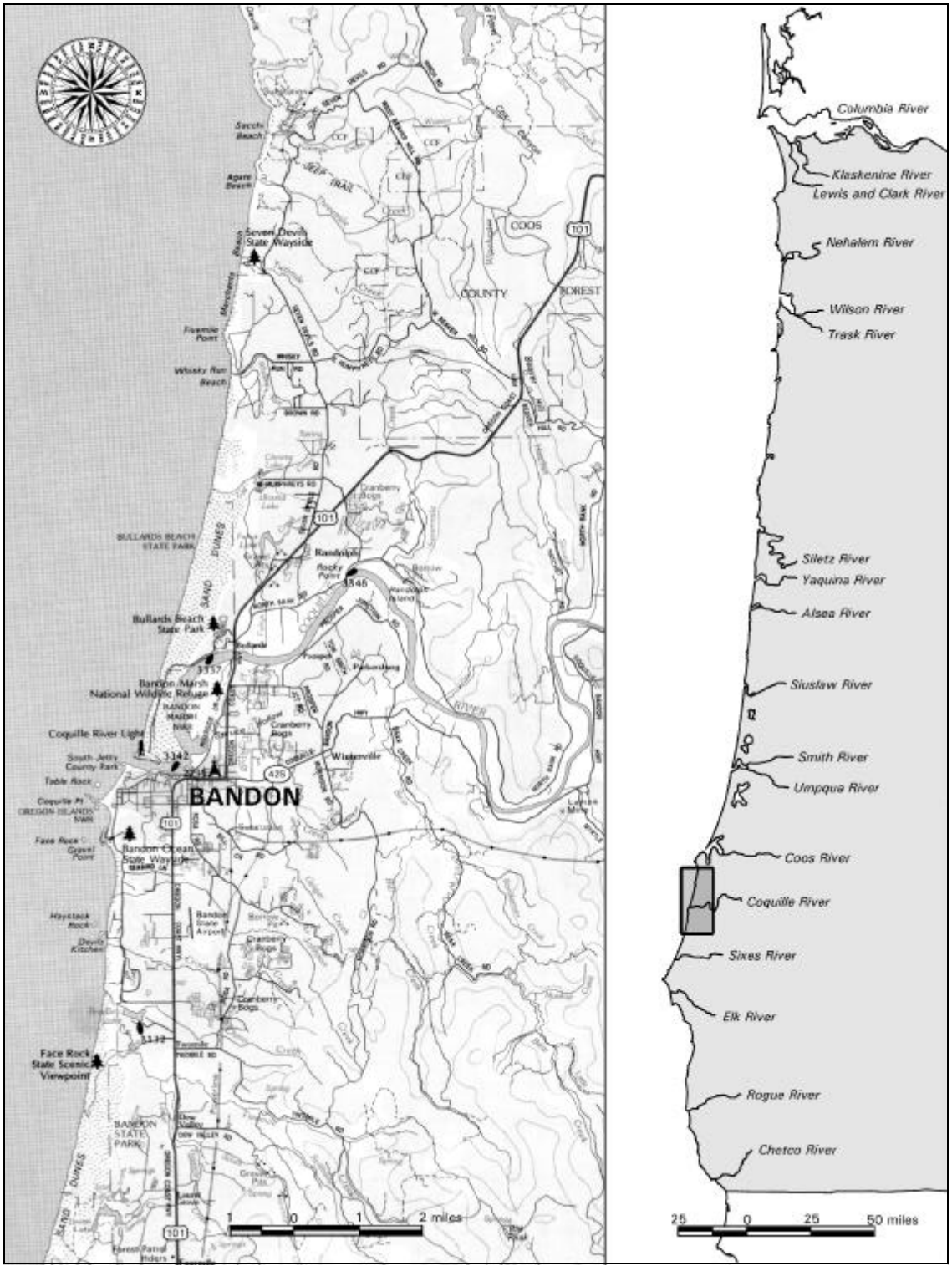

Figure 86. Location of Bandon, Oregon, as Shown on a 1996 DeLorme Topographic Map.

$10,000 toward the effort and started building a jetty on the south side of the mouth of the Coquille. In 1895, more money was sunk into the south jetty, and a north jetty was begun. Both of the jetties were declared complete in 1908.[136]

The Lighthouse Bureau did not rank the need for a lighthouse at the Coquille River very highly. Not until 1891 did Congress appropriate funds to build a lighthouse station on the north spit of the Coquille River. The light was illuminated in 1896, making it the 11th lighthouse to be erected in Oregon. Today, the Coquille River Lighthouse is an Oregon State Parks property and is open to the public.

Coquille River Life-Saving Station

At about the same time as the lighthouse was being discussed, a life-saving station was proposed for the Coquille River. Oregon Representative Binger Hermann requested the establishment of a life-saving station in 1889.[137] The argument must have been persuasive and the facts clear, as a station with crew was approved on 20 February 1889. It appears that this was the fastest approval of a bill for any Oregon life-saving station. The amount appropriated was $8,000, whereas most stations of this period and area were receiving $5,000. Construction on the station was well underway by June 1890, and it was activated in early 1891. The keeper made do with a crew of seven until 15 December 1911, when the station finally acquired an eighth surfman.[138]

---

[136]Donovan and Kachel, E.33.

[137]Congress, House, 50th Cong., 2nd sess., H.R. 1643, 1889.

[138]U.S. Life-Saving Service, *1912 Annual Reports,* 108.

The station was built on the standard Marquette plan with a Fort Point-type boathouse, as described in Chapter III. The station complex was situated on the west end of the Bandon waterfront on First Street (Figure 87). The boathouse was located on the river's edge with a launchway descending directly into the water (Figure 88). The station house was located on the bluff above the boathouse at the end of an 81-step staircase (Figure 89). In general, the 50' by 30' house was divided by a central hallway and stair with the right half reserved for the keeper and the left half for the crew (Figure 90). On the main floor, the keeper's living room, office, kitchen and pantry were to the right. On the left was the crew's living room and quarters. Upstairs, the right half contained the bedrooms for the keeper and his family. On the left was the crew's locker room.

The boathouse was a Fort Point-type boathouse. The standard Fort Point boathouse is thoroughly described in Chapter III. The Coquille River boathouse was located on the waterfront approximately 70' below the station complex. The building was one-story with two bays and measured 24' wide by 40' deep. One bay held a surfboat and the other bay a lifeboat. A launchway led from the building directly into the Coquille River. Around 1915, a diminutive boathouse was appended onto the original boathouse to store the crew's new 36' motor lifeboat (Figure 91). A new launchway was built adjacent to the old one to give the new motor lifeboat a direct run into the river.

As with other stations, there were auxiliary buildings. To the south of the station house were two gable-roofed structures. One was one-story and most likely the wash house. A larger, 1-1/2 story building was probably the workshop. A round water tank, elevated by a square, battered stand, was squeezed in between the 1-1/2 story building

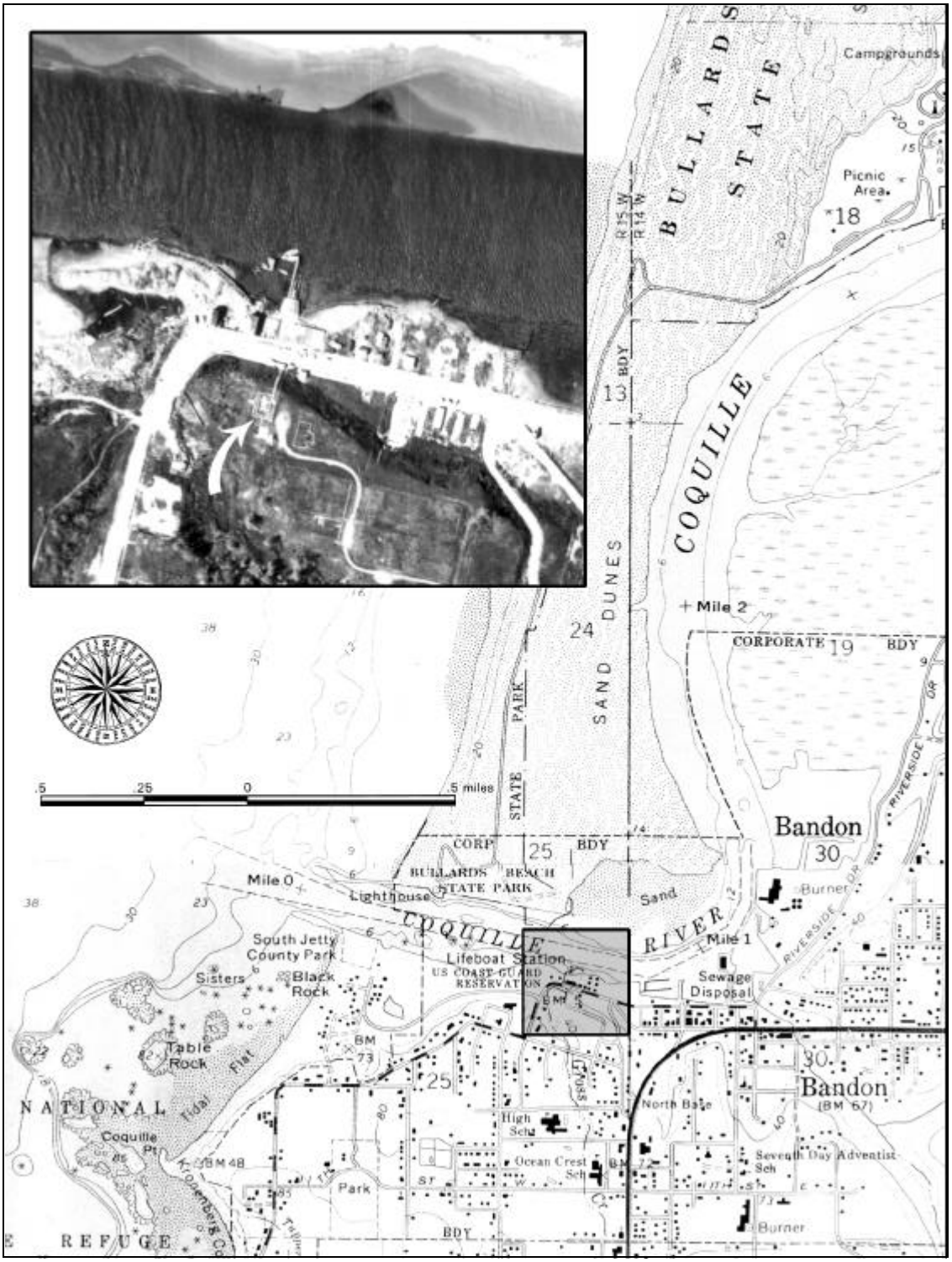

Figure 87. Aerial Photo of the Coquille River Station Area in 1939 Superimposed Over the Bandon, Oregon, USGS Map (1973 Revision).

Figure 88. Coquille River Life-Saving Station Crew with Lifeboat, Circa 1912. Source: Bandon Historical Society (BHS #34).

and the station house. Boardwalks connected the buildings, and a picket fence surrounded the station site.

About a mile southwest of the station there was a lookout station to watch the river mouth (Figure 92). The watch house was similar to those mounted at other stations on a tower. This one, however, was elevated by its location on Coquille Point and had no need for additional height. The watch house was an 8' cube with windows on each side, capped by a hipped roof, and built on a wooden platform. Below the lookout on the beach was an auxiliary boathouse where a surfboat and equipment were kept just in case the boats from the station could not get across the bar in an emergency (Figure 93).[139]

[139]U.S. Life-Saving Service, *1910 Annual Reports*, 59.

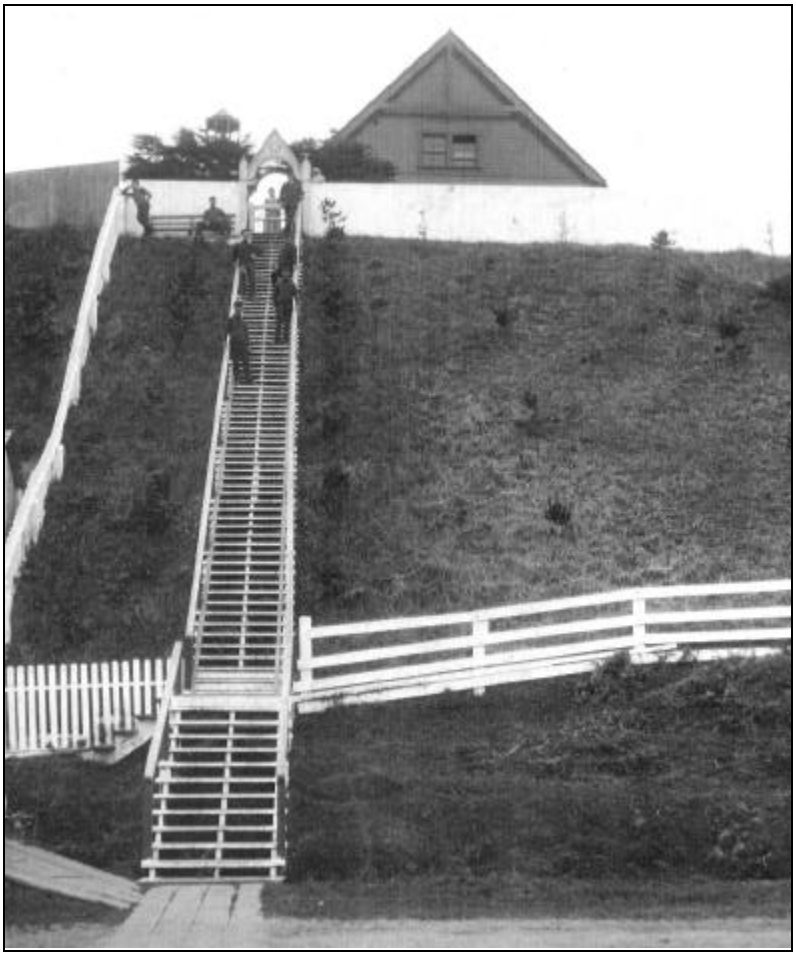

Figure 89. Coquille River Life-Saving Station Staircase to Station House, Circa 1910. Source: Bandon Historical Society (BHS #1559).

Figure 90. Coquille River Life-Saving Station, Circa 1900. Source: Bandon Historical Society.

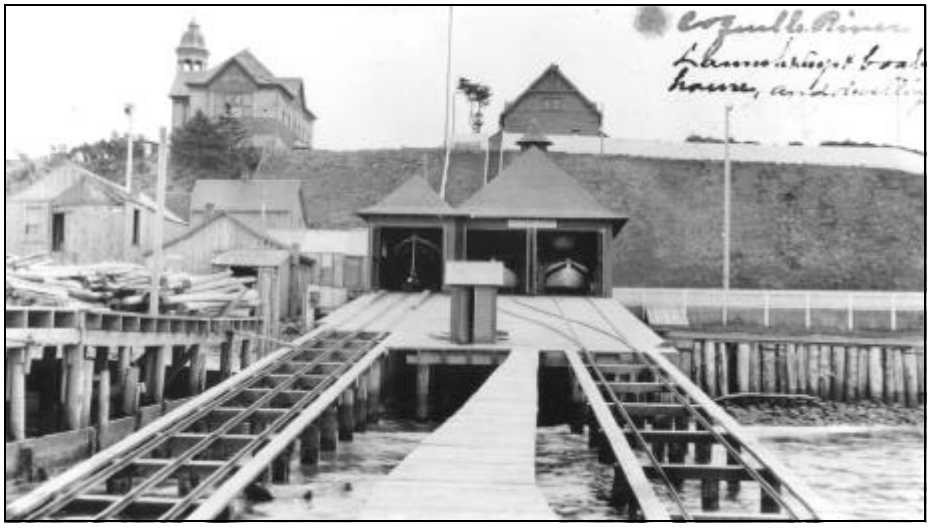

Figure 91. Coquille River Life-Saving Station Boathouse with Station House Directly Behind on Hill, 1916. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters (Coquille River File).

Figure 92. Lookout at Coquille Point, Circa 1900. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters (Life-Saving Service: Stations File).

Figure 93. Lookout and Abandoned Boathouse at Coquille Point, Circa 1910. Source: Bandon Historical Society (BHS #178).

In late-1916, a concrete sidewalk and retaining wall were poured at the base of the station bluff. At the stair to the station, the retaining wall opened in two places to create two, eight-step flights that rejoined into one before going up the hill. Between 1923 and 1936, the upper portion of the launchway was replaced with a concrete ramp and bulkhead.

Plans were drawn in November 1933 to insert a basement under the station house. Final drawings were made in February 1934 and the basement was built soon after (Figure 94). An exterior entrance to the basement from the rear was provided, as well as an interior stair from the central hall. A furnace and hot water tank were installed. A small lean-to was erected on the south end of the building to house the first toilet for the station house. A new garage building was also built at the same time. It was a 1-1/2 story structure, 22' wide by 27' deep, with a gable roof penetrated by two dormers. Inside were a bedroom and bathroom over a two-bay garage. Unfortunately, most of the town of Bandon burned down soon after in 1936. Only 16 out of approximately 500 buildings survived the blaze on 26 September 1936. The station complex did not outlive the firestorm (Figure 95). All that did survive were the boats, the concrete launchway, and the bell stand on the hill.

Coquille River Lifeboat Station

The new Coquille River Lifeboat Station was ". . . the finest and most substantial building erected in Bandon since the fire of '36 . . . ," declared the local *Bandon Western*

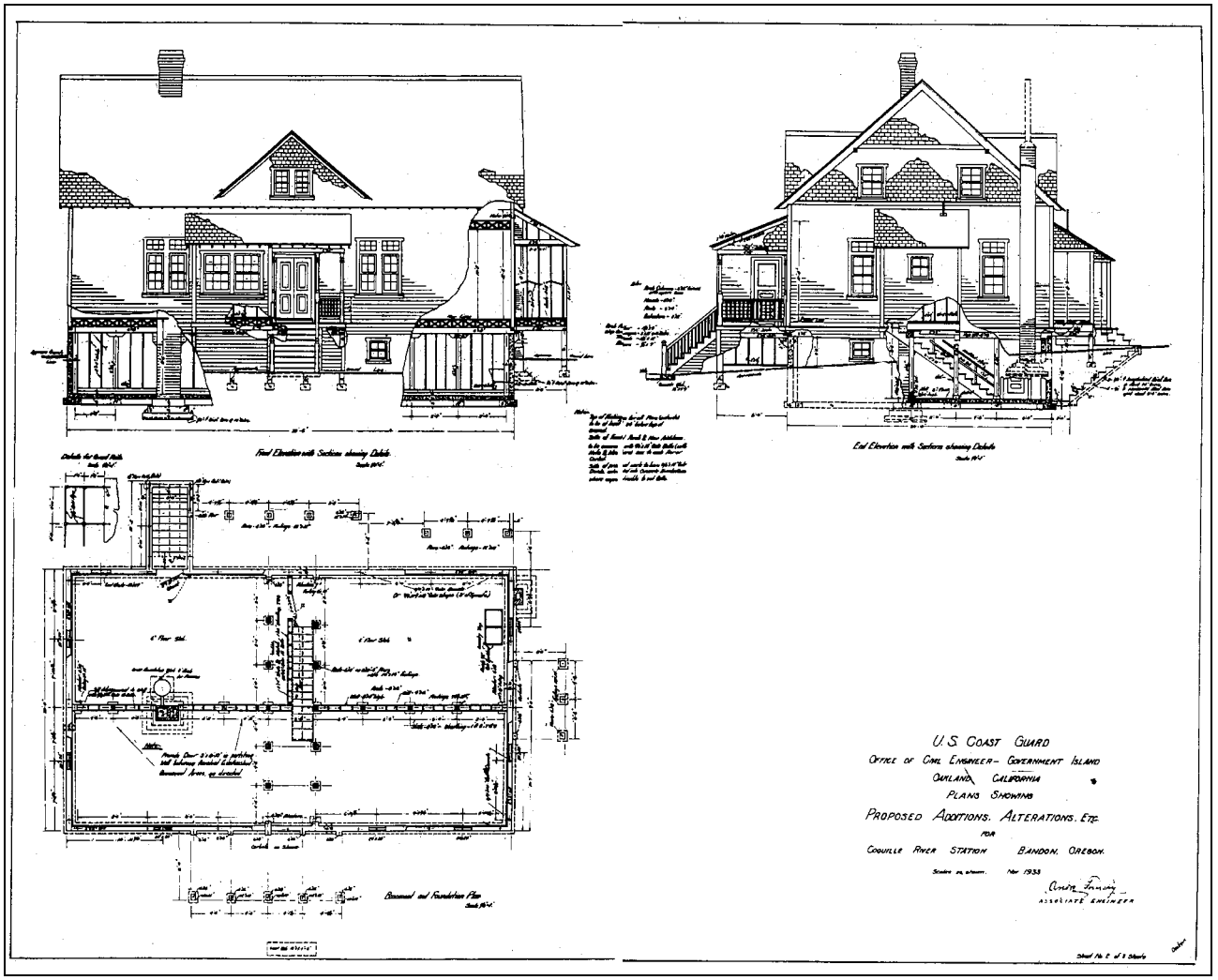

Figure 94. Coquille River Life-Saving Station Remodel Plan, 1933. Source: Nautical Research Centre (#3-439).

Figure 95. Remains of the Coquille River Life-Saving Station Boathouse After Bandon Fire, 1938. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters (Coquille River File).

World newspaper in 1940.[140] Quinn Construction Company of Portland was the general contractor for the building; however, local subcontractors were used on the job. Working drawings were completed by the Coast Guard on 23 December 1938, and construction started in February 1939 (Figure 96). It was decided to consolidate all of the Coast Guard operations into one building on the waterfront, similar to the one on Yaquina Bay's waterfront, though larger. The structure cost approximately $80,000, but equipping the station drove the cost up to $125,000. This was by far the most expensive of the pre-WWII stations built in Oregon. The station was built on the site of the old

[140]"Completing Federal Structure," *Bandon Western World*, 11 January 1940.

boathouse to take advantage of the existing launchway; however, the site had to be enlarged, so two lots to the east were purchased from the Gallier Estate.[141]

After the old life-saving station and boathouse had been destroyed on 26 September 1936, the crew was housed in the town's former city hall. Captain J.A. Trantor and the crew finally moved into their new station in late-January 1940 after waiting more than three years for their new dwelling (Figure 97). The *Bandon Western World* noted that to the east of the station, "Married members of the crew have bought lots and built small houses . . . forming a colony that is now termed, 'Little America.'"[142]

The new, two-story station was 120' wide by 54' deep, making it easily the largest station constructed on the Oregon Coast. It was built on a reinforced concrete foundation with a concrete bulkhead along the river to protect the property. The station's exterior walls and subfloor were constructed entirely out of wolmanized Douglas fir lumber to help prevent dryrot and insect damage.[143] The first floor had a 54' by 42' boatroom built over the former launchway not destroyed by the fire (Figure 98). To the left of the boatroom was the crew's kitchen, mess room, utility room, storm clothes locker, and porch. To the right were the three-bay equipment room and workshop, and the office of the Officer in Charge. The equipment room housed a surfboat, a lifeboat, a tractor, truck, and automobile. On the left side of the second floor, there was a bathroom and three bedrooms for two surfmen each (Figure 99). The center section of the second floor

---

[141]Ibid.

[142]Ibid.

[143]Photo caption, wolmanized lumber truck, Coquille River File, U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters.

Figure 96. Coquille River Lifeboat Station Under Construction, 1939. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters (Coquille River File).

Figure 97. Coquille River Lifeboat Station, 1939. Source: Oregon Historical Society (OrHi #0028P244-006977).

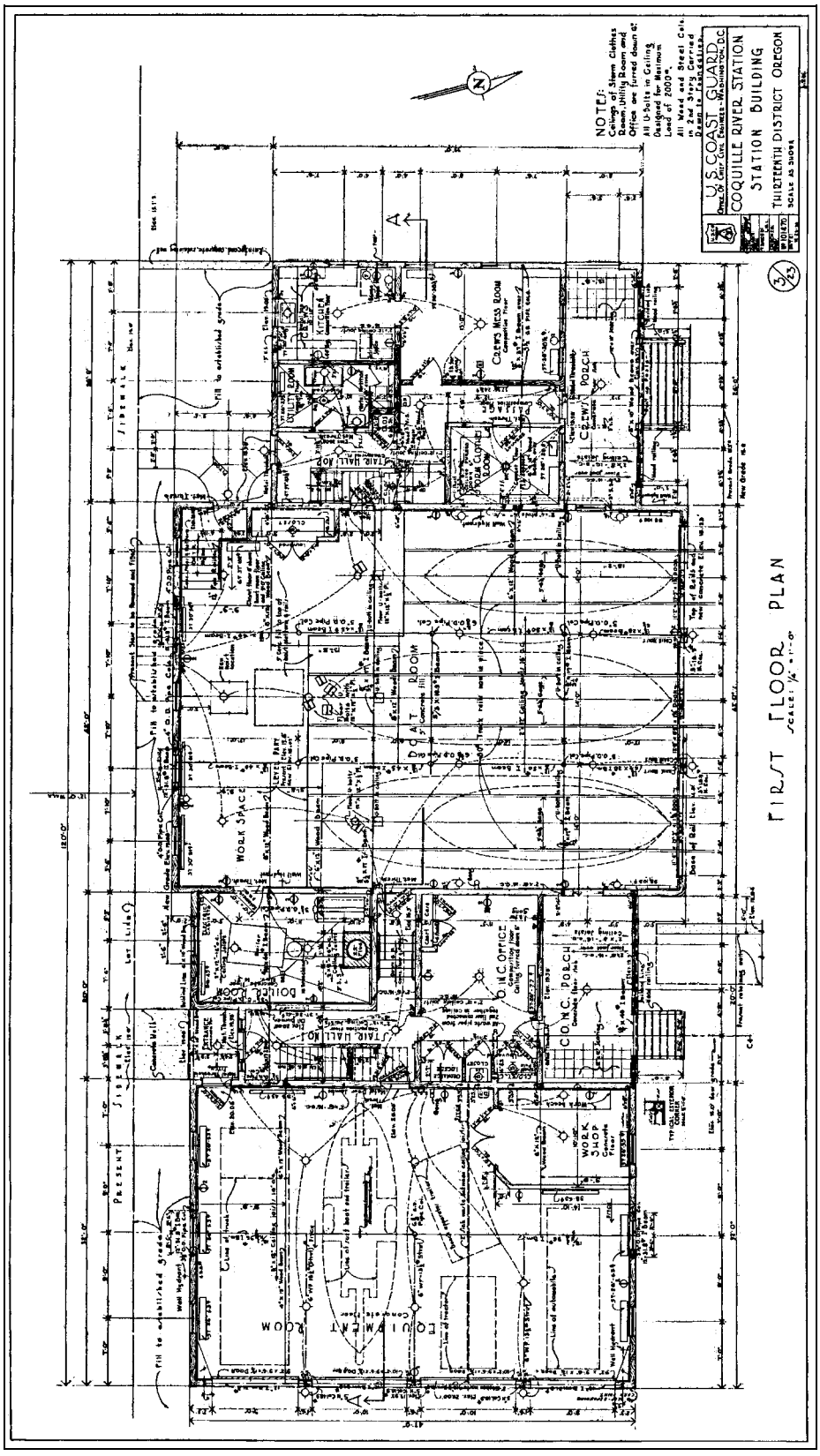

Figure 98. Coquille River Lifeboat Station, First Floor Plan, 1938. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Civil Engineering Unit, Oakland, CA.

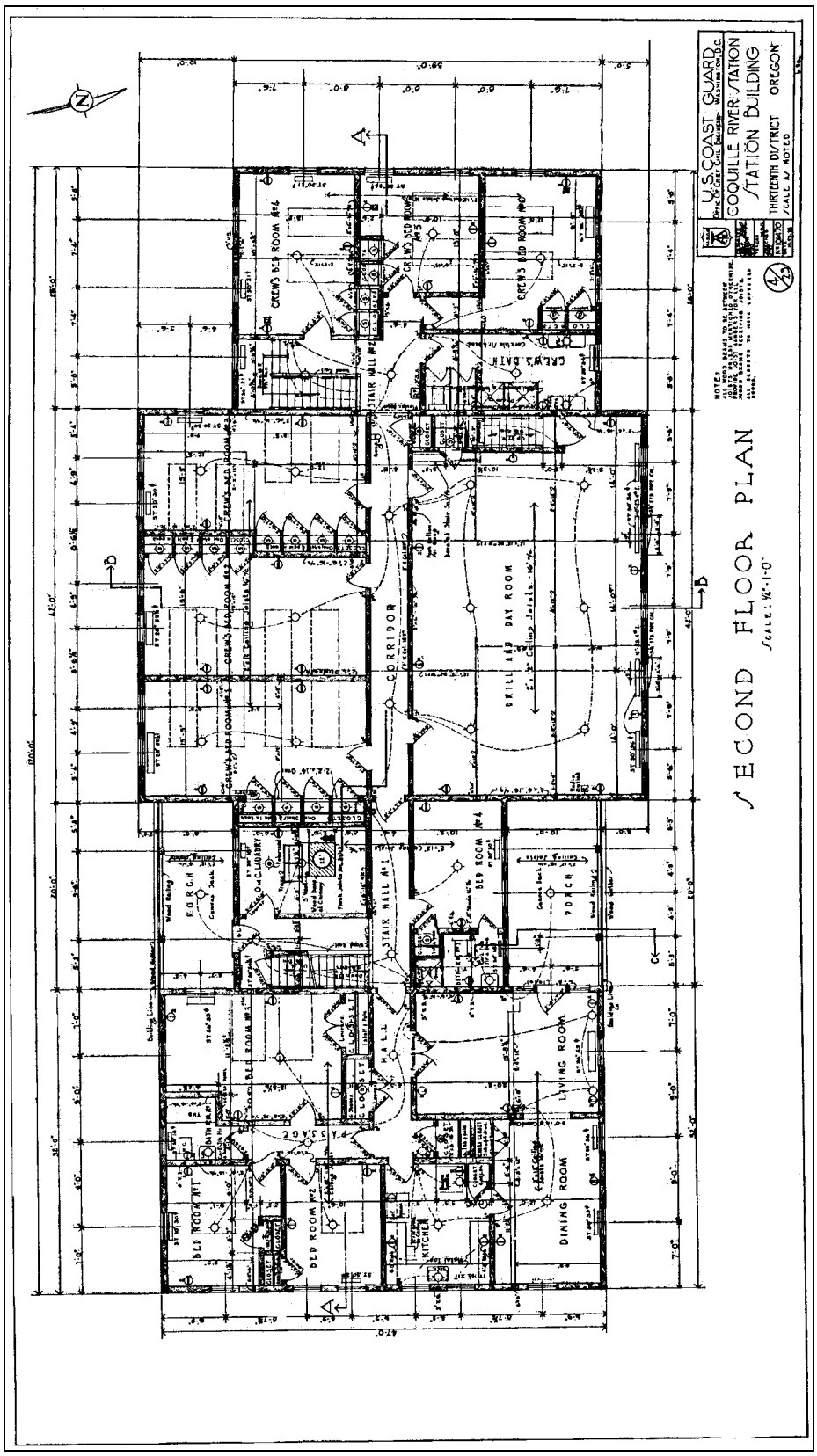

Figure 99. Coquille River Lifeboat Station, Second Floor Plan, 1938. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Civil Engineering Unit, Oakland, CA.

contained a large day room and three more bedrooms large enough for four crewmen each. The right side of the second floor had four more bedrooms, and a kitchen, dining room, living room, and laundry room. The third floor was used for storage space, but during WWII, the area was converted into additional living quarters for the patrolmen (Figure 100).[144] Windows and doors were all weather-stripped with copper. The building was completely electrified with ". . . electric ranges, refrigerators, etc." An oil-burning heating system serviced the entire building. The station also boasted the "latest style" of one-piece, stainless steel sinks.[145] The old Life-Saving Service bell was removed from its stand on the top of the hill and put into a new stand east of the building.[146]

The Coquille River Lifeboat Station was used heavily during WWII. Besides the Coast Guard's usual role of protecting life at sea, the station was under Navy jurisdiction and entrusted with beach patrols. The station served as headquarters for a beach patrol that covered a range of about 15 miles of coast centered on Bandon. Throughout the war, local marine traffic remained heavy as large shipments of milk, salmon, and lumber left the port.[147]

---

[144]Kay Linke and Greg Dilkes, *National Register Nomination for Coquille River Life Boat Station* (Salem, OR: Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, 1983), 8.2.

[145]"Completing Federal Structure," *Bandon Western World*, 11 January 1940.

[146]William Alvey, phone interview by author, transcript, Eugene, OR, 25 May 2000.

[147]Linke, 8.2.

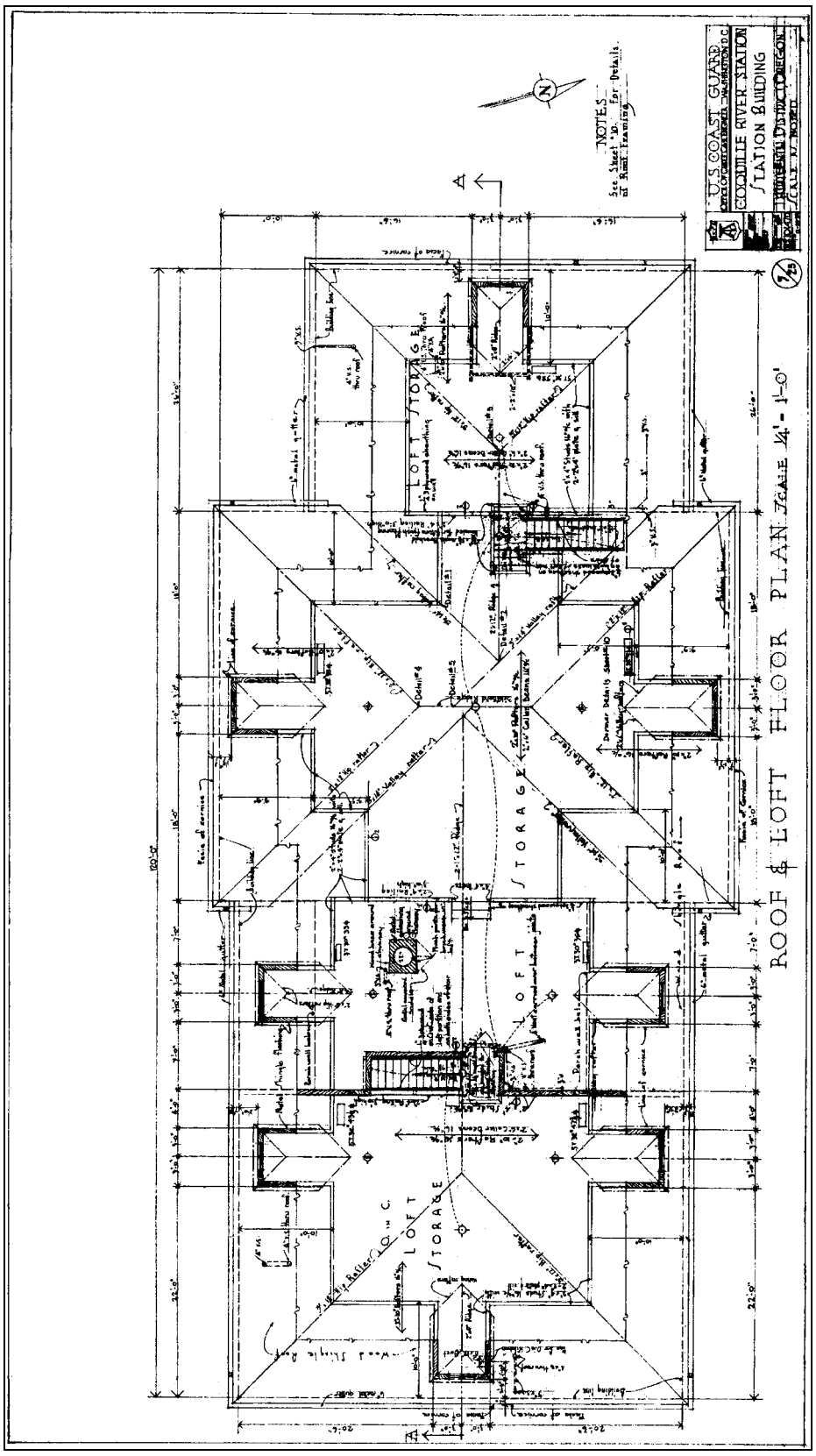

Figure 100. Coquille River Lifeboat Station, Attic Plan, 1938. Source: U.S. Coast Guard Civil Engineering Unit, Oakland, CA.

The Coast Guard scaled back quickly after WWII. In July 1946, the station was decommissioned. The station was reactivated in 1962, with a seven-man contingent. From 1964 until 1969, a portion of the building was used by the Bandon School District to teach boat building.[148] Finally, the Coast Guard moved out of the station entirely in Fall 1971. The building was deemed too costly to maintain to justify its retention.[149] The Coast Guard "surplused" the station, and it was acquired by the National Park Service. In June 1980, the structure was transferred from the National Park Service to the Port of Bandon, which still owns it today.

Preservation

Of course, the fire of 1936 took the 1891 station complex. The auxiliary boathouse below the lookout tower out on Coquille Point was torn down before 1916. The lookout tower itself has also disappeared over time. Today, the Coast Guard monitors the mouth of the Coquille River during the summer months only. They still occupy the old life-saving station property on "Coast Guard Hill," using a post-WWII lookout tower and operating out of a double-wide mobile home (Figure 101). The former Coquille River Lifeboat Station stands virtually intact and mostly vacant (Figure 102). The station was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983. It is owned by the Port of Bandon who have only a few of the potential spaces rented. The Port uses the equipment room at the east end of the building as a vehicle maintenance shop. The

---

[148]Ibid.

[149]"Coast Guard to Cut Bandon Operations," *Bandon Western World,* 22 April 1971.

Figure 101. Aerial of Station with Current Coast Guard Lookout at Upper Right and "Little America" to Left, 1966. Source: National Archives (RG 25-CGS, Box 2, Folder Coquille River Station).

Figure 102. Former Coquille Lifeboat Station, 1999. Source: Author.

boatroom remains unused. The Port has maintained the exterior well and should continue to do so according to the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards*.

This building is the most underutilized of the former Coast Guard stations in Oregon. Business offices make a good, compatible reuse of the structure, as long as rehabilitation standards, as defined in the Secretary's *Standards,* are followed. Its largest tenant, the Bandon Historical Society, operated a museum displaying the history of Bandon starting in 1991. Unfortunately, they were forced out by rising rents in 1995. Today, the museum occupies the old city hall on Highway 101, its new location tripling their attendance. The museum had occupied the former day room and three bedrooms at the center of the second floor of the station. This space is an ideal home for a maritime museum, and it is unfortunate that it is not being used for such a purpose. The day room is 42' by 20' and has five windows overlooking the river. The three adjacent rooms are each 13' by 24' and face Coast Guard Hill. A Coast Guard, military, or maritime museum would not conflict with the mission of the Bandon Historical Museum and might even generate a synergistic relationship.[150]

Another option for the adaptive reuse of the building would be to create a maritime teaching program, similar to what has been created at Hull, Massachusetts, by the Hull Life-Saving Museum, and use the station as the learning facility. The large, three-bay boatroom and adjacent four-bay garage would make ideal boat building space. Students could be housed on the second floor and in the attic space. There are bathrooms, kitchens, and laundry facilities. The day room could be a lecture hall. There

---

[150]Judy Knox, phone interview by author, transcript, Eugene, OR, 25 May 2000.

are even multiple exits from the upper floors, a safety code issue that is rarely met easily by Coast Guard stations. The ground floor is level with the street, making for straightforward disabled access, another feature seldom found in Coast Guard stations. If it were promoted and capitalized upon, the Coquille River Lifeboat Station could be a fine asset for the community of Bandon.