



BILL LEE/CONTRIBUTED

The 67-foot Merlin.

# Putting Santa Cruz on boating map

Longtime award-winning sailor Ernie Rideout recalls coming to Santa Cruz on weekends with his family from their San Jose home, sailing "club boats" belonging to the Santa



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Cruz Yacht Club then located on the municipal wharf. "We were envious of the local kids who got to hang out on the wharf after school," he told me.

The club was founded in 1928 by sailors including

local members of the San Francisco Yacht Club who, rather than choosing sides during a split, chartered one here. They set up headquarters on the wharf in 1930 and 12 years later one of its official boats washed ashore in a storm, destroyed. Finding a place without that risk drove the search for a sheltered harbor.

There are tales that during prohibition, club headquarters saw both sides of the law brush past each other. Rideout shared one: "According to one story, a revenue cutter was gassing up at the fuel pump on the east side of the wharf and a few feet away on the other side bootleggers were taking liquor off their boat."

The clubhouse stayed on the wharf until 1964, when the harbor was completed at Woods Lagoon. The current clubhouse on Fourth Avenue was recently renovated to provide more room and better access from the harbor and the club's activities including youth programs, races, events, charity work and the annual lighted boat parade.

Rideout said he divides the club's history into eras dominated by types of boats. "The first involved small sailing boats," he said. "Then, there were medium sized cruising boats in the late 1930s and in the 1940s. There were the early fiberglass boats too."

The next phase is what Rideout calls the era of the ultra-light boats, built for speed, starting in the 1960s although they didn't get that name until years later. Boat designer and builder Bill Lee explained this to me. "The phrase ULDB or Ultra Light Displacement Boat was coined coming up to the 1973 Honolulu race. That was the year we built a 35-footer named Chutzpah which even though she received a ULDB penalty, she was the overall corrected time winner, one of the first boats built in Santa Cruz to win a major ocean race."

Rideout said that 1977 was an important year. "That was when Bill Lee designed and built the 67-foot Merlin and launched it in order to break the record for the Trans-Pacific race" which crosses from Los Angeles to Hawaii. "And he did. He put Santa Cruz on the map."

"Twenty years later, he did it again and by doing so he set yacht design back 10 years," Rideout continued. Bill Lee confirmed this. "It took 20 years to break the Merlin record and that was by a boat I built for Roy Disney called the Pyewacket," Lee said.

"For Santa Cruz, the bigger story is the boat building

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that sprung up here starting in the late 60s and which ran very strong up until the mid 90s. Between companies such as Moore's, Pacific Boats, Alsberg, Wilderness, myself, and others, we probably employed a couple of hundred people at the peak and built a family of boats that continue to be very respected in the world to this day for high quality construction, speed, and generally good boats," said Lee, who is also an elected member of the Santa Cruz Port Commission.

But conditions in Santa Cruz changed. "When I started, an employee could buy a house in Santa Cruz on typical boat builder wages," Lee told me. "By the 90s, it just didn't add up. But the Santa Cruz Yacht Club has made a permanent mark, thanks to Merlin. My next column: lighted boats parade the first Saturday night in December.

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