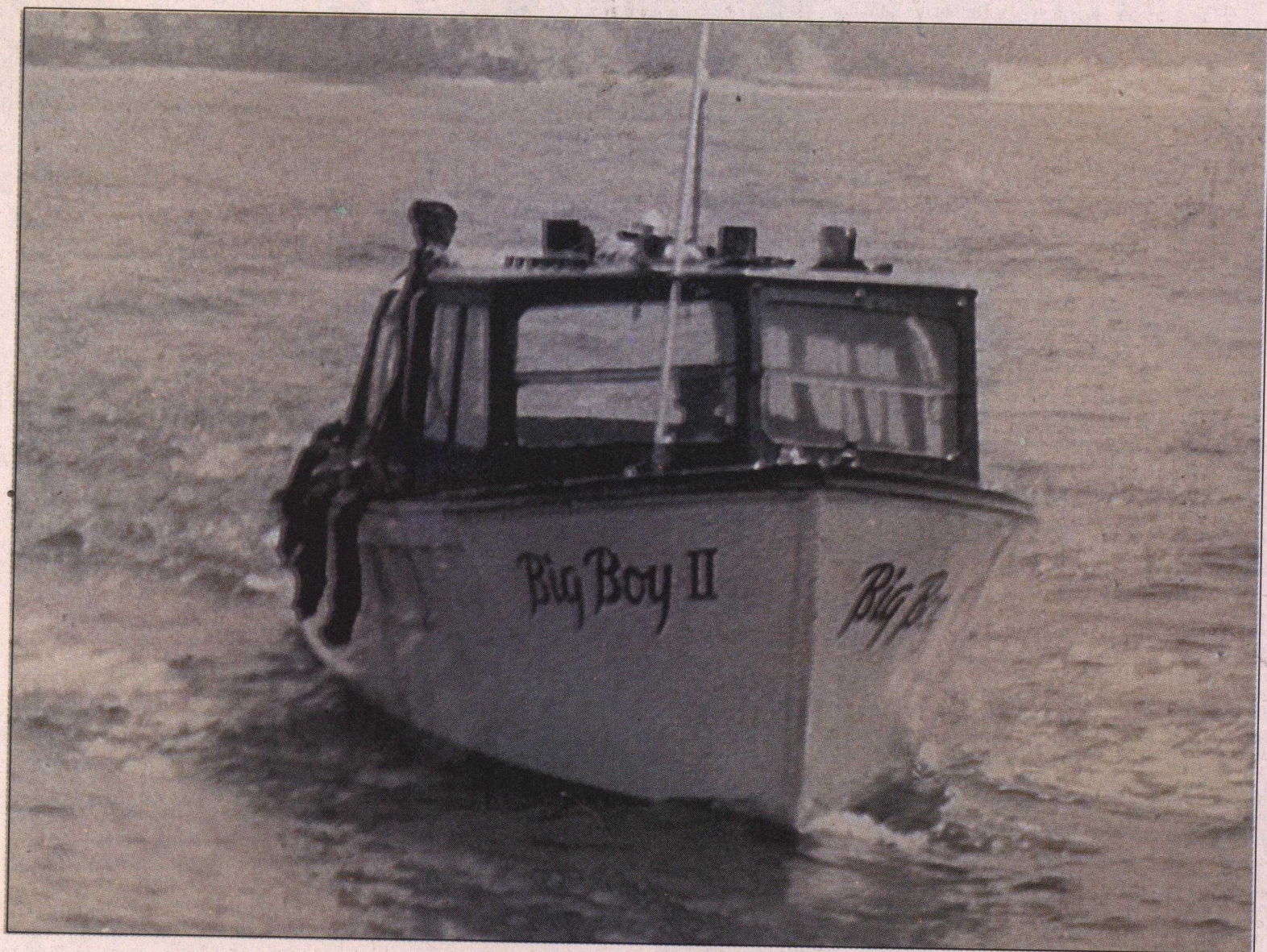


*'You gotta have something to get up for in the morning,
and nothing is more beautiful than the Santa Cruz wharf.'*

ROBERT STAGNARO



The Big Boy II was a relief boat, or water taxi, used by the Stagnaros in the 1940s and '50s to shuttle customers back and forth from the Municipal Wharf to their sportfishing boats anchored farther out in the Monterey Bay. Contributed photo/Covello and Covello Photography

A Santa Cruz institution

Stagnaro family continues a long mariner tradition

By ALLEN BUSHNELL
SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

SANTA CRUZ — The sharp white prow of the Velocity towers above me as I stand on the F-dock ramp at the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor. Under a typical summertime overcast sky, the boat seems to glow with an inner light. This new boat is the largest sportfishing vessel in the harbor, and the result of a three-year effort in planning and construction by Stagnaro's Sportfishing.

From a broader perspective, the Velocity is the culmination of more than 130 years of family tradition that has relied upon effort and innovation in wresting a living from the sea.

Robert Stagnaro, commonly known as "Big Boy," is on the boat this evening to chat with his nephew Skipper Ken Stagnaro and me. We're sitting in the roomy and comfortable salon of the Velocity and enjoying the gentle rocking of a quiet boat at dockside. Robert and his sister Gilda Stagnaro own Gilda's Restaurant on the Municipal Wharf, and he is the current patriarch of the Stagnaro family. As a former breakfast cook at Gilda's in the 80s, my history goes back a ways with the family. Robert greets me warmly and, with little prompting, launches into an exhaustive history of the Stagnaros, the city of Santa Cruz, and fishing on the Monterey Bay.

Robert's great grandfather Cottardo Stagnaro was 8 years old when he shipped out as a cabin boy from his home near the Riviera in Riva Trigosa, Italy. By 1874, he had sailed around the horn of South America five times. When his ship stopped at Santa Cruz to trade



The newest of the Stagnaro family's boats, "Velocity," begins an afternoon sightseeing cruise. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel Photos

goods, Cottardo liked the place so much he jumped ship and settled in on the shores of Monterey Bay.

"He knew America was going to give him something for his future family," Robert said.

Señors Perez and Faraola, their first names lost in history, soon hired Cottardo to assist them fishing from the shores of the bay. Within a few years, Cottardo expanded to offshore fishing and introduced lateen-rigged fishing

boats to the bay. This ancient design, originally constructed by the Arabs for fishing in the Mediterranean, was the boat of choice for fishermen in his homeport of Riva Trigosa.

Cottardo made a few trips back to his hometown in Italy, finally getting married and starting a family there while he continued to build

See STAGNARO on PAGE D3

Stagnaro

Continued from Page D1

his commercial fishing business in Santa Cruz. Later, he brought the family to America.

Cottardo Stagnaro II, Robert's father, arrived here in 1893 at the age of 8. With gravity, Robert spoke of his father.

"The greatest day in his life," he said, "was when he saw the Statue of Liberty. He knew he was free."

Cottardo continued to sponsor family members and relations to join him in Santa Cruz. By 1915, there were 65 related families from his hometown living in Santa Cruz, all making their living from fishing in the Monterey Bay. The sailboats were replaced by a fleet of Monterey Clippers, the classic double-ender fishing boats that one can still see occasionally in the harbor. These boats used a one-cylinder engine that generated 4-5 knots of speed.

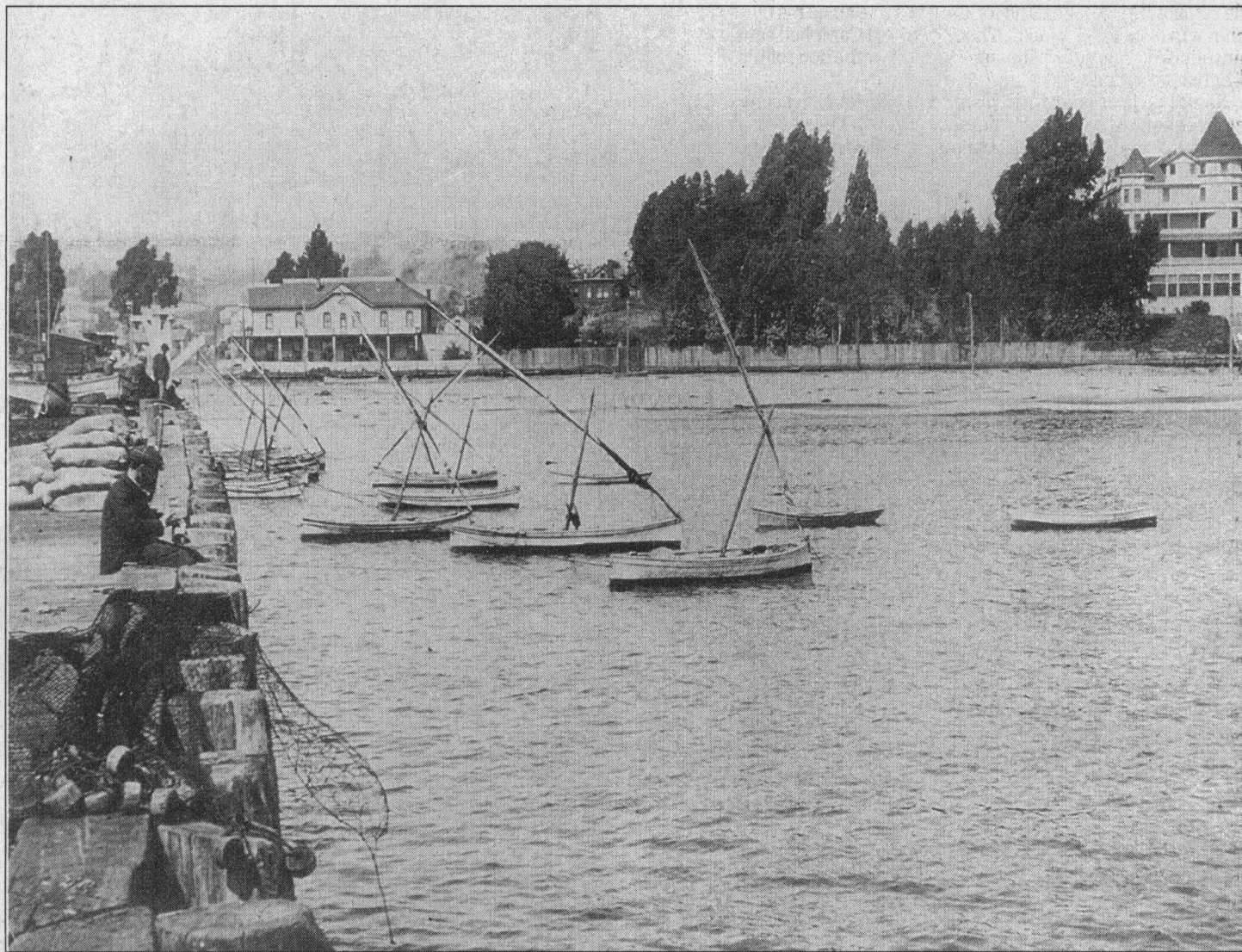
The Municipal Wharf, dedicated to shipping goods and commercial fishing, opened in 1915. The fishing boats were hoisted from the water with the aid of davits. In the evenings, 50 boats rested on the wharf and 50 hung from their davits. Of these 100 fishing boats, 15-20 belonged to the Stagnaros. Most of the others belonged to related families from Riva Trigosa such as the Ghios and the Canepas.

"These boats weren't fast, but they didn't have to go far," Robert said. "There were more fish back then, and they were bigger. The old-timers fished for sardines, anchovies, sole, halibut, salmon, white sea bass, black sea bass and rock fish."

At the time, Robert said, the Monterey Bay was rated "the third-richest bay in the world for fishing." To take advantage of the bounty, the Stagnaros established a retail fish market soon after the wharf opened. They also began wholesaling their commercial catch.

But Cottardo, who was always looking ahead, saw more potential on the horizon. He realized tourism was going to play a big part in Santa Cruz's economy. So, in the early 1920s, he established the town's first sportfishing-trip business. Starting with a 30-foot open boat named "The #2," Cottardo began taking tourists and locals out to the rockfishing grounds not far from the wharf. In that day, they would anchor the boat above the reef and fish in one spot all day. Most anglers used hand lines weighted with a railroad spike. Those fortunate enough to possess a fishing rod would have to stand behind the hand liners and extend the rod over the heads of those in front.

The 1930s brought bigger boats with more power and range. The Stagnaros bought a few sardine lighters powered by Buick Marine V-8s and bought out an early competitor, the Johnson Company, for a few more boats.



Contributed photo/Covello and Covello

This photo from around 1900 shows the old shipping wharf that stood near the current site of the Municipal Wharf in Santa Cruz. The sailboats anchored off of it are fitted with the Lateen rigs Cottardo Stagnaro brought back from Italy.

"We constantly improved these boats," Robert said. "We added decking, then cabins."

In 1936, the city gave Cottardo permission for a restaurant on the wharf. It was named simply "Stagnaro's." Cottardo II and his brother Malio decided at that time the company needed a "relief" boat that could ferry passengers to and from the anchored fishing boats offshore. Robert was proud to tell us of this first water taxi, built in Berkeley by Ernest Vilbrick, which was powered by a modern Holscott marine engine and named "Big Boy I." Very fast for its day, it would cruise at 10-12 knots.

By then, the Stagnaros had seven sportfishing boats going. "We would catch all the fish we wanted. There were no limits on the size or number of fish to keep. Fifty fish was not unusual in those days," Robert said. "The price was \$1.50 for a fishing trip, and 300-500 people would fish some days. The skipper would navigate with a watch and a compass."

Through the '40s, '50s and '60s, the Stagnaro family continued to expand its fishing and restaurant business. Its custom-built boats got bigger, faster and more comfortable. The Stagnaro II, built in 1948, served anglers and tourists in Santa Cruz for 55 years, and was finally retired in 2003. The Sea Stag I held the title of the world's largest speed-

boat and provided fast, thrilling rides on the bay to thousands of people. Gilda's and Malio's Restaurants were established on the wharf and hosted movie stars and sports luminaries.

By the '70s, however, the sportfishing industry fell into decline. The Stagnaros also began losing older members of the family. The family sold Malio's Restaurant as well as the sportfishing and fish retail and wholesale businesses. However, the Stagnaros kept Gilda's Restaurant on the wharf.

As Robert said, "You gotta have something to get up for in the morning, and nothing is more beautiful than the Santa Cruz wharf."

The sportfishing business was out of the family's hands from 1979-1992. In 1993, Robert bought it back and turned the business over to his son Dino and his nephew Ken Stagnaro. From 1993 to 2004, these fourth generation Stagnaros operated the business with two boats. One of them was the Stagnaro II, the last of the wood boats.

Like their great-grandfather, these Stagnaros have an eye for the future. They realized this time of increased costs and limitations in the sportfishing industry calls for a creative approach. They began looking for a single boat that could provide all of their varied services, including multi-species fishing, scenic cruises, whale watching

and other special excursions. After two years of checking the used boat market, Ken said nothing seemed to fit.

"Everything either cost too much money, or was not well-kept," Ken said. "We needed a larger boat to cut the overhead costs, not just a fishing boat, but a true charter boat. We needed deck space, rail space, comfortable seating, a galley and bunks."

At last, Ken learned of Yank Marine, Inc., in Tuckahoe, N.J. The company offered a program that would allow buyers to assist in the labor of building their own boat to keep the costs down. In February 2004, Ken traveled to southern New Jersey, where he would spend four months building the Velocity, the first custom Stagnaro boat since 1956. Deckhand Mike Margrave stayed on 10 months to help complete the construction. In January 2005, the Velocity was shipped via the Panama Canal to Ensenada, Mexico. Ken and Mike took possession there and sailed her up the coast, arriving in Santa Cruz just in time for salmon season.

The Velocity is a beautiful boat, but utility rather than esthetics dictated its design.

"What makes her a good boat is her size, speed and comfortability," Ken said. "We could call her the Versatility rather than the Velocity. Besides our regular fishing trips, we can handle

private charters for any purpose and we offer very economical bay cruises daily. A lot of people don't know they can get out and enjoy the bay for so little."

Truly state of the art, the boat should carry on the Stagnaro history for years to come. The hull features a steep deadrise on the bow to cut through the waves easily, and a V-bottom that flattens at the stern for comfortable cruising. Powered by twin clean burning electronic turbo diesels, the boat can push past 24 knots, and it cruises economically at 18. She is equipped with the latest in safety gear and fish-finding electronics. With a length of 60 feet and a beam of 18 feet, its maximum 65 passengers will have plenty of room on deck for fishing or sightseeing.

As Ken and Robert reminisced on their long family history of fishing in Santa Cruz, and we compiled a list of the dozens of boats the Stagnaros have owned through the years, Ken remarked that the Velocity cost more than all the previous Stagnaro boats combined. But Ken said he is willing to take a risk to pursue his dream and his livelihood of ushering the Stagnaro family into its third century of fishing in Santa Cruz and on the Monterey Bay. Just like his great-grandfather Cottardo would have.

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