

# Capitola hero once needed his own

**R**OSA GIBELLI HAD reason to savor her celebration of Thanksgiving Day 1913.

Two days earlier, she and her husband had awakened early to the sound of giant breakers slamming against the Capitola wharf. Hurrying from their cottage nearby, they saw a tide coming in that was higher than anyone in the village could remember.

Waves broke over the entire length of the wharf and slammed against the beach, pummeling the Esplanade and gushing up side streets to Capitola Avenue.

Fifty-four year old Alberto Gibelli, native of Genoa, Italy, calmly went to work pulling boats and fishing gear to safety. When some of the wharf pilings began to sway, his companions withdrew, shouting to Gibelli on the far end.

Helplessly, the others gaped in horror as the middle of the pier sagged and collapsed.

Some 200 feet of wharf pilings came down with a thundering crunch. Gibelli survived, stranded and exposed to the full force of waves across the break.

Rosa became hysterical, falling to her knees with a plea for her husband's rescue. Patiently, the old fisherman "calmly flirted with death," as the newspapers described it, for about four hours.

Such courage was nothing new for him. Living in San Francisco in 1902, he was out fishing one day when he heard cries for help. Gibelli was first on the scene to aid the sinking SS Rio de Janeiro.

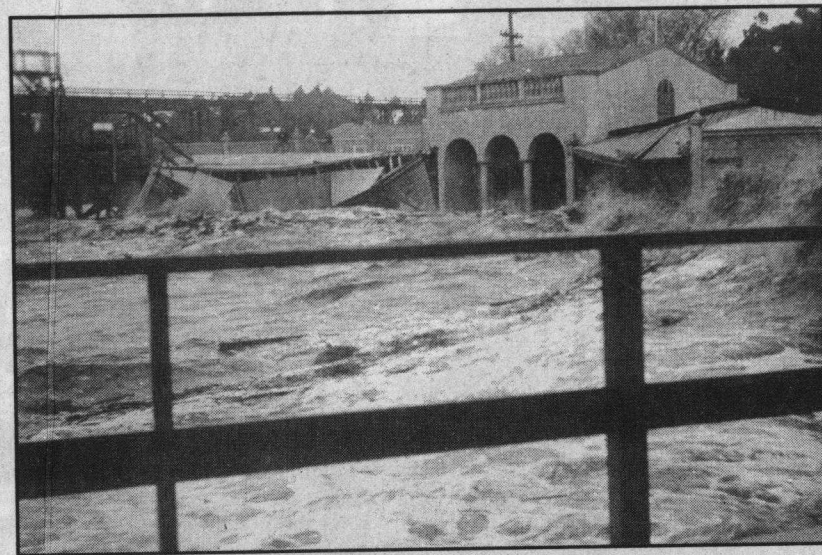
A large man for his day, more than 6 feet tall, Gibelli plucked all 24 passengers from the rigging, saving their lives. For his gallantry, he was awarded a purse filled with gold coins and a medal that he treasured for the rest of his life, as well as the name "The Hero of the Rio de Janeiro."

On the Capitola pier a decade later, he was forced to remain steady as other heroes were called on to rescue him.

According to local legend, at some point that morning, Boston Red Sox baseball star and Capitola resident Harry Hooper and his buddy Al Lent arrived at the scene and tried to throw a line to Gibelli, but failed to overcome the force of the storm. Finally, around noon, Giacomo Stagnaro ran his boat over from Santa Cruz and threw Gibelli a line weighted with a lead.

The rope was attached to a life preserver. He put it on, tied the rope around his arms, took a deep breath, and leapt into the waves.

Rescuers on the shore end of the pier got the other end of the rope and yanked hard. Seeing their man drop like a sinker, they reeled as



The sea revealed her strength again in 1926, when on Feb. 12-13, waves and a high tide pounded the wharf and shoreline buildings.

fast as their arms could pull.

Several tense moments passed before Gibelli resurfaced, "as calm as a cucumber," and evidently none the worse for wear.

The newspaper account said he was "the least ruffled of anyone in the crowd."

Capitola spent Thanksgiving Day with its trolley tracks buried in sand, the beach strewn with debris and its pier split in two, but in the Italian fishing village, people were especially grateful. Gibelli was

saved.

In the next few years, most of the families that lived in this community, including the Gibellis, moved to Santa Cruz to be near the new municipal wharf.

A decade later, the old Capitola fishing village was gone and a modern complex of stucco bungalows took its place.

Ironically, the new units were named the Venetian Courts to play up their ocean front locale and mooring for boat owners.

The courts were barely completed when, in the winter of 1926, the ocean once again delivered waves bigger than anyone could remember. A high tide on Feb. 12 and 13, 1926, rammed against the first row of bungalows and broke the sea wall promenade into chunks of concrete. Hardest hit, however, was the reconfigured Esplanade that had just been curved out onto the beach.

Among the buildings totally destroyed in that 1926 storm was a boathouse, built at the edge of the lagoon pool near the Stockton Street bridge. Buckling under the force of the waves, the structure had to be completely reconstructed.

Today it is the ground floor of the building housing Mr. Toots, Margaritaville and Stockton Bridge Grill. Its 1926 construction date makes part of the building nearly 75 years old, while the second and third stories were added during World War II.

*Next week: Another big tide and the wreck of the Linden Steamship company freighter La Feliz.*

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FLASHBACKS

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REFERENCE



Photos courtesy of Museum of Art and History

In 1913, the Capitola wharf was nearly destroyed by storm waves and an unusually high tide. One man, Alberto Gibelli, was left stranded on the far end of the wharf, but was eventually rescued by residents and a daring fisherman.