

# Cement ship Palo Alto's shining season

By CHRIS WATSON  
Sentinel staff writer

THE MEEK MAY inherit the earth some millenia, but the fish of Seacliff Beach have already claimed the hulk of the *Palo Alto* as their own. Every year, the fish which make their home in the hull keep the deck filled with fishermen hungry for sport.

There was a time when the cement ship hosted a more well-dressed crowd. During the 1930-31 season, the cement ship hosted partyers who came to enjoy the restaurant, arcade, swimming pool and well-polished dance floor. That single season was the only time the ship fulfilled its promise of being more than a fishing pier.

The story of the cement ship and its first incarnation as the oil tanker *Palo Alto* is told in David Her-

## Grand opening

- **WHAT:** Seacliff Beach Visitors Center
- **WHEN:** Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- **WHERE:** Seacliff State Beach State Park, Aptos.
- **FOR INFORMATION:** 688-7146.

on's book "Forever Facing South," due Saturday from Otter B Books. The book's publication coincides with the grand opening of the visitor center at Seacliff Beach State Park, where the cement ship is beached.

The book is Otter B Books' first original title in many years. It is also author Heron's first attempt

at researching and writing local history.

"The oil tanker *Palo Alto* was built in 1919," Heron said in a recent interview, "to satisfy the war effort's need for more oil tankers. It was one of the first of a group of 7,200-ton oil tankers built by the San Francisco Shipbuilding Company. Because of the shortage of steel, its hull was built out of reinforced concrete. Unfortunately, it wasn't completed until after the war was over."

Strike one against the ill-fated *Palo Alto*.

Strike two was the fact that, as a concrete ship, it kept getting into collisions at sea. "Concrete-hulled ships were," Heron said, "a little too brittle. The *Palo Alto* was a perfect example of why they don't

Please see **PALO ALTO** — C2



Pelicans fly in formation before landing on bow of the *Palo Alto* at Seacliff Beach. David Heron

## Palo Alto

Continued from Page C1

build them anymore." Heron adds, however, that there are still many small pleasure craft constructed with concrete hulls.

Strike three was the fact that although it was relatively economical to build, costing only \$1½ million, a buyer wasn't found until 1924. And all they got for her was a measly \$18,000.

"I think, though I can't verify it," Heron said, "that they sold her to the Standard Oil Company for use as a stationary oil tank."

Strike four in this unusual game came in 1930 when, Heron said, "the engine and drive shaft were removed and it was tied up in Oakland."

"Finally, a group of Santa Cruz investors decided to buy the hulk, tie it up at Seacliff Beach and make it a pleasure palace. The two ring-leaders, who were in real estate in Aptos," Heron said, "formed the Seacliff Amusement Company."

According to a report in the Sentinel, 3,000 visitors came to the grand opening weekend in the summer of 1930. The number, Heron thinks, is a bit inflated.

By the end of the second summer, though, the short-lived glory days had come to an end.

"People just stopped coming," Heron said. "They were coming to the beach but they weren't patronizing the restaurant or dance floor any more. It could have been due to the Depression."

Finally the Seacliff Amusement Company went out of business. Everything movable was put to auction in 1934. In 1932, the State Park System bought the first piece of Seacliff Beach; they bought the cement ship in 1936.

## Seacliff Beach visitor center opens Saturday

Music, Ohlone story telling and mural painting are part of the festivities planned to mark the grand opening of the visitor center Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Seacliff State Beach State Park, Aptos.

The Monterey Bay Natural Historical Association and the California Department of Parks and Recreation are sponsoring the event, which will begin at noon with a dedication ceremony.

The visitor center has exhibits of local cultural and natural history plus a touch tank featuring sea anemones, sea stars, urchins and other tidepool creatures.

Docents at the day-long event will lead tours of the beach and of the cement ship, *Palo Alto*. Copies of David Heron's book "Forever Facing South," a history of the *Palo Alto*, will be available at the bookstore and the author will be signing copies from 11 a.m. to noon and 1 p.m. to 2.

The Monterey Bay Natural Historical Association will also be unveiling its new poster, a watercolor by local artist Suzanne Gamble.

Chris Watson

In the early '80s, part of the ship was restored for fishing. But the crack that first appeared in the forward half of the ship — thanks to a storm in 1932 — still continues to deteriorate.