

Festival of the Cement Ship enters 15th year

Cement Ship
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Though the would-be World War I tanker the S.S. Palo Alto moored off Seacliff State Beach has had alternating bouts of luck and misfortune during its 90-year-long history, someone has usually managed to find in it a cause for celebration.

With the help of California State Parks and Friends of Santa Cruz State Parks, residents will continue to do so on June 7 at the 15th annual Festival of the Cement Ship.

The festival will consist of a family-oriented afternoon of arts, crafts and education about the marine life of the Monterey Bay and local history. California State Parks began hosting the annual

festival in 1994 to celebrate the 75th birthday of the ship and "its surprising story... World War I tanker built of concrete turned amusement ship that is now a magnet for marine life," said Jodi Apelt, a state park interpreter.

The bands Banjos by the Bay and Gold Standard Barbershop Chorus will provide a musical background to the festival with tunes from the 1930s, the era of the ship's stint as a ballroom and restaurant. Between 1930 and 1932, the Seacliff Amusement Company used the Palo Alto to provide visitors with a place to forget the troubles they faced onshore due to the Great Depression. Although it had been constructed in 1919 in record time as a tanker in the war, it didn't leave San Francisco Bay until it was bought

If You Go

WHAT: 15th annual Festival of the Cement Ship.

WHEN: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday.

WHERE: Seacliff State Beach, Aptos.

by the Seacliff company in 1930 after being deemed of little use as soon as the war had ended.

The ship's days as a palace of pleasure did not last long, however. In 1932, soon after financial difficulties forced the company to forgo its project, the ship's hull cracked during a series of storms, leaving it in two pieces. More storms in the 1980's led the ship to split into four parts.

But once again what appeared to be a tragedy harbored a silver lining. The storm clouds hid a sil-

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ver lining in the form of a unique marine habitat that the ship pieces provided for a vibrant ecosystem. But in 2004, it became clear that any silver lining had faded when dead cormorants bathed in oil began to turn up on Seacliff shores. Though authorities had long believed it no longer contained oil, it was discovered that the ship's deterioration was causing seepage and endangering the ecosystem it harbored. The discovery led to a six-week \$1.7 million state-funded cleanup effort in 2006 that revealed 200 birds and two harbor seals dead inside.

With its most recent mishap cleared up, the Palo Alto is again something to celebrate this Saturday.

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