

# Register Pajaronian

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## Remembering the cement ship's heyday

By E.L. Hutchings

SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

A way back in 1930, I was a freshman in Watsonville High School. That is where I met a classmate named Theta Belle Langstaff, the only child of a couple that lived in and operated a small hotel on the "flats," as it was called, near the beach at Rio del Mar. I was often invited to spend many weekends with her and her folks.

Theta Belle's father was a Britisher who had a small dance band that played on Saturday nights below the deck level of the cement ship that was permanently anchored at Seacliff Beach.

Theta Belle and I were allowed to go early with her father and the band to get everything set up for an evening of dancing. We, however, were told in advance that Theta's mother would be there to take us home promptly at 10 p.m. because "Things might get rough on board," since some people thought it permissible to drink on the anchored ship during those Prohibition days.

But a favorite occasional pastime for us in Rio del Mar was to walk to the nearby Esplanade area after dark to watch for the rum runners. First we would hear the chug of a motorboat engine just out past the surf line, followed by a bright blink-

ing light in the dark. Then we would hear the motor break through the wave line and proceed toward shore. We left in a hurry for Theta's home, scared we would be caught spying on the illegal activity.

One summer Theta's father built a small room on the beach next to the river, where Theta and I were in charge of selling soft drinks, sandwiches and candy to beachgoers. It was great fun for us, because we could meet the "big shot" boys from San Francisco whose families were there for the summer.

When Mr. Langstaff's band wasn't playing on the cement ship, it often played for dancing at the Farm Bureau building (I think that's what it was called), in Aptos Village. Its 1925 to 1930 music was lively and got both the young and the old onto the dance floor. When the time rolled around to about 11 p.m., refreshments appeared. Then everyone headed for home, weary but happy.

Those long-ago days in that area bring back happy memories for me. But they bring a bit of sadness too now, when I now see the cement ship resting beneath the waves, hardly visible anymore.

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