

Pier-ing into the past



State Sen. Bruce McPherson (second from left) joins Supervisor Ellen Pirie, Assemblyman John Laird (not shown) and State Parks Ranger Dave Vincent in the dedication ceremony of the Seacliff State Beach Pier on Friday afternoon. Ranger Nedra Martinez (left), supervisor for the south sector, and ranger Ron Callison lend a hand holding the ribbon.

Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Cement ship reopening brings back fond memories

By KATHERINE MORRIS

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

APTOS — Lew Merrill was just a young boy in 1929 when the SS Palo Alto first came to what is now Seacliff State Beach.

"It sounds like a crazy thing to do, but I used to swim out past the breakers and let the currents carry me over to the pier, which I'd walk down to the end to the ship," the 84-year-old Aptos resident said. "They had a real nice soda bar there for the kids, and I liked to get a cream soda.

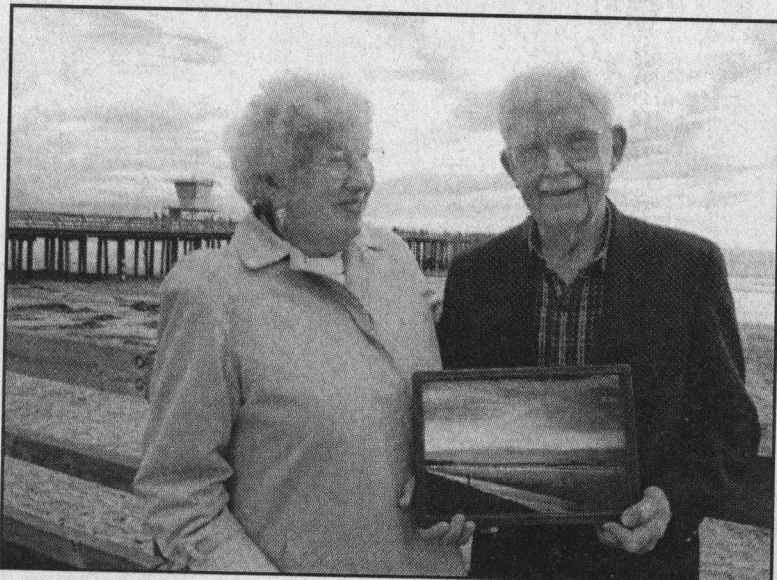
"They had some kind of a casino, too. But I wouldn't know too much about that because I wasn't old enough to gamble then," Merrill added with a sly smile.

Merrill, who volunteers at the park's visitors center, was joined by more than 300 people Friday — including state and local legislators, fire personnel, law enforcement officers and California State Parks representatives — at Seacliff State Beach for an afternoon ceremony celebrating the reopening of the park's pier.

The 665-foot pier closed on Nov. 7, 2002, after a series of storms damaged the pier and its supporting pilings, rendering it unsafe.

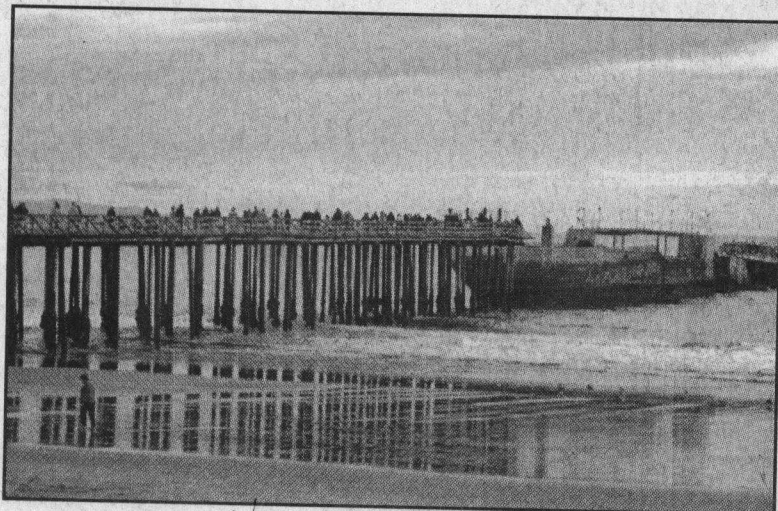
Thanks to support at both the state and local level, however, the Department of Parks and Recreation was able to secure the \$311,000 needed to refurbish and repair what's been a favorite spot for visitors, fishermen and beachgoers for more than 70 years.

"This is a wonderful day for us," said Dave Vincent, Santa Cruz State Parks superintendent, adding that Seacliff State Beach is one of the oldest parks in the state system.



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Jeanne Watkins joins her husband, Carl, as he shows a photograph he took about 20 years ago of a sunset of the Seacliff State Beach Pier. They were among hundreds of people who celebrated the dedication ceremony of the pier's reopening Friday.



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Crowds of visitors pour onto the newly opened Seacliff State Beach Pier.

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The idea for the ship and pier was actually hatched prior to the state's acquisition of the land. A group of businessmen first purchased the ship in Oakland, hauled it to Seacliff and constructed the original pier with grandiose plans of converting it into a casino and amusement center.

But when the group went belly-up a year or so later in 1931, State Parks stepped in and purchased the ship and pier from them for \$1.

"I imagine that no one realized at that time just what that ill-founded adventure would one day mean to this community," Vincent said. "Just think how many sunrises and sunsets have been watched from that pier, how many people have learned to fish here, how many conversations have taken place here."

Vincent was joined by State Sen. Bruce McPherson, Assemblyman John Laird, Santa Cruz County Supervisor Ellen Pirie and Pat Clark from the Friends of the Santa Cruz State Parks, who all spoke for a few moments before the red ribbon was cut and the crowds descended onto the pier.

"Just being here really reminds me of my dad," one woman said to another. "He used to fish here when we were kids, and then we'd go home and cook it."

Other locals, such as Pat Lester, wheeled their grandchildren out onto the refurbished pier in strollers.

"His great-grandmother, my mother-in-law, used to walk down the pier to get to the ship, where they had dinner and dancing," Lester said.

Even though the SS Palo Alto is now a rusted out, dilapidated hull, the ship and pier are still key parts of the community, Lester said.

"That's what is so wonderful about today," Lester said.

The reopening triggered fond memories for many people in attendance Friday, such as Jeanne and Carl Watkins of Watsonville.

"This place means something very important to us," Jeanne said. "My husband and I have been coming here for years. It's a sanctuary. We just love it. It's a real freedom that we have something like this here, and we have to enjoy it."

Her husband Carl even brought with him a photograph that he'd shot of the pier during a sunset more than 20 years ago.

"It's so nice to just see all the people out here walking — everyone always smiles," Jeanne said. "We like to bring a picnic and meet my twin sister. It's just one of the only places that you can come and not have any thoughts but your own."