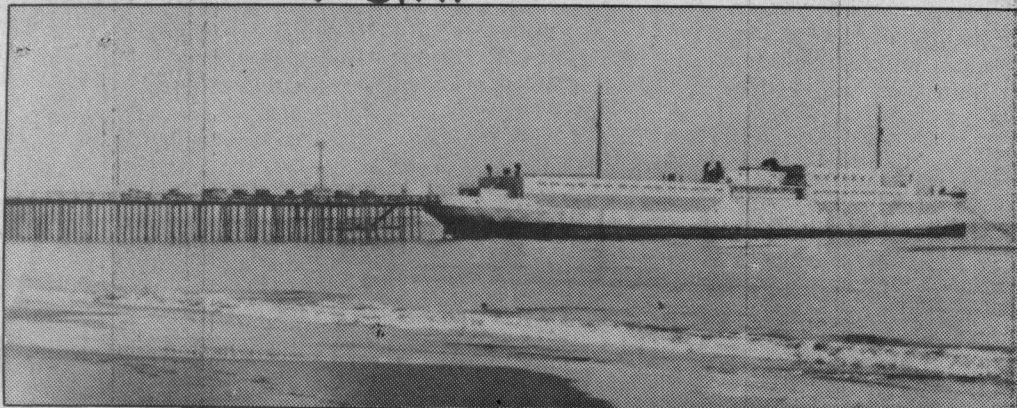


CEMENT SHIP



ROSS ERIC GIBSON COLLECTION

The cement ship was an amusement center in the 1930s until a storm cracked its hull.

Prizes to be given for '30s costumes at cement ship's 75th birthday party

BY ROSS ERIC GIBSON
Special to the Mercury News

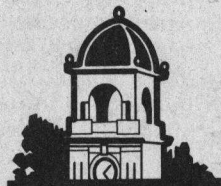
The old ship groans from the tidal action moving through her cracked hull, full of memories on the eve of her 75th birthday. She is a war veteran who never saw action but enjoyed a brief heyday as a pleasure palace.

That heyday will be relived Saturday when guests will be invited to come aboard in 1930s garb and play children's games or take Charleston and swing dance lessons to music from Cabrillo Big Band and Santa Cruz Brass Quartet.

David Heron, the ship's biographer, published a history called "Forever Looking South" and helps trace her amazing story.

San Franciscan William Comyn was impressed with three cement ships made for Norway in 1917 when half of its merchant fleet

was lost in World War I. In September of
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Cement ship approaches its 75th birthday

■ HISTORY

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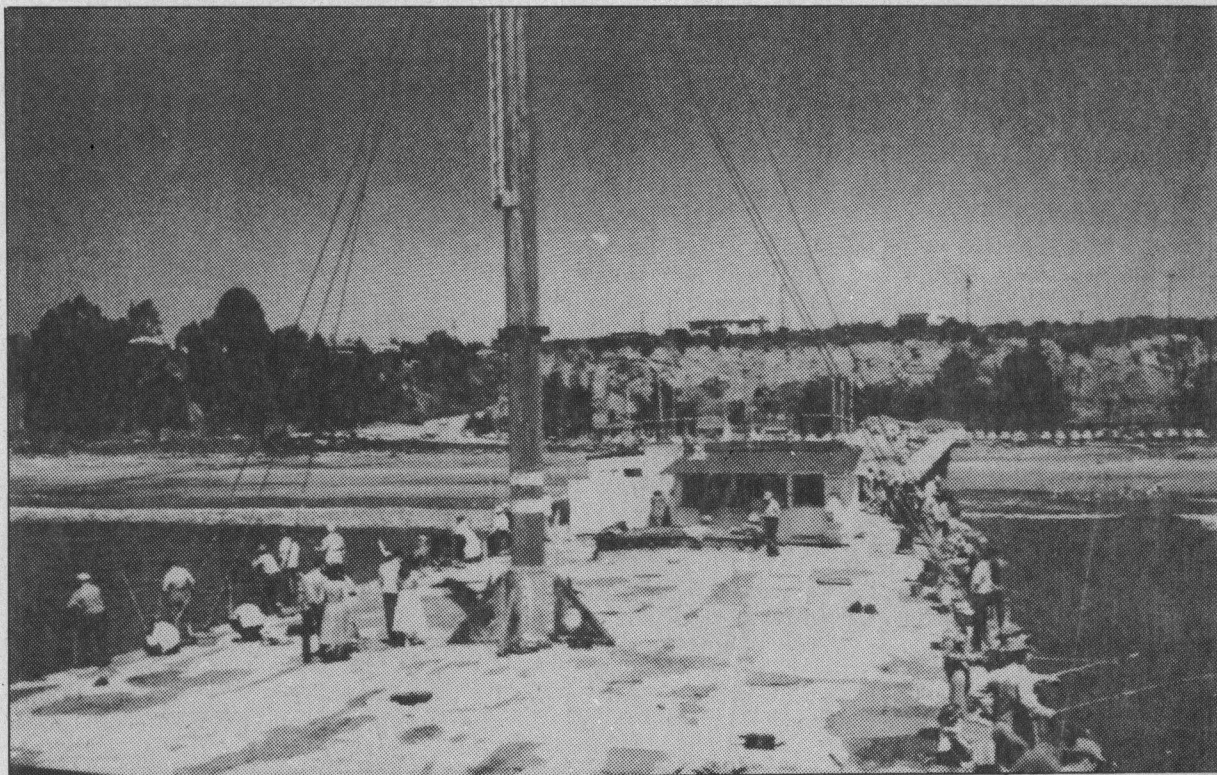
that year he formed a Redwood City company. In 73 days he built America's first cement ship, made of cement from Davenport. He christened the 320-foot ship Faith, and it sailed widely, reaching ports such as Vancouver, Hawaii and New York.

Its success led President Woodrow Wilson and Congress to approve a fleet of 36 cement oil tankers, with part of the contract awarded to Comyn's company. The United States had entered the war and was facing a steel shortage. In the record time of 120 days, the world's largest cement ship — 434 feet — was constructed of Santa Cruz cement. It was launched to great fanfare May 29, 1919, and christened the Palo Alto (Spanish for "tall tree"). Less than six months later the war was over.

What in an emergency was highly prized now was mothballed and became a white elephant. Only about 10 seagoing cement ships were constructed. When the tanker Cape Fear collided with a steel granite-loaded freighter, it "shattered like a teacup" and sank in three minutes. Some started referring to them as the "crockery fleet."

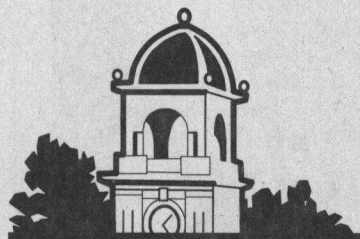
Cement ships were being sunk for breakwaters, but a deal to sink the Palo Alto was dropped because she was still seaworthy. She made one voyage under her own power, across San Francisco Bay, and then her engines were removed. In 1929 a Nevada group called "Seacliff Amusement" bought the \$1.5 million ship for little more than surplus scrap prices: \$28,000.

Gladys Erb, a wife of one of the investors, recalled that the group originally intended to locate the ship as an amusement center in Santa Cruz, either north of Light-house Point or in Seabright, but



ROSS ERIC GIBSON COLLECTION

In the 1950s the cement ship still had its masts, but not its pavilions, and was popular as a fishing pier.



SANTA CRUZ

Historic Perspective

no land was available. Investors were stuck with a remote site on what is now Seacliff State Beach, where they'd already tried and failed to develop a new boardwalk in 1926. In the 1920s, Seacliff and Rio Del Mar were planned to be "Aptos Beach Country Club," a luxury resort and golf course. That would have justified the boardwalk's remote location, but only a fraction of the resort ever materialized.

The Seacliff investors couldn't foresee this when they moored the cement ship there and began to remodel it as an amusement pier. Only the 100-stateroom hotel was left out of the final design. The stern wheelhouse marked the entrance to the arcade of carnival games. Midships

was a swimming pool in the former engine room.

Beyond was the Rainbow Ballroom, a popular place to hear headliner bands of the day and hold school dances. Erb remembers meeting Clark Gable there. Directly above was the Ship Cafe and Fish Restaurant with breathtaking ocean views. The rest of the top deck provided superior fishing. Old-timers like to recall the hidden rooms in the bowels of the ship, rumored to be speakeasies and gambling dens. Those rumors have not been substantiated.

The ship was wildly successful its first year, justifying construction of the Aptos Beach Inn on a nearby cliff in 1932. But a winter storm that year cracked the hull amidships; and with the attraction closed, Seacliff Company went bankrupt. The ship was stripped of anything salvageable, including its white ash decks, before being sold to the state park system in 1936 for \$1.

Since then the ship has been a fishing pier. Ralph Creffield made the wheelhouse a bait and tackle shop. His boat rentals, stored on deck, were lowered over the side by a crane. He also had a hamburger stand.

Storms continued to batter the ship, until a 1978 storm closed it and the state park considered a \$3 million demolition. To the rescue came Rose Costa and Harry Haney, who formed "Save Our Ship," a grass-roots group that made sufficient repairs to reopen the ship in 1983.

Today the state parks system plans to maintain the ship as a ruin, expecting it to become an underwater reef in about 75 years. Until then, if funds become available, some would like to see wooden decking to even out the ship's bulging cement floor and possibly bridge gaps in the deck.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

A 75th anniversary celebration is planned from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday. There will be music by the Cabrillo College Big Band and the Santa Cruz Brass Quintet, with dance lessons, ship walks and activities for children. Prizes will be given to everyone who comes dressed in 1920s-'30s fashion. For more information, call Jodi Apelt at (408) 688-7146.

Local historian, architectural consultant and author Ross Eric Gibson writes a weekly history column for the Santa Cruz/Monterey edition.