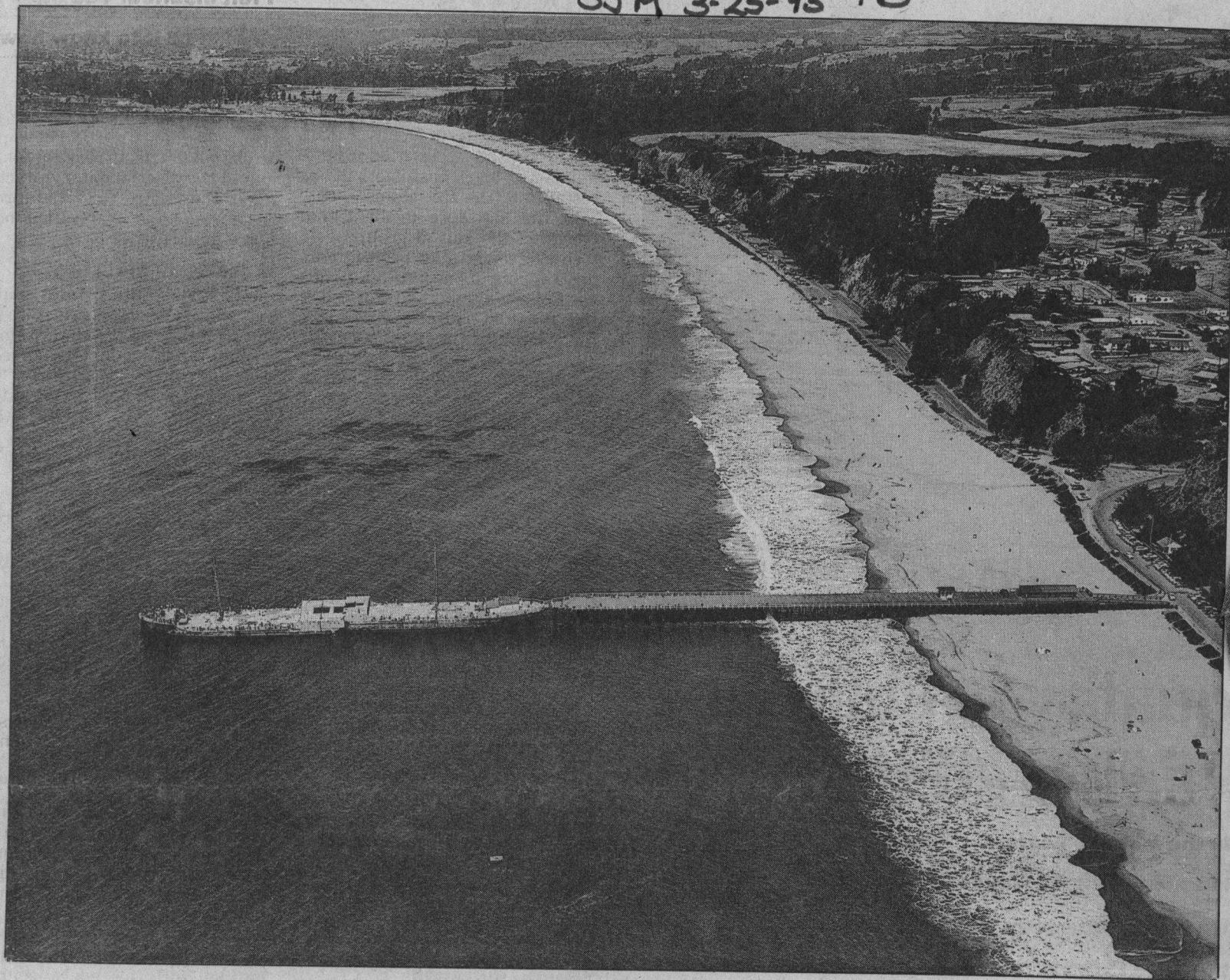


✓ CEMENT SHIP

Battered by time and tides

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Once-proud ship now plays home to fishing, tours

BY LEE QUARNSTROM
Mercury News Staff Writer

Among the most-common "What is that and how did it get there?" questions asked in Santa Cruz County is the one about the concrete ship that sits, half-submerged, on the edge of Monterey Bay at Seacliff State Beach in Aptos.

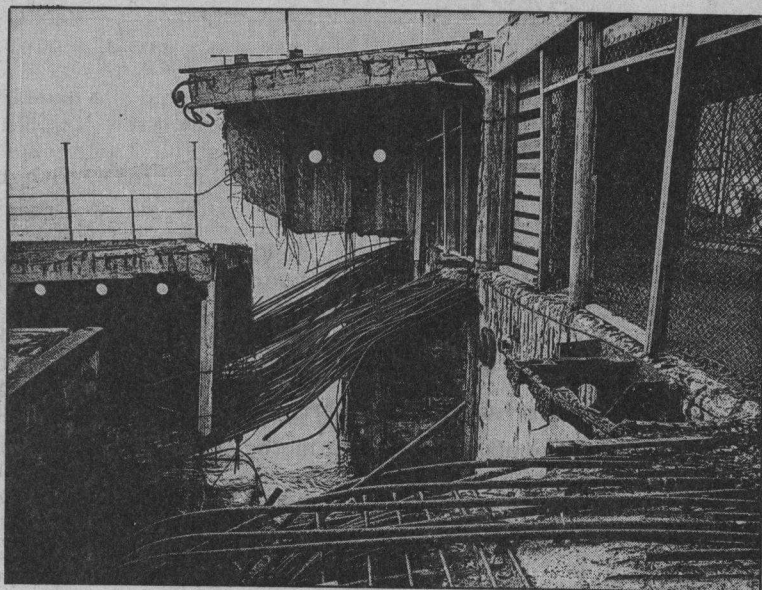
The ship is the Palo Alto, and it was built but never used as a cargo vessel for World War I. Almost a decade later, it was towed to its present resting spot and scuttled by some entrepreneurs with stars in their eyes who wanted to turn it into an amusement center.

For a couple of years, dance bands did play in the Palo Alto's ballroom, and families swam in its pool and ate in the dining room. Then the investors went belly up, and the Palo Alto and its pier were abandoned to adults and kids with fishing poles.

This weekend, a docent from the nearby Seacliff State Beach visitor center will lead a guided tour of the hulk of the Palo Alto, which has been battered by a series of storms over the decades that have basically broken it in half.

One of the regulars who dangles a hook and line from the deck of the concrete ship is Steve Miller, 40, who comes down from his home in the hills behind Aptos to fish for surf perch.

Occasionally during the summer, Miller said Wednesday, anglers catch a salmon,



The Palo Alto, built but never used as a cargo vessel for World War I, was a stately vessel when it was towed to the Seacliff State Beach in 1955, above. But by 1978 the ship, at left, was already a wreck.

MERCURY NEWS FILE PHOTO-GRAPHS

This weekend, a docent from the nearby Seacliff State Beach visitor center will lead a guided tour of the hulk of the Palo Alto.

halibut or striped bass from the ship or its pier. But small surf perch are most common.

The walking tour will begin at the Seacliff Beach visitor center, where a highlight is the sooty shearwater display. This dark seabird, which occasionally soars in flocks of hundreds of thousands above the waters of Monterey Bay in huge gyres visible from land, apparently inspired the late Alfred Hitchcock when he filmed "The Birds."

An old newspaper clipping reports on the

mysterious events of Aug. 17, 1961. That evening, in dense fog, the circling flock of perhaps a half-million sooty shearwaters lost its way, with thousands of the birds crashing into roofs and walls of homes in Capitola. The collisions were fatal.

Three days after the story appeared, the paper ran a story about Hitchcock, who had a residence near Scotts Valley. The story said the amazing sooty shearwater story had stimulated the creative juices of the famed director, who was already at work on a film about a flock of vicious birds.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The tour begins at noon on Saturday. From Highway 1, take the Seacliff exit in Aptos. For more information, call the visitor center at (408) 688-7146.