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Cement ship graces Seacliff

SEACLIFF — A cement ship? It's indeed a curiosity, especially when the ship is beached offshore for 50 years so its history becomes misty, and a widely popular state beach is developed around it. You find yourself with questions on your hands.

The cement ship "Palo Alto" is a trademark of Seacliff State Beach today. It's a popular fishing spot for young and old alike.

Although the boat never actually went to sea under its own power, it was one of three cement ships built in the Oakland Naval Shipyard during World War I. It was designed to carry petroleum. None were finished in time to be used in battle.

The Palo Alto was completed May 29, 1919. It was 435 feet long, 54 feet wide, 42 feet from the main deck to keel and weighed 7,500 tons. Cost was about \$1.5 million.

The ship sat in Oakland for 10 years. In 1929, it was purchased by the Cal-Nevada Co. for use as an amusement center. Its maiden voyage occurred under tow to its home port at Seacliff, where it arrived Jan. 22, 1930.

The Palo Alto's bow anchors were placed and swung into position. Six of the oil storage compartments — each 16 feet wide, 34 feet long and 36 feet deep — were flooded with water. This was

eventually replaced with sand, which acted as a permanent ballast to hold the ship in place.

The formal opening of the ship as an amusement center took place June 28, 1930. The ship sported several concessions on deck similar to those at the Boardwalk today. The Rainbow Ballroom, where many big bands played for dancing, was 156 feet long and 54 feet wide and took the main foredeck, now broken off.

The Ship Cafe and Fish Restaurant were built on the superstructure. The dining area was 84 feet long and 54 feet wide with almost continuous windows on three sides.

There were 23,000 square feet of weather promenade decks and 45,000 square feet of inside deck space.

But the Palo Alto's life as an amusement center was a short one. The company went broke in 1932.

The first winter after the demise, the Palo Alto cracked mid-ship — where the large break is now. The superstructure and all its improvements were scrapped in 1934, leaving a stripped hull.

In February 1934, the Parks Commission of California acquired the ship from an Aptos businessman. A slashing winter

Please see Page 46

Cement ship popular Seacliff attraction

Continued from Page 42

storm completely broke the ship's back five years later, but its popularity grew as an ideal fishing spot. The rotting hulls below became a living, protected environment for sea life.

In 1959, the rotting 76-foot masts were cut down in the

interest of public safety. In 1963, the bow section was broken by another storm.

In 1979, battered by more storms, the state closed the Palo Alto down; many thought it would never be opened to the public again. But a brave group of volunteers from the Monterey Bay Natural History Association put in

some 8,000 hours of labor. Seventeen tons of cement had to be wheelbarrowed down the pier and into the ship.

Today, the ship is once again open and the state is making more improvements. Hopefully, the ship is back where it belongs ... for good.