

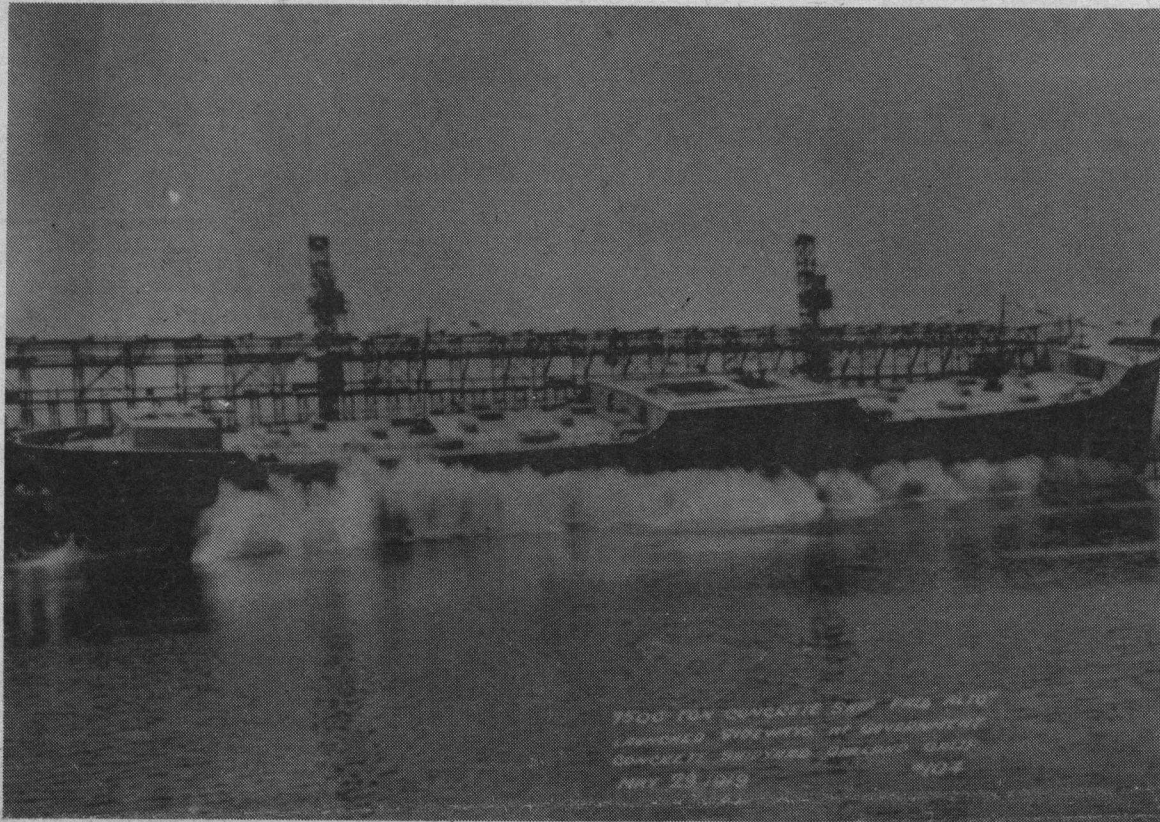
Built of Santa Cruz concrete in 1919, the ship *Palo Alto* lies today off the shoreline at Seacliff Beach as the corroded hull of a lost vision—a salty corpse split and broken by ocean currents and the economic tides of the Great Depression.

It sits there, naked, suggestive of some tragedy that never was. For this bulky boat was christened a floating white elephant, one of five designed for government construction just before the end of World War I. The 7,500-ton vessel was launched sideways at the Government Concrete Shipyard at Oakland on May 29, 1919. It then waited over a decade for its inglorious maiden voyage, a 15-hour journey under tow to the site of a development scheme that rode the crest of financial disaster in 1930.

Seacliff Beach was among several subdivisions that spotted the midcounty coastline as "by-the-sea" development dreams in the mid-1920s. They were spawned in a decade in which California became the receptacle for the greatest internal migration in American history, a time when real estate booms thumped the seashore on both sides of the continent. Cars were faster, roads better, mortgages easier and land was available in large chunks.

Developers first purchased Aptos lands from the heirs of San Francisco sugar king Claus Spreckels in 1922. Within two years the old Spreckels racetrack had become "the polo field"—home of the Aptos-Santa Cruz Polo

Cemented in Time



Aptos, according to promoters of the day, was to be "the realization of the dream of the city man, a place in the country where he can turn for a weekend or vacation."

Rio del Mar was one of very few

Carolyn Swift

community near the Southern Pacific train stop at Manresa (now La Selva Beach) and the established seasonal town of Capitola. This village shed its timeworn summer camp skin in the '20s to become "Capitola-by-the-Sea" under the ownership of Henry Allen Rispin, an oil millionaire. He built a 22-room mansion on Wharf Road, sold subdivision lots and developed the Monterey Heights Golf Course on Soquel Drive.

Capitola was then the site of California's first condominiums, the Venetian Courts, and sported both the Hawaiian Gardens Night Club and a yacht club on the pier, in addition to the 160-room, turn-of-the-century hotel built against the bluffs by Capitola's founder, F.A. Hihn.

Eventually, however, the village was singed by the Depression. Rispin went bankrupt and the hotel, yacht club and night spot all burned under "mysterious circumstances."

Seacliff emerged in 1924 when Santa Cruz Land and Title Company filed plans that included the entrance to what is now the State Park. No less than six subdivision maps were filed in the next year, each revising the shape of the roads until they took on the appearance that is familiar today.

W.I. Morgan headed the Seacliff company that bought up the bluff lands after a seawall and beach access were constructed. Soon after the purchase, the home site project went through its first crisis.



A man named Woodside, known as a hermit and rumored to be "crazy," refused to give up his tiny cliffside shack and house lot for the sake of coastal progress. Attempts to remove him only made the man more stubborn and a bit mean. At last the developers called the law.

When Sheriff Howard V. Trafton and Undersheriff Roundtree appeared at the cliffside shack, they were in for a fatal surprise. Woodside engaged them in a shootout that left all three of them

dead. Trafton lived just long enough to outline the details. Woodside, who collected the greatest number of wounds, was still the last to die—and some say he did so reaching for a weapon in one final protest.

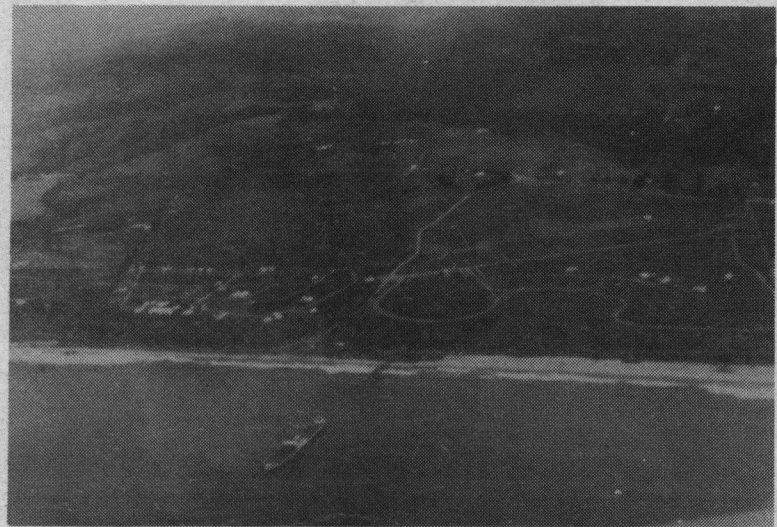
A storm in 1926 washed out the seawall and Seacliff stayed a blueprint on paper until 1929, when Cal Neva Development Group bought the land on the eve of the Depression.

It was this firm that had the brainstorm of an entertainment ship off the coast. The *Palo Alto* was towed in on January 30, 1930, before an audience of hundreds, and given a permanent anchor.

Tom Lindsay of Capitola guided the ship in place. A 630-foot pier was built to the shore and the *Palo Alto* was grounded to a rock-sea bed. Slowly, the boat was renovated to be a "pleasure ship" with dancing, swimming and dining. The "Rainbow Ballroom" measured 156-by-54 feet.

R. Carpenter, business manager, announced a June 21 opening, but steam from the hot water in the swimming pool warped the dance floor on opening night. Crews worked round-the-clock to ready the grand event for 3,000 guests the next day.

Its heyday was extremely short. A heavy storm broke the *Palo Alto* in the season of 1931, just before Cal Neva went bust. The Depression ended the ambitions of all promotional schemes in mid-county, and Aptos of the 1930s remained a tiny village surrounded



Team. Across the Santa Cruz Highway the old deer park was renamed "Deer Park Villa" on subdivision maps that sketched the early design of Rio del Mar. This tract eventually became the ambitious project of the firm of Monroe, Lyon and Miller—whose initial plans for the Aptos Beach Country Club included a casino, Venetian waterways, a hotel, "Spanish Village" and "deCastro Lake" north of Rob Roy Junction, an area now covered by the freeway.

to survive the financial hard times ahead. Through an ownership-membership plan, there was construction of a golf lodge and links, a bath pavilion on Aptos Creek, home lots and the impressive Aptos Beach Inn that overlooked the "flats" and beach esplanade. Built in 1932, the Inn burned down in 1963.

Aptos land subdivisions were sandwiched between the Rob Roy development of D.W. Batchelor, who gave Scottish names to a small

by farms, a few suburbs and lavish remnants of bankrupt fantasies.

The state picked up the *Palo Alto* at a bargain in 1936 after it had begun to acquire beach lands as a park site in the early '30s. That action preserved for 50 years a landmark of affection to local people. The *Palo Alto* is so much a part of the landscape, in fact, that considerable efforts may be made to insure that its concrete hulk continues to appear in local picture postcards. □