



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

The cement ship Palo Alto, built as a tanker, arrived in Seacliff in 1930.

Weathering the storms of time

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THE YEARS are lost in concrete beaten and battered by infinite waves and reckless storms.

Unlike sailboats that have traveled the seas and destroyers that have waged wars, this ship of cement has had no storybook journey, no legendary battle.

Consigned to a stationary life, the Palo Alto is anchored in time to one place.

There is no mystery as with her sisters of the sea. There is no wanderlust left to steal this traveler away.

Her life, in many ways, lies incomplete, busted like her cracked body. A war ship that never saw battle. A luxury palace doomed by the Depression.

Perhaps, it is this unlikely history that has endeared the ship to a community that gave her a home.

It has been 75 years since her first launch.

The community of Seacliff will toast the Palo Alto on May 14 with a daylong festival. It will be a moment of glory for the most pedestrian of vessels.

ADMIRERS WILL DRESS in clothes from the '30s. There will be guided ship walks. There will be Charleston and swing dance lessons and games for children.

"I still love my cement ship," says Rose Costa, a nearby resident of Seacliff State Beach, where the ship rests. Costa, 77, successfully led the drive to reopen the battered ship a decade ago.

Like others in the Aptos area, Costa has stories to tell about the Palo Alto. She begins 30 years ago.

Her first catch, a salmon, was off the, Palo Alto.

"I retired, and I learned to fish," she says. "I used to fish every day."

When her husband died, Costa asked that donations go to the ship. That's how deep the emotions run.

Or hear the story of David Heron, who first saw the stark ship in the 1960s during a camping excursion.

Heron, 74, was so captured by the ship he spent four years of his life researching the Palo Alto and writing a book called, "Forever Facing South."

"I wondered how an old ship like that got there," he says.

It's a long story.

Please see CEMENT SHIP — BACK PAGE

Cement ship

Continued from Page A1

As a result of wartime steel shortages, the government began building ships made of concrete around 1917. The 435-foot-long Palo Alto was meant to be a tanker. The war, however, ended before the \$1.5 million ship was completed.

According to reports, she stayed in dock in Oakland until 1929 when the Cal-Nevada Co. bought her to serve as an amusement craft. A year later, she was brought to Seacliff.

"Her destiny was for the pleasure of people rather than as a tanker in the war," says Jodi Apelt, a park interpretive specialist at Seacliff State Beach. A group of 50 volunteer docents also help at the beach visitor center.

DURING THE SHIP'S glory years in the 1930s, the Palo Alto featured a dance floor, a restaurant and carnival-type games. But this only lasted a few years before the Depression hit and sunk this endeavor.

Soon the winter storms cracked the ship's hull. The equipment was then removed, leaving her barren. The state, newspaper accounts say, acquired her around 1934.

Later storms were unkind, forcing the front half to be closed around 1958.

The ship was closed around 1978 after storms caused a large diagonal break at mid-span. Storms in 1982 battered her even more.

Officials doubted she would reopen to visitors and the fishermen who cast their lines off her deck. Costa and other volunteers, however, brought her

and the pier back to life in 1983.

Time and the ocean will tell how long she will remain.

"I don't think it'll last another 75 years," Costa says. "But 10 years ago, they said, 'It would never be open again.' But we did it."

Costa walks to the ship daily.

The Palo Alto is interesting because it is a survivor, says author Heron, an Aptos resident.

"If it suffers more storms, it may deteriorate further," he says.

THE SHIP will remain a good habitat for fish even if it breaks down, according to Chief Ranger Bob Culbertson of the state parks' Santa Cruz District.

"It provides an oasis for an otherwise desert floor for fish," he says.

Seacliff is a refuge for the many families who journey to the beach in their recreational vehicles.

The state will maintain the Palo Alto for as long as it can, but there are no long-term plans to repair the parts that are damaged, Culbertson said.

"It's been 10 years since the last big storm," he says. "It is subject to episodic changes, powerful storms."

But, the size of the next tempest and the severity of the suffering are merely details.

"The community loves this old ship no matter how much damage there is," says Apelt.

The ship festival will be from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Seacliff State Beach. The event is free, but entrance to the park by vehicle is \$6.