

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Distinguished Professor of Earth and Planetary Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

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Young Pirates in Santa Cruz**

The central coast has had its share of shipwrecks. A catalogue completed by the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary lists 463 individual vessels that were lost over the years. Only 25 of these met their end along the coastline of Santa Cruz County, however, as most on this long list were lost offshore.

There is one local and very interesting offshore adventure that could have easily ended in a shipwreck, but quite amazingly did not. The story starts in the 1930s with three local Santa Cruz teenage friends, Bill Grace, James Henniger and Bud Tara. These guys all grew up around the water, mostly along the lower San Lorenzo River and the adjacent ocean. They built their own rowboats, which were sometimes outfitted them with sails, and also made belly boards out of plywood for riding waves. Bill Grace wrote an amazing account of their bizarre adventure, which found its way into my hands recently.

Bud was the youngest of the four Tara boys who were widely known in Santa Cruz for their pranks. They were also known for their hunting, fishing and poaching skills, as well as their willingness to fight any and all comers, including each other if there was no one else around.

The Tara family arrived in a Model T Ford from Michigan in 1920, and legend has it that they virtually lived off of smoked salmon and steelhead caught in the San Lorenzo River. When the steamer “*La Feliz*” wrecked on the rocks just west of Natural Bridges in 1924 the Tara family in their Model T were the first on the scene to pick up the cans of sardines that were scattered along the shoreline.

In the late 1930s Santa Cruz had no harbor and many of the fishermen pulled their boats up onto the wharf during the winter months. Other locals kept small boats along the San Lorenzo River where Bud Tara’s father, Bill, ran a boat rental business.

When Bud Tara, James Henninger and Bill Grace entered high school in 1937, they bonded with their love for the ocean and boats. They also all felt that it would be a great adventure to sail a boat to the South Seas. The only problem was that they didn’t have a boat.

In their rowing and fishing adventures out in the kelp beds, however, they often saw and admired a 52-foot ketch that was anchored off the wharf during the spring, summer and early fall months. The boys would row around this fine sailboat and make notes and sketches for their dream adventure to the South Seas. The “*Tira*” was sailed up to the Berkeley Marina each winter to avoid the usual winter storms, which gave the boys time to scheme about their planned adventure.

Bill Grace (and perhaps Bud and James as well) joined the local Sea Scouts to learn about seamanship, navigation and nautical chart, as well as ocean currents and wind patterns. They even did some research on where pirate treasure was reportedly buried in the South Pacific that provided more incentive.

Their plans for a South Pacific adventure were encouraged when they met another high school kid who had actually sailed on the “*Tira*” the previous year. Through conversations they learned how the sailboat was laid out and how the auxiliary diesel engines worked.

When the sailboat returned to Berkeley for the winter, the three boys began to plan for their South Pacific trip by gathering what they felt were all of the necessary supplies and gear. Keep in mind that they were 16 and 17 years old boys with good imaginations and large dreams. They managed to find cases of dented cans of food at the local cannery, a beer keg to fill with extra water, tools for repair and a length of heavy rope and a large rock that had a special use. All they needed now was the “*Tira*”.