

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

**#248 October 29, 2017**

**Stealing a Sailboat and Sailing to Mexico**

Two weeks ago we left our three young adventurers scheming about sailing to the South Pacific. They had gathered everything they were able to find for their trip, an old beer keg with extra fresh water, a case of dented cans of food, fishing gear, a sack of potatoes and a .22 rifle; everything but the boat.

In the early evening of May 24, 1938, almost 80 years ago, they maneuvered their two heavily laden rowboats out through heavy surf at the river mouth. The boys hung out under the wharf until the lights of the Boardwalk and Casino went out, and then made their way over to the *Tira* and boarded the sailboat.

After quietly pulling up the anchor they used the rope and heavy rock they brought with them in a process called kedging to move the boat far enough away from the wharf so as not to arouse any suspicion. Kedging is a sailor's way of moving a modest size sailboat when there is no wind by dropping the anchor, or rock in this case, a distance from the boat and then pulling the boat towards the anchor.

They figured out how to get into the cabin, started the engine, and set a course south southwest to make sure they cleared the Monterey Peninsula. They were off on their long dreamed of adventure... in a stolen boat.

After several hours they turned off the engine and hoisted the sails. With the early morning light there was no land in sight and the seas were calm. The three boys had some mixed feelings of exuberance and nostalgia, but agreed that there was no turning back now.

They spent much of their first day at sea exploring their new home and discovered additional cans of food, and a critical instrument, a taffrail log, which they could trail behind the boat to keep track of how far they had traveled. This is important to know when there are no road signs.

The ketch was well outfitted with two heads (toilets), bunks, a galley, and extra sails. After two exciting but tiring days at sea getting things worked out, they settled down to schedules of two hours each at the helm and then four hours off. This all seems pretty impressive for three teen-age boys who may have never sailed a boat before, never been out to sea much beyond the municipal wharf, and didn't have any of today's conveniences like satellite navigation.

The calm weather didn't last long, however, as they soon ran into their first storm. This is a time when inexperience could quickly lead to disaster. But from their Sea Scout experience and reading they learned enough to lower all of the sails except one small jib, and even to rig a sea anchor to hold them into the wind. They responded well under pressure to their first challenge.

As is often the case with one's first sailing experience, however, James Henniger got terribly seasick, which left Bill Grace and Bud Tara to split the watches. Again, these young boys were either mature beyond their years, lucky, or some combination of the two. There are literally thousands of stories of boats lost at sea

or crashed on some rocky coast, even today with all of our weather maps, radar and sonar, ship to shore radios, satellite navigation and other modern instruments.

On May 26, two days after their late night departure, the Santa Cruz Sentinel carried a short story with the headline: “Coast Guard Asked to Look for Lost Trio”. Some local fishermen had reported seeing the two small boats a short distance offshore two nights earlier, one with a sail, apparently heading out to sea. There was no mention of the missing 52-foot sailboat, however.

By the next day more headlines appeared in other papers, including the San Francisco Examiner, which made the connection between the boys and the missing boat: “Ocean Scoured for SC Yacht”; “Three Schoolboys Seize Yacht”; “No Trace of Missing Yacht, Crew”. Bill, Bud and James, however, unaware of the search by the Coast Guard and Navy, continued on their southerly course.