

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

#249 November 12, 2017

Pirates of the Pacific



newspaper photograph of the three young boys on the stolen boat from 1938

Oblivious of the search underway back in Monterey Bay for them and the boat, Bill Grace, Bud Tara and James Henniger continued sailing towards paradise. They set a southerly course initially, well offshore to avoid running aground in the dark but also to avoid any detection by authorities that might be lurking about.

During the daylight hours they began to shift their course slightly to get closer to shore in order to see if they could locate themselves by finding identifiable landmarks on their nautical charts. They passed sand dunes and some low mountains, but when they saw waves breaking on the beach they shifted their

course to get a bit farther offshore for safety. Dragging a lure they were able to catch a tuna, which was their first fresh fish dinner.

After a number of days of sailing they were soon able to identify Cape San Lazaro, along the coast of Baja California, just north of Magdalena Bay, and about 600 miles south of the border. They had now amazingly navigated nearly a thousand miles since they left Santa Cruz without any mishaps. The boys sailed *Tira* into a picturesque bay, anchored the boat and made their first landfall.

About 20 miles further south they entered Magdalena Bay and followed the eastern shoreline of Santa Margarita Island, which forms the outer edge of the bay. They first came to a small fishing village and then sighted a wharf a few miles beyond where they decided to tie up.

As luck would have it, they soon discovered that it was a small military outpost. Although the boys had found the boat's papers, the soldiers didn't understand what to do with them. Fortunately, no problems arose in this first encounter with the law, as news of the stolen boat hadn't reached this remote island.

They bought some cookies at a small shop and then asked the villagers if the outlet to the sea at the south end of the island was safe for their boat. There was a narrow channel between two sand spits but safe passage was dependent upon tide, wave and current conditions. I'm not sure here whether the language being used was English or Spanish, but the boys understood that some boats did use it.

They decided to sail southward rather than retracing their course. Unfortunately, the large-scale nautical charts onboard didn't provide adequate information for the

channel, and while they were trying to follow deeper water, they ended up running aground as the tide dropped- their first serious mishap.

With the tide at its lowest point, the *Tira* was virtually resting on its side, which allowed Paul and James to wade ashore to explore. A second mishap was coming up quickly, however. Bud yelled that there was a large hammerhead shark between them and the boat, which gave him an excuse to use the .22 rifle they had brought along.

At the lowest tide, they managed to drag an anchor out to deeper water and the next morning when the tide had risen, they were able to use the anchor windlass to pull the sailboat off the sandbar. These boys were clearly proving to be self-sufficient and capable of taking care of themselves.

They retraced their course back to the open sea at the north end of Santa Margarita Island, cleared the coast, and set a course south along the coast until they reached Cabo San Lucas at the southern tip of Baja California. They had now traveled about 1300 miles since leaving Santa Cruz.

The trio headed southeast across the entrance to the Gulf of California and towards the mainland of Mexico, 350 miles away. They began to encounter fishing boats, and also caught some fish of their own to supplement their canned food rations.

This story brought back memories of a similar sailing adventure 24 years later. In December of 1962, I was on a sailboat following the opposite course of the *Tira*. We had picked up (but not stolen) a 50-foot racing sloop that was anchored in La

Paz, about 165 miles north of the tip of Baja on the Gulf side, and were to sail it to Santa Barbara.

Sailing south in the Sea of Cortez from La Paz to Cabo San Lucas was an easy and calm run, but once we turned the corner and got out into the open Pacific conditions changed quickly. We hit rough seas and were heading directly into a strong wind. We powered most of the way back to San Diego with some interesting adventures along the way. But we were using the same nautical charts that the pirate boys used 24 years earlier and the same taffrail log to keep track of how far we had sailed.