Our Ocean Backyard

Gary Griggs

Article No. 385

Failures at Seacliff

The first three weeks of January could accurately be called the perfect storm. Four forces combined to essentially recreate the conditions of the destructive winter of 1983, now 40 years later. Nine atmospheric rivers brought concentrated precipitation with strong onshore winds; very large waves (up to 28 feet in height measured offshore) smacked the coast in the first week of January, hitting the bluffs and beaches head on; and this happened during some very high tides. Historically, the greatest storm damage along the central coast shoreline has consistently occurred when large waves coincided with very high tides.

Damage in early January was serious along West Cliff, but major impacts were also inflicted on Capitola, Seacliff and Rio Del Mar. While West Cliff Drive sits atop a 20 to 40-foot-high bluff, Capitola, Seacliff State Beach and the Esplanade and Beach Drive in Rio Del Mar are within a few feet of sea level, virtually on the sand, which the Pacific Ocean has pointed out repeatedly over the years.

Much has been written over the past week or so about the nearly complete demise of the once somewhat majestic *SS Palo Alto*, one of several ships constructed of concrete at the end of World War I, and the collapse of its former connecting pier. Seacliff State Beach also has a repeated history of storm damage.

Going way back in time, in 1821 when Mexico gained independence from Spain, much of southern and central California was divided up into Mexican land grants to many of the families living here at the time. These were big land grants; big like thousands of acres. The area occupied by Seacliff State Beach was part of the Rancho Aptos grant to Rafael Castro in 1833. Castro worked with another major player living here at the time, Claus Spreckels, to build the Castro-Spreckels wharf. This soon became a successful shipping port, exporting redwood lumber and importing sugar from Hawai’i. It didn’t last long, however, and was destroyed by a storm in the 1880s within a few years of its construction.

In the 1850s, Thomas Fallon, a legendary and controversial Irish-born, Canadian-raised, California politician, acquired part of the beach and turned it into a resort. He named this new resort "New Brighton", in honor of his favorite seaside resort in England. How people like Fallon and Spreckels happened to find their way to Monterey Bay over 175 years ago always amazes me. Fallon at age 18 joined John C. Fremont’s third expedition to California and actually visited Santa Cruz in 1846. He returned after serving in the Mexican-American War to start some businesses and acquire land here.

In the 1920s, after Claus Spreckels' death, sections of the beach were developed into the Seacliff Park and the Rio Del Mar Country Club with grandiose plans for the future. In early 1926 - without any Coastal Commission approval - fill was placed on the beach for a parking lot, and construction was begun on a curved-face concrete seawall supported on concrete and timber pilings, which extended for about 2,200 feet along the shoreline. This first wall was about 60-70 feet seaward of the present timber bulkhead.

Storms in February of 1926 overtopped the new wall, however, which had not been backfilled yet. By mid-February the wall was described as “considerably damaged” at the middle and both ends and 350 feet of the wall had collapsed. During a southwesterly storm in mid-February of 1927, the remainder of this first timber wall was destroyed.

In 1930, the first California state grant for preserving land was awarded for the beach and, in 1931, Seacliff became a state beach. That same year a Wakefield-type timber bulkhead (where timbers are placed vertically) was constructed extending for 2,900 feet along the shoreline. This 2nd attempt was slightly landward of the first wall, but still about 50 feet seaward of the today’s timber bulkhead. The shoreline here is deceiving with a nice wide summer beach, but a beach which typically is eroded back during severe winter storms, all the way to the base of the bluff if there was nothing in the way.

Waves from the southwest on December 9-10 of that same year destroyed a portion of the new second wall. A little over two weeks later, on December 26, waves from the southwest and then northwest wrecked a concession building and bathing pavilion and more of the new seawall was toppled. Portions of this old Wakefield wall can be seen at low tides today or when the beach has been eroded in the winter months.

Reports in 1938 indicate that the timber bulkhead was in very poor repair and that additional portions of the wall had been damaged by wave overtopping. Three new sections totaling 2,700 feet in length were built at the west and east ends of the earlier wall in 1938. Five gaping holes were noted in the old bulkhead in January 1940, and there had also been loss of pilings and the planks between them as well as collapse of portions of the parking lot.

In August 1940, a third Seacliff timber bulkhead was built, consisting of horizontal 2x12 inch planks or lagging nailed onto wooden pilings that were eight feet apart. Five months later a severe storm again hit the shoreline here. Large logs were thrown over the timber wall and the beach was eroded back 75-80 feet leaving remnants of the bulkhead well seaward of the new shoreline. Much of the eastern and western ends of the older wall were destroyed. The newer August wall survived about five months until January 8-13, 1941, when waves from the southwest eroded the beach to bedrock and destroyed half of the remaining timber bulkhead, less than six months after completion.

There are still almost 75 more years of history to cover but this will need to wait for two weeks.