Our Ocean Backyard

Gary Griggs

Article No. 388

A Club on the Beach at Rio Del Mar

The warm summer days and wide sandy beach at Rio Del Mar attracted several entrepreneurs who saw opportunity during the Great Depression. Shortly after the original developers of Seacliff relinquished their beach to the state of California in 1931 following failure of the first seawalls, several of the investors had a plan to expand the Rio Del Mar Hotel and Country Club on the bluff. When prohibition was repealed in late 1933, plans were developed to expand the hotel, add a casino and build a beach club on the shoreline below.

The brother-in-law of one of the developers was a San Francisco architect who was brought in to make the Rio Del Mar Beach Club a reality. The original concept was for a two-story structure, something like the country club on the bluff, with lodging upstairs. This idea evolved on the architect’s drawing board, however, to a modern, art-deco design, quite different from the country club.

In September of 1935, the vegetation on the back beach was cleared by workers and a team of horses was used to level the site. Beach Drive was then moved inland so the new beach club was closer to the shoreline, providing easy access to the beach. The original cost estimate for construction was $40,000, which quickly rose to $80,000, roughly $1.8 million in 2022 dollars.

The Beach Club was built about four feet above the sand on a six-inch thick concrete platform resting on concrete piers. The foundation was advertised as “impervious to wind or wave”, which is difficult to guarantee when building on the beach. The Club included indoor and outdoor dining rooms, a bar, lobby, kitchen, 400 lockers, a large shower room, a heating plant and employee’s rooms. The furnishing were first class and attractive, inside and out, eagerly awaiting the first big winter storm.

The surrounding grounds were landscaped with full grown plants which had been moved from the Rio Del Mar hotel grounds on the bluff above in order to make room for new additions. One of the original palms, a little worn now, still survives today adjacent to the bathroom at Platforms.

The Beach Club had 1,000-foot beach frontage and the developers intended to provide every type of beach recreational facility, with the portion of the beach in front of the club built up for volleyball and badminton courts. There was even a door man who greeted guests to make sure they were members. Staff also included a chef, a bartender, a number of beach boys to serve the guests, and a masseur in the locker rooms. You could get a full Swedish massage for just a dollar.

The Rio Del Mar Beach Club officially opened for the season on February 22, 1937, and this became the annual opening date. The beach was advertised as “the cleanest and safest on the Monterey Bay. It is clear of kelp and seaweed. There is no riptide or undertow and the sands are kept as clean as a scoured floor”, and “government statistics show that this section of beach is one of the two safest beaches on the Pacific coast.” It’s not clear where these claims came from, but they were apparently intended to attract members. There was also a lifeguard on duty when the club was open.

It turns out that these claims were a little too bold. In February of 1938, just 12 months following opening, a pile of seaweed four feet high had accumulated directly in front of the club while there was very little seaweed elsewhere on the beach. A large amount of driftwood had also built up on the sand (this sounds familiar) that had to be removed before summer visitors arrived. The claims of a safe beach also came into question in April when three swimmers in trouble has to be pulled from the waves. To make the incident a bit worse, two swimmers trying to rescue the three others were themselves exhausted and had to be assisted from the water.

In January 1939, large waves at high tide washed across Beach Drive, piling sand up on the Club’s concrete deck and washing out some of the landscaping. Just a year later, in January 1940, high waves took out more of the plants but there was no damage to the Club building itself, yet. Large waves nine months later, however, sent water under the Beach Club and over the retaining wall onto Beach Drive. Things got worse in December when waves washed completely around the beach club. The beach was covered with logs and the concrete foundation and pilings were completely exposed to the waves, which closed the club for the winter. Newspaper accounts from December 26-27, 1940, reported that damage during that storm was also severe just upcoast at Seacliff. Large logs were tossed onto the road, buildings were damaged, and 80 feet of the state park was lost as two sections of the timber bulkhead were ripped out by waves.

During the World War II years, the Beach Club became a barracks for the U.S. Coast Guard and it never fully recovered to its former grandeur. In 1955, the State of California purchased it and added it to Seacliff State Beach as the Rio Del Mar unit. The main building was removed and reportedly relocated and given to a local nursing home. The remaining locker rooms and bathrooms were kept as a comfort station until 1966 when they were torn down. The bathrooms there today were built in 1980 on a portion of the remaining original concrete platform from the 1930s.

I am indebted to John Hibble of the Aptos History Museum for much of this history.

The developers of Rio Del Mar had grand dreams but all that remains are shadows of former grandeur and wonderful memories. John Hibble