Our Ocean Backyard

Column No. 409

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The Great Chase

The local desire for a protected small-boat harbor to serve the existing fishing fleet and prospective recreational vessels in Santa Cruz on a year-round basis culminated in the construction of the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor by the Army Corps of Engineers between 1962 and 1964. One very large uncertainty remained in the mind of the Corps as they undertook this project – how much littoral drift or sand is transported yearly along this stretch of shoreline that would be trapped by the planned harbor jetties?

Based on some very limited study, the Corps estimated that the average volume of sand moving along Seabright Beach was somewhere between 25,000 and 300,000 cubic yards per year. In practical terms, this amounts to somewhere between 2,500 and 30,000 dump truck loads each year. For a visual reference, this would be somewhere between 7 and 82 dump trucks filled with sand every day driving along the beach. This is obviously a huge difference, and akin to taking a group of your friends out and treating them to dinner and saying, I have somewhere between $25 and $300 in my pocket, but go ahead and enjoy yourselves.

The Corps chose to proceed with this uncertainty and to wait and see. Their report stated if the larger volume was reached that downcoast beach erosion would be rapid and continuous followed by bluff recession, and that the possible harmful effects of jetty construction could be offset initially by depositing sediment dredged from the harbor on the downcoast beach (Twin Lakes beach).

In the first two years following jetty construction, about 600,000 cubic yards of littoral sand accumulated against the west jetty and then began to move into the harbor entrance channel. In other words, the Corps’ highest estimate was reached in those first two years. This led to a very significant widening of Seabright Beach, a sanded harbor entrance channel that required regular dredging, and the erosion of downcoast beaches, all the way to Capitola where their beach disappeared about two years later.

As of 2020, a total of 19,244,000 cubic yards of sand had been dredged from the harbor. This is enough sand to fill a line of ten cubic-yard dump trucks over 7,290 miles long long. A little hard to envision, but this line of trucks would stretch bumper to bumper from San Francisco to New York City, then back to San Francisco and then to Denver. In short, a lot of sand and a constant annoyance and very significant cost to the harbor over the 59 years since its completion.

As littoral drift moves the sand into the harbor from Seabright Beach, it creates a seasonal sand bar in the entrance channel. This shoaling or shallowing of the channel can produce hazardous conditions for boaters during large waves, and there have been more than a few accidents as boaters try to race into the harbor during a lull in the waves. This is one thing for a large powerboat, but far more difficult for a sailboat, and can be a treacherous crossing for either.

Another effect of the sandbar has been to produce an excellent right-hand breaking wave under the right conditions. This wasn’t lost on the local surfers in the early years who surfed the harbor mouth whenever it broke well. In the mid 1970s, when the sandbar was in its prime, surfers and boaters had differing opinions on how the channel should be best used. Not unexpectedly, however, this almost immediately produced a conflict with a narrow and shallow channel, waves breaking across the entrance, boats coming in and out, maybe a dredge working, and surfers trying to navigate the waves and vessels. This quickly became a major concern for the Harbormaster and all of the harbor crew, who have a primary concern with safety in and around the harbor. There have been four fatalities in the entrance over the years. Finally, in the winter of 1977, then Santa Cruz Harbormaster Brian Foss made it clear that surfing in the harbor was forbidden and began citing surfers who didn’t comply. This decision was all about safety and not about punishing surfers.

But surfers are an independent group of individuals and there was a group at that time, almost 50 years ago now, who weren’t about to let a perfectly good wave go to waste and saw themselves as outlaw surfers. They would find a way to get out to the harbor entrance, grab as many waves as they could before the harbor patrol boat showed up. They would then either paddle or make a run for it, or otherwise evade the authorities.

The most infamous of these outlaw surfers soon became known as Harbor Bill, and many stories and legends captured his adventures of surfing the harbor mouth and always managing to avoid capture. One of these describes how Bill paddled nearly two miles down the coast to Pleasure Point where he lost himself among the other surfers, and eventually was able to slip out of the water and run through back alleys and get home without ever getting caught.

Bill was finally discovered and cited, although apparently beat the rap in court when Surfer Magazine in 1984 did a story about his somewhat illegal adventures. In the now famous article, Harbor Bill’s last name was printed….Mulcoy. From there it just took a little detective work to find him. The rest of that episode is local history.

Bill’s son, Josh Mulcoy, grew up under the tutelage of his father, who taught him respect for the ocean and how to ride. Josh learned to surf in Santa Cruz but has since traveled the world searching out the best, remote waves he can find. Josh has surfed professionally for the last 18 years and has been a professional kite-surfer for the last nine.

All this brings me back to an outlaw surfer adventure, the Great Chase, likely a story not known by too many, and I’m indebted to Bill Simpkins for bringing this history to my attention.

There were three guys surfing in the harbor entrance on an afternoon back in 1977. Brian Foss, the Harbormaster, and Steve Scheiblauer, the Deputy Harbormaster at the time, were both on duty and decided they were going to nab these guys by swimming after them. But a little background is necessary first.

Brian was a championship swimmer and won the 1962 Pac12 200-yard butterfly swimming for the University of Southern California, where he was the captain of their National Collegiate and Amateur Athletic Union team. Brian swam the 1,500-meter freestyle in the 1964 Olympic Trials and missed qualifying by a tenth of a second after swimming nearly a mile. This guy was a powerhouse swimmer. Steve Scheiblauer was no slouch in the water either. He was a standout collegiate water polo player and distance swimmer and also had spent many years lifeguarding and surfing.

Brian and Steve pulled on their wetsuits and fins and took off in pursuit of the three surfers who were paddling madly for the wharf, about 1500 yards away. At the same time, Brian and Steve instructed one of the other harbor staff to use one of their small boats to head the surfers off. As luck would have it, he couldn’t start the engine right away so the boat was a little delayed. The surfers were paddling short boards and every time they turned around, they noticed the swimmers were gaining on them.

When the chase boat and Brian and Steve finally caught up with them, they were about 200 yards east of the end of the wharf. The surfers yelled out -“Who are you guys anyway?” – being surprised that any swimmers could keep up with them for almost a mile. The great chase was an epic swim, and surfing in the channel became less and less advisable after that.