Stormy Weather

HOW OUR HARBOR COPES

By Hillary Hauser

On March 1, 1983, at ten o'clock in the morning, the beer was flowing abundantly at the Moby Dick Restaurant on Stearns Wharf. Even at that early hour, the atmosphere in the restaurant was curiously festive, like that of an odd sort of wake. In fact, the revelers were watching the predicted demise of Santa Barbara's waterfront.

A few days before, weather forecasters had spotted the storm 3,000 miles away in the Pacific. It was a southeaster, the kind of storm that plagues harbors up and down the California coast, including Santa Barbara's harbor. Coupled with an extremely high tide, this southeaster would soon be called the worst storm to hit the coast in the

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***In January 1983**, a dangerous southeaster wrecked several boats and began a season of devastation that culminated six weeks later in the record-breaking Queen's Storm.*

PHOTO BY CHUCK PLACE

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The epic storm of March 1983 churned up political turmoils and harbor problems that had existed since the harbor was built in 1926.

***The cataclysmic March 1983** storm devastated Leadbetter Beach, above, marooned the Santa Barbara Yacht Club and flooded the harbor, opposite.*

past hundred years.

As swells rolled under and over the pier, the Moby Dick Restaurant heaved and groaned. Light fixtures swayed as if a six-point earthquake were in progress, and the biggest waves bounced people in their chairs. Outside the rain-streaked windows, a froth of debris and foam boiled furiously atop the turbulent seas. Those who peered into this gray maelstrom from the restaurant windows realized that to the west the harbor was taking a terrible beating. But when they saw a jet skier pounding his way out through the surf to catch a ride at the sand bar, they cheered.

By the next morning, the results of the storm were obvious: Stearns Wharf was closed and many of its pilings lay twisted and broken. The Moby Dick Restaurant sagged precariously seaward because many of the wharf pilings that had once supported the building were missing. On the beach, spectators stumbled among wrecked boats and trash, astounded at the destruction that surrounded them.

In the harbor, things were worse: after a night of relentless pounding from the sea, Marinas Three and Four were badly mangled, the harbor parking lot was flooded and the Santa Barbara Yacht Club stood marooned between the flooded lot and the sea.

PHOTOS BY JÜRGEN HILMER

Amid the debris now trapped in the marinas, the harbor's dredge sat like a big, wounded duck without wings. The storm had robbed it of its anchor, and the sand-pumping behemoth was out of commission indefinitely.

The record-breaking storm was the final blow in a series of misfortunes that had befallen the dredge in previous weeks. The entrance to the harbor, closed since the beginning of February due to an excessive buildup of sand in the channel, had dredgers working around the clock, but without success. Throughout the month of February, equipment broke, minor storms arrived and operations closed down.

Earlier in the year, a few commercial fishermen who foresaw the possibility that their boats might become stranded inside the threatened harbor had moved their vessels to other ports. However, less cautious operators were now stuck. Because their losses were mounting at the rate of $1,000 a day, these unfortunate fishermen began railing at city council, the harbor commission, the dredge, the dredgers, the federal government, Mother Nature and the man who originally financed the harbor's construction, Max Fleischmann. But fishermen were not alone in creating an uproar; yachtsmen, live-aboards, harbor business people, seafood processors, charter-boat captains and political aspirants joined the storm of protest, too.

Indeed, the epic storm of March 1983 churned up political turmoils and harbor problems that had existed since the harbor was built in 1926. Detractors revived old criticisms of the harbor: it had been built in the wrong place and in the wrong way—

TOM TUTTLE

Record waves *crashed into the harbor at the end of the breakwater following a February 1986 storm. Inset, the day after a severe 1988 winter tempest.*

AL DANIELS

Dramatically illuminating *ocean and sky just before a downpour, lightning appears to strike an oil platform. At right, Stearns Wharf weathers a violent 1987 winter storm.*

MARK WALDRON

and possibly for the wrong reasons.

Harbor construction began in 1926 because a rich man needed a place to moor his luxury yacht. Major Max Fleischmann, inheritor of his father's yeast empire, wanted a safe anchorage for his 250-foot vessel *Haida*. Since the turn of the century, city council had been considering different locations for a harbor. Some prominent Santa Barbarans favored converting the marshy Salt Pond—now the Andree Clark Bird Refuge—to a marina at a cost of $20,000; others campaigned for a breakwater and harbor to be built west of Stearns Wharf near Castle Rock at a cost of $400,000.

In the early 1920s, the Santa Barbara Yacht Club called for a report on the best location for a harbor. The club's committee made several recommendations. Noting that prevailing currents would soon block a Castle Rock anchorage with sand, thus creating the need for constant and costly dredging, the committee concluded that the city-owned Salt Pond would be the most logical and least-expensive location at which to construct a harbor.

Max Fleischmann opposed a Salt Pond harbor simply because his huge yacht would never fit inside such an anchorage. Frustrated by the city's lack of direction and the yacht club's recommendations, Fleischmann decided to take matters into his own hands and build his own harbor.

On January 5, 1926, he presented $200,000 in government bonds to a Santa Barbara bank with instructions to turn the money over to the city after it had raised matching funds. The money would be Fleischmann's contribution to the construction of a Castle Rock breakwater. Fleischmann's attorney, Francis Price, who was also the city attorney at the time, presented the idea to city council. The council subsequently passed an ordinance that put the $200,000 bond issue before the public.

On May 4, 1927, Santa Barbara voters approved the bond issue, and with $400,000 in hand, the city commenced breakwater construction. Crews dynamited huge boulders of igneous rock from Frys Harbor on Santa Cruz Island, barged them across the channel and dumped them in a straight, 1,200-foot line parallel to West Beach. This rock wall created a detached, *riprap* breakwater, open at both ends to allow sea currents to flush through the anchorage—or so the theory went.

It wasn't long before Fleischmann decided this breakwater was inadequate to protect his yacht. He paid $250,000 to extend the breakwater another 600 feet to the east, toward Stearns Wharf. This ac-

BONNIE MUENCH

tion may have been the first of what critics have since dubbed the "Band-Aid" approach to fixing the harbor's problems.

However, citizens who watched the harbor's progress in the 1920s were blissfully unaware of what lay ahead. One reporter for the *Santa Barbara Daily News* of August 14, 1929, trumpeted the news that the harbor now presented a "striking view from the air." The newspaper story further chortled that the harbor "reminded a person of a tiny model harbor, often dreamed of and outlined by engineers and designers in their sketches of proposed improvements."

Despite such praise, Fleischmann was not happy; *Haida* still bounced around too much when rough weather hit. The major decided to enclose the marina, and he spent another $100,000 to construct a dike that connected the west end of the breakwater to the beach.

On June 30, 1930, this project was finished and the happy citizens of Santa Barbara rejoiced. The harbor, now enclosed, was really a harbor. Residents could stroll out on the breakwater and take advantage of its "comfortable benches, its drinking fountains and its wide, concrete dock, well-lighted at night."

This observation, noted by the *Daily News* on June 27, 1931, in celebration of the first birthday of the harbor, continued with the glad tidings that illustrious yachts were now visiting the area and that people without boats could "enjoy the vicarious thrill of striding their own quarterdeck, by promenading the length of the finger which reaches out into the sea."

However, this same *Daily News* reporter also noted, "An additional feature that has proved of inestimable value has been the fact that the breakwater, virtually a great groin reaching into the sea, has done much to build up the stretch of beach from State Street to Plaza del Mar."

The journalist hailed this newly created beach: "One of the finest beach stretches in Southern California has been developed along this section of the harbor shore that was formerly an unsightly, rocky waterfront. Now one finds here a broad stretch of fine and level sand leading into the surf with an easy gradual slope. The surf is negligible, providing ideal water for swimming." In further praise he wrote, "West of the breakwater another stretch of beach has been built up. This stretch has become a favorite of those who enjoy the excitement and thrill of surf bathing."

The writer of this report was actually describing, unwittingly, a chronic problem that would soon become a plague. All this "fine and level sand" that provided so much enjoyment for surf bathers in 1931 was to become an expensive headache for the city of Santa Barbara, one that has not yet gone away.

The West Beach area that the surf bathers particularly adored continued to build until the shallow-water sailing area just offshore had filled in and was unsailable. Drifting and settling sands also created a new shoal under Stearns Wharf, and this sand bar caused waves to break under-

***Picturesque clouds** over the mountains may signal impending disaster for the harbor. During storm season, commercial fishermen and harbor businesspeople scour the weather reports and prepare for the worst.*

In the harbor, storms and sand have become synonymous, and it's difficult to tell which natural occurrence is worse for the man-made enclosure.

PETER C. HOWORTH

neath the pier on stormy days.

Downstream from the harbor, in both Montecito and Carpinteria, oceanfront homeowners complained that their beaches were disappearing. The harbor, they claimed, was to blame.

Worst of all, sand eddying around the end of Fleischmann's breakwater quickly created a formidable sand bar at the harbor entrance. The sand bar, the city soon discovered, presented a mix of some good and much bad: Although the sand bar provided the harbor protection from dangerous, southeastern storms, excess sand spilling into the harbor channel from the end of the sand bar would soon clog the harbor's entrance entirely. The process is simply an oceanographic fact of nature.

Today, we continue to battle *littoral drift*, the movement of sand along a coast. Off California, currents normally transport over one million cubic yards of sand down the coast at the rate of one mile per year. Oceanographers note that all the harbors on the California coast act as traps for this sand stream; Ventura's harbor, the Channel Islands harbor and Marina del Rey are among the ocean structures that continually fight the silting problem. Santa Barbara's harbor is no exception. Currently, the federal government dredges 350,000 cubic yards of sand every year from the Santa Barbara harbor entrance at a cost of $750,000.

In the harbor, storms and sand have become almost synonymous, and it's difficult to tell which natural occurrence is worse for the man-made enclosure. Boats can bounce around inside the marinas and survive, harbor businesses along the breakwater can clean up flooding and debris from their front doors and survive, but everyone suffers if sand blocks the harbor's opening.

Although the storm season begins in September and lasts well into March, many of the most violent storms have smacked into our coast in January. During storm seasons past, commercial fishermen have watched closely the water depths and sand buildup at the harbor's entrance. Many of these fishermen carry memories of devastating storms—and the treacherous sand they brought—that battered Santa Barbara's harbor in the last fifteen years; during some of those tempests, dredging operations sat idle, ensnared in political red tape.

Until 1973, the city of Santa Barbara took care of its own harbor dredging with a year-round crew that worked 40 hours a week in the summer and 80 hours a week in the winter. Storms could come and go

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***A calm sunrise** over the breakwater and a colorful rainbow are welcome images during Santa Barbara's storm season.*

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as they pleased, but the dredgers stayed on the job.

During a fierce storm that hit Santa Barbara on January 14, 1952, Goleta turned into a "sea of mud," Carpinteria became a swamp, roads flooded everywhere and 392 people aboard the Daylight train were stranded in Santa Barbara. Nonetheless, the harbor remained open.

Again, on January 10, 1953, a storm involving extreme high tides and heavy surf brought water, debris and kelp over Leadbetter Beach to the area around the harbormaster's shack and Carter's Restaurant. But the breakwater businesspeople mopped up and continued their operations.

On January 26, 1969, Santa Barbara County experienced its wettest January since 1916. One thousand people fled their homes in Carpinteria, a woman was lost in the flood for twelve hours, Lake Cachuma spilled a sixteen-foot head of water down the Santa Ynez River and helicopters rescued 120 people from the upper Santa Ynez River. During this record-breaking tempest, the harbor didn't experience anything extraordinary. Ironically, only ten days later, on February 5, oil blackened the harbor during the infamous Union Oil blowout.

Throughout all these powerful storms, city-paid dredgers kept the harbor passable. But their successful record couldn't compete with the federal government's offer of free dredging for Santa Barbara's harbor. In 1973, the U.S. Congress passed the Harbors and Rivers Act, a piece of legislation that offered the Army Corps of Engineers' services to take over dredging of the Santa Barbara harbor and other California ports. The city sold its two dredges and sat back.

However, Santa Barbara's free ride became a problem all too soon. Every year, the city had to petition Washington for funds to dredge the channel. Often, the mayor traveled to the nation's capital and appeared before federal budget hearings to state Santa Barbara's needs. Sometimes the feds put the city on hold, even as storm season approached.

During these years, the city initiated a number of harbor-fixing projects—continuations of the "Band-Aid" approach—that did not solve the problem.

The sand bar that sits at the east end of Fleischmann's breakwater created the most troublesome predicament for the city. In 1982, the city decided to increase the protection offered by the sand bar and installed a makeshift breakwater of pilings and planks bolted across them. It was hoped that the barrier would serve a dual purpose: to further protect the harbor and to keep the sand bar's sand in place—and out of the harbor channel. The city was satisfied, but critics scoffed.

In early 1983, soon after the barrier's installation, an El Niño-related series of storms gave this new breakwater its first test. In just two days, one storm reduced the dimensions of the harbor's channel from 80 feet wide and 7.5 feet deep to a width of 50 feet and a depth of 4.5 feet. A week later, a sand bar six inches above water at zero tide closed the channel. The new barrier had provided little protection to the marinas and had failed to keep the sand bar's sand in place.

Federal dredgers did their best to clear a path for boats. But generators went haywire, cutter motors quit and the ladder on which the cutter was mounted broke. Start-up dates came and went.

By February 11, commercial fishermen were fuming publicly about their losses. Seafood processors and fish market proprietors were having to import frozen fish from the East Coast.

By late February, the dredgers were working overtime because Queen Elizabeth was coming to Santa Barbara—by ship. Fishermen fumed even more: they complained that if it were not for the queen's arrival, the dredgers would be sleeping and the harbor would remain closed until the year 2000.

On March 1, the big storm hit. The so-called Queen's Storm stripped the sand bar of all its protective sand. Turbulent surf spilled over the top of the piling-and-plank breakwater and deposited the sand inside the harbor. The mooring area behind the breakwater silted in, and the rest of the harbor lay in shambles, its entrance closed more tightly than ever. Queen Elizabeth came to Santa Barbara by airplane, and the harbor remained closed until March 23.

During this time, the harbor commission battled the city, the city battled the federal government, the fishermen battled the city, an independent researcher called for the harbor to split off from the city to form an separate harbor district, and the Harbor Preservation Task Force resurrected an old plan to build a breakwater east of Stearns Wharf. Everyone was mad at everyone else.

On March 23, the furor stopped temporarily when dredgers finally opened the channel. The city, however, continued to take a sober look at the financially and structurally broken harbor. City council created a new Waterfront Department and installed a military man as its director.

Although Paul Nefstead's tactics—including raising rents and slip fees—were unpopular, he put the crippled harbor back on its feet. (See *Santa Barbara Magazine*, May/June 1988.) Under Nefstead's reign, work crews rebuilt Marinas Three and Four and repaired the main breakwater. And he initiated a massive sand-bar reconstruction that beat the long-time problem. In addition, Nefstead arranged for commercial fishing docks to receive water and electricity, and he put the Army Corps of Engineers' dredging program back on track financially. When Nefstead retired in June 1988, he left a $2.5 million reserve fund that hadn't existed before his arrival at the harbor.

However, the most significant accomplishment of Nefstead's administration may be a Corps of Engineers study, now under way, that may result in an end to chronic harbor problems. The study may recommend that the entrance channel to the harbor be realigned, and that the bend of the breakwater by the yacht club receive an additional rock groin with a new sand bypass system. Best of all, the study may propose that the federal government provide Santa Barbara with its own dredge so that the city can dredge whenever it wants, the way it did before 1973.

Harbor workers and watchers may welcome these proposals, or they may consider new plans cautiously. With the benefit of hindsight, many Santa Barbarans may wish they had the same opportunity to examine Max Fleischmann's harbor plans. To be fair, that hindsight should also reveal that any harbor, built Max Fleischmann's way or anyone else's way, inevitably experiences silting problems.

By taking advantage of today's technological advances, perhaps we can make improvements to our harbor that will allow the storms of winter to roll in as they will—and that will give celebrants on the waterfront something other than disaster to toast. ■

Hillary Hauser covered the harbor and waterfront for the Santa Barbara News-Press *from 1981 to 1987.*