

# Pillar Point Harbor's ever-

FRIDAY March 7, 1997

# present breakwater battle

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A fierce winter storm in 1911 drove a handful of fishing boats into waves crashing below Pillar Point. The men and their boats were doomed because The Point, which sheltered fishermen from summer winds out of the northwest, offered no protection from the winter winds out of the southwest.

The frail boats were beaten to pieces as the swells poured over Pillar Point reef, and all hands were lost.

Coastsiders knew the deaths could have been prevented. What was needed was a harbor of refuge enclosed by a wall of stone extending inland from Pillar Point. Behind this breakwater, fishermen could ride out the winter storms in safety.

The concept was simple. It was building it that was difficult.

When San Mateo County voters approved a Harbor District in 1933, Coastsiders crossed their fingers and hoped that a harbor at Pillar Point would be one of the district's first projects. But once formed, the Harbor District immediately became inactive until 1948.

Coastsiders were elated when Congressman Jack Z. Anderson got funding for a harbor at Pillar Point included in a 1939, but with the threat of war, President Franklin Roosevelt vetoed the bill.

When World War II started in December of 1941, Coastsiders repackaged the need for a harbor of refuge into a need for a Naval base.

"From the standpoint of coast defense," wrote George E. Dunn, editor of the Half Moon Bay Review, "it is highly neces-

in 1945. Fishermen anchored their sardine boats 900 feet offshore and dumped their glistening catch into a huge floating hopper. The sardines were then pumped through an anchored pipeline to women waiting in the cannery to process the fish. In the peak year of 1945, fishermen poured over 800 tons of sardines into the bobbing hopper.

Offshore hoppers and collecting boats weren't the only strategies fishermen devised to fish year-round off Pillar Point. To save refueling time, a barge anchored offshore supplied them with gas, oil, ice and food.

As clever as these strategies were, fishermen still needed a safe refuge to anchor in during storms. During the winter of 1945-1946, the Coast Guard, which manned a rescue station in Princeton, "succeeded 15 fishing craft in the vicinity of Half Moon Bay with a total of 70 people aboard."

One of the 15 was the fishing-fleet supply ship Lucybell, anchored off Princeton. "When the heavy waves hit the vessel, the crew made a desperate attempt to save her," reported the Half Moon Bay Review.

"They set the water pumps and endeavored to keep the ship afloat until it hit the beach. But it sank under their feet below the Point."

In the 1950s, when it looked like the sardine boom was over, Princeton fishermen refitted their vessels and continued to bring in record catches of salmon, albacore, squid and crab.

Sardines or no, Coastsiders never stopped lobbying Congress for a harbor of refuge.

sary that a breakwater and harbor be erected at Half Moon Bay. To protect our fair nation from foreign invasion, we should build a base for navy submarines and torpedo boats." But no Navy base was built.

When the devastating April 1, 1946, tsunami flooded most of the houses in Princeton-by-the-Sea and shoved anchored fishing boats 1,000 feet inland, Dunn sent photos of the damage to Washington, D.C.

"We wouldn't have had this damage at Princeton if we had a breakwater at Pillar Point," he thundered.

It was to no avail, as the threat of war in Korea forced Congress to freeze appropriations, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers survey about the Pillar Point breakwater.

While Washington dithered, the fishing industry at Pillar Point took off.

What began in 1900 with a few fishermen living in shacks tucked below the point had by 1945 expanded to 125 fishing vessels — ranging from sardine purse seiners to crab boats, three privately owned fishing piers and a sardine cannery in Princeton. Fishermen harvested the ocean from the Golden Gate in the north to Pigeon Point in the south and west to the Farallon Islands.

The exceptionally productive waters off Pillar Point had been noted early on. "Just beyond Pillar Point is the finest fishing ground to be found anywhere along the Pacific coast," wrote a commentator in 1914.

Fishermen quickly realized that a hold full of fish was one thing but getting the catch to market was another. Only a few brave locals attempted to tie up at the exposed piers in Princeton to off load their catch. Most fishermen chose either to take the arduous boat journey to San Francisco to sell their catch or to sell it to the large collecting boats passing offshore.

Either way, fishermen lost time and profits. What they wanted was a safe harbor where they could unload the catch of the day onto waiting trucks, which would quickly speed to San Francisco markets.

With the booming sardine industry, it was a different story. The sardine catch was off loaded and processed in Princeton. A Quonset-hut sardine cannery had been built on the bluff above Denniston Creek

Finally, success.

On September 4, 1958, under a banner headline reading "Breakwater at last," Dunn rejoiced: "The Pillar Point Breakwater is now officially a reality. When work on the project begins in the next few months, a coastside dream of 47 years will finally have been realized."

Work by the Army Corps of Engineers on the two sections of the rubble-mound breakwater began in the summer of 1959. At the end of two years, and at a cost of \$5.2 million, Pillar Point had a 245-acre harbor.

But two serious problems immediately became apparent.

First, the prevailing northwesterly waves rounding Pillar Point bounced off the new breakwater and crashed upon the sandy beaches of El Granada, quickly eroding the centuries-old shoreline.

Second, winter storms out of the southwest surged through the narrow harbor opening, tearing boats from their anchorages, just as if the breakwater had never been built.

To attempt to solve the erosion problem, San Mateo County dumped tons of rip rap in the 1960s along the El Granada bluffs. To solve the surge problem, the Army Corps of Engineers installed a 1,050-foot rock arm off the west breakwater in 1967.

Neither solution worked.

The rip rap didn't stop the waves, and the bluffs eventually receded more than 150 feet from the original shoreline.

The surge problem was finally solved in 1982 when a new breaker was built within the original breakwater.

Nowadays, the inner break-

water protects the fishing fleet of Pillar Point Harbor.

"The breakwater may not work all the magic expected by the extreme optimists," Dunn wrote in 1958. "Then again it may exceed even their most fanciful visions."

*Please send story ideas to Barbara VanderWerf, Other Times, San Mateo County Times, 1080 S. Amphlett Blvd., San Mateo CA 94402.*



The west arm of the breakwater stretched 2,620 feet from Pillar Point. Together both arms used more than 800,000 tons of rock.



## TRACING PILLAR POINT: PAST TO PRESENT