

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Spud Point Marina History

by Sue Tichava - 2017

The building of Spud Point Marina in Bodega Bay harbor meanders through a maze of 52 years of bureaucracy on the county, state and federal levels. It began in 1933 and ended with the opening of the Marina in 1985. The opening was followed immediately by the collapse of the local fishing industry. In an attempt to keep it brief, a lot of material has not been included, but hopefully a picture will emerge of the tremendous effort it took to get Spud Point Marina built, and then the despair at watching the bottom fall out of the commercial fishing industry and its impact on the Marina and the Bodega Bay Community.

Commercial fishing has been the primary industry in Bodega Bay for at least 99 years, since the Smith Brothers started selling fish to Paladini, a fish marketing company in San Francisco in 1919. Sport fishing has always been popular as well and has been bringing visitors to the Sonoma coast since the 1920s. It was the dream of the earliest local fishermen to develop the inner bay to create a safe harbor in order for the fishing industry to thrive. Over the next 25 years, the inner bay was developed with wharves, small private marinas, fish processing plants, restaurants and cafes, motels, gas stations and markets to provide the necessary services to Bodega Bay residents, fishermen and visitors. These included the Smith Brothers, the Tides, Shaw's Marina (Porto Bodega), Mason's Marina, Meredith Fisheries (defunct) and Lazio Fish Company (defunct) to name just a few. Bodega Bay was also becoming a tourist and weekend destination.

In the 1930's the salmon and crab catch off Bodega Bay was one of the most plentiful in the state and commercial fishing was booming. Sonoma County administrators in Santa Rosa recognized Bodega Bay's need for development in order to foster this burgeoning fishing industry for the economic benefit of the county. The inner harbor was basically a mud flat, navigable only at high tide, and most boats anchored out



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in the bay or lined up around Campbell Cove. Many boats were often destroyed in the bay during storms because of a lack of safe moorings and no breakwater. At the height of a fishing season there could be as many as 400 commercial boats tied up in the bay.

As early as 1933 the Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce sent a letter to the State Division of Fish and Game endorsing a proposal to dredge a safe channel at the entrance to Bodega Harbor and urged them to recognize the importance of the project in the interest of the fishing industry in the county. Louis Asman, a Bodega Bay fisherman and member of the Coast Chamber of Commerce (pre Bodega Bay Chamber of Commerce) discussed the “dire necessity for provision of a channel for use of the fishing fleet in entering and leaving Bodega Bay....The continuation and very existence of the fishing industry at Bodega Bay is dependent upon a safe and sufficient channel.”

Three years later, in 1936 The North Coast Council of California State Chamber of Commerce formed a committee to gather data to present for a proposed development of the harbor at Bodega Bay, to convince the Army Corps of Engineers of the importance of the project. The members of this committee were appointed according to their interest in the project. Among it's members were Howard McCaughey, Chair, and Eli Smith representing commercial fishing interests, Frank P. Doyle would gather information on installing landing wharves, Ralph Sage was with sport fishing organizations, and A. W. Hollingwork and J.R. Gallagher would represent pleasure craft navigation. The committee's final report asked for the construction of a landing wharf and facilities for icing and packaging the catch and a channel dredged. The County's request for federal assistance was finally answered in 1938, with authorization for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to dredge a three mile channel and turning basins and to build entrance jetties to make the harbor usable by small crafts. It was partly paid for by emergency wartime appropriations and the project was completed in 1943.

The dream of a fully functioning port marina in the harbor to serve the needs of the fishing industry, which is the backbone of Bodega Bay, stayed in the hearts and souls of the local fishermen. They did not give up their dream even though, after the original dredging in 1943, development around the harbor stalled.

In 1951 the State granted 1200+ acres of Bodega Harbor tide and submerged lands in trust to Sonoma County with the condition that the harbor be substantially improved within 10 years or it would revert to the State. This produced many conflicts over tideland rentals between lessees and lessors who were trying to use the tidelands. The County was supposed to establish rental fees and other policies for tidelands use, but it never did address this issue. Some blamed it on then 5th district County Supervisor Nin Guidotti who appeared to have no interest in the harbor development.

There were no more improvements and nothing moved forward on a public marina in Bodega Bay until 1956 when the Sonoma County Planning Commission approved a master plan to develop harbors at Bodega Bay, Petaluma River and Sonoma Creek. Bodega Bay received a high priority and was the only plan authorized.

Local fishermen and their wives realized the need to get themselves organized to help their industry prosper. One of the first steps happened when the Bodega Bay Grange was organized on Feb. 28 1952 with a membership of 115. Officers were Roy Fought, Dusty Rhodes, Mrs. Clarence Steen, Paul Wedel, Emil Valena, Mrs. Vernot Ginrich, Glenice Carpenter and Shirley Ames.

The Grange was now part of a national organization through which it would have a political voice in matters pertaining to the harvest of the ocean and the need to improve the economic conditions of the fishing industry. It was the 4th fishing grange organized on the Coast.

In May of 1952, a meeting was held at Roy Faught's boat shop attended by some 25 local fishermen. They voted on three actions that needed to be taken in order for them to make a living. "1) dredging the channel as soon as possible, 2) establishing protective tariffs to protect local fishermen from all competitive imports of fish, 3) demanding an immediate investigation of apparent price-fixing by dealers." Recently several fishermen had been prosecuted by the federal government for violating the Sherman Anti-Trust Act

The Bodega Bay Grange was founded in defiance of the McCarthy-era House Un-American Activities Committee, which had declared the local fisherman's association an "un-American union." The association appealed to the National Grange for membership as "fishermen of the sea."

Not only has the Bodega Bay Grange been instrumental in fostering the development of the harbor and the fishing industry it is also a community service organization and has contributed to the Bodega Bay community as a whole in many ways. In 1953, the year after it was formed, they held the first Grange Cioppino Crab Dinner as a community fundraiser. It continues today as an annual event, and provides funding for local high school student scholarships.



In 1959, the fishing community was galvanized into more action. Ray Carpenter worked to get Bodega Bay it's own Chamber of Commerce to serve Bodega, Bodega Bay, and Valley Ford. It's first members included in addition to Carpenter, James Respini, Henry Dinucci, Roy Fought Jr, Ray Ruebel and O.F. Parker. In 1960 Earl Carpenter, Ray's son, helped found the Bodega Bay Fishermen's Marketing Association.

Around 1960, developing the harbor got complicated, mired down in political, environmental, and bureaucratic policies involving multiple local, state and federal agencies, who sometimes seemed to be working against each other. Progress was at a crawl, with activity parsed about 10 years.

For the next 20 years, the project was tied up in a series of Catch-22s that prevented the project from being funded and built. In 1960 the County adopted a Revised Master Plan for Development of Bodega Harbor. In 1970 a feasibility study was funded by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) to study the employment opportunities in commercial and sports fishing in Bodega Bay. The results of the study recommended building a marina with 200 berths and associated services to meet the current (1970) and future needs of fishermen in Bodega Bay. Here is the first Catch-22. In 1970 there was no sewer system nor adequate water supply around the bay. Up until this time, raw sewage was dumped right into the bay. This was solved with the development and building of Bodega Harbour Estates. The developers were required to put in a sewer system and expand both water and sewer hookups to include the harbor and Bodega Head.

In 1976 County Supervisors applied as lead agency for State and Federal funds to construct a \$4.7 million small craft commercial harbor at Bodega Bay. In 1977 President Carter approved \$100,000 in funds to study 14 small craft harbors in California and Bodega Bay was one of them. In 1978 Gov. Edmund Brown approved construction of Spud Point Marina for commercial and sports fishing berths. Second Catch-22: the new Marina must include pleasure crafts in order to get funds from the State Department of Navigation and Ocean Development. Under (then) current law, the California Coastal Commission could not permit harbor expansion unless it was exclusively for commercial boats. This required a bill in the State Assembly

(AB 2855 introduced by Assemblyman Barry Keene to amend the Coastal Act to allow Spud Point to be developed. It passed.

In 1979 funds were again jeopardized when the State Boating and Waterways Commission raised the interest rates on harbor projects. Berthing rates would have to be raised. In 1980 The Commission did approve a \$60,000 planning loan for environmental studies regarding dredging spoils, and the EIR was approved which cleared the path to apply for a construction loan.

Catch-22 number three: what to do with dredging spoils. Not only would there be the dredging spoils from the project, but the channel was (is) on an 11 year schedule for maintenance dredging. Up until this time, the dredging spoils were dumped around the bay at various sites on shore. In 1980 the North Central Coast Commission gave its approval for the marina to be built, but they required a feasibility report on off-shore dumping sites. The County did not comply and continued dumping the dredging spoils on-shore. It was not until the 2004 dredging that the issue was resolved and the spoils were approved for off-shore dumping in a San Francisco Deep Ocean Disposal Site Spud Point Marina was finally built and opened in 1985 at the cost of \$8 million, financed by State and federal grants.



Local families were involved with this long long process. During the actual building of the Marina, in the early 1980s, Hazel Mitchell, Bodega Bay's first realtor and Donna Freeman joined forces to promote the development and earned the name of the Dynamic Duo from Gaye LaBaron.

Catch-22 number four: Spud Point Marina has never been able to pay its bills. Since 1985 it has been under threat to be taken over by the State. In 1987 the future looked rosy for the Marina but that was soon to change as the west coast fisheries began it's monumental decline from which it still hasn't recovered.

By 1989 the Marina had a budget deficit and the salmon season was poor. In 1990 the Marina had to raise its berthing fees, and by 1994 Spud Point was \$8 million in debt and the State wanted to take over title to the Marina. By 1997 the debt had risen to \$11 million. In 2000 a new business plan for the operation of Spud Point Marina was introduced but the County rejected the plan, claiming that even when berths were full and they were selling ice and fuel, the Marina still couldn't pay it's monthly bills and state loan obligations. By the 1990's the fishing industry had shrunk because of drought, poor seasons and new restrictions to protect fish populations, and the County refused to underwrite the operation. In 1998, California suspended interest on the (then) \$12 million loan.

In 2007 Spud Point Marina and the State Department of Boating & Waterways finalized a settlement agreement, by which the State agreed to a one-time payment and 15 annual payments. Today, 2018, Sonoma County Regional Parks manages not only Spud Point Marina, Doran and Westside parks and campgrounds, but in 2012 it took over Mason's Marina and the Sport Fishing Center at Porto Bodega. Last year (2017) The United States Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) paid \$4.285 million for maintenance dredging of the interior channel of Bodega Bay. The Marina continues to be in debt. The future is unknown for the Marina and the County is still undecided what to do to with this gem of Bodega Harbor. The newest Catch-22 is to how make Spud Point and Mason's Marinas pay for themselves without jeopardizing the fragile environment by permitting and promoting tourism, growth and development around the harbor and Sonoma coast. Is there a new dream for the future of Bodega Bay?