

# RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Bodega Bay's Legacy of Fishing, Resilience and Community

Needing to raise money, in 1958 for their newly built volunteer fire house, the people of Bodega Bay began the annual festival first called "Discovery Day". Held in October, the festival honored the



memory of Lieutenant Juan de Bodega y Quadra who, sailing down the coast from Sitka, Alaska in his tiny sloop the Sonora, thought he had found San Francisco Bay, which had not yet been entered by water. He learned, on October 3, 1775 that instead, he had discovered a smaller, but also beautiful harbor on what is now the Bodega Bay Coast. Discovery Day featured carnival rides, including a Ferris Wheel and a Merry-Go-Round, at Doran Park; the Old Adobe Antique Car Club came out to the airfield; the Tomales High School band performed; and Saturday night there was a Dime-A-Dip Potluck supper at the Grange, followed by fireworks and a dance, featuring music from the likes of Gene Carter's five-piece orchestra, a San Francisco combo. The highlight of Discovery Day was the boat parade around the inner harbor.

**At the first "Discovery Days" celebration, some 17 festively decorated boats participated in the parade.** The parade was appropriately led by Eddie, William, and Steve Smith, members from the local Smith Brothers family, who began the commercial fishing industry in Bodega Bay in the 1920s. As the beautifully decorated boats made their way

around the harbor, they passed a stand where they were blessed in a short religious ceremony. Local fisherwoman Mary Darling spearheaded Discovery Day's committee until she became pregnant with her first child, and thus the event was discontinued after the 1964 festival.

The festival resumed in 1974 under the auspices of the Bodega Bay Chamber of Commerce. The date was moved to the beginning of the salmon season in recognition of Bodega Bay's hard working fishing industry, and the name was changed to the "Fisherman's Festival".

The Volunteer Fire Department continued to be a festival beneficiary, and in 1975 the community formed its own ambulance service, the "Bodega Bay Area Rescue", so it too received money from Fish Fest (as the festival is called by locals).





## FISHERMAN'S FESTIVAL

The theme for each coming year was chosen by the Fisherman's Auxiliary\* at its Golden Hook award ceremony in November. Themes have included "Mariner's Mardi Gras" (1981), "Adios El Nino" (1984), "Salmon-Chanted Evening" (1992), and the somewhat controversial "Golden Hooker's on Parade" (1996).

For over twenty years, the festivals were spread throughout the town, with the newly renovated Yacht Club the center of much activity, and fish and chips served at the Grange. There were foot races, kite flying contests, a Saturday night dance at the Grange, a juried art show, a "White Whale sale," and a crafts fair. Clown Lagoon was for children, where they played games, got their faces painted, and looked at cuddly animals.

During the early years of Fish Fest, there was the "bathtub regatta" with "bathtubs" of all varieties, from contraptions made of milk cartons to real bathtubs. Later, that event became the "Wooden Boat Challenge", where groups have a limited amount of time to build a boat with hand tools and materials provided by organizers, which they then have to float and race. Throughout, the Coast Guard has stood by, as not all vessels were sea-worthy.

As with Discovery Day, the highlight of Fish Fest was, and still is, the Boat Parade and Blessing of the Fleet. Decorated fishing boats sail around the bay and out of the harbor to the outer bay off Doran Park. There, a bugler plays Taps as a wreath is cast into the sea to honor those who died wrestling a





## FISHERMAN'S FESTIVAL



living from the sea. Then the boat carrying the clergy stations itself at the entrance to the harbor so each boat can be individually blessed as it sails back in.

For decades, vessels decorated in the theme of the year paraded past a reviewing stand of judges, and prizes were awarded to the best decorated boats.

Music has always been a part of Fish Fest, starting with high school bands and the Sonoma County Sheriff's Bagpipe Band. By 2002, there was a full line up of music both days across a variety of genres, such as Celtic music, folk-rock, jazz, county rock, swing, and blues.

1997 was the first year that Fish Fest charged an admission fee, \$3. Discouraged that in 1996 they had grossed \$60,000 but only had \$17,000 left to distribute, festival organizers saw an admission fee as a money maker. Park rangers were pleased with the plan to charge admission, as the park would receive a percentage of ticket sales, and alcohol sales and consumption were easier to monitor when the area is fenced. Thereafter, all festival activities were consolidated to West Side Park, except the art show continued at the Yacht Club for several more years. The admission fees dramatically increased net proceeds, and the community was happy.

The 25 year alliance between the Bodega Bay Chamber of Commerce and Fish Fest organizers ended in 2000 due to liability insurance and tax concerns. Fish Fest then formed its own non-profit organization. The net proceeds of Fish Fest have always stayed in the community. As the amount of money to distribute has grown, so have the number of local non-profits seeking money.

“Over time, it’s kind of turned into community fun,” said Josh Perucchi, a Petaluma Firefighter. “We still celebrate commercial fishermen, but it’s really become a major community event to support local non-profits. Last year (2024), we made about \$90,000, which we distributed to about 20 different organizations overall.”

Volunteers are the heart and sole of Fish Fest. Each year dozens of committee chair persons oversee the set up and supplying of Fish Fest, and hundreds of volunteers show up on the days of the event to sell tickets, fry fish, paint faces, pick up trash ... whatever it takes to put on a great party and help the Bodega Bay community prosper.

Be sure to come celebrate this year’s Annual Fisherman’s Festival, on May 3rd & 4th, 2025 in Bodega Bay! ([www.bbfishfest.org](http://www.bbfishfest.org))

\*Editor’s note: Fisherman’s auxiliaries were in most ports on the coast, from Mexican border to Alaska. An auxiliary group known as the *Fishermen’s Wives Coalition* later became the *Fishing Women’s Coalition* to include women that weren’t wives. The Coalition held annual meetings in rotating port locations. *Andrea Granahan published the Bodega Bay Navigator, a publication that still exists today as the Coast Navigator* She reported on the meetings because it almost always led to legislation. They were big on safety and stayed on top of any laws that could affect safety.

With good reason, at one meeting a new president had to be elected because unfortunately the current one drowned on her Alaskan fishing boat. Fishing is dangerous work. - *Robin Rudderow* ■