

# Alex W. Pape

## Legendary Oarsman

By Richard Cooper, 2015

**PAPE, Alexander W., athlete, succumbed today, August 4, 1928, following a short illness.**

This is the story of one of our club's early heroes. In his youth Alex Pape was a strong swimmer and water polo player for the Olympic Club, San Francisco. He joined the Dolphin Swimming and Boating Club on November 11, 1896 to try rough-water swimming and his newest interest, rowing. Wearing Dolphin Club white and blue colors he quickly became a West Coast rowing champion. In later years Alex became equally respected as a coach, referee, benefactor of aquatic sports, and the best open-water swimming pilot of his era.

Alexander William Pape was born January 13, 1873 in San Francisco. His parents were natives of Hanover, Germany, who came to America and married in San Francisco in 1868. Alex grew up with two older brothers who would also excel in their own right. His life would be forged by the 1906 earthquake, the 1915 Pan Pacific Exposition, a horrific World War, and a terrifying flu epidemic.

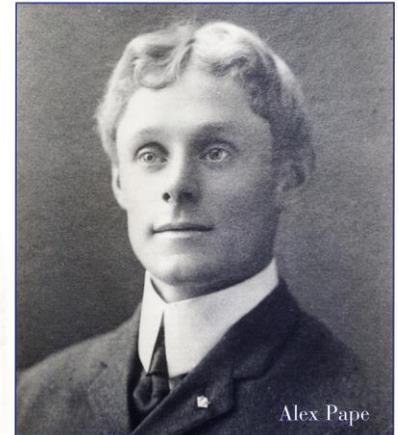
Locals first learned about Alex, a teenager, when he swam out and

around Alcatraz Island. Soon he became passionate about competitive rowing, one of the most popular sports worldwide. The Dolphin Club raced against five San Francisco rowing clubs plus others from Alameda and around the Bay Area. Moreover, there were rowing regattas up and down the West Coast from Astoria, Oregon, to San Diego. The Pacific Association of Amateur Oarsmen (PAAO) oversaw the sport until the 1950's.

Conditions today are no different than described in the article "Rowing on San Francisco Bay" published in the magazine *Outing*, Vol. XXXV, Issue 6, March 1900. Here are excerpts: "Although being very popular, rowing is greatly affected by peculiar local conditions. San Francisco summer is the most blustering, windy season of the year. When strong westerly winds meet an outgoing tide the sea quickly becomes rough and choppy. Tides and currents are tricky. Hence the racing boats employed on the Bay are wooden lapstreak, open boats, called outriggered skiffs. Lapstreak in-rigged

### DOLPHIN LOG

Fall 2004



Alex Pape

"barges" with sliding seats are also raced with four-oared crew and coxswain. Regattas are held at Long Bridge at the foot of Third Street in the city and at El Campo (Paradise Park) in Marin County. Calmer venues such as Lake Merritt and the Oakland estuary allow the use of lighter, faster shells."

Alex Pape won his first local race on February 16, 1897, in an outriggered skiff. That year he would stay undefeated in the series of multi-club regattas. In 1898 Alex continued his winning streak in skiffs and also in shells. Moreover, his powerful stroke propelled the Dolphins to their first Junior Barge victory in 14 years. Also, in 1898 the Bay Area clubs journeyed to Astoria on the Columbia River to compete against crews from the Northwest and British Columbia. Alex Pape came home as outriggered skiff champion, although the Northern crews rarely raced skiffs.

There is a racing skiff built about 1900 on display in Sausalito, Friends of the Library, City Hall.



ALEX W. PAPE, OUTRIGGERED SKIFF CHAMPION.

Pape continued to dominate opponents in 1899, and in December the PAAO presented a silver trophy to Alex for being single shell champion for two years. That same year Alex commissioned a racing shell from Al Rogers who had built the handsome six-oared barge, the John Wieland, in 1887 which is still the pride of the Dolphin Club fleet in 2015. For wooden boat purists, here is the description printed with photos in the *San Francisco Call*, August 4, 1900, page 5:

*After being outrigger-skiff champion for two years, Alex W. Pape of the Dolphin and Olympic clubs has become the owner of the most beautiful shell ever built on this coast. It is of Spanish cedar, one-fourteenth of an inch in thickness. Her outriggers are of galvanized iron, red enameled, and all the fittings are nickel-plated. This shell was built by Al Rogers, the boat-builder of Alameda Point, and cost \$175. To give her stability she has a fin of brass which makes her a very seaworthy craft. The decks fore and aft are of Irish linen, oiled and varnished. The sides were specially constructed by Rogers. Alex Pape brought the shell over from Alameda last Sunday on the ferry-boat and put her into the water near the ferry slip. He then pulled along the water front, and, though the weather was rough and the craft shipped a deal of water, she baled herself and came through splendidly.*

*This is more than an extraordinary shell. It has been in process of construction for a period of time extending over a year. Every joint, every fastening, every seam, has gone over again and again, until today it stands as a model piece of work. The oarsmen who have seen Pape's new shell pronounced it the very finest ever afloat on Pacific Coast waters.*

The Dolphin Club and other Bay Area crews returned to Astoria, Oregon, in August of 1900. Alex Pape would win the single shell contest in great fashion. He was finally recognized by all as the Pacific Coast racing shell champion.

By 1902 Pape was still undefeated and outclassing his opponents. He was easily the best amateur in the West. Speculation about him turning professional first began in 1899. Now he found himself considering a challenge from the famous Henry C. Peterson (an Honorary Dolphin) to race a three mile course for a prize of \$4000

and a percentage of the gate. He suppressed this temptation with a new goal to win a national amateur title.

In May 1903 Alex Pape headed east as the first California native son to compete for the national sculling championship. He would train and enter a few races prior to the American Henley on the Schuylkill River, Philadelphia, in July. Unfortunately, Alex not only suffered from the East Coast climate but also acquired an unspecified illness that dropped his weight from 168 to 139 pounds. Still he was making impressive practice runs

and was regarded as the favorite.

However, well into the race his dream ended with more bad luck. He collided with another shell that was considerably off course. Alex was unable to recover and fell overboard. Pape considered a protest but then withdrew it.

The Philadelphia Press complimented Alex saying "With his withdrawal there retires as true a sportsman as ever came over the Rockies."

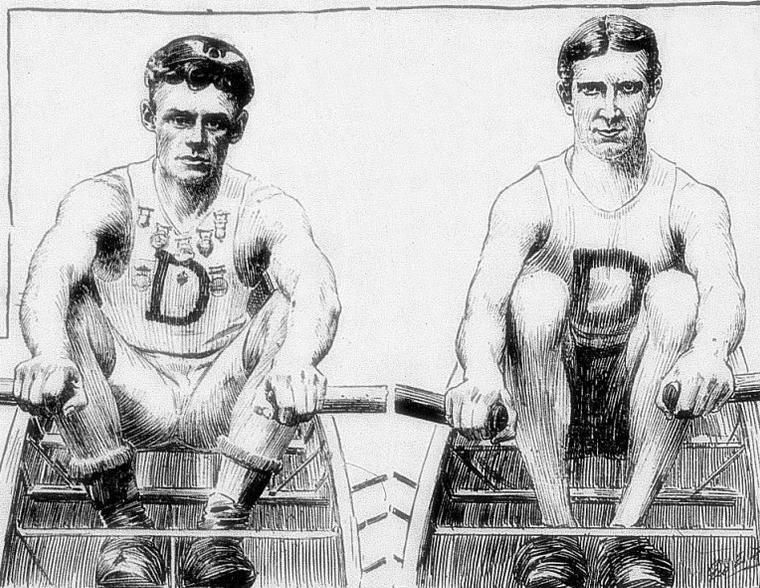
SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 1, 1897.

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TWO MEMBERS OF THE DOLPHIN SWIMMING AND BOATING CLUB  
MATCHED IN A SPECIAL OUTRIGGER SKIFF RACE AT EL CAMPO.

ALEXANDER PAPE.

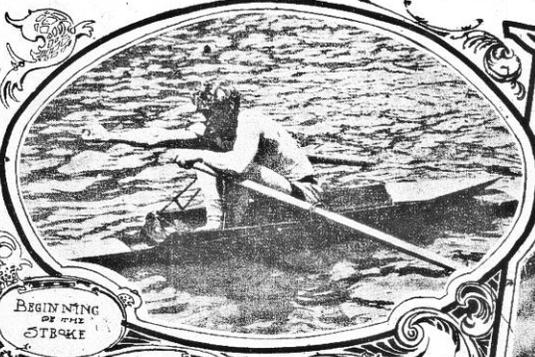
THOUGH comparatively a new man at the oars, Alexander Pape has shot to the front in the short time he has given to the sport. He held the diamond club medal of the Dolphins before losing it to Patch in an unsatisfactory race. The meeting of the two men Sunday is expected to decide the superiority. Though not as clever or as cool as his opponent, Pape is phenomenally strong. He rows wildly if excited, but his staying qualities generally bring him in a winner. He has practiced much lately and is expected to use good judgment in the coming race. His physical condition is perfect.



W. O. PATCH.

ONE OF the best-known oarsmen of this bay is William O. Patch, who is to meet Alexander Pape in a special rowing match arranged as part of the entertainment to be given at El Campo. Patch is the holder of the diamond medal of the Dolphin Club, which he wrested from Pape at their last meeting. Patch is in excellent condition, and he never rowed finer in his life than at the recent El Campo regatta. Though he knew he had little chance to win against his seasoned opponent, he trained as if his life depended on it. He is a much cleverer oarsman than his opponent.

# CHAMPION ALEX PAPE OUTCLASSES SCULLERS ON THIS COAST



BEGINNING OF THE STROKE



ONE OF CHAMPION PAPE'S DIFFICULT TRICKS



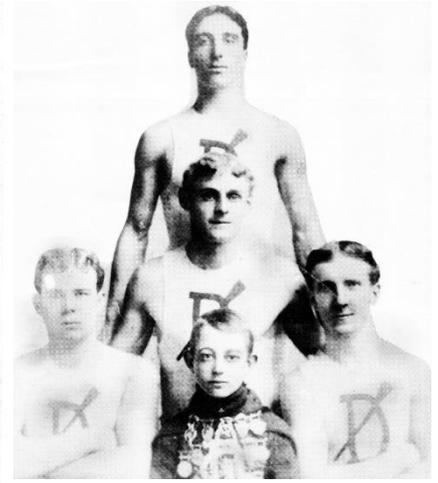
END OF THE STROKE

ALEC PAPE



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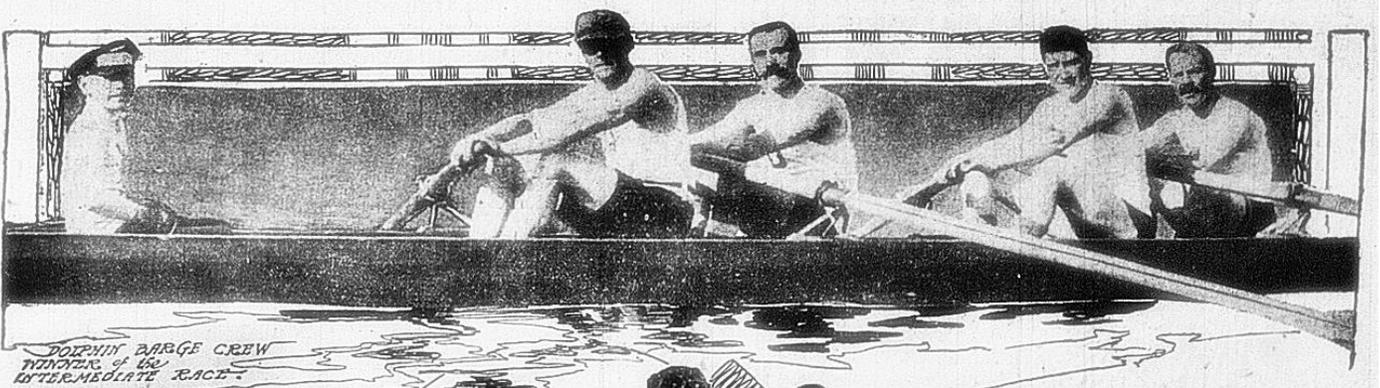
IF YOU want to win a Golden Gate swim, just get Alec Pape for your pilot. He has a record of never having guided anyone across the Gate but a winner.



Dolphin Barge Crew ca 1898  
Alex Pape (Center)

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## SPORTS OARSMEN REVEL IN THE WATERS DOLPHIN BARGE CREW NOSES ALAMEDA OUT AT FINISH



DOLPHIN BARGE CREW  
WINNER OF THE  
INTERMEDIATE RACE

1905 Barge Crew: G. Kenniff (cox), Alex Pape (stroke), C. Farrell, L. Wienard, S. Vicini



The Philadelphia trip drew attention to Pape's unorthodox sculling technique. His stroke had always appeared somewhat jerky. This was likely the result of learning in outrigger skiffs battling the nasty SF Bay chop. In contrast, the East Coast oarsmen used classic longer pulls and layback position at the end of each stroke. However peculiar his stroke seemed, Alex was a winner. Others took a closer look. His technique became known as "rushing your slide" the impulsive glide forward in the seat to begin a new stroke. His posture remained more upright, strokes slightly shorter, and recovery quicker. The University of Washington eight-oared crew would use a similar technique to win the 1936 Olympics.

Back in San Francisco Alex resumed his string of wins and helped stroke the Dolphin Club barge to occasional victories. In July 1905 he easily retained his Pacific Coast Championship in Portland. Now over 30 years old, this turned out to be his last serious competition. Although probably not realizing it, he was retiring as an undefeated sculling champion.

Alex displayed numerous other talents as a photographer, boxer, wrestler, and entertainer. He would perform fancy skip rope exhibitions, as well as doing hand stands and other acrobatic tricks in his tipsy racing shell. Alex and his shell had a role in the stage play "A Dark Secret" at the Central Theatre on Market Street in 1902.

He was also a marksman and member of the San Francisco Schuetzen Verein, a shooting society of German Americans dating back to 1859. As good as Alex was, his father and brother were far better sharpshooters. Frederick Ludwig Moritz Pape held national records and was still winning at age 80 without the aid of eyeglasses. Alex's brother, August Hilmer Pape, also a Dolphin member, set world records with his rifle and was International Champion in 1915.

Frederick "Eric" Pape, Alex's other brother, was a foreign educated and celebrated illustrator who founded an art school in Boston.

Alex Pape married Miss Agnes Walsh in one of the city's most anticipated society events of 1900. Their daughter, Agnes, would later travel the world as a vaudeville dancer.

In September 1905 Alex Pape announced that he was relocating his family to Reno, Nevada, as a career move. He served on the staff of Denver S. Dickerson who became Governor of Nevada in 1908. Except for random visits, Pape did not return to San Francisco until 1910, ready to accept his new role to coach and

help others in aquatic sports.

Piloting was not new for Alex. Although not officially documented, he claimed to have directed Dolphin Club swimmer, John H. Coughlan, to become the first person to cross the Golden Gate in 1894. Charles Cavill is recognized as being the first in 1896. Walter Pomeroy came into prominence a few years later when Alec Pape took Pomeroy across in record breaking time. This was before there was a bridge to aide crossings by establishing location and progress. The skill of an experienced pilot was paramount.

In the Dolphin Club's first Annual Golden Gate Swim, Sept 10, 1917, Alex Pape piloted the winner, Henry Koch. That same year the Dolphin Club organized a Golden Gate race for women. Pape again guided the winner, Catherine Flaherty, to a new record.

## PAPE, THE OARSMAN, WILL WED A BELLE

THE host of friends of Alexander W. Pape will be pleased to learn of his engagement to Miss Agnes Walsh, a charming young lady of this city, daughter of the late John T. Walsh, U. S. A. (retired).

Mr. Pape is widely known as an athlete. He has been the amateur champion single sculler of the coast for two years and is also noted for his feats as a swimmer. He is prominently identified with the Olympic Club, the Dolphin Swimming and Boating Club and is also a member of the National Yacht, N. E. G. W. His brother, Eric Pape, is one of the noted illustrators of America, his work appearing regularly in the principal magazines. Mr. Pape is an attaché of the American Biscuit Company.

The friends of the young bride and groom, to be, await with interest the further announcement of the day on which they will be united in marriage.

WILL GO THROUGH LIFE TOGETHER.

Pape's reputation as a pilot was soaring, and he was sought out by elite swimmers. In 1918 he piloted Hazel Cunningham from Lime Point to Key Route Pier in Oakland, eleven miles in 2 hours and 28 minutes. The swim was intended to start from Point Bonita but high seas prohibited it.

Also in 1918 there was a women's race from Pier 9 in San Francisco to Alameda. Catherine Flaherty won it in 2 hours and 26 minutes. Afterwards another competitor stated "To Alec Pape should go a great deal of praise. Pape was undoubtedly the only pilot on the Bay who knew exactly the course to take."

In September 1923 Leo Purcell (both an Olympic and Dolphin Cub member) won a five mile race out around Alcatraz and back. Pape was his chief advisor while Sid Foster rowed. A year later, with Pape piloting, Purcell set a two-way Golden Gate record in 1 hour and 6 seconds using the newfangled Australian crawl.



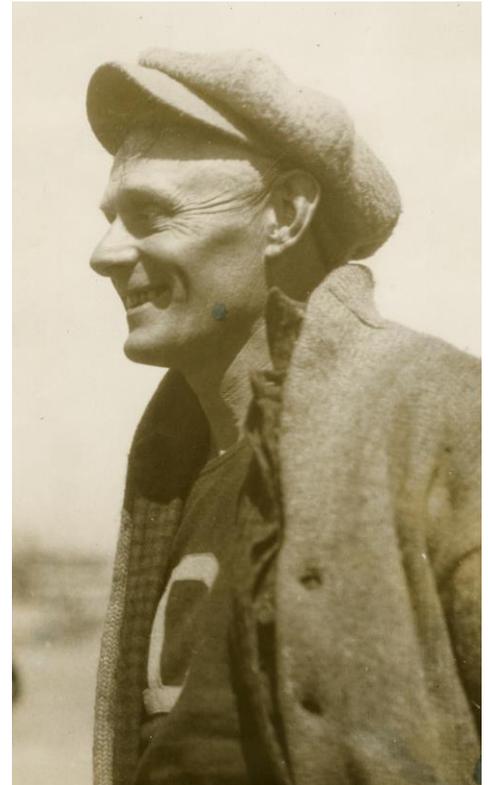
The *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper began sponsoring an Annual Golden Gate Swim in 1925. Alex Pape donated a trophy to be given to the oldest to finish. He then piloted the winner, Leo Purcell. Pape had now piloted thirteen straight Gate winners.

Prior to the Chronicle Gate swim the next year there were articles proclaiming "Alec Pape is Gate Swimming Pilot De Luxe" and "Veteran guide has never brought in anyone but a winner." In 1927 Pape donated a trophy to be awarded to the pilot of the winner of the Chronicle Golden Gate swim.

When William Wrigley, Jr. announced a 22 mile race to promote his Catalina Island in 1927, Alex Pape was selected to pilot Bay Area swimmer Leo Purcell. With a \$25,000 prize for first place, there were 400 hopeful entries. After dipping their toes in 54 degree water, only 102 would plunge in on January 15, 1927. Swimmers soon became discouraged realizing they had no chance for the prize. Alex's swimmer was one of the last to drop out. The only finisher, George Young, took 15 hours 45 minutes to cover an estimated 27 miles.

The next year, far too soon, one of our finest Dolphins passed away into history. The Chronicle established an Alex W. Pape trophy for the pilot of future winners of their annual Golden Gate Swim. Newspapers proclaimed Pape as "the greatest pilot of all time who gave his time, money and soul to aquatic sports."

The obituary for Alexander Pape, and even his death certificate, said he was age 56 and born in 1872. This is almost certainly incorrect based on all other available records such as census, voter registration, club memberships, and passenger lists. California did not require birth certificates until 1905. Other records were lost in the earthquake and fire of 1906. As a rule in genealogy, death certificates and



tombstones are not proof of birth dates. Alex was probably one to three years younger than reported when he died.

The Dolphin Club named a boat in honor of Alex, a Life Member. Later, in 1947, the Board of Governors commissioned Bill Richards to build three more boats "similar in construction to the Al Pape at a cost of \$400 each." These three modified-whitewalls, the Baggiani, Foster, and Landucci, became the template for future club singles. Sadly, the original Al Pape was damaged in 1950, and before repairs could be attempted it was set on fire without authorization.

In 1951 the Dolphin Club presented Alex Pape's many championship medals to his grand-daughter.

Handwritten signatures in blue ink, including "Wm Wrigley" and "Alex Pape". The signatures are written in a cursive style. "Wm Wrigley" is written above "Alex Pape".



A Selection of Alex Pape's Swimming and Rowing Medals