

Chronicles of the Dolphin Club

Thursday, March 22, 2012

Landmarks of Aquatic Park

Like any geographic boundary that humans share, Aquatic Park Cove has named landmarks. (Clicking on the picture of Aquatic Park in the sidebar of this blog will link to a larger annotated chart). Of course, depending on the humans consulted, the names vary. In particular, a member of the South End Rowing Club will give different names for buoys than will a Dolphin. Different Dolphins will give different names depending on when they joined the club and what time of day they swim. The main reason for having names at all is to allow two or more swimmers to quickly plan a course around the cove without pointing, squinting, confusion and repetition. Having shared names doesn't necessarily cut down on the repetition and confusion, but it does quell the pointing and squinting somewhat.



"The Flag"

One landmark that almost everyone knows by the same name is the Flag. It rests near the shoreline at the Van Ness end of Aquatic Park. The Flag is the artistic creation of Colin Gift. It has been in the cove for more than thirty-five years and, conveniently, has a swiveling fiberglass flag on top of a rectangular, fiberglass-coated piece of marine Styrofoam. The flag itself is a vibrant red and yellow replica of the international maritime signal flag representing the letter "O" and indicates, in solitude, "Man Overboard". This is the flag that both clubs use on pilot craft during an out-of-cove swim to warn ship traffic away from the swimmers in the water. The clubs recently refreshed the colors and the iconography of the buoy. When, as happens around every

five years, the Flag breaks loose from its ground tackle, members of both clubs react as if they had lost their life's beacon.

It is just a little less than four hundred yards from the clubs' beach to the Flag. In the colder parts of the winter, some swimmers count this as a quarter mile. The more competitive and obsessive will insist that it is closer to a quarter mile from the Oprah to the Flag.

The Oprah is the buoy that keeps the bow of the sailing ship Thayer from banging into the Hyde Street Pier. The Oprah got its name from the eponymous talk-show host when she was filming a segment in San Francisco and pointed toward the buoy to make some theatrical point. Only Dolphins call it the Oprah and I like it that there's a story and a short name for, "the buoy at the bow of the Thayer." In the winter of 2016-2017, Duke Dahlin swam 400 miles to shatter all previous records for the [Polar Bear](#) season. In honor of this achievement many Dolphins now refer to the Oprah as the "Duke" or, sometimes, the "Duke-rah." Granting Ms. Winfrey historical precedence, some call it the "Okra."



Thayer and "Duke" buoy at bow

Driving to the extreme north of Van Ness street brings one to the San Francisco Municipal Pier. Built in 1929, it curls around and defines Aquatic Park. Only emergency vehicles drive on the pier now and it bears the trauma of age and ocean. Where the pier attaches to land at the foot of Van Ness, three creosote poles stick out of the water up to twelve feet depending on the tide. Because they resemble American football field goal posts, they are cleverly known as the Goal Posts. It is definitely more than a quarter mile from the Oprah to the Goal Posts.

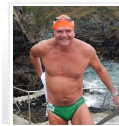
The Muni Pier has been structurally reinforced a number of times. One of the larger repairs is easily spotted from the water about three quarters of the way around. My friends call this The

Aquatic Park



[Click for Annotated Chart](#)

About Me



Larry Scroggins

San Francisco, CA

I joined the Dolphin Club in the fall of 1989. It has made my life richer beyond measure. When taken as a

whole with the South End Rowing Club, no place on earth can compare for eclectic membership and fascinating stories. As the captive audience of each other while we slowly warm up in the sauna, we are treated to myriad "sauna true facts." Some facts are even true. A few of them, true or otherwise, are related here.

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Repair and, while it doesn't currently have a buoy marking, it is still a common swimming destination. Because it doesn't have a buoy, people of various swimming speeds can go to the Repair and arrive at the same time. For those that are afraid to swim close to the pier and the fishing and crabbing lines, the Repair is more of a notion than an exact spot.



Roundhouse, Opening, and Jacuzzi

Muni Pier ends in a bulbous plaza that Dolphins call the Roundhouse. It is possible to swim under the Roundhouse. There are broken, barnacle-encrusted pilings to negotiate at the perimeter, but it's not terribly difficult. When it's very dark and the water is clear, a swim stroke produces a sparkling luminescence that is beautiful and magical. The quality of light under the Roundhouse is also remarkable at dawn and dusk. SouthEnders call this structure the "Wedding Cake."

A cigarette buoy resides just beyond the confines of the Roundhouse. It sits between the Muni Pier and the Breakwater. In the 1980's, a string of used tires provided scant protection for the cove. Storm surge and wakes from passing ships rolled freely into Aquatic Park making it a much wilder place to swim than it is today. With the construction of the concrete breakwater extending from Hyde Street Pier to Pier 41, our swimming hole experienced a major upgrade. The cigarette buoy marks the Opening. The Opening, like the Flag, is common terminology among all swimmers.

At the Hyde Street end of the Breakwater is a structure with concrete piers radiating from a circular capstone. When the current is flowing strongly in San Francisco Bay, this area is subject to incredibly forceful swirls of moving water. Owing to the water jet effect, many swimmers refer to this structure as The Jacuzzi. As it turns out, the capstone of the Jacuzzi is flat on top but has a pronounced recess underneath. When the highest tides bring sufficient water to seal off the outside of the capstone, 2 to 2 ½ feet of air remain trapped in the underside nook.

In order to enter this space and breathe the trapped air, the swimmer must dive beneath the surrounding capstone and surface in the center chamber. The radiating cement piers create a bit of an obstacle course so the prudent aqua-spelunker will feel around under the capstone for an opening before diving. Since this part of the structure is very rarely in contact with the ocean, it's completely free of barnacles, starfish or other abrasive critters. The concrete is still quite hard, though, so a more experienced and chastened diver will advise a hands-first-not-head-first approach.

East of the Jacuzzi is a large orange buoy to which the hay scow, the Alma, is moored. This buoy was a favorite target for one of the faster Dolphins, Becky Fenson. When she was training for her English Channel swim, she cruised around this landmark many times. This buoy demarcated the boundary beyond which Dolphins were forbidden to swim at the time. The then-current president of the Dolphin Club was taking the motorized club boat, Arias, out for a spin one day and spotted her swimming two yards east of this point. He spun the boat around, leaned over the pontoon, shook his finger and shouted, "Bad Becky!" A large group of Becky's friends delighted in this story and decided to name the buoy the Bad Becky. Since then, the National Park Service has installed a cigarette buoy slightly beyond clearly designating this as protected swimming area. Nevertheless, the name has stuck and its origin has faded into history. Many people now wonder who was Becky and what was it that she did here that was so bad.

The cigarette buoy just north of the Bad Becky acquired its own name in 2013 when Peter Perez tied the then-current Polar Bear record of 356 miles. Not a supremely fast swimmer, Peter set this record by swimming three or four times every day while working full time. He soldiered on through a severe case of shingles and clearly earned a buoy of his very own.



Balclutha

Moored at the north end of Hyde Street Pier is the 300 foot Balclutha. It is a steel-hulled, three-masted sailing ship built in 1886 and had a starring role in the film "Mutiny on the Bounty." At her stern is a mooring buoy called the Kebbe. Mr. Kebbe is the first person to have swum 356 miles during a Polar Bear. This amounts to almost four miles every day for 90 days. When Dolphin Club member, Peter Drino, was crafting a series of fifty courses around the cove for his "Polar Bear Challenge" event, he needed names for buoys

that had none. He decided to honor George for his Polar Bear achievements. Some years later, Tom Keller recreated the Polar Bear Challenge and renamed this buoy the "North S'more" because its rusted white crust makes it look like the camper's toasted marshmallow treat.

The mooring buoy at the bow of the Balclutha has many names among Dolphins. Peter Drino named it the "Luigi" in honor of the Dolphin Club commodore, Lou Marcelli. In Tom Keller's nomenclature, this is the S'more. Some people call it the "Wenzel" to honor Ralph Wenzel, the second person to match George's record of 356 miles for the Polar Bear

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season of 2006-2007.

The next boat south from the Balclutha is the Eppleton Hall, a 1914 steam-powered, paddle-wheel tugboat. It is moored end-on to Hyde Street Pier, so it's possible to swim behind it. It's not so easy to swim behind the Balclutha or the Thayer as they have numerous pipes and cables snaking through the water to the pier. Also, debris tends to collect in the back eddies on the east side of these boats. Certain SouthEnders and Dolphins refer to this corridor with affection as "Rat Alley." Directly behind the Eppleton Hall, however, the swimming is relatively unencumbered and adds a modicum of distance to help round out a full mile around the cove. Tidal flows are funneled through this area occasionally creating incredibly strong currents, especially on a flood tide. The rudder at the stern of the Eppleton Hall is a thin, scimitar-like metal protrusion that invokes the appellation, "Blade of Death."



George Kebbe



Eppleton Hall and "The Moon" Buoy

Just south of the bow of the Eppleton Hall is a buoy mooring the stern of the Thayer. Mr. Drino named this buoy the "Moon" in honor of a long-time Dolphin who devoted extraordinary hours to painting and maintaining the club. For the Keller crew, this is the "South S'more."

That brings us back to the Duke/Oprah/Duke-rah/Okra. All of these landmarks encompass about one mile. It takes a different amount of time to swim this course depending on the current. At the end of an ebb, there can be a "spin cycle" effect where the current is moving west at the shore and east at the Opening, helping a clockwise swimmer along. Other times, there is nothing but resistance the entire way.

There are other transient landmarks in the cove, but this describes the more permanent ones. Taken together, they populate one of the best swimming holes in the world.

Posted by [Larry Scroggins](#) at 11:17 AM



3 comments:



[Louisa Pickering](#) May 30, 2013 at 9:55 AM

Very well done! Thank you for all your information!

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[ryan](#) March 18, 2023 at 11:38 PM

This comment has been removed by the author.

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[ryan](#) March 18, 2023 at 11:39 PM

Someone told me the backstory of the Oprah buoy this morning and I was searching google to find the video and stumbled upon your site. I'm loving the history. Your website should be required reading for New members (and old ones, too) . You rock Larry!

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