

Self-Liquidating Shipyard by Jerry MacMullen

Westways, September 1941

p. 1
(of 3)

Self-Liquidating SHIPYARD

WHEREVER there's trade, hardy men will fight seas
and rivers. Here's the story of a strange shipyard on the Colorado

By JERRY MacMULLEN

AFTER THE NAME Port Isabel on the map of the Colorado River delta you will find, in parentheses, the single word "Abandoned". The same notation is made opposite a cross designating the location of a shipyard.

Today, nomadic bands of *totuaca* fishermen sit around their fires at night, close to the site of a once thriving little settlement devoted to servicing stern-wheel river steamboats, and to the transshipment of cargo for Fort Yuma, brought around the tip of Cape San Lucas in schooners from San Francisco. In fact, for many of the steamers Fort Yuma was merely a stopping-place; they went up into Nevada in the hey-day of steam navigation on the turbid Colorado—and Shipyard Slough, at Port Isabel, was a busy place for overhaul and repair work. Today the silence of Shipyard Slough is broken only by the occasional cry of some shore-bird, or the distant growl of the tidal "bore" of the river, which moves northward with the flood tide. Of the tidal phenomena in the vicinity, the Sailing Directions offer these suggestions:

"Spring range (of the tide) is 31.5 feet; mean range is 21.6 feet. The tidal currents run with great strength at full and change of the moon, sometimes as much as six knots, and there is no slack water . . . the spring tide comes in with a bore or bank of water four feet high, extending in one huge breaker clear across the river, while the ebb is still running out."

No place, this, for the faint-hearted boatman. But men will fight seas and rivers wherever a trade-route opens; there was profit in the transportation business between San Francisco and Fort Yuma, so men took chances. And while a 21-foot tide presents its problems, it also has its advantages. For one thing, it made Port Isabel's drydock literally self-liquidating—with muddy water.

The drydock was nothing but a shallow basin lined with planks, situated at high-