



MAINS'L HAUL



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PALM-TREES AND BENCHES: A hitherto-unpublished photo of the ferry steamer *Silver Gate* at Coronado Tent City in 1902. The upper deck has been enclosed to form a club-room, but the engines (later sold to a mine in Mexico for some \$800) have not yet been removed.

SAN DIEGO'S FOUR-SCORE YEARS OF FERRIES

By Jerry MacMullen

Aside from the fact that she was brought here to be a museum rather than a carrier of commuters, there is nothing unusual about the *Berkeley* being an importation from San Francisco. With three exceptions, all of the ferries on the San Diego-Coronado run came from the Bay Area.

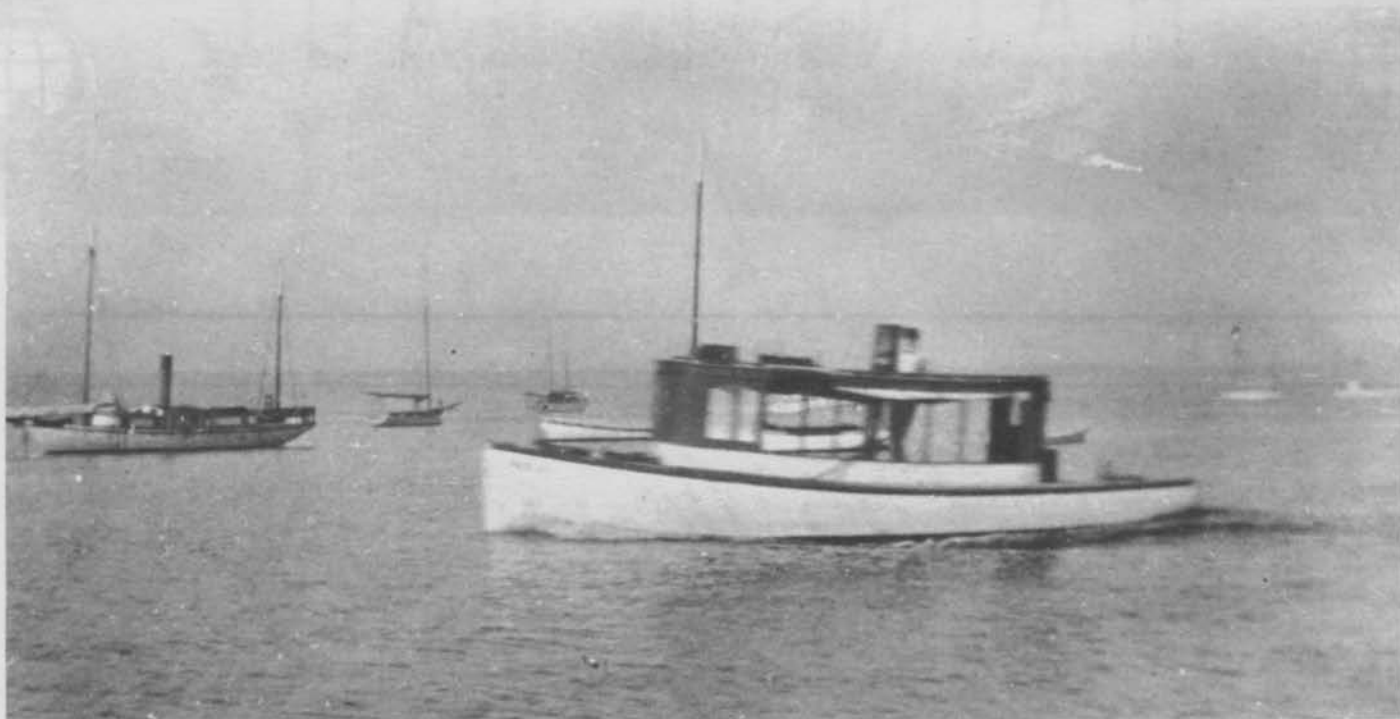
The first exception was the *Della*, the very first ferryboat on the bay, and she came here -- on a flat-car -- from Chicago. Nor was that her first trip by rail; she was built at Waltham, Mass., in 1885, came to Chicago by rail and, after brief service as a yacht, was shipped on to San Diego by E. S. Babcock and H. L. Story, the original developers of Coronado. She was about 25 feet long with a vertical boiler and the cutest little toy steam-engine you ever saw, and on her first ferry trip, with a handful of passengers, Babcock was her captain and Story her engineer.

Even when she towed a small scow full of real estate prospects, she proved too small, so Babcock and Story arranged for the tug *General McPherson*, a former Army steamer built in San Francisco in 1867, to handle the passengers. Shortly after that the *Della's* machinery was removed and she ended her days as a sailing yacht. Later the *McPherson's* engines also

were removed; she became a sealing schooner and was wrecked in the Bering Sea in 1900.

The first honest-to-goodness ferryboat was the side-wheel steamer *Coronado*, which arrived here, brand-new, early in August of 1886. She could carry ten horse-drawn vehicles and about 100 passengers -- or a lot more when the Steamboat Inspectors weren't looking. Like all of the earlier ferryboats she was of wooden construction. On one side of the center-line driveway was the Ladies' Cabin, where lighting off a panatella would get you into big trouble; on the opposite side was the Gents' Cabin which permitted as much smoking, or spitting of tobacco-juice, as anyone could desire.

Such was the impetus of the Coronado real estate boom that it soon became apparent that the *Coronado* was going to be too small. So the Coronado Beach Company built its own shipyard and, in the autumn of 1887, laid the keel for the magnificent, if unfortunate, ferry steamer *Silver Gate*. They had her plans drawn by the Union Iron Works in San Francisco, who also built her machinery, but they couldn't let well enough alone. They altered the plans by adding a second deck, and sent back to Chicago for a crew of Mid-west steamboat carpenters, who obviously were told that the sky was the limit. They added tons of jig-saw work and two gargantuan pilot-houses -- but they didn't add to her horsepower. So when she was completed in the spring of 1888 and they put her into



THE FERRYBOAT FROM POINT LOMA: Apparently Capt. Bob Baker was his own lonely passenger on this turn-of-the-century snap-shot of the launch *Nautilus*. The handsome little auxiliary yawl at the left is the *Dolphin*, which also served occasionally as a Point Loma ferry.

service, they found that it took the too-small engines half the way across the bay to get her up to speed -- and then they couldn't stop her. After about a month of smashing ferry-slips on both sides of the bay, she was laid up -- to become eventually a floating recreation center at Coronado Tent City, and then, for some years, the quarters of the San Diego Yacht Club. Like the *Berkeley* of ten years later, she was propeller-driven, being the first one of that type on the West Coast.

Now the Beach Company, having blown \$400,000 on the *Silver Gate*, found themselves still in need of a second ferryboat, and right now. They scouted around San Francisco and finally bought the *Benicia*, a cattle-boat which ran across Carquinez Straits. The *Benicia* was really something. Although a double-ender, she was flat-bottomed, like a huge skiff, and she was the only San Diego ferryboat to have the fantastic "walking-beam" engine. She is said to have been owned originally by her captain and engineer, who did not get along too well; allegedly, a factor in this feud was a weakness on the part of one of them to get into the sauce from time to time, which always makes for bad landings, even in a cattle-boat. She got here in July of 1888 and ran until 1903, when the side-wheeler *Ramona* appeared upon the scene. They tell a story of the *Benicia* wherein a nervous lady passenger -- it was a rough and stormy day -- spoke to the engineer, who worked in full view of the passengers --

"Dear me! Do you think this boat is going down?"

"Madame," he assured her, "From the condition of her boiler, I'd be far less surprised if she went up!"

The *Ramona*, although far smaller than the hilarious *Silver Gate*, was bigger than either the *Coronado* or the *Benicia*. She, too, was a wooden side-wheeler, and a good-looking one. She had two tall smokestacks set side-by-side, and could carry 14 teams instead of ten -- and she had the distinction of being the first local steamer to have electric lights. The old *Coronado*, right up to the end, had no illumination in her passenger

cabins but a pair of huge, swinging kerosene lanterns. And she lasted until 1920.

The San Diego-Coronado run, however, was not the only ferry service on San Diego Bay. Away back in 1888 Joseph Supple, later a famous Portland shipbuilder, launched the little steamer *Roseville* for the developers of the then brush-covered Point Loma area. She was no beauty -- but into her 67-foot hull and upperworks, Supple took care of a nice observation deck, a pilot-house copied from that of the *Silver Gate*, and an enclosed passenger cabin complete with plush upholstery and, of all things, a piano. At one time she had a purser who could play the piano, but only one tune, "Listen to the Mocking-bird". It drove the engineer, who apparently was not musical, right up the bulkhead and he issued an ultimatum to the owners: either they'd get along without the Mocking-bird or they'd get along without him. A licensed engineers were in short supply at the moment, the purser's concerts were terminated. For a few years she made a couple of trips a day out to Roseville and Ballast Point -- and then the Great Boom of the 1880's flattened out disastrously. No longer able to afford her, her owners ripped away the cabins (and the piano) and converted her into a tug. In the early 1890's she left for Central America to tow logs, and she never came back. Point Lomans went back to the horse and buggy, because there was a road, of sorts, to San Diego, and it was passable if the tide was not too high.

About this time the internal combustion motor reared its ugly head and the late Capt. Bob Baker (then a teenager and years later one of the founders of the Maritime Museum Association) acquired a little gasoline launch called the *Nautilus*. He needed her for getting to the old Russ High School -- so why not provide a ferry service for others as well? Under the proud banner of "Point Loma Transportation" he ran her until about 1902, when he left to attend Stanford.

Meanwhile Fort Rosecrans had been established, and was

garrisoned by the 28th Company and the 115th Company of the Coast Artillery Corps. With all of those soldiers, many of them with families, transportation by water to San Diego became a "must", and the big steam-launch *Gen. de Russy*, built in San Francisco in 1899, was acquired. In 1905 she was augmented by one of the most handsome vessels ever to come here, the Seattle-built (in 1905) artillery-steamer *Lieut. George M. Harris*. Actually a glorified tug, she had a small dry-cargo hold up forward, and a roomy and comfortable passenger-cabin at the after end of her deckhouse. She lasted until World War I, and after that she was sold and returned to Seattle to become the tug *Andrew Foss*. About 1925 she was Dieselized and lasted until 1957, when she was dismantled.

Back in 1892 Capt. Rufus M. Creswell bought 10 acres on Pt. Loma and, with the Fort Rosecrans deal going great guns, acquired a tiny iron steamboat called the *Hercules* -- built, some folks say, by some Southern Pacific machinists in the shops at Sacramento while SP wasn't looking. Neither those 10 acres nor the *Hercules* did too badly in Point Loma development and ferry service. However, Creswell believed in diversification, and for seven years served as captain of the Army's *de Russy*.

Just after the turn of the century, you began to hear more and more of the Star Boat House and the McKinley Boat House, around the foot of H (now Market) Street, and of an active young boatman named Capt. O. J. Hall. There was the Crescent Boat House as well and -- if you will believe it -- ferry service to Imperial Beach. A big gasoline launch, the *McKinley Jr.*, took you, via Coronado, down to a canal dredged through what today is the salt works, to the terminus of a short railroad, with electric cars powered by storage batteries, on to Imperial Beach.

Until the street-cars came, along Rosecrans Street, the merged Star & Crescent Boat Co. did well with ferries to Point Loma. There was a nice little wharf, which later blossomed out with a dancing-pavilion to encourage evening trade in spite of the street-car competition. A "group" -- in those bucolic days called an orchestra -- provided music to dance to the strains of *The Blue Danube Waltz* -- to say nothing of *Steamboat Bill*, *Red Wing*, and *School Days*. Already, such dance-hall classics as *There'll Be A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight* -- and *Ta-Ra-Ra Boom De-Ay* -- had become old hat. The Point Loma ferry service lasted until around 1918. Ah, those tender memories of the "gas boats" *Golden West*, *Dolphin*, *Fortuna* and *Owl*, to name but a few!

The Curtiss Aviation School and the Army's Rockwell Field, on North Island, brought need for a ferry service on that run, and it was handled nicely by such boats as the *Virginia*, the *Crescent*, and some of the veterans of the Point Loma fleet -- as well as the more modern *Scout* and *Hyack*. This was the beginning of the famous "Nickle-Snatcher" which really blossomed out in 1942 with the specially-designed, and locally built, North Island ferries like the *Glorietta* and the *Del Mar*. Actually diesel-driven passenger scows with square bows and sterns, they were neither slow nor homely, and they carried hundreds of thousands of those who today add to the congestion of the San Diego-Coronado Bridge. There are rumors that, away aft on the lower deck, you could get into a lively crap-game -- but that's neither here nor there.

So -- back to the Coronado ferries. The *Ramona* and the first *Coronado* were becoming inadequate, and in 1920 the side-wheeler *Morena* was built at Wilmington, California. Said to have been the last side-wheel steamer built on the West Coast, she was a big double-decker (the first since the *Silver Gate*) and was the last steam ferryboat on San Diego Bay. De-



A FAITHFUL SERVANT: The side-wheeler *Ramona*, first local craft to have electric lights, gave excellent commuter service from 1903 to 1929.

finitely feeling all of her 34 years, the *Coronado* was sold. Cabins were ripped away, machinery was removed -- and with plywood, paint, masts and rigging, her new Hollywood owners made her into a pirate ship. She went out in a blaze of glory when she was blown up during the filming of Sabatini's "Captain Blood".

Again the traffic-load was increasing, so in 1929 the second *Coronado* was built at Oakland. She was steel hulled, propeller-driven, and with Diesel-electric power. She replaced the faithful old *Ramona*, which became a floating night-club -- and mysteriously sank at her pier. She was raised, stripped down to her hull, equipped with a Diesel and served briefly as a fishing-boat before suffering the final ignominy of becoming a garbage scow.

In 1931 the second steel-hulled, Diesel-electric ferry was built at Oakland. She was the *San Diego*, of similar design but slightly larger than the *Coronado* -- and it wasn't long until another ferry was needed. Although also Diesel-electric, the next ferryboat was of wooden construction, built in 1923 as the *Golden West* of Southern Pacific-Golden Gate ferries. She was extensively altered, and went into service as the handsome *North Island*. Meanwhile -- in 1938 -- the *Morena* had been laid up, and when World War II broke out, she was leased to the Navy; they mounted a gun on her lower deck and used her as a training-ship for Armed Guard crews on merchant ships. After the war she was sold, and wound up as a storage-hulk at San Quintin, Baja California.

The Golden Gate bridge had ended the days of the Southern Pacific ferries from the foot of Hyde Street across to Marin County, so that when still another ferry was needed for the burgeoning war-time traffic, the market in second-hand vessels was just about gone, and there was no time, nor shipyard space, for building a new one. However, the *Golden Shore* had been sold to Puget Sound owners, who had re-named her *Elwha*. And she was for sale -- at a stiff price. It was that or nothing, and so the San Diego & Coronado Ferry Co. had to buy her, and she made the long voyage from Puget Sound to San Diego to become the *Silver Strand*. Like the *North Island*, she was Diesel-electric, of wooden construction, and had been launched at Alameda in 1927.

The local ferry people, by this time, had more than their share of second-hand, wooden ferryboats. So in 1954 the last San Diego-Coronado ferry was built, the huge, steel-hulled

Crown City. By this time, commuter buses were crossing the bay on the boats, and the need for large upper-deck accommodations for pedestrian passengers no longer existed. So the *Crown City* was completely open-deck, with only a small passenger cabin above the engine-casing.

And then came the bridge. On August 3, 1969, more than eighty years of ferry service on San Diego Bay came to an end. The law authorizing the bridge contained a section prohibiting ferry competition, and both the Coronado service and the "Nickle-snatcher" run to North Island were doomed. In a matter of months, the boats were sold. The *Crown City* went to Puget Sound, where she remains in use as the *Kulshan*, of the Washington State Ferry system. The *San Diego*, retaining her original name, also wound up in Puget Sound, but is reported as for sale, with indications that she will move on into Canadian waters. The *North Island* went to Ensenada (where later she was broken up) and the *Coronado* wound up on a ferry run in the Gulf of Fonseca. The *Silver Strand* got to San Pedro; there, in a storm, her moorings parted and she went onto the breakwater, where heavy seas made short work of her.

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"Mainsail Haul — An order in tacking ship bidding 'Swing the main yards.' To loot, steal, or 'acquire.'"

— John Masefield

THE END OF AN ERA: The Diesel-electric ferry *Crown City* (below) was the last vessel built for service between San Diego and Coronado. She made her final run a few days after this photo was taken.



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