

# San Diego's Waterfront Through the Eyes of a Child

By Jim Bregante

How well I remember walking to the edge of the Embarcadero and watching the movement of the water, looking for fish and studying the size and variety of ships in the bay. I watched the seagulls flying overhead and sea planes landing in the bay. I listened to the sounds of trains from the Santa Fe Depot and the roar of baseball fans at Lane Field. Yes, growing up two blocks from the water in an Italian fishing community provided an opportunity to experience many of the daily activities on the beautiful San Diego waterfront as it existed in the 1930s and 1940s.



My Grandfather and me, 1937

My waterfront experience began with my Grandfather Agostino Ghio, when I was old enough to walk and hold his hand. Living a block away from him provided many opportunities for visits to the bay.

In later years, the walks to the waterfront became family outings. We began our walk to the Grape Street piers where tuna boats moored while waiting to unload their catch at local canneries. My parents knew many of the fishermen in our community so they stopped to visit with fishermen who were on watch. My father worked in the ship chandler business so I think some of those waterfront outings were prompted by a need to check the status of the tuna boats at the dock. Ship chandlers supplied boats with marine hardware,

poles, hooks, nets, rope, anchors and more products to outfit the boats.

Our walk proceeded south along the embarcadero heading towards Broadway. We stopped at the H&M sportfishing landing near the Broadway Pier to watch the fishing boats arrive. Water taxis, called "Nickel Snatchers" also arrived to unload passengers from navy ships and North Island. A fare to ride the water taxi cost a nickel so the name Nickel Snatcher was appropriate. The location today is occupied by the Hornblower excursion boats, and the sportfishing boats are operating from Shelter Island.

Outdoor aquariums at the landing provided people with a glimpse of the type of fish being caught in the local waters. Fishermen displayed their catch by hanging large fish such as tuna, marlin and sea bass on hanging display racks, containing hooks to hold the fish. I thought, "what huge fish for this little guy."

Our walk continued east on Broadway, passing Lane Field, home of the San Diego Padres of the Pacific Coast League. I kept watch for foul balls flying over the fence. A visit to the Tower Bowling Alley, and having a drink at the soda fountain, was the highlight of the outing. This was one of the largest soda fountains in San Diego. I hurried to the counter and shouted, "Chocolate coke please." By that time my parents caught up to me. What a treat!

We watched the bowlers for awhile, and then went outside to view the pin setters from doors outside the alley on India Street. The walk proceeded north on India street, walking through Little Italy, a very quiet area in those days.

Broadway was a busy place during WWII with sailors and marines on liberty. As I looked east, I could see a sea of white hats. Military parades were common place. The bands playing, soldiers marching, and viewers cheering was a lot of excitement for me. I thought the service men were great and looked so distinguished in their uniforms. I feel the same way today.

I recall the Sunday in December 1942 when my Uncle Fortunato walked onto the B street pier to

depart in a convoy. My mother and grandmother were in tears that day. That was also a sad moment for me. There were many families saying goodbye to their loved ones.



Coronado Ferry, 1950s  
(Courtesy of the Maritime Museum of San Diego)

I really had fun riding the Coronado Ferry across the bay. The size of the boat, and being in a car as it boarded the ferry, provided lots of excitement for me. As my Dad parked the car on board, I immediately headed to the top deck to view the activity in the bay and watch the ferry move away from the dock. I still recall the clanking of the deck plates as our 1936 Plymouth moved onto the dock.

The ferry ride usually included a stop for a walk around the Coronado Hotel and the beach. We then drove down the Silver Strand for a while, and back to the ferry for a ride in the opposite direction and back home. Today, I appreciate the Coronado Bridge and its efficiency; however the Coronado Ferry provided the excitement of a mini- cruise.

My next ferry boat experience occurred forty years latter when I celebrated my 30<sup>th</sup> high school class reunion aboard the Berkley at the San Diego Maritime Museum. That was exciting, to be among so many wonderful former classmates and friends. A celebration on the waterfront. It doesn't get any better than that.

The lumber schooners docked at the B Street pier and on the Embarcadero where Anthony's Fish Grotto and the San Diego Maritime Museum are now located. Cranes aboard the schooners hoisted huge bunks of lumber onto the dock. Lumber company straddle carriers picked up the lumber and transported it to their yards. I was fascinated by this activity and I stayed on the dock for hours. Little did I realize at that time I would spend most

of my working career with Western Lumber Company, one of the destinations for all that lumber.

A very unique activity on the waterfront was the crushing of ice by Union Ice Company. Some of the older tuna boats required ice to preserve their catch. Newer boats used brine, plus refrigeration to preserve the fish. The ice truck parked a crushing machine near the boat and attached a large hose leading to wells in the boat. When the crusher started, the iceman skidded huge blocks of ice into the crusher. It was fun to watch those four foot high pieces of ice disappear into the crusher. I spent lots of time around the crusher operation. On hot days I yelled to the operator, "Hey, Mister Iceman, throw me some ice please." The ice man took out his ice pick, chipped a chunk of ice and threw it to me. My buddies and I were always friends with the icemen.

Much of my childhood centered on fishing boats belonging to my family. Conversations at home with visitors focused on fishing. Names of tuna boats and fishermen poured out in the discussions. I can write the names of at least, fifty tuna boats today. If the South Seas was heading home, I expected to see my uncle and cousin soon. In later years, news of the Lou Jean heading home meant my father-in- law and uncle were arriving. Fishing boat names became as common as persons' names.

Westgate Cannery, located on Harbor Drive, near what is now Solar Turbine, employed many residents of Little Italy. One night a week the cannery featured movies in the lunchroom for the employees. That was always a fun evening. Kids attended and watched movies from the 30s and 40s vintage along with plenty of cartoons. Westerns and the Three Stooges were my favorites. All this was within two blocks of my house.

The wharf area west of Westgate Cannery became the swimming hole for the children in our community. The children swam in the area from Grape Street pier to the eastern side of the Coast Guard Air Station and near a beach on the west side of the Station. Occasionally a skiff was found tied up to the dock near the Grape Street pier. Some kids would borrow the skiff and row around the bay. Children were known to swim to boats at anchor in the area and use them as diving platforms. A very adventurous group of kids!

It was fascinating to observe the unloading of huge nets onto the Embarcadero. Fishermen mended and repaired their nets in view of bystanders. This became quite an attraction for tourists. They could observe our families waving goodbye to fathers leaving for distant fishing grounds or, more joyfully, watch us welcome our loved ones home safely (hopefully with a full catch!)



Campbell Shipyard, 1930s  
(Courtesy of the Maritime Museum of San Diego)

I treasure the memories of watching tuna boats being built and their launchings. Occasionally on Sunday mornings, my Dad and I visited the Campbell Machine Shipyard during the late 1930s. It was an awesome sight for me to look up to those huge ships in various stages of construction. Tuna boats were made of wood in those days, with many shapes and sizes of components used to create the finished product. Four boats could be constructed at any given time.

I had my first experience with the power of electricity during a visit to the Campbell Machine Shipyard. Being inquisitive, I came upon an extension cord and began inspecting it. As I handled the cord I poked my finger into the socket and received a very strong shock. I vividly remember that day! Little did I know someday I would spend part of my working career around that lumber milling machinery.

I loved attending the fishing boat launchings. The festivities surrounding ships sliding down the ways into the water are some of my most cherished memories. The champagne christening of a boat, the banners, the American flag flying, and lots of good food provided our families with a Fourth of July atmosphere. Prior to the boat's maiden voyage, family members and friends were invited for a cruise around the bay and another party.



Grandfather Agostino's boat, *North America*, 1941

During the summer, I spent hours on Grandfather Agostino Ghio's tuna boat, the *North America*. I was able to roam freely throughout the boat, exploring every nook and cranny. I accompanied the *North America* with Uncle Fortunato Ghio to Van Camp Cannery and witnessed the unloading of fish. A great experience! The fish were loaded into large buckets and hoisted up to conveyors for transportation into the cannery. Large fish required loading one at a time and lifting with ropes. This was very strenuous work for the fishermen.

Upon arrival at the cannery, Uncle Fortunato handed me a can of metal polish and rag and said, "James, I want you to polish every piece of metal on this boat." Wow, I was going to work on the boat and contribute to its upkeep. I began at the pilot house and worked my way to the engine room. I kept very busy that day as I watched some of the unloading process.

At lunch time, crew members joked with me and warned me to do a good job of polishing the brass. Some asked if I wanted to become a fisherman someday. I said, "I think so," and that made my uncle happy. I believe he wanted me to learn the trade and someday become a skipper and relieve him. His wish did not come to pass. Later, I

decided to pursue a career on shore. I always admired the fishermen for their dedication and work ethics. I even married into a fishing family but the fishing life was not for me.

The absence of television and other electronic toys enjoyed by children today provided me the opportunity to focus on the excitement of the waterfront activities. Those unforgettable memories remain with me today. Ultimately, changes over the years have kept the waterfront a vibrant part of San Diego. Today, I am pleased to see the waterfront through the eyes of an adult, while performing duties as a docent for the San Diego Maritime Museum.



Yes, I still walk to the edge of the Embarcadero, watch the movement of the water, view the variety of ships in the bay, and I look for fish!

This essay is the first of future articles to be written by Jim Bregante, a native San Diegan, on growing up near the waterfront and the Little Italy area. He volunteers as a docent at the Maritime Museum of San Diego and narrates a historical journey of the waterfront and vicinity from the 1930's to the present via a power point presentation featuring pictures from historical and family archives. These pictures depict his family's start in the fishing industry as well as his experiences on the waterfront and as a child in Little Italy. His presentation is offered as a community service to acquaint audiences with the rich history and romance of our beautiful waterfront and Little Italy. Groups interested in scheduling a presentation can call (888) 485-4825 toll free or e-mail: [info@italianhistory.org](mailto:info@italianhistory.org).