

pressure natural dry steam was abandoned. There was an air of mystery surrounding the whole drilling operation.

The first commercial geothermal well was brought in January 1, 1964, near Niland and a few miles north of Calipatria. This 8100-foot well sent brine and steam rushing to the surface just two and a half months after operations began. The prime objective was to explore the potential of these steam geysers to provide and generate electricity. According to scientists who have studied the area, the Imperial Valley has one of the largest geo-thermal potentials in the world. In times past, a great oozing mass of magma rose in a dome-like structure close to the surface of the now imperial Valley. What vents there were became plugged with hardening obsidian. These plugged vents have kept a great deal of heat close to the surface. In the Imperial Valley there are perhaps 25 square miles of high temperature porous rock associated with an underground sea of very hot brine which must have a source of heat deep in the earth. Evidence indicates that the brine is a combination of water released as the magma cools and an active ore solution containing untold tonnages of mineral salts and metals, including copper, manganese, lithium and silver. These impurities in the steam can cause problems for the turbines, but if a successful way can be found to separate these minerals, they will represent another source of wealth. A drive west from highway 111, between Niland and Calipatria reveals massive structures already utilizing this remarkable natural resource from below the Salton Sea.

Mullet Island can now be reached by boat from Red Hill Marina. Occasional bubbles rise to the surface from the mud pots which once bubbled merrily for the visitors to Hell's Kitchen. No doubt Captain Davis would be pleased to know that the Salton Sea Wildlife Refuge has been established almost at his backdoor, where magnificent geese and many other waterfowl feed on fields of alfalfa planted just for them. It is a fitting salute to a man who so painstakingly covered the old trails west to help preserve the record of the Donner Party.

## **Chapter 9**

### **SEA OF DREAMS**

A recent movie gave us the unforgettable line, "If we build it, the people will come," referring to the dream to build a baseball field. It was true of the inspiration provided by the Salton Sea, which moved men and women to build the places described in this chapter.

#### **Date Palm Beach**

In 1926 a man with a dream came to the Salton Sea. Seeing beyond the barren stretches of sand, he fell in love with the blue water and the tan and purple mountains, and he envisioned

fun loving, sun-loving people finding health, relaxation and entertainment on its shores. The man was Gus Eilers and with John Goldthwaite, a Bay area promoter, he secured land from the Southern Pacific Railroad on the North Shore, down toward the sea from the old train stop at Mortmar. It was 250 feet below sea level.

They called their location Date Palm Beach, and planned to develop it using an Egyptian motif. Stationery and folders spoke of a place "mysteriously enchanting, teeming with adventure." Streets were laid out and named. A main building, as imposing as a Near East palace, was pictured.

Eilers described his early years at the beach when his only companion was a pelican named "Pete". He said, "I chugged and boiled down to the beach in an old Model-T from Mecca. It was just a trail and you never knew when you were going to get stuck out there in the middle of nowhere. I hauled all my water from Mecca. I guess in the first few months I was there I didn't see more than four or five people at the beach. I lived in a tent for a good while and didn't even start the first building until 1930. My family stayed in Los Angeles until my two children, Henry and June (Eilers) Hall, were through high school."

Eilers built a small building and a pier out into the water, and began coaxing outboard motor boat racers to the sea. They came, they raced, and they loved it! But, Gus Eiler's oriental paradise was not to be. In 1929 the stock market crashed, and with it the partnership of Eilers and Goldthwaite. Eilers was not to be discouraged. He simply changed the plans for his dream community. He brought in two of the Olympic Village cottages from Los Angeles in 1932, the first of his guest houses, and he built a 200 ft. pier where motor boats were tied up and kept year round. Date Palm Beach was the place where the official electric timing clock for boat racing was first used.

June and Henry moved down in 1934 to help with the family business. Mrs. Eilers served meals in the rustic community building and loyally used Coachella Valley products-grapefruit juice squeezed to order, date bread with salads and date torte for dessert. The largest crowds came when Camp Young was in operation, during World War U. Eilers said, "We announced that all soldiers could have free swims and we had as many as 500 men a day, with a total of about 150,000 taking advantage of our offer. Patton himself often visited the resort. Incidentally, I got a son-in-law out of the deal, Sgt. Cameron Hall of the Signal Corps in Gen. Patton's Army. He married my daughter, June."

National attention had focused on Date Palm Beach many times. Several movies were filmed there--"Five Graves to Cairo" and parts of "They Were Expendable" and at least two Abbot and Costello pictures. Film stars entertained by the Eilers included Al Jolson, Brian Ahern,

and Ronald Coleman. In 1946, Eilers sold his resort to C. Roy Hunter, and moved to his ranch near Mecca. Hunter renamed the location Desert Beach, and a new dream was given substance!

### **Desert Beach**

In a Desert Barnacle article of June 13, 1946, Hunter said, "We (his sons Robert and Kenneth Hunter, and J.S. Stein) are just a bunch of ex-sailors who can't stay away from salt water, so we're going to 'go to sea' on Salton Sea at Eilers' Beach." Hunter himself was in the Navy when Teddy Roosevelt sent the United States Fleet around the world in 1907-08-09. His son, Robert Hunter, for years a cameraman with Fox Studios, was just out of the Navy, having served as a Chief Photographer's Mate. J. B. Stein, another associate in the beach project, was a Merchant Marine Captain. Hunter's other son, Kenneth, was a technician with Technicolor. Hunter, himself, who owned the Royal Date Garden in Indio, was one of the nation's most celebrated cinematographers. He served 20 years as chief cameraman for Universal and then 10 years in the same capacity with Paramount pictures.

On a shopping trip to San Francisco, Hunter was in a ship chandler's office. Asked if he would like to buy a beautiful old wheel off a US battleship, he replied, "I would if you had the wheel off the battleship 'Nebraska', because I sailed around the world on her."

"I've got it," exclaimed the ship chandler. It was a beautiful mahogany and maple wheel with the nameplate "Nebraska" set in it. Hunter bought it and installed it in the clubhouse, renamed "The Wheelhouse." Hunter told the reporter covering his new purchase, "We are very enthusiastic about prospects for the beach down here. Salton Sea is destined to become one of the nation's greatest play spots." He certainly did his best to make it that. The Desert Beach Yacht Club had reciprocal privileges with other clubs up and down the coast. A card from the Portland Yacht Club is in the Historical Society files, attesting to the welcome of Desert Beach Yacht Club members at its Club House and Moorings.

But success eluded the Hunter enterprise. Fed by run-off agricultural waste water, and floodwaters from a series of unusually heavy rain storms, the sea began to rise in 1948, and by 1953 the improvements at Desert Beach were awash. When Hunter had begun improving Desert Beach, the fear was that the sea would recede, so he built his clubhouse as close to the sea as possible and dredged out a small harbor. Buildings were mostly of cement block construction, on cement slab floors, and not movable. Title to the land included a guarantee by the Imperial Irrigation District, given in 1915, that the sea would not rise above 238 feet below sea level. In May of 1950, the sea was more than a foot above that mark.

C. Roy Hunter died before a lawsuit brought against the Coachella Valley County Water District and the Imperial Irrigation District was decided. Superior Court Judge Bertram Janes awarded \$188,000 to the Desert Beach owners in 1960. Judge Janes held that the flooding from 1951 to 1955 was 39% the fault of the CV district and 61% the fault of the Imperial Irrigation District. Salton Sea was referred to in the national press as "The Cruel Sea."

Eiler's Date Palm Beach Resort, established in 1927 was the forerunner of Salton Sea resorts. It flourished until the rising sea took its toll.

North Shore Beach and Yacht Club, opened in 1962, was the show piece of what was to be a 2 million dollar marine paradise - the largest marina in Southern California

#### **North Shore Beach and Yacht Club**

It was 1958 when developer Ray Ryan and Trav Rogers bought the land that is now the town of North Shore. They began selling plots of land for homes and in 1960 began building the North Shore Motel and the North Shore Beach and Yacht Club, which opened in 1962. It was described as a \$2 million marine paradise with one of the largest marinas in Southern California. Gladys Fei, publisher of North Shore News, says that for the next decade, North Shore was a "swinging" place. Ray Ryan's oil millions backed a very unique Yacht Club in the middle of the desert. Mrs. Fei says, "This was a very, very popular place. The Beach Boys would come out. And Jerry Lewis had a boat here, and so did the Marx Brothers. There were big boat races, and parties and dances. Clubs and organizations from all over the Coachella Valley came for meetings and parties."

Like most of the other locations around the Salton Sea, fluctuating water levels and flooding created problems. In 1981, North Shore suffered from a severe flood which wiped out the jetty at the yacht club, making it impossible for boats to dock there. The main clubhouse was closed and has yet to reopen. Homes dot the hills above the water, their residents either retired or commuted to valley cities for work. The views are spectacular and it remains to be seen whether or not a solution to the high salinity problem will bring back this once glamorous resort.

#### **Salton Sea State Park**

Continuing down the eastern side of the sea, just south of North Shore, Salton Sea State Park comes into view. At its dedication on February 12, 1955, it was noted that it was the second

largest in the state, and would probably be the greatest single spur to the development of the Salton Sea as a great inland recreational area.

Curiously enough, comments made at a 1947 Coachella Valley Union High School faculty picnic at the approximate site of the present park headquarters on Hwy 111, led to action by the Coachella Valley Sports League that culminated in the establishment of this new state park. Forty years before, in 1907, a commission formed to study the sea concluded gravely that the sea would gradually evaporate and cease to exist in 18 years. Scientists are willing to admit that there was an error in the original calculations! Efforts by Coachella Valley groups, and the Riverside Board of Supervisors to interest the State Park Commission and the Division of Beaches and Parks succeeded. It was in November 1949 that authorization to negotiate for lands was given. The original development consisted of 510 acres leased from Imperial Irrigation District. Water was obtained from the All-American Canal, through an agreement with the Coachella Valley County Water District. Work on the park started in July 1952 and on February 12, 1955 more than 1,000 people attended ceremonies dedicating the new park. At the time of the dedication the park service had 1,880 acres under lease, plans for extension into Imperial County and was envisioning a sea shore frontage of 17 miles. Since that time, facilities have been continuously improved and expanded, and a truly wonderful recreational opportunity has been placed at the disposal of visitors year-round. Almost 50 years later, this dream for the sea continues to give pleasure to thousands of visitors every year.

#### **Bombay Beach**

Typical of several private developments along both the east and west sides of the sea is Bombay Beach, about fourteen miles south of the state park. A permanent community of small beach homes and mobile homes is swelled in the winter by retirees in motor homes seeking the sun and good fishing. Their dreams are fulfilled here.

#### **Salton City**

Probably the most ambitious of the Salton Sea developments is Salton City, founded in the late 1950s by A Penn Phillips, fresh from successfully developing the high desert community of Hesperia. Busloads of prospective residents were brought in to see and buy in this state-of-the-art planned community. It was described as a "wondrous playground of swimming pools, beaches, harbors and golf courses." An article in the Indio Daily News of September 29, 1964 states that \$20,000,000 had already been spent establishing a vast network of roads, sewer lines, power lines and water mains. Some 15,000 persons already owned property in this new city

according to the Holly Corporation, which took over the project in 1961. The first nine holes of a championship golf course were opened in 1963, and construction of the second nine holes was begun. A brochure pictured professional golfer, Tommy Bolt, on the course as one of the professional tournaments was underway there. Golfers Desi Arnaz, Harry James, Johnny Weissmuller, Johnny Dawson and Ellsworth Vines all praised the golf course. Showpiece of the development was the \$500,000 Salton Bay Yacht Club. A 3,500 foot landing strip was built immediately as part of a proposed complete airport. Commercial buildings including a large motel, restaurant, service stations and stores were built. District News, published by the Imperial Irrigation District, in their June 1959 issue, concluded in their article entitled "Miracle Salton City by the Desert Sea", that every factor indicated that Salton City's growth should continue to accelerate, resulting in the most popular sea resort in all of Southern California.

It was not to be. Although many lots were sold, few homes were built. The fluctuating sea, and the condition of the water made it less attractive to water-skiers, swimmers and fishermen. In the 1970s, Linda Dresser, widow of developer Arthur Dresser, took over the former Holly House restaurant and turned it into a casino, catering to the 10,000 plus motorists passing Salton City daily on Highway 86. A newspaper article of March 21, 1976 called the casino a shot in the arm for Salton City, but the stimulus was only temporary. The casino sits abandoned and the yacht club is in ruins, partly underwater. Salton City's present day residents love their relatively small community, where a Par 3 Golf Course is a popular replacement for the tournament courses envisioned by the original developer, but the city is a far cry from the dream of M. Penn Phillips. The setting remains as beautiful as ever, and when the time is right, Salton City may become all it was intended to be.

#### Salton Sea Beach-Helen's Beach House

Helen Burns first came to the Salton Sea as a child. Her father had purchased property on the western shore in the 1920s and in a 1985 interview she told a reporter, "I never saw anything so beautiful. The sun was shining, the sand was white, and I knew this was the place I wanted to live." After graduating from San Diego State and living several years in Hawaii, she returned in 1947 to her father's land by the sea. There was no electricity and water had to be hauled from two miles away, but she and her two daughters, aged 4 and 6 months old, made it home. Helen's Beach House grew from a small snack and souvenir stand she planted at the edge of the sea. She told of driving a beat-up Chevrolet truck to Indio for ice-a 28 mile run. She said, "I used to throw wet towels and sheets over the lids to keep them cool." Back at the beach, it took hours to chisel the huge ice blocks into small chunks that cooled the soft drinks at her snack shack.



Many of Helen's first customers were undocumented workers from Mexico, making their way into the valley to find work. In the 1950s tourists and real estate speculators began coming to the sea, and Helen's Beach House was the place to go. There was a steady stream of cars pulling boats and trailers to Helen's on Friday night. It had grown into a restaurant, nightclub and boat marina. Helen threw parties for the crowds. There were luaus, jam sessions, beauty contests, long-distance swimming events and speedboat races. People came in their RVs. Water skiers flocked to Helen's place to participate in the competitions she arranged, with as many as 150 contestants taking part. In 1958 she began to publish a small newspaper, the Salton Seafarer, designed to bring the communities around the sea closer together and to keep the image of the sea before the public. Anything that had to do with fighting for the Salton Sea, she did.

Three times the Beach House moved inland because the sea lapped over its foundations. When it burned on June 28, 1979, her daughter, Donna, a staff writer for the Press-Enterprise, described the first hours after the fire in these words, "In the first hours after the fire, Helen did consider giving up. When she returned to the rubble of her restaurant, she saw her usual beach crowd sitting on burned benches drinking beer. Friends and neighbors, among them retired builders and electricians, had dumped loads of sand in the flooded areas of her beach front, built an awning of palm fronds onto a small temporary building, hooked up electricity and water and brought in a sound system. Old-timers, dancing in the sand under the stars the night after the fire said it was just like Helen's place in the '40s."

Helen Burns died of a heart attack on May 31, 1994, delaying a trip to the hospital until she completed work on the June edition of her newspaper. "The last thought on her mind was to get the paper out in time for the election", said her daughter, Donna. More than 300 friends and family gathered for a memorial service at the water's edge at Salton Sea Beach, on the sands Helen loved, to bid goodbye to this energetic, dedicated lady.

## **Desert Shores**

Just north of Salton Sea Beach on the west side of the sea, is the community now called Desert Shores. If you happen to look for this spot on an old map, what you will see is Fish Springs, so named for the small fish that surfaced in the wells there. Developers in the early '50s, before good fishing was established in the sea, thought the appeal of boating and water-skiing was a better drawing card. They changed the name and promoted the area as an attractive weekend get-away location. When corvina and other game fish were established in the sea, Desert Shores became very popular as a fishing spot. A five-fingered marina was built at the water's

edge, and mobile homes lined its waterfront lots. A residential community was developed between the sea and Highway 99 (now called Highway 86).

The property up the slope from the sea has continued to be a safe home to commuters from jobs in the upper Coachella Valley, as well as retirees and weekenders. Unfortunately, the waterfront property has suffered from the rising of the sea. Wind-whipped waves, crashing over the concrete block embankments built by residents to protect themselves, became an all too familiar sight. Desert Shores participates in the Community Services District which includes Salton City and Salton Sea Beach, and its residents, too, look forward to the day when fluctuations of the water level and the high salinity problems of the sea will be things of the past, and this beautiful area will enjoy well-deserved popularity.

### **And the dream go on--**

While the communities mentioned here represent concrete expressions of the dreams people have dreamed for this unique inland sea, many, many others have expressed ideas for its preservation and use. The Coachella Valley Historical Society received in 1994 a box of clippings and correspondence from Miss Mary Taberoff, a resident of Los Angeles in the 1960s and 70s, and the owner of property near the sea. It was a fascinating account of her dreams for the sea and her persistence in seeking help from everyone from local residents and officials to President Lyndon Johnson and members of his government. She envisioned a four-lane highway around the sea, sand moved down from the upper valley to create beaches, planted to native palm trees, and elaborate hotels with helicopter service to Palm Springs. She was greatly concerned with the environmental impact of energy development at the south end of the sea, and with the deteriorating quality of the water. Fortunately, in 1994, Saving the Sea is again in the public eye, and hopefully action will be taken to turn dreams into reality for this great natural resource.

**READY FOR REGATTA--**Sponsors of events in the 14th annual national championship Salton Sea Regatta, which will be held October 16, 17, and 18, are shown here with the trophies which they will award to winners. They are (from left) Roy C. Ruby of the Pen-Go-Inn Motel; Joseph Zaboy, Valley Motors; Morris Garth, Morris Lincoln-Mercury; Charles Gillett, Plaza Hotel; Kenny strickland, Union Oil Station; Helen Burns, Salton Sea Beach Resorts; J. Garwood, Garwood's Oasis Station; Kay Olesen, Imperial Motors; Frank Cavanaugh, Cavanaugh Electric; Charles J. Wameling, Desert Bank; Howard Carr, president of the Indio Lions Club, and Mrs.



Roy C. Ruby. Two other donors, Hilma Lawrence and Maurice W. Johnson of the Sans Souci Restaurant, are not shown. --Gillman Photo

## **Chapter 10**

### **SPEEDBOATS IN THE DESERT**

"Low barometric pressure and greater water density make the Salton Sea the fastest body of water in the world for speedboat racing," proclaimed an article in *National Motorist* for January-February, 1950. The article goes on to say that during October a Speedboat Regatta, sponsored by the American Power Boat Association, is held at Desert Beach, the Sea's principal resort. That's 20 years after a Salton Sea Race Program made the front page of the *Coachella Submarine* of December 13, 1929. Much of the credit goes to a small group of local enthusiasts. These "dry land sailors" started racing on the sea, then took their boats to Elsinore and elsewhere, and sailors from those places started coming to the sea. There were no graded roads down to the sea, and just getting to the water was an adventure. Mecca was the "jumping off point", and Mecca farmers were called upon with regularity to pull out stalled cars. Locals also laid out the racing courses. Ted Gordon rigged up a raft with his own version of a pile driver and with two transit men on the beach to center them, the volunteer workers drove two inch pipes in water ten to fifteen feet deep to make two of the best courses in the country. The Salton Sea Boat Race of December 14, 1929 was particularly exciting because rough waters at regattas at Lake Elsinore and Long Beach that year had kept down speed and there was great expectation that records would fall at Salton Sea. Prizes included the \$450 Mackay Circuit Trophy, the \$400 trophies awarded by Richfield Oil Co., and the \$500 Warren S. Ripple prize, offered for the first Johnson motor to make 50 miles per hour. Both days promised to be busy ones. A loud speaker truck from one of the large oil companies was to be there to announce results as soon as the boats crossed the finish line. Boy Scouts would serve refreshments. This was to be the first race in which Eastern boats and pilots had entered competition with the West, and rivalry was expected to be keen. A follow-up newspaper article of December 16 reported that about 2,000 people attended the event, "mostly outside people with not as many locals as expected. There were five new world records set at this Salton Sea event.

Local racers were active in competition outside the valley. In the same newspaper which reported the upcoming regatta on December 14 and 15, 1929, there was a front page article entitled, "Covington Wins Famous Trophy." Mr. Covington was reported to have the coveted O.K. Hunsaker Trophy, valued at \$300 on display in the window of the C.O. Murphy sporting

goods store in Coachella, so that the public may look it over, and see that local yachtsmen are on the job in the outboard racing game.

Don Pearson recalls personally the early days of boat racing on the Salton Sea in these words: "It was in the late 1920s that hydroplane racing was innovated on the Salton Sea. The low altitude was thought to be ideal for carburetion and there was talk that this was the 'fastest body of water in the world.'

"Three local men became involved in hydroplane racing and the Salton Sea Yacht Club was organized to sponsor these races. My dad, A.L. Pearson, had his grocery store, C.L. Covington had the meat market and C.E. Murphy had a feed store. My dad named his boat the "Desert Kid", C.L. Covington was the "Diamond C" and Murphy was the "Shamrock". They raced at Lake Elsinore as well as Salton Sea.

"There were some "monied" people traveling this circuit and it soon became apparent in 1929 that small business-men did not belong. Loretta Tumbull, whose father was a judge in Monrovia, was perhaps the first girl to receive recognition as a hydroplane racer. Rodney Pantages used to show up with his wife, driving their "Cord". Bobrich, of Bobrich's Ammonia also sponsored boats. Perhaps the most amusing race was one in which my brother, in our relatively slow boat, nearly won from two of the most noted racers. They became so intent on each other that they missed the course, but they recovered in time to correct their mistake and just beat my brother by a few yards.

"In an attempt to break the mile straightaway record, my dad built a Sea Sled. It was rectangular in shape and very small, light and tapered in a manner that when it began planing, only the very back of the boat would be in the water. He constructed the bottom of fibre-board, which was easily shaped. The day of the testing arrived and we were on the Hwy 99 side of the Salton Sea. The only steering mechanism was the shifting of one's weight from side to side. A couple of trial runs were satisfactory, so, with stop watch in hand, he tried it for fun. It was at the half mile post, nearly in front of us, that part of the bottom came off. A geyser erupted probably 30 feet in the air. The boat began sinking almost immediately, but fortunately in shallow water. Dad jumped in and held the motor up out of the water. When we waded out to help him, his stop watch was in his mouth!

"I recall two occasions of near tragedy on the Salton Sea. One Sunday two or three members of the Covington and Pearson families boarded the launch of Eddie Ruoff for a trip to Pelican Islands at the lower end of the sea. It was necessary to anchor the larger boat some distance from shore and commute in a small boat which was then towed behind. After visiting the

sandy islands and observing the waterfowl, we started the return trip just about dark. Ray Covington and I had been riding on the prow of the boat when the wind suddenly came up. The sea became very rough and we joined the rest of the group underneath the canvas. Before we made it back, waves over 8 feet were crashing on us. It was a frightening experience.

"On another occasion, three hydroplanes left from the south side and were going to the salt works, which could be identified by poles and other landmarks. I was riding with my dad in his boat. On the return trip, again after dark, we had no lights but Curly Murphy had a spotlight on his boat. We were ahead of Murphy and about half way back when he increased his speed to take the lead. With his spotlight on us he ran over the back of Dad's boat, on an angle, and knocked the motor loose from the transom. Dad grabbed it and when Murphy circled back with the spotlight, we were able to reconnect the motor and it still ran. Our only guess was that he was holding elsewhere when he ran us down."

The temporary motor boat club which had been sponsoring Salton Sea events formed a permanent organization in 1929. The organizational meeting followed a dinner served at the Desert Tavern. Officers elected were C.O. Murphy, Commodore; A.L. Pearson, Vice Commodore; A.T. Sclater, Rear-Commodore; R.K. Widdecomb, Sec. Treas.; Board of Directors, C.L. Covington, L.J. Yost, T.H. Rosenberger, H.P. Shumway and H.W. Postlethwaite. Initiation fee was fixed at \$5 and dues at \$6 per year.

At first the boating fraternity from elsewhere tried to get the Salton Sea disqualified as being unfair. To this, George Ames replied, "It's water, isn't it?" By the mid-thirties Kent Hitchcock from Balboa and others popularized it sufficiently to attract national attention and backing by the National Power Boat Association. Then the best boats and drivers in the country were lining up to participate.

The 1948 Regatta was sponsored by the newly organized Desert Beach Yacht Club. It was a massive undertaking for a small club, and the files turned over to the CV Historical Society tell a remarkable story of a club with dues of \$10, per year and fifty members putting on an event of national importance. M-G-M newsreel and Life Magazine and scores of other magazines and papers sent reporters. The files reveal letters to Paramount Pictures and Warner Brothers requesting the presence of their film crews, starlets, or whatever assistance they could render to lend glamour to the events. Instead of money, the prizes were trophies, and local businesses and organizations provided them. The Official Program for the 1948 Regatta, October 15-18, 1948 noted that Event 30, scheduled for 3:30 PM on October 17th, was "The Gold Cup Class." It went on to say, "Gold Cup Record: Guy Lombardo. Speed: 118.229 mph for one mile on the Salton

Sea. These boats are among the fastest in the world. They are up to forty feet in length, weigh up to 2 1/2 tons, and are powered by motors developing as high as 1500 horsepower. They are temperamental, dangerous and spectacular. It is not uncommon for boats of this class to clear the water for distances of sixty to eighty feet. On these occasions, only the perfect balance and ballast of the craft, together with the driver's skill will keep them from capsizing ... Trophies by Glenn Gurley Buick, Indio."

The trophies were called "cheap" by some of the winners. "Neither the businesses, nor the yacht club members were to blame", stated letters of apology to winners, written by Kay Olesen. He went on to explain that this was the first year the Desert Beach Yacht Club had been in charge, and they simply didn't know what was expected. A telegram saved in the yacht club files, dated October 4, 1949 reads,

"K OLESON=IMPERIAL MOTORS=INDIO CALIF= SENDING LARGE CUP EXPRESS TOO LARGE FOR GREYHOUND ... ED BATHKE"

Apparently the 1949 trophies were of adequate size!

A local newspaper reported just before the highly successful 1949 Speed Boat Regatta, "The unlimited world speedboat record tottered precariously today with the disclosure that a flock of the nation's 'hottest' Gold Cuppers were committed to the ninth annual Salton Sea Regatta October 7,8,9, and 10 at Desert Beach. Heading the announcement made at a meeting of the Desert Beach Yacht Club last night at the Indio Hotel was the news that Henry J. Kaiser, Jr. had given his assurance that his famed industrialist father would enter two great boats--'Hot Metal' and 'Aluminum I'.

"Both of the craft are radical in design. Powered by Allison airplane engines, skilled engineers have made corrections that they hope will blast away the present world standards on the course 33 miles away from the Kaiser iron mine at Eagle Mountain. 'Aluminum' is now in Detroit, while the other craft is up at Oakland.

"The American Power Boat Association has assured the club that automobile magnate Horace Dodge of Detroit will also have a topnotch entry in the regatta. The Dodge colors will be flown by either 'My Sweetie' or 'Delphine X'. These boats each pack two 710 horsepower Allison engines. 'My Sweetie' won both the Gold Cup and National Sweepstakes this year at Detroit and carries its propeller midships.

"Skip-a-long', already entered by Stanley Dollar of the Dollar Steamship Lines of San Francisco, will not appear at the regatta. The club was informed that the boat, winner of the Hamsworth trophy at Detroit, is now at the bottom of Lake Tahoe.

"Another Lake Tahoe casualty was 'Hurricane IV,' prospective entry of Morlan Visel, multimillionaire Los Angeles attorney. It had broken many Gold Cup records. However, Visel flew down to Desert Beach in his private airplane Tuesday and said he would bring three of the new 48 cubic inch class which will run the first national championships here in competition with twelve other boats from Texas.

"Such Crust I' entered by Jack Schafer of Detroit holds the All-American class record of 126 MPH set at Gull Lake, Florida. Its drivers will be two brothers --Gene and Dan Arena. The Schafer entry was edged out by "Skip-a-long" for the Hamsworth Trophy this year. The American Power Boat Association has warned the Yacht Club that it must be prepared to handle 300 entries for the four-day regatta."

Coachella Valley's own Dr. Louis Novotny was always a popular competitor and in the 1950 regatta he drove his Pacific One Design hydroplane "Cherub II" to a new five-mile competitive mark, 54.545 mph.

The 1950 Salton Sea Regatta was sponsored by the Southern California Speedboat Club, The Los Angeles Speedboat Association, and Roy Hunter, of Desert Beach. The program states "the Regatta this year is being conducted on an emergency basis. When it appeared that cancellation of this year was certain, last minute arrangements were made to get the races on the water. The courses at Desert Beach are famed ... More records have been established here than at any other course in the world in the history of boat racing."

The 1951 Regatta, again held at Desert Beach, called "The South Seas of the Desert" on their letterhead, resulted in 21 World Records. Subsequent boat races were held at other beaches, and ultimately on the west side of sea at places like Helen Bums' Salton Sea Beach. It was not all serious, either. The Daily Enterprise of January 5, 1970 had headlines proclaiming, "Salton Sea's bathtub race turns out to be a runaway." A bathtub race it was-and according to Bill Bryan of the sponsoring Indio Jaycees, "we want to keep it loose so people can have fun." The exact number of official entries could not be determined, but the obvious winner, Danny Wagar skimmed the 25 miles to the east shore and back in one hour and four minutes. For his pains, he received a gold-plated plumber's friend and one-fourth of all entry fees. The second and third place finishers didn't come in until nearly two and one half hours later. Thirty entrants had been expected, but only nine tubs actually started. Technical difficulties plus second thoughts about actually taking a bathtub out on Salton Sea apparently took their pre-race toll!

Swimming and boating attracted crowds from all over Southern California and was popular with locals as well. Pictured is Coachella Valley High School coed Peggy Rue Julian with the ship's wheel which became a focal point in "The Wheel House".

## **Chapter 11**

### **FISHING THE SALTON SEA**

The fishermen who first used the earlier manifestations of the Salton Sea were the Indians. Each time the Colorado River turned the Salton Sink into a freshwater lake, the fish swept along with the flood waters prospered for a time and were a food source for the native people of the area.

Indian legends and oral history tell of fishing on the shores of a great body of water that "little by little" went away.

At the west end of Avenue 66, near the Valerie Jean corner, there are unusual circular formations of rocks 50 to 100 feet up the rocky slopes below the travertine covered rocks that mark the old beachline. There are actually several levels of these so-called "fish traps", indicating that there may have been tides which regularly raised and lowered the level of the sea and made the traps effective fishing nets. This theory is disputed by those who believe that the circles are simply the foundations of homes. The tide theory causes one to have to believe that the rock circles were built at a much earlier time, when the sea was really the upper end of the Gulf of California, subject to ocean tides. Current wisdom holds that they are definitely man-made structures and probably were fish traps, flooded in an unknown manner.

The fish the Indians caught were probably those carried in by the Colorado River. Even today, salty as the sea is, there are a few carp, blue gill and catfish found in Salton Sea around the freshwater inlets such as the Whitewater drain and the Alamo and New Rivers.

Mullet from the Gulf of California used to migrate up the Colorado River. When Imperial Dam was constructed the mullet's path was blocked and most mullet died out. The commercial mullet fishery petered out in 1953.

The State Department of Fish and Game recognized the recreational opportunity offered by this vast inland sea and as early as 1929 introduced striped bass from the San Joaquin River and in 1930, from San Francisco Bay. None were ever recovered. Pile worms and mudsuckers from San Diego Bay were introduced to provide food for the bass. Even though the bass didn't make it, the pile worms and mudsuckers did and they proved in-valuable as the effort continued to find a



game fish for the sea. It has been suggested that the pile worm is the basis on which the whole food chain is built and without it, the chain would collapse.

In 1934, 15,000 silver salmon fingerlings were stocked in Salton Sea, and they all disappeared.

A major effort to establish a sport fishery began in 1948. Freshwater Fisheries Biologists Willis Evans and Phil Douglas and Marine Biologist John Fitch led the program. In 1950 they decided that introducing one species at a time was too time-consuming. They moved to plant every popular species that they could net out of the Gulf of California. The fish were transported by tank truck to the Salton Sea.

Gulf croaker, orange-mouth corvina and gulf-fin corvina were successfully transplanted and they proceeded to multiply. The small gulf croaker became an excellent food for the corvina. Less successful were halibut, perch, smelt, anchovies, sardines, tortuava, squid, clams, mussels and two kinds of oysters.

By the end of 1951, 34,000 fish of 35 different saltwater species, had been transported from the Gulf of California and planted in the Salton Sea. This was the year that sargo were first successfully transplanted into the sea, and sargo became the second saltwater game fish to thrive in the sea.

A UCLA research group came into the picture in 1954. The Department of Fish and Game could only determine that corvina and gulf croaker had survived and they needed help. Dr. Boyd Walker, Dr. Lars Carpalon, and Dr. Richard Whitney, and Biologist Richard Linsley went to work on the project. A total of 2,289 corvina were transplanted into the sea. By March of 1957, the researchers were netting 2 inch and 3 inch baby corvina, obviously hatched in the Salton Sea. A baby sargo was netted in a beach seine in the fall of 1957 and the biologists were greatly encouraged. By October, large numbers of corvina, weighing 1 1/2 pounds each were showing up in research nets and the Salton Sea population was estimated at 1,000,000 fish.

Now the problem was how to catch them. Enthusiastic anglers found that a wobbling spoon tossed into the shallow waters around Bombay Beach and the mouth of Salt Creek produced catches averaging about 10 pounds per fish. Live mudsuckers worked well in deeper waters in midsummer.

In September 1958 an employee at the US Salton Sea Base took the first known catch of sargo with fish up to 12 inches in length.

A recurring problem at Salton Sea is the summer phenomenon of decaying organic material at the bottom of the sea creating a "green tide" situation. Resulting oxygen depletion kills the gulf croaker and other fish as well, and their bodies line the beaches.

An on-going fisheries management program has made Salton Sea one of the best and liveliest fishing areas on the West Coast. The largest corvina caught by 1972 was 32.6 pounds. Many 20 pound fish are caught. There is no closed season so corvina are caught every day of the year. The best fishing is from boats, but a wind warning is given. Winds come up quickly and unexpectedly on this vast but shallow inland sea. Even experienced locals have lost their lives in a sudden storm.

## **Chapter 12**

### **WHERE BARNACLES GROW ON THE SAGE**

John Hilton, writing for *The Desert Magazine* in the early 1940s, remarks on the paradoxes that are the Salton Sea. It is a sea below sea-level. On its shores you can collect wood that sinks and rocks that float. At its southern end are geysers of hot mud near gas wells that are used to produce one of the coldest substances on earth--dry ice. Now add barnacles on the sage and salt bush that line its shores. Where in the world did barnacles come from?

Hilton recounts some of the strange sights which World War II brought to the Coachella Valley, not the least of which was the appearance of a large boat making its way slowly down what was then called Highway 99, at the Valerie Jean corner. His own art studio and shop were directly across the street. The boat was being drawn by a giant truck, which was heating up and the driver stopped in the parking lot to let it cool off. Hilton asked the driver why in the world he was pulling a boat across the desert in the middle of summer, and the answer was, "I'm taking it to the Navy base."

That still puzzled Hilton, thinking he meant the base in San Diego. In complete disgust the driver explained, "Ain't you heard of a naval base right here on the desert? And don't go asking me why. I'm a peacable man but I've answered more fool questions since daylight than I've heard in 12 years in the heavy trucking business."

There had been vague rumors that the navy was using the Salton Sea for certain training and there were even occasional flying boats circling the valley, but most residents thought the mention of a naval base on the Salton Sea was a gag to be classed along with the report of a German sub in Lake Mead, back of Boulder Dam.

It soon became apparent that the Navy was definitely moving in. Other boats trundled past Mr. Hilton's studio and more and more Navy planes flew over the valley. The Eilers family at Date Palm Beach were surprised one day to have a big P.B.Y. circle, land and taxi to the end of their pier. In a short time, this was also considered a "Navy Base." When a plane seemed to be

heading their way, Mrs. Eilers and her daughter, June, would put a coffee cake in the oven and brew a pot of coffee and by the time the flying boat was anchored, the refreshments were ready for the crew. Flying boats came and went, and small craft towing targets could be seen out to sea. Navy officers lounged in the small dining room. One valley rancher who came down for a swim remarked, "Anything can happen now. It wouldn't surprise me if barnacles started growing on the sagebrush." And that is just what happened! Actually, pieces of brush, washed out to sea became home to the tiny barnacles, and shrubs at the water-line offered a place for the barnacles to attach themselves and go through a sort of metamorphosis. Once attached, they stay there for life.

There were two theories as to how the barnacles got there. Some held that they came in on the boats or bouys that were hauled over from the coast. Others blamed the seaplanes. One young flyer told Mr. Hilton that it was not uncommon for the R.B.Y. boats to pump their bilges in the Salton Sea. The water might have come from any point in the ocean from San Diego Bay to the South Seas. The barnacle larvae might have survived between the fibers of a wet coil of heavy rope hastily brought from San Diego. However they came-they stayed and they thrived. Today barnacles line the beaches, cover rocks and pilings and generally make recreational use of the sea more difficult.

Where was this not-to-be-believed naval base in the desert? Little was written about it in World War II era newspapers, probably for security reasons. The naval base itself was located on the southwest shore of Salton Sea, four miles east of the present Highway 86. It was in the Salton Sea Wildlife Refuge at a point previously designated as Sandy Beach. It covered an area of 81 square miles, two-thirds of which was over water. The nearest town was Westmoreland, 27 miles away. Indio was 47 miles to the north.

An area just east of the headquarters buildings is reported to be the location where the movie "Wake Island" was filmed. Buildings and a landing strip constructed for the film were used for several years afterward. The base was headquarters for a torpedo and skip bombing range. Local residents remember finding scrap lumber washed up on beaches on the east side of the sea, probably from targets and other construction projects at the base.

In September, 1946, the base was taken over by the Sandia Corporation, and operated for the Atomic Energy Commission. The Salton Sea Base, as it was called, was used primarily as a bombing range for non-explosive ballistic tests. Ground instrumentation determined time of fall of the bomb, its trajectory, and its impact point. It also provided for telemetering of bomb performance, filming of impact and in-flight motion pictures, and the collection of meteorological data needed to analyze and interpret test results.

When World War II came to a close in August of 1945, development and production of rockets was a massive enterprise in the US and Great Britain, but the Allies had nothing even approaching the technology already in use in Germany. Recognition of the potential of rocket power by the Allied powers came too late in the war to catch up with German developments. Technical intelligence teams followed close behind front line troops as they moved across Germany. One of the prime target of the Allies was Peenemunde, on the Baltic Sea. There the top planning and technical staff was headed by Major General Walter Dornberger and Wernher von Braun, who fled south in the last few days of the war in order to surrender to US troops. Thus the priceless experience of the German rocket effort became available to the Allies. According to Mr. Stuart Ward, a valley resident who lived and worked at Salton Sea Base, the optical equipment used at Salton Sea Base was some of that captured from the Germans-- extremely accurate Askania cameras--and also high speed 35 mm Mitchells. These and other special purpose cameras enabled the ground observers to record events of a very fast action and short time duration, too fast for the human eye. Planes from the Air Force Special Weapons Center and the Naval Air Special Weapons Facility performed the drops. A variety of instruments were used to receive coded information transmitted by automatic electronic devices installed within a falling device. When this data was decoded and coordinated, it was possible to develop a complete report on behavior of equipment within the bomb as well as certain physical phenomena. Instrument stations were located on the land area and a target was installed approximately 7000 feet offshore. Technical facilities were operated by Sandia Corporation of Albuquerque, New Mexico. It was reported that space capsule parachutes, drone airplanes, and Nike missiles were tested at Salton Sea Base. Some of the activities are still on the classified list.

A small city was built for the 100 regular employees who manned the facility when it opened in 1946. One-third were directly concerned with technical activities and the remaining two-thirds provided the necessary services and administrative assistance. San Felipe Lodge and small homes and apartments provided housing for personnel, and there was bus service to Indio, Brawley, Westmorland and El Centro. Children of employees were transported by bus to schools in Westmoreland and Brawley. Residents enjoyed a variety of recreational facilities including a swimming pool, tennis courts, a ball park, billiard room, fishing and various crafts and hobbies. The base had its own fire department and a tight security system.

Salton Sea Base suffered from the rise of the Salton Sea in the 1950s. They constructed a dike 3,400 feet long, at a cost of about \$400,000, to protect the buildings and facilities. The dike was built in a horseshoe shape around the headquarters buildings, with the open side being the

higher ground to the West. It rested on an impervious clay formation 16 feet below the water level, and rose 12 feet above the surface, at a time when the surface of the sea was 236 feet below sea level. The embankment, faced with soil-cement, was expected to protect the facility for at least 10 years. But the sea did continue to rise, and today, in 1995, only vandalized buildings remain to remind us of the Salton Sea's part in developing the rocket technology which made our space program possible, and many of the spin-off benefits we enjoy in everyday life.

### **PART III WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE?**

#### **Chapter 13**

#### **RESTORING THE SALTON SEA**

Stories of a polluted Salton Sea are greatly exaggerated. Responsible sources have verified the fact that the sea is safe, with work still to be done to discover the cause of some unexplained bird deaths. The real problem is too much salt-carried in by irrigation water, and concentrated by the natural process of evaporation. Salinity has gone from 38,000 parts per million in 1965 to 45,000 ppm in 1993-perilous for fish reproduction. The Coachella and Imperial Valleys produce a large percentage of the fresh fruits and vegetables of the US, and farming would not be possible without a place to run-off the irrigation water used to carry away the excessive salts in the soils. It also is the basin which receives flood waters originating in the mountains that surround the valley, and from storms in the valley itself, but the sea would dry up if it were not replenished by irrigation water. Over the past 40 years many groups have suggested possible solutions. Several feasible plans have been developed, at considerable expense, but for lack of funds, none were ever implemented.

In the 1960s, an advisory committee chaired by the president of the Coachella Valley Water District produced a publication named the Salton Sea Project Federal-State Feasibility Report. The plan suggested then was to drain off portions of the sea--essentially construct in-sea impoundments of salt water, and make changes in the local drain water distribution to dilute and preserve as much of the remainder of the sea as possible. Had it been implemented in 1960, the cost would have been \$58 million. Another possibility was to construct a navigable canal from the Gulf of California to the sea. This plan would necessitate the approval of the Mexican government.

In the early 1980s a plan was proposed which would modify the in-sea impoundment to use the ponds of condensed brine to entrap solar heat which would be released to drive turbines to

produce electricity. In 1986 a Salton Sea Task Force, composed of 16 representatives from federal, state, county and local agencies, and appointed by the California Resources Agency, came up with similar solutions, but no funding, and the Task Force was disbanded in 1993.

In 1993 a Salton Sea Joint Powers Authority--with the ability to tax and to spend funds--was established. The board includes two directors each from the Coachella Valley Water District, the Imperial Irrigation District, and the counties of Riverside and Imperial. This is a very necessary first step. Most money must come from federal and state governments since the local tax bases cannot support such a massive project. It is thought likely that one of the previously identified solutions will probably be adopted. They range in cost now from less than 100 million to more than a billion dollars.

The Salton Sea has a fascinating history--and its best years can be those ahead. The good news is that restoring the sea is possible--it just takes money--and the will of the people to reclaim a beautiful natural resource for present and future generations to enjoy.