

“The Fishing Barges”

Sea fishing off the Southern California coast became quite popular in the early 1900s. Anglers lined the piers of coastal towns but envied the fishermen on boats who enjoyed better catches off shore. In the 1920s, fishing barges began to appear. Anchored in deeper waters, the barges provided great fishing but at a more modest cost than the sport boats.

The first San Diego barge opened for business in April 1926. For a \$2 ticket, fishermen were taken by rowboat from the beach at La Jolla Cove to a water taxi waiting off shore. The boat then whisked the customers to an old Navy coal barge named the *Ike Walton*. Moored in the kelp beds off La Jolla, the fishing was excellent, and soon the *Ike Walton* was joined by other barges.

The most successful competitor was an ex-kelp harvester, the *Point Loma*, owned by Captain Oakley Hall of the Star & Crescent Boat Company. Hall rebuilt the old harvester, adding a dining room, bunk beds for overnight stays, and a large fishing platform above the stern. The barge opened for fishing in April 1928 in the kelp beds at “Portuguese Point” off Point Loma.

After four successful seasons, Hall retired the aging barge and introduced the *New Point Loma* in April 1932. The replacement was the ex-*Glendale*: a 165-foot long, three-masted schooner. The 44-year-old schooner had formerly carried lumber and fished for halibut in the Bering Sea. Captain Hall found the *Glendale* working as barge in Santa Monica Bay and towed her to San Diego for renovation in his shipyard at the foot of Sampson Street.

Incorporating “every modern development in live bait fishing barges,” Hall cut down the bulwarks in the stern and widened the deck with a 1000 square foot fishing platform over the stern. The platform was only five or six feet from the water to allow easy gaffing of fish on the line. Bait wells below deck held 40 tons of circulating sea water and 100,000 live “racehorse” sardines. A battery of flood lights permitted night fishing.

Captain Hall’s transformation of the old schooner created “the best-appointed fishing barge in the business,” according to maritime historian Ed Ries. A coffee shop and dining room were attended by a chef and a hotel steward. There were staterooms below decks and bunks in two deck houses for thirty-five people. At the bow, the forecabin was fitted up as a “bachelor’s hall.” Overnight stays cost \$1.

On a promenade deck built above the deck houses, anglers sat at picnic tables below awnings for “a quiet retreat” from the frantic activity of the fishing platform. “The world’s finest fishing barge” accommodated 200 anglers. A day’s sport cost \$2 per person (children half-price) and included a 40-minute ride by water taxi from the Broadway Pier, free fishing tackle (not including a \$1 rental of rod and reel), and “all the live bait you want!”

The barge was anchored 1 ½ miles off Point Loma and opened for fishing on April 30, 1932. Quickly successful, the vessel became known for its “phenomenal runs of yellowtail.” On one occasion, 30 anglers hauled in 170 yellowtail and 10 white sea bass. Sensational fishing would be the norm in the days and seasons that followed. After the summer of 1935, the barge master tallied a season total of 4,551 yellowtail, 10,116 barracuda, several hundred sea bass and assorted bonito, mackerel, and even one marlin—caught after a dramatic 50-minute battle.

When each year's fishing season ended in September, Hall towed the *New Point Loma* back to the dock to spend the next seven months tied up at the end of a pier in San Diego Bay. Marine insurance required an on-board caretaker, a job that went to veteran shipwright and Hall employee, Omar Schmidt. The Schmidt family--wife Opal, and young daughters Ruth and Grace--enjoyed rent-free accommodations each winter from 1932 to 1935.

Ruth and Grace would always remember the joy of living aboard a floating house. The entire barge became their playground. Their father installed a trapeze in the dining room and a swing on the deck. They played for hours in the empty bait tanks. At night they slept in bunk beds. Listening to the chimes of the buoys, they rocked to sleep in the wake of passing Navy ships, while their parents entertained friends in the barge dining hall, which had become the family living room.

Opal Schmidt cooked the family meals on the barge's diesel stove, which also heated the bath water for a small tub. The stove showered the barge with soot, creating a continual cleaning problem, Ruth remembers.

A fond memory was a trip in March 1934, when the *New Point Loma* was towed to San Pedro for work on the hull. It was a foggy, eerie passage up the coast. The weather cleared for the return trip but the barge rolled heavily from the wakes of passing ships. The two girls remembered the fun of running from side to side as the barge rolled in the waves.

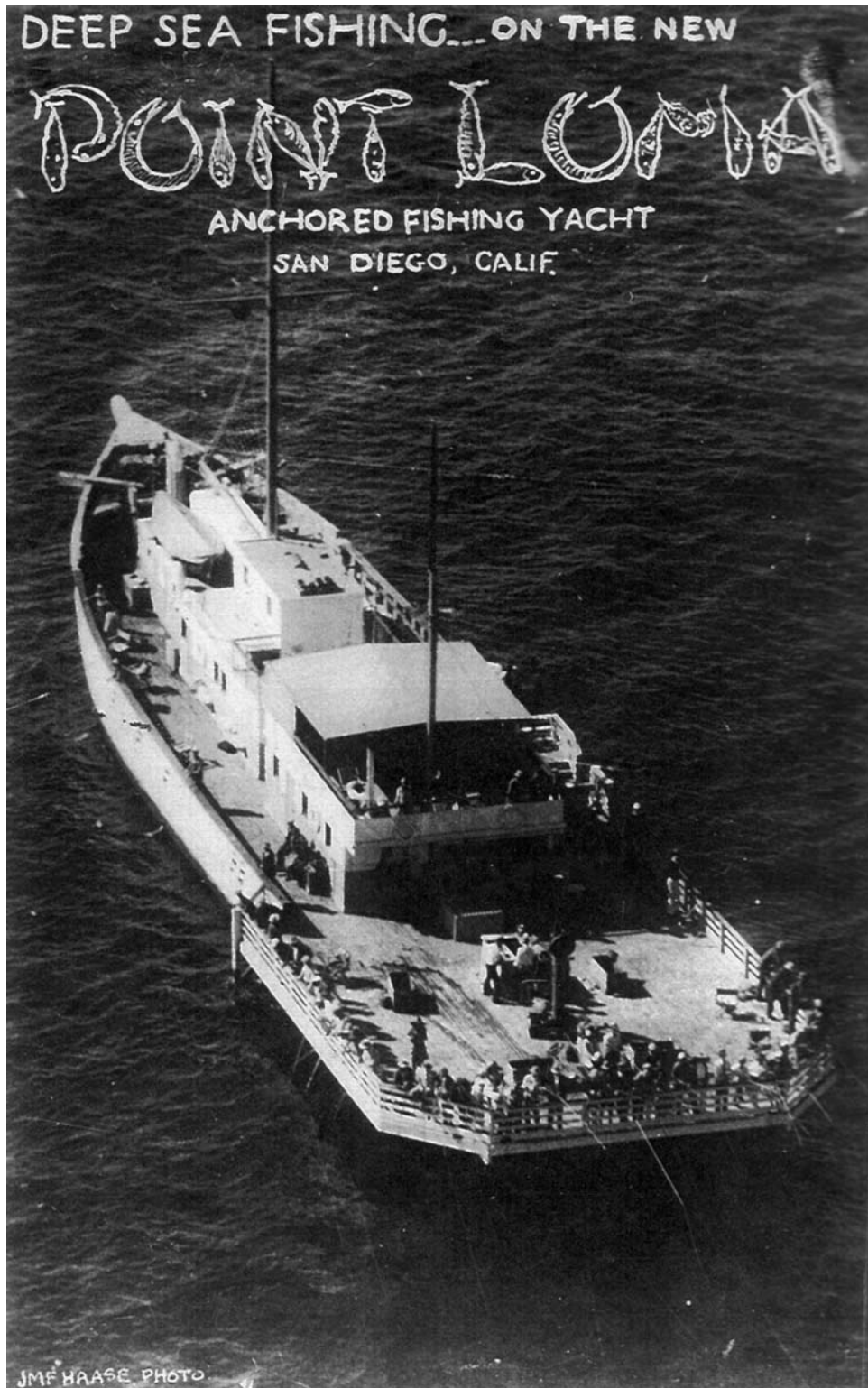
In February 1935, five-year-old Ruth fell from the gangplank into water. A man on a nearby pier heard the cries from Ruth's sister and mother and quickly dove into the bay to rescue her. The near-death experience unnerved the family. The Schmidt's moved onshore the next day and soon bought a tract of land in La Mesa.

By the late 1930s the fishing barge business in San Diego appeared in decline. Captain Hall sold the *New Point Loma* in 1940. The new owners anchored the barge off Long Beach, three miles off shore. Water taxis from shore sped to the barge ten times a day for a \$1.25 fare.



Advertisement from the *Los Angeles Times*.

During World War II, the *New Point Loma* was converted to a crane barge. She sank under tow on September 18, 1950 off Crescent City.



Promotional postcard for the *New Point Loma*. Photo courtesy of Ruth E. Embleton.

Originally published as "FISHING BARGES OFF SAN DIEGO COAST WERE QUITE A CATCH," by Richard Crawford in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Nov 4, 2010, p. CZ.2