

# ARKTOWN & OPENING DAY

By Susan Cluff & Dave Gotz



"Arktown" in Belvedere Cove circa 1900. Beach Road on the left, Corinthian in the center, and Tiburon waterfront on the right.

On Opening Day on the Bay, the last Sunday in April, boaters come out in to mark the official start of the boating season with a blessing of the fleet and a boat parade. The tradition began in the 1890s when floating arks and pleasure boats from Corinthian Yacht Club paraded out through the passage to the Bay from Tiburon lagoon where they'd spent the winter.

How arks first came here is a mystery but by the turn of the century, more than 30 houseboats were floating in "Arktown" in Belvedere Cove. The arks were of every conceivable description from little more than homemade rafts to elegant floating residences. Built of wood and brightly painted, they typically had rounded roofs, flat barge-like bottoms, four rooms and a kitchen with hogsheds of water for drinking and washing. White railings circled a covered deck with chairs and a table, and there were built-in bunks everywhere for friends and family.

In 1899, the Strand wrote, "There is an indescribable charm about the life; one has the pleasure of boating combined with the comforts of home. Sea baths are at one's very threshold, fish are caught and cooked while you wait..." During the day, residents could row over to visit neighbors, catch the ferry to the City, or have the butcher, the baker and others deliver whatever they needed. At night, the arks would glow with colorful Japanese lanterns and echo to the sounds of parties.

After the 1906 earthquake, many families moved permanently to their floating summer homes. Artists, sculptors, painters, and writers joined the ark community. During prohibition, arks became great places to hide illegal stills and moonshine. When officers raided Bleasie Cancania's ark near Belvedere, they pulled up a trapdoor to the hull and found 100 gallons of alcohol, a quantity of whisky, 1,000 bottles of untaxed wine, 500 bottles of home-brewed beer and a 50-gallon still.

Because arks were not powered, they had to be towed by boats to their moorings and back to a protected area for winter. When the lagoons silted in, Corinthian Island drawbridge became a permanent structure and the passage was closed to form a protected lagoon for house lots. Some arks were moved to Alameda, Sausalito or the Greenbrae waterfront; others were hauled ashore or put on stilts for use as land dwellings. In 1968, the last eight arks on Beach Road were moved to make way for apartment buildings.

If you want to see one of these Victorian arks today, the Lewis ark built around 1900 has been fully restored and is on display at the Maritime National Historic Park in San Francisco.

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The Charles Doble ark in 1906. This was the last floating ark to leave the Cove in the late 1930's.

Rowing out to visit an ark, circa 1900. Hugo Keil on the oars with his wife Serena at the tiller.



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