

LOOKING FOR TIBURON'S ARKS

By Susan Cluff

Arks flourished on San Francisco Bay from the 1890s through the 1930s and were the forerunners of the modern houseboat communities in Sausalito and Greenbrae. In Tiburon, arks were built as weekend dwellings, as duck hunting or fishing clubs, or inexpensive housing that could be towed to deep anchorage, moored to the shoreline, or put up on wood pilings above mudflats, beaches or dry land.

Since most arks were built by shipwrights, they had a distinctive style and design for life afloat, even if the dwellings never left the shore. The typical flat-bottom hull was raked at bow and stern allowing it to be towed, a bulkhead was built into the barge for stability, seams were caulked with oakum and pitch for waterproofing, and the area below the waterline covered with Irish felt and a sheath or redwood boards to deter wood-eating shipworms.

Tied to the barge wall was the ark cabin, generally with a bow or arched roof, tongue and groove walls, ceilings and floors. Skylights were a common feature and windows slid sideways into the walls or dropped down to take up less space. Interiors were nautical with sleeping bunks, closets, cabinets, benches, and water storage tanks built in. Many arks had masts to fly their colors and brass nameplates with names like *Neptune*, *Nautilus*, *Dolphin*, *Zephyrus*, *Lizzard* and *Mudlark*.

In the Landmarks book of oral histories, *Both Sides of the Track*, Laurence "Bunk" Mersereau said a man named Stinky Wilson who lived on Corinthian Island would haul the floating arks onto the beach once a year, scrape off the barnacles and mop on hot tar as waterproofing. "I remember seeing all the arks, just took them for granted, Mersereau lamented in 1975. "Now they're all gone."

Over time, Bay ark dwellers anchored closer to shore or put their homes on stilts and set up ark neighborhoods with friends. Moorings along San Rafael Avenue attracted Italian families, another behind Tiburon's Main Street housed railroad workers, groups of fishermen and dairy workers could be found near Greenwood Cove on Richardson Bay. For a few years, the local library was housed in an ark on the lagoon. In 1964, *the Little Mermaid*, was moved for use as a teenage clubhouse at the Tiburon Peninsula Club.

By the 1960s, most of the arks in Tiburon had destroyed, moved or repurposed to make way for development. Still a few old arks remain if you know where to look for them. Many still have the original porches, pediments, gabled trim, Victorian cottage molding, panel doors and bay windows. There's a pretty cottage with a white porch at **5 Beach Road**, its brick fireplace, rear entrance and other improvements were added later. Over on Ark Row, the blue ark at **104 Main Street** is actually two arks on top of each other – the dwelling is 90 percent original with a flat roof, bead and reel molding and slender Corinthian columns.

You can find even more if you keep your eyes open.

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1. The Alice, built in 1905 by German Cabinetmaker Paulus Heilrich, was rolled from the Belvedere Lagoon shoreline to its new location at 12 Laurel Avenue in 1939.
2. Lewis Ark being moved by barge to the S. F. Maritime National Historical Park, 1969.
3. The Double Ark at 116 Main Street.

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