



# Marina del Rey Historical Society



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## Looking Back

by Willie Hjorth

**H**istory was made when Jerry B. Epstein, today the last living original major developer of Marina del Rey, sprang into action in 1963 to help solve the most critical problem in the early years of Marina del Rey.

"In 1955-56 then Supervisor Burton Chace telephoned me to urge me to sign on to help in the planning for a new marina," Jerry Epstein told the Marina del Rey Historical Society in an interview November 2011. Epstein already knew the area, since the Marina was to be built in the marshland area where he often went duck hunting.

### **Vision and Action**

The relatively new concept of a public/private real estate development partnership that Chace presented--The county would own the land and let private developers do the building and then pay the county rent--intrigued Epstein. He felt that Supervisor Chace's experience of "having had to face a payroll in private business" before being Mayor of Long Beach (1947-1953)

reinforced "the idea that private developers could build it [the marina] and operate it better than government could by itself."



Jerry B. Epstein, November 2011

Greg Wenger, Photographer

executed, including several with Howard Hughes, a major landholder in the area.

### **Masterplan**

Epstein recalled that Victor Gruen

Associates was the architect hired to create the initial Master Plan for the Marina. Parcels were designated for different types of land use, e.g., commercial, residential, restaurants, marine commercial, etc. Epstein chose to bid on Parcels 23 and 24 on Via Marina, which included approximately 23 acres. He submitted his sealed bid in a Request For Proposal (RFP) process, emphasizing in the MdRHS interview "there were no shenanigans, all bidders were welcome."

### **Building the Marina**

Dredging by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began in 1959, and in May 1962 the Marina del Rey Small Craft Harbor opened. Epstein explained that development money was difficult to get because most local bankers did not understand why apartments were being built in a marina. Bankers questioned, "Who would want to live there?" East Coast bankers on the other hand were more familiar with residential/coastal development on many natural waterways in the eastern U.S.

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## Looking Back

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### The Storm Surge

Epstein recalled the havoc done to the Marina by the Pacific Ocean storm in January 1963. "The storm surge created a nine foot tidal action that sloshed against the docks and bulkheads every 90-seconds, like water spilling over the sides in a bathtub, demolishing some of



MdRHS Photograph

Temporary Storm Surge Channel Baffles, 1964.

the infrastructure." When the news was broadcast around the country, like many of the other successful original bidders, the worst damage was that Epstein's original loan was canceled and his then partner wanted out. Supervisor Chace "caught hell for wasting county funds" on a project that was labeled "Burton Chace's White Elephant," Epstein said, especially amongst the naysayers who believed the project would never work.

### Build a Breakwater

Correcting the surge problem was crucial if Marina del Rey was to survive. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recommended a detached breakwater be built but there was no money budgeted for that expense, according to Epstein.

### Turning Point Toward Success!

Recognizing the immediate need for money, Jerry Epstein, still in the United States Air Force Reserves, and Aubrey Austin, president of Santa Monica Bank and Chairman of the County's new Small Craft Harbor Advisory Commission, and also in the Reserves, "hitched a plane ride to Washington, D.C., from March Air Force

Base. Then the two of us walked the halls of Congress lobbying for funds to build the breakwater." The county did not have any lobbying presence in those days, but, with the help of California Senator Clair Engle and Congressman James Roosevelt funding was obtained to bring rocks and boulders from the quarry on Catalina Island to build the breakwater beginning October 15, 1963. Temporary

baffles were placed across the neck of the main channel to prevent surge action while the early developers struggled to finance their construction projects.

### Success!

Completion of the breakwater in January 1965 revived confidence

for the commercial viability of the boat harbor and opened access to financing. Epstein recalled that Union Bank gave him a construction loan (without worry about a "take-out" permanent loan to repay the funds) to build Del Rey Shores, the original 76-unit residential project that opened in May 1965 on Parcels 23 and 24. After buying out his disillusioned partner, Epstein partnered with actor Kirk Douglas "who had total faith that the Marina project would be a success." After 47 years the Epstein/Douglas team still gets excited about "second generation" redevelopment of aging Marina buildings, as evidenced by the 544-unit Shores project currently under construction and scheduled to open in the spring of 2013.

### End of an Era

Jerry Epstein, now 88 years young, standing tall with unwavering voice, tells of the huge admiration and high esteem the public had for the charismatic Burton W. Chace and his vivacious wife, Pauline (Polly), a strong influence in Burton's life. Supervisor Chace was killed in a freeway

## 125 Years Ago...

by Howard Wenger

Marina del Rey finds its beginnings 125 years ago.

In 1887, when trains and horse and carriages were the typical mode of transportation, a man by the name of Moyer L. Wicks dreamed of turning the Playa del Rey estuary and inlet into a major harbor serving the Los Angeles area.

At this same time, the Santa Fe Railroad was looking for an ocean terminal in the Los Angeles area to extend shipping markets to the west. So Wicks and other investors would form the Port Ballona Development Company. They would raise \$300,000 to begin dredging operations. The plans were for a channel linking the ocean and a two mile long by 300 to 600 foot wide harbor.

Over the next couple years, work on the Marina began to take shape. Wicks wharf was built and the Santa Fe railroad began carrying passengers to Port Ballona. However, after three years, dredging was halted when the funds were exhausted and the company would end up bankrupt. More troubles followed that winter when heavy rains flooded the area and high tides which would push the sand back into the channel and would destroy Wicks wharf.

The project would be abandoned and the area once again became a marshland for the seabirds and wildlife, occasionally visited by fishermen and hunters. It would be another 25 years before the project would be resurrected. //

car accident in August 1972 when a car crossed the center median. As a result of that tragic accident, Caltrans has since insisted that all freeways are built with concrete median barriers.

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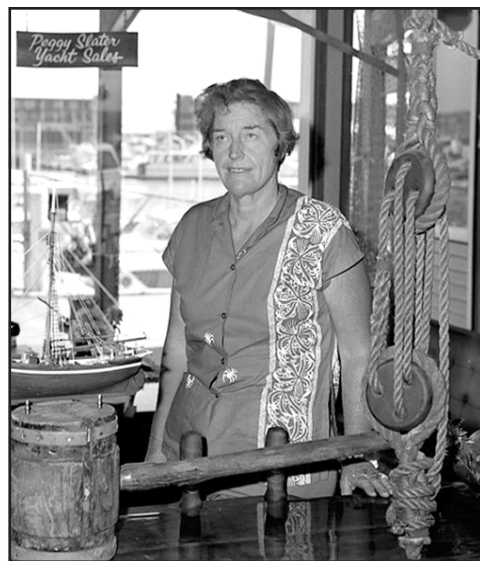
# Racing in Marina del Rey: Part 1

## Women in Racing

by Tim Tunks

### Marina History

Sailing is the most picturesque thread woven through the history of Marina del Rey, and to many sailors, racing is a vital strand of sailing. What vision is more stirring than a fleet of white sails clustered when they tack and gybe as if choreographed by some dance master? Who are these sailors and what crafts do they master?



Peggy Slater.

MdRHS Photograph, circa 1974

Going back nearly fifty years we find records of races with names like "Ladies Got Guts Race to Catalina" first held by the Del Rey Yacht Club in 1964, "Racy Ladies", and the "Coffee Cup Regatta" -- all of which inspired me to follow the women's side of this story.

That was the period that witnessed the first flood of fiberglass sailboats popping out of Costa Mesa, many of which can still be seen moored around the Marina.

*Good God, haven't you ever seen a naked fat lady with a toilet strapped to her back before?*

Peggy Slater

Reading the race results, familiar boat models frequently appear: Santana 22's and 27's, Cal 20's through 36's, Islanders

and Columbia boats of every shape and size.

Most of the women racing then would take out their family boat for these races if they were not skippering their own Sabots, the 8 foot dinghy of choice at the time. Back then, a thirty foot fiberglass boat was a big one, but not so big that healthy women had any difficulty handling them.

#### Sailor Shows Heart

There were several notable yachswomen who had grown up around boats, gaining skills that were the equal of any sailor, competing in the races of the time. Our own Peggy Slater was one such exemplary competitor, who owned a series of beautiful wooden boats named Valentine -- all with a large red heart boldly applied to the foresail and white spinnaker. Although she has been gone for two decades, her stories are still told around the Marina.

One Transpacific Race from here to Hawaii found her skippering Valentine with a full compliment of male sailors. As the seas were large, she availed herself of the safety harness fitted to a plank behind her as she arranged her MuMu and settled on the toilet. A large wave then tossed the boat with enough force that it dislodged both Peggy and the toilet on which she had strapped herself, spilling that package out the bathroom door in front of her astonished crew. Always poised, Peggy politely inquired, "Good God, haven't you ever seen a naked fat lady with a toilet strapped to her back before?"

#### Boats Get Bigger

When I joined the Marina's racing fleets in the mid seventies, the bigger boats were much bigger, and it seemed that the women were mostly relegated to more decorative roles, except for the few wives who stuck with races like the "Got Guts." Frequently the husbands would follow the fleet in motor yachts, meeting their boats at Catalina island to make sure they were safely moored for the night, and then helping to sail them home and putting them away in their slips.

#### Boats Get Lighter

However something special happened in sailboat design evolution about then, catching on world wide with the "Ultra Lights" of the 1970's. The Santa Cruz 27 was the first production boat built to naval architect Bill Lee's philosophy that: "Fast is Fun" and he was surely correct. With large sails propelling these low drag slimmed marvels, light displacement sailboats could now surf down waves at near double the speed they'd make if they were of normal weight and had to plow a deep furrow through the water.

These lightweight boats opened a new path for women in racing. The older International Offshore Rule (IOR) race boats were heavy, with that mass felt in the high tension of all the lines and the weight of all the gear. The crew at the "pointy end" of the heavy race boat was known as the "Foredeck Ape", for heavy sails and a huge spinnaker pole had to be tossed about with agility on a frequently bouncing deck. But such a massive crew would sink the bow of these lightweight marvels, robbing them of the speed and excitement they were bred for.



MdRHS Photograph, circa 1974

Marcia Alpert, Jamie Berger, Nancy DuBois (l-r), early racers in Ladies Got Guts and sabot regattas.

With these Ultra Lights, there was a vital role for women to play on a race boat, and it was something that women could do better than men! The foredeck's skill becomes paramount as sails are changed at bouy roundings, and the spinnaker is gybed down wind. Now women were key players in some of the most important tactical maneuvers,

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## Looking Back

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### Epilogue

When asked what his vision was when he signed on as a leaseholder, Epstein replied that he felt "the Marina would be a success, that it would be great to have a harbor in the midst of the second largest city in the United States and to have people live there." He added, with a wry wink, "Looking back, how stupid it was to have put all my eggs in one basket!."

Epstein has devoted countless hours to a number of state and local commissions over the past three decades, including stints as President of the Los Angeles Board of Airport Commissioners, President of the Los Angeles State Building Authority (which built the Ronald Reagan and Junipero Serra State Buildings in downtown Los Angeles), Chair of the California Transportation Commission, and Vice Chair of the High-Speed Rail Authority.

When asked about hobbies, Epstein said he plays tennis twice a week and has been collecting autographs of our country's founding fathers and presidents for more than 45 years. A copy of the W.J. Stone Declaration of Independence, with a collection of Presidential autographs and autographs of the individual signers of the Declaration of Independence, was donated by the Pat and Jerry Epstein Collection for display at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. It's an historical resource especially for children. Epstein and his wife remain active at St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica.

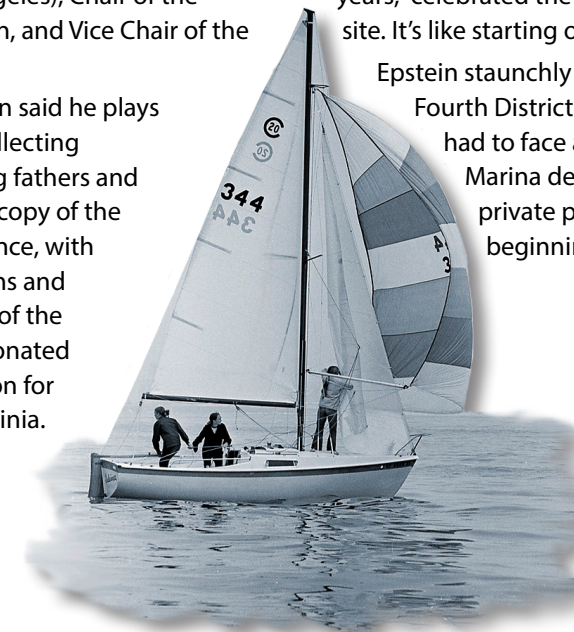
### Future

Jerry Epstein believes focus on the Marina waterfront community should be "to keep it fresh." He said he has never built anything he would not live in. In addition to his development and management of Shores, Epstein is still a co-general partner of the Marina Harbor Apartments and Anchorage (Basin A), whose new construction and renovation of the anchorage, built in the 1960s, have earned high marks as a paradigm for future redevelopment in the Marina.

Shores has been designed to attract residents interested in the Marina lifestyle of today, with an attractive courtyard, large, usable (not just decorative) balconies, mountain and ocean views, all to encourage outdoor living. "Once funds were available for the project," Epstein said, "Pat and I," his wife of 63 years, "celebrated the event with a very emotional picnic at the site. It's like starting over again!"

Epstein staunchly lauds current Los Angeles County Fourth District Supervisor Don Knabe, "who also has had to face a payroll," for his mindful stewardship of Marina del Rey in the spirit of the original public/private partnership that was responsible for its beginnings. ✍

(For information about this article, please contact the Marina del Rey Historical Society: 310-578-1001)



1960s Cal 20 with an all woman crew setting the spinnaker after going around the Weather Mark turning buoy.



Racers of the 60's - including America's Cup 12 Meter Racers



Sharon Sikes, sailor, before her departure on her single handed sail to Hawaii in 1979.



All photographs from Marina del Rey Historical Society collection.



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**Racing...**

*(Continued from page 3)*

and they quickly mastered this new skill set. Tactical acumen was now the property of the women!

We then saw the Women's Sailing Association (WSA) cloned from the South Bay Yacht Racing Club in the mid eighties. WSA was the first women's group whose purpose it was to teach women to sail competitively in all capacities. Little remembered, but so important in this effort were two women: Carol Robinson, the skipper, and Elise Anderson, the crew, who pioneered the effort later led by the first WSA Commodore, Shelly Dickerson. The WOW, or "Women on the Water Series" had been well established by then, so now the 'critical mass' of accomplished women racers was large enough to be self sustaining, with intelligent and dedicated women to lead their movement.

Women skippering their own race

boats became a common sight, not just on the water but on the podium as well, picking up their fair share of trophies.

**Schooling Sailors**

Gail Hine was, and still is, another potent force in the rise of women racers, picking up the WSA education mission and spreading it up and down the Southern California Coast. *Hummer*, Gail's second boat which she still races thirty years later, is a wonderful example of this transition from the wide and heavy boats of the IOR racing period to the new ultra lights. *Hummer's* previous owner had discarded the original mast and sails, replacing them with the much larger ones from a Santa Cruz 27, converting the IOR 'Quarter Tonner' *Nightingale 24* into a downwind rocket ship.

This marks the time that women truly came into their own and joined the racing fleets as the equals of most male skippers. //

*[Part 2: Sport boats, high speed multihulls and women champions.]*

**Membership Perks**



- ◀ Access to Collections
- ◀ Notification of Upcoming Exhibits and Events
- ◀ Quarterly Newsletter
- ◀ Marina del Rey Historical Pictorial by Greg Wenger (New Members)
- ◀ *Snoopin' Around: The Story of David Asper Johnson and the Argonaut* (Renewing Members)
- ◀ One 8-1/2x11 Historic Marina Photo (at a discounted rate)

**Our Collections**

The Marina del Rey Historical Society database is used to identify privately and publicly held archives. The collections that document aspects of MdR life and history are recognized by community historians. Since our collections are scanned and electronically filed, all original contributions will be returned to donors. This online directory provides a unique resource of cultural materials that will be retrievable and accessible to the public.

To learn how you can donate, contact Greg Wenger (310-578-1001). //

**Historical Society Exhibits**

- ◀ **Community Building** in **Burton Chace Park**, on Mindanao Way
- ◀ **Lloyd Taber Marina del Rey Library**, on Admiralty Way (Please call 310-821-3415 for library hours.)
- ◀ The **Marina del Rey Hotel**, on Bali Way
- ◀ **Tony P's Dockside Grill**, on Admiralty Way



Marina del Rey Historical Society  
**Membership Application**

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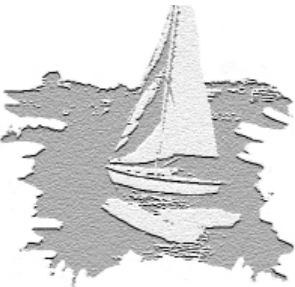
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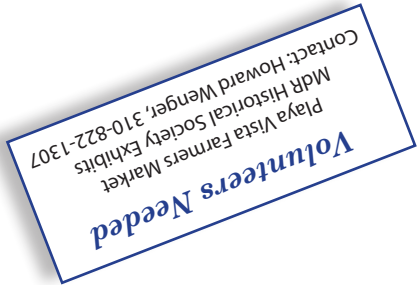


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