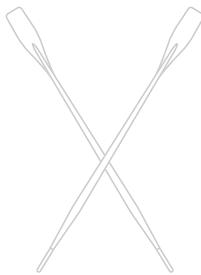


Introduction



PEOPLE IN THEIR THOUSANDS walk past the South End Rowing Club every year, yet it remains practically invisible. Wandering along the San Francisco waterfront near Fisherman's Wharf, past the historic ships and towards the Maritime Museum, Aquatic Park and Ghirardelli Square, visitors might easily walk right past the South End clubhouse without really *seeing* it or having any idea what it is or has been since 1873. Hiding in plain sight, it is one of San Francisco's oldest social and sporting institutions.

ITS EXTERIOR GIVES LITTLE hint of what the interior might hold. A pair of giant oars and the stylized "SE, since 1873" are painted on the plain white wooden siding, but beyond that there is little indication of what might transpire within.

To enter the modest, red-painted wooden doorway facing the street is to leave San Francisco and journey into another century, almost another world. It requires no more than a card-key. No doorman greets you, no security guard protects the sacred precincts. The lights in the cavernous upper boat house may not even be turned on, and it could take a few moments for your eyes to come to terms with the dimness of the light. Like wandering through a museum after hours, the patrons shooed away, the curators and guards gone home, the past is present, as though the collection of boats and trophies and photos, stretching back nearly a century and a half, were about to break the silence and welcome you.

A line of wooden boats, their painters (ropes) coiled neatly by the bow and stern, their varnish catching the odd ray of light, seemingly at attention, await your inspection. Half a dozen white fiberglass racing shells feign to glide in the twilight, hovering like immense gulls above the heavy wooden antique boats. And above them all, upside-down like giant dusty bats, perched

South End: Sport and Community at the Dock of the Bay



Figure i.1 San Francisco's Aquatic Park, Home of the South End Rowing Club. Photo by Jeff Cooperman

Figure i.2 Exterior of the South End Rowing Club



in seeming permanence on the ceiling, are the racing shells and barges of a century ago. No longer seaworthy and impractical to repair, they are shadowy reminders of what wooden racing boats used to look like, when grace was coaxed from cedar and silk by a craftsman's hands.

Should you come early in the morning, not too long after sunrise, a gap in the line of wooden boats would signal that one of them is already out. A splash of natural light draws you down through the lower boat house and toward the open overhead door at the far end of the building. Through this aperture the boat and its rower made their escape. The concrete floor slopes down toward the Bay, but a trail of wet footprints heads toward you,

back and into the clubhouse, up toward the warmth of the locker rooms and saunas, evidence of early morning swimmers.

By now the water is exerting its irresistible pull, luring you toward the dock. A stout wooden pier—one of a pair, it seems—has its last section lowered to meet the morning tide, and a small wooden dolly is evidence that one of the wooden rowing boats has, indeed, gone out to watch the water meet the dawn. Alcatraz, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Marin headlands stretch out to the north and west, the city blankets the hills behind you, the sun begins to peek out from behind the Bay Bridge.

Introduction



Figure i.3 Upper boathouse at the South End Rowing club—with the lights turned on. Photo by Alexander Lam

There is a small beach between the two piers, and now a group of swimmers materializes out of the Bay, yellow caps emblazoned with the morning light. They clamber out of the shore break and climb up to the pier, men and women of all ages, shivering and chattering with the easy camaraderie of having done, together, something rather special.

Following them back into the clubhouse, past the outdoor shower and its “Designated Sniveling Area,” it seems that the place has awoken. More swimmers appear, apprehensive of the frigid water that awaits them. Rowers are taking down a couple of the fiberglass shells. The big stove in the dining room (aka “cook shack”) has been fired up—the swimmers may get a hot breakfast! Someone has cranked up the stereo in the weight room, and there is the clank of weights to tunes beloved of over-age rockers. A loud thumping from the inner sanctum says that the handball players are limbering up on Court 1. The stale aroma of do-it-yourself instant coffee trickles down from the second-floor Day Room. The South End is ready for another day.

Why do we need this book?

In a sense, we are taking up a task set over a century ago. In 1901 the Club appointed members Joseph Foley, Ed Scully and William Mead to write a Club history¹. If they wrote that history, it has been lost. In 1995, Bill Pickelhaupt self-published “Club Rowing on San Francisco Bay 1869-1939, Featuring the South

¹ Minutes of the South End Rowing Club, December 1901.

South End: Sport and Community at the Dock of the Bay

End Rowing Club." While not intended as a history of the Club, it did pull together photographs and facts about the early South End. It was a start.

The South End is a place beloved by its fifteen hundred members, and this book is first and foremost for them, a way of explaining the Club to ourselves: why is the South End Rowing Club here, for us to join and enjoy? How did it get to be the way it is? How are we part of San Francisco's history? How does the South End hang together as a place to play and a place to call home, composed as it is of people with wildly different interests? What made the South End unique? What helped it survive when nearly every other rowing club did not? What is it and why do we love it? Who are "we"?

The Club's evolution mirrors that of the city in many ways and has influenced the broader city at several turns. Not in earth-shaking ways, as the events of 1906 did, but in the subtle creation of additional possibilities, small but real, for the people of the Bay. As a social institution, the South End is a part of San Francisco that others, outside the pale of membership, might find interesting. We've tried to keep them in mind, too.

Why is there a South End Rowing Club? Why did the first South Enders create the Club? To row, of course, but what other needs did the Club fulfill? We don't know. The early members were not ones to commit their innermost thoughts to diaries or letters. They were working men who probably didn't think that the Boat Club would be historically significant, or that their motives might be worth knowing. Perhaps it is as simple as, "They were just a group of guys who wanted to row."

Or perhaps, in their individual make-ups, they were more complicated, more varied in their motivations. After all, in 1873 if you just wanted to row, there was Jerry the Greek down at Long Bridge, who would rent you a boat for a morning or an afternoon. If it was competition you wanted, then *two* of you could rent boats. And why rowing and not some other sport? There were baseball clubs to join. And there was always the corner pub where one could watch a fight—or get in one.

Looking for reasons for there to be a South End Boat Club, it surely came into being through a confluence of changes in San Francisco society and in the country more broadly. Three in particular stand out:

- the nationwide craze for rowing that was embraced by various classes;
- a movement led by cultural elites to promote healthy activities for the urban working classes; and
- the desire of immigrants or people newly arrived from Back East to find a home away from home (or perhaps a refuge from their own homes and families).



These and other aspects of the “social environment” of post-Gold Rush San Francisco are explored in Chapter 1, “Before the Beginning.”

We have tried to combine a chronological, narrative approach with chapters that explore particular themes. The former provides a sort of timeline of the Club and its evolution, while the latter delve into such topics as the evolution of swimming, the restoration of our eponymous barge, cultural expressions of South End-ness, our rivalry with the neighboring Dolphin Club, and how the South End is part of the greater community. A separate chapter is devoted to the most radical (and satisfactory) development in the Club’s history: the incorporation of women as full-fledged members.

Writing this book

South End combines an historical narrative, based on archival sources, with the words of the Club’s own members. The former tell us predominantly about the first half of the Club’s existence, while contemporary South Enders can inform us about the last sixty years or so. We have grouped chapters into two parts: The South End in History (part 1) and The South End Today (part 2).

Figure i.4 The Bay and the Dock (the one on the right), home of the South End Rowing Club. Photo by Alexander Lam

South End: Sport and Community at the Dock of the Bay

From our vantage point in 2018, it is astounding to see how assiduously the newspapers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries covered the rowing scene. Not only did they report on races, but on Club elections and parties and “high jinx” as well. When boxing and horse racing were the only sports with a truly national fan base, local sports such as rowing received extensive attention in what was the sole mass medium of the day—newspapers. Several thousand newspaper stories help us paint a picture of what the early clubs, including the South End, were like. These stories are complemented by our own “archives”—Club ledgers dating back to the 1880s and other old documents, newsletters, and memoirs. Many were preserved by Pat Cunneen, for years the Club’s artist-in-residence and *de facto* historian². Hundreds of photographs hang on the Club’s walls, a seemingly random history assembled by South Enders over the last century.

Documents from the distant past tell us only so much about the life of an organization. For the near past and the present, we’ve used both documentary evidence and the words of South Enders themselves—oral histories, published writings, unpublished musings—to describe how the Club functions *qua* club: what holds it together, how we use it, and how we feel about it.

Otis Redding never pulled an oar, and his song “Dock of the Bay” is supposedly set in Sausalito, but that’s close enough. “Dock of the Bay” tells you we’re at the water’s edge. We hope that South End tells you the rest.

Bob Barde and Pat Cunneen

² A sad irony is that Pat’s house was destroyed during the great Wine Country Fires of 2017. Most of those documents had already been moved to another location “Just in case my house burns down,” but even so, a good deal of South End historical material went up in flames.