

HISTORY: FROM BOLINAS COAST GUARD STATION TO MARINE BIOLOGY LAB

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The ghostly College of Marin Marine Biology Lab buildings in Bolinas stand across Wharf Road from Bolinas Lagoon. Their shabby appearance belies their important and colorful history that began as the United States Coast Station No. 321 (1917-1947). Then, from 1964-2005, the buildings served as a vibrant educational facility; the Marine Biology Lab of the College of Marin.

The backstory of the Coast Guard station in Bolinas starts in 1848 when the Gold Rush engendered busy ship traffic and the rugged coast of Northern California was the site of too many ships. Only two sea-rescue stations served the entire coastline (at Humboldt and Ocean Beach) until 1881, when the fully equipped Bolinas Bay United States Lifesaving Station was built over Bolinas Lagoon, beside Wharf Road. (Where the wildly decorated Waterhouse Studio stands today, next to the Bolinas Rod & Boat Club.) Sea rescues were dangerous and grueling as men rowed heavy boats through violent winds and waves to reach a vessel in trouble. In Bolinas, station keeper Thomas Johnson had to rely on volunteer crews. The keeper's job was endless routine, punctuated by occasional desperate drama. Unfortunately, Johnson, a well-known local shipwright, took to drink, neglected his duties and was dismissed in February of 1885. On April 16, the Station burned down. It was arson and Johnson was suspected.

By 1899 coastal Marin had Life Saving Stations at Ten-Mile Beach and at Bonita Cove, but too distant for vessels in trouble near Duxbury Reef at Bolinas. Among the many shipwrecks on that reef was the *Western Shore*. She was the largest full-rigged vessel constructed on the Pacific coast and the fastest clipper ship of her time. In 1878 she was splendid in full sail, traveling at 10 knots and headed south to San Francisco—when she hit Duxbury Reef and sank within hours. In 1914, the ship *Polaris* was slammed onto the reef in a storm, within yards of the 1909 shipwrecked *R.D. Inman*. But it was the terrible wreck of the *Hanalei* in 1914 that finally motivated the government to build a new rescue station at Bolinas. Headed for San Francisco in dense fog and raging surf, *Hanalei* hit the reef just below today's Commonweal. For 16 exhausting hours, desperate rescue attempts failed. In darkness rescuers heard the dreaded sounds of the ship ripping apart and screams of children, women, and men as they were thrown into the cold sea that was covered in engine oil, ship debris, and the cargo of heavy railroad ties. 23 lives were lost.

That year, 1914, the United States Coast Guard was established by combining the U.S. Lighthouse Service, U.S. Life Saving Service and U.S. Revenue Cutter Service. The newly constructed U.S. Coast Guard Station No. 321 opened in Bolinas in 1918. Its two-story main building housed guardsmen, a kitchen, dining area and offices. A large garage stored their boat and rescue equipment. Behind the station, a steep stairway led to the top of Little Mesa where their Lookout Tower, with its panoramic view, still stands on the bluff. Because this station had a motorized boat it was referred to as Bolinas Bay Life Boat Station. Guardsmen who performed rescues at sea were called “surfmen”, a term still used today. Many of the men who served in the early United States Coast Guard, including in Bolinas, were new immigrants to America.

The station bustled with activity as guardsmen ran drills in the lagoon and ocean, helped locals and taught kids to swim. The guardsmen responded to many dangerous emergencies as well,

including in 1927, when they struggled in a roiling sea near the rocks below Point Reyes Lighthouse, to attach a line between a tugboat and the floundering ship *Yosemite* that was filled with 827 tons of dynamite. In December 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the US was at war. Fear of attack on the West Coast and convoys of military trucks, equipment and soldiers poured into coastal Marin and the Coast Guard Station became a hub of activity. But after WWII, in 1947, new technology and silt build-up in Bolinas Lagoon were among the factors that led to deactivating Coast Guard Station No.321.

College of Marin purchased the buildings in the late 1950s, including the dock and Waterhouse studio, intending an educational facility. In 1963, marine biology teacher Al Molina presented a plan to the college's enthusiastic board of directors to convert the buildings into a learning and research center, with the former garage as a laboratory. Molina and fellow teacher Gordon Chan found grants to generously equip the new Marine Biology Lab that opened in 1964. Sited at the edge of one of the richest marine ecosystems in the world, study at the lab featured hands-on field experience in diverse habitats. It was an era of alert public activism to protect and understand the environment and students recognized the visionary leadership of professors Gordon Chan, Al Molina and later, Joe Mueller, along with others. Many of their students went on to become ecology activists, teachers, authors, researchers, professors and scientists, including at California Academy of Science and University of California.

For 42 years, the Marine Biology Lab in Bolinas was a robust learning center. Al Molina shared his knowledge and undiminished enthusiasm with thousands of students during his 37 year teaching career. Today, two engraved stones lie by the steps of the marine lab, honoring this important teacher. In the 1960s, Gordon Chan, who grew up in Marin, led his students in an intense study of Duxbury Reef. The result was irrefutable scientific evidence that the unique reef and its dense population of marine life needed protection. His work led to establishing Duxbury Reef State Marine Reserve in 1971. Now, the reef is part of the Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary. A plaque at the entrance to the reef honors Gordon Chan. Joe Mueller, a student of Molina's, has been the leading College of Marin marine biology professor for 30 years, sharing his broad knowledge of many scientific disciplines. Mueller and his students used the lab from 1995 until 2005. He also facilitated its use for the Bolinas-Stinson Summer Camp children, providing them with indelible experiences of science and natural history. Today Mueller continues to teach at College of Marin and is an important adviser on local ecology, including the health of Bolinas Lagoon.

College of Marin closed the Marine Biology Lab in 2005, due to concerns for structural problems, contaminated building materials, and potential earthquake danger. The neglected buildings became a visual blight at a time when many of the town's storied buildings have been restored or renovated—preserving the town's historic architectural face. Highly-qualified Bolinas residents presented the college with viable proposals to purchase the property for community use, but were declined. Finally, after continued public pressure, in the autumn of 2017, a meeting was held at the Bolinas Firehouse, led by the college's president David Wain Coon and county supervisor Dennis Rodoni. Community members, former and current college students and representatives from Bay Area education and scientific communities discussed the future of the buildings. Strong arguments for revitalizing the lab included concern that the college has cut back its once-exceptional marine biology program and life sciences, in this time of environmental crises and urgent need for a science educated populace. Joe Mueller also

reminded the college president of existing funds earmarked for the lab. On May 19 of this year, College of Marin representatives held another public meeting in Bolinas to introduce their proposal for a \$ 3 million-dollar project that would include demolishing the historic buildings and replacing them with a sleek structure for classrooms, lab, equipment storage and faculty offices, along with seven off-road parking spaces and preserving public use of the dock. This proposal will be refined and requires much public discussion. For now, as you walk past the historic structures, imagine them when Coast Guard men, college students, children, researchers and visitors enlivened their rooms. Whatever the fate of these buildings, they deserve to be recognized and appreciated for their history and service to the Bay Area community.