

A Short History of the Berkeley Paddling & Rowing Club

By Elaine Baden, BPRC Board of Directors

Berkeley Paddling & Rowing Club (BPRC) was started in the early 60's by friends and family of local high school and collegiate rowers, who were looking for a place to train and practice. In 1968, the Club was formally established as a non-profit, under the name Berkeley Rowing Club.

Margaret "Peggy" Calder Hayes spearheaded the drive to create the Club and build a boathouse, she fundraised and paid for much of it, and dedicated it in memory of her husband, Kenneth A Hayes. The boathouse still bears his name. Note: Peggy's brother was Alexander Calder, renowned Mobile Artist.

Soon a small group of women from Cal, who were considered "too delicate" to row or compete, coalesced to start training with their own coach as well. At that time, women were not allowed to access the boathouse on the Oakland Estuary that the men used then, and still use now, although it has since been rebuilt.

The boathouse itself is a repurposed one room schoolhouse, which was moved from its original location which, we believe, is near where McLaughlin Park is today. You can still see the blackboards on two of the boathouse walls.

In fall of 1974, thanks to Title Nine, Cal got its first women's rowing team, and held their training sessions at the Lagoon, and trained there all that first year. They are celebrating their 50th anniversary this weekend!

There was a huge training "Barge" that was parked at the side of the lagoon for nearly a decade. Novice Men and the Womens Team used it until they were able to get a rowing shell. The rowers would be on two separate sets of seats and the coach could walk down the middle, calling out commands and corrections.

Competitive racing distances changed shortly after that, making the lagoon too short for training and racing for any of the teams; High School, Novice or Women. So, in 1975, the woman's team built a boathouse out at Briones Reservoir, which is still there now. They are about the only people who are allowed to use Briones for any sort of aquatic "recreation". The High School teams (all boys) and the Novice Men also relocated, mostly to the Oakland Estuary.

Additionally, in 1973 Andy Toro, a former Olympian (who defected from Hungary), started training paddlers at the Lagoon, using the boathouse as their base. Kayakers from around the country came to train and prepare for the 76 Olympics. Andy, now in his 80's, is still a member. His wife, Jane Toro, was on the first Cal women's rowing team, and is also still a member.

The lagoon became popular with whitewater and slalom paddlers as well, and served as a home base for some of the best known whitewater paddlers in California, including Lars Holbeck, who pioneered many first descents on California rivers.

The Club currently has approximately 180 members, ranging in age from 9 to 86. There are former Olympians, Olympic hopefuls, Masters Champions of all ages (both current and former), Assorted National Record Holders, and many who simply paddle or row for fun.

We have Rowing Shells, (singles, double and a quad), as well as SUPs, Canoes, a Sit-on-Top Kayak, Outrigger Canoes, Olympic Kayaks and a full range of Surfskis.

A growing number of members are also quite interested in the bird life that is found at the Lagoon. The Lagoon is on the Pacific Migratory Flyway, so attracts 100's, if not 1000's, of birds throughout the Fall and Winter. BPRC partnered with the Golden Gate Bird Alliance this year to offer 2 on-the-water birdwatching trips. It is because of this that the waterski club is not allowed on the water between October and April – to protect the birds.

With Shark Stewards' help, and their ongoing water quality monitoring, we are also becoming more attuned to the fish and other aquatic life found at the Lagoon, and hope to collaborate further in the future.



Dedication ceremony for the Berkeley Rowing Club boathouse, March 1968. O-62

ORIGINS OF BPRC

Karl Drlica

Filling the Bay

In the 1950s, municipalities along the shoreline of San Francisco Bay were extending their borders and increasing their real estate revenues by filling in the Bay. Examples are Foster City and the Berkeley Marina. A turning point occurred in 1961 when an article in the *Oakland Tribune* showed a 2020 vision of the Bay as little more than a wide river. The general public began to take notice of the shrinking Bay. Three activists in Berkeley led a fight to halt Bay filling. They thought that encouraging more aquatic activities at or near the Bay would help stop Bay filling.



Awareness of Bay fill begins. Left. Map of Bay future published in Bay Area newspapers. Right. Activists. From left, Esther Gulick, Sylvia McLaughlin and Kay Kerr started one of the country's first environmental movements.

Art Sachs and his Women's Crew

In the fall of 1965, Art Sachs, who had rowed at Cornell and later at the Lake Washington Rowing Club in Seattle, began optometry school at U.C. Berkeley. While in Seattle, he encountered young women rowing; that experience led him to start a women's crew at Cal. Since the only East Bay location for club rowing was Oakland's Lake Merritt, Art and 20 women from Cal joined the Lake Merritt Rowing Club. Although the crew rowed on Lake Merritt for two years, Art was determined to make Aquatic Park in Berkeley the home for his women's rowing team. Soon after arriving in Berkeley, he began developing a support base to move from Lake Merritt. For example, in the fall of 1965 he built a small lean-to on the water side of the Rod and Gun Club (northwest shore of Aquatic Park) where he stored a double scull and two sets of sculling oars.

I also began graduate school in Berkeley in the fall of 1965. I had recently arrived from Oregon; compared to the quiet town of Corvallis, the Berkeley campus was a hotbed of political activity. To escape the circus atmosphere of the campus, I began sculling at Lake Merritt. I had enjoyed coaching women rowers at Oregon State, so I didn't hesitate to offer assistance to Art and his Cal Women's Crew. According to a newspaper account, I helped Art design and build a small

dock next to the Rod and Gun Club at Aquatic Park so the double could be launched. That fall I sculled at Aquatic Park after classes with one of Art's more skilled rowers. Most of the time we sculled in the dark, relying on ambient city lights to avoid running into the bank. The din of I-80 freeway traffic was as loud then as it is now. The only other rowing activity at Aquatic Park was a competition between Cal Women's Crew and Mills College, arranged by Art and Ed Lickiss, the driving force of Lake Merritt rowing. Boats were transported from Lake Merritt for a four-oared race that Mills won.



First coaches of Cal Women's Crew and advocates of rowing at Aquatic Park. Left: Art Sachs, 1967. Right: the author, fall of 1965.

Art also used his Aquatic Park shed to store waste paper (computer punch cards) that he recycled to obtain funds to support travel for his crew. He and I, sometimes accompanied by members of his crew, collected the cards from trash bins in U.C. Berkeley computer centers, usually in the middle of the night.

Peggy Hayes and the Rowing Club

At some point Art must have encountered Peggy Hayes and made a pitch for starting a rowing club at Aquatic Park. The idea fit well with her goal to save the Bay by increasing bayside activities; her group may have facilitated Art's access to the Rod and Gun Club. Art had salesman skills, and he probably recruited former Cal oarsmen to promote the idea of a rowing club. One of these was Jerry Denham. During the previous year, former Cal oarsmen and one Oregon Stater had been rowing four-oared shells on Lake Merritt, attempting to qualify for a position on the U.S. Olympic team. Whether Aquatic Park would be a better venue for future men's training was uncertain; to my knowledge Cal graduates did not use the Berkeley facility.

The key issue was capital expense: a boathouse and dock were required. Peggy Hayes was well-connected to Berkeley financial resources, but she was fiscally cautious. She wanted to be certain that if she and her activist friends built rowing facilities, they would be used. Art and Cal Women's Crew took the lead in assuring Peggy that a facility would be used. As a part of her decision-making process, multiple meetings were held at her Berkeley home. I attended one to confirm that Art had the backing of others who had rowing experience. I believe that Jerry Denham was also supportive. At about the same time, Conn Findlay, a rowing icon, began purchasing racing shells and leasing them to beginning programs on the West Coast. If we had a boathouse and dock, plus a little money, we could gain access to boats and oars. The Cal women's team was ready to move from Lake Merritt, and equipment was available.

Peggy and her group obtained what appear to be two temporary school buildings that were joined to form the present boathouse. When the buildings were spliced together, they were

long enough to store 8-oared shells. I was not involved in the positioning of the buildings or construction of the dock, as I was still focused on rowing at Lake Merritt.



Dedication ceremony for Kenneth A. Hayes boathouse at Aquatic Park, March 1968

Cal Women's Crew Relocates to Aquatic Park

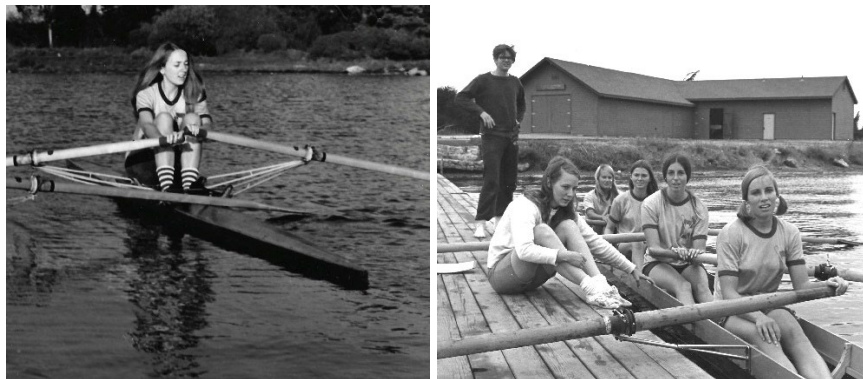
By the fall of 1967 Art had graduated from the optometry program and taken a job in Yakima, Washington. That left the coaching task to Ilene Wagner and me. We had worn out our welcome at Lake Merritt, partly because our crews took a very competitive approach to rowing, one that was uncommon at the time. Indeed, it was frowned upon. Consequently, when a boathouse and dock became available in the fall of 1967, Cal Women's Crew moved to Aquatic Park. Rowing was in four-oared shells, since the team did not have enough members to field an eight. About a year later, Berkeley High School began rowing at Aquatic Park. Thus, the facility was being used as Peggy Hayes had hoped.



Off-water training at Aquatic Park (1968-69).

In the 1960s male rowers exhibited considerable animosity toward women's crew. Women were degrading the grand old sport and taking up valuable water time. Indeed, the Cal men's coach was firmly in that camp. He actively discouraged the Cal women from rowing even though the women did not share water or resources with the men. He complained that the women were crowding out the high school crew. This prompted a letter from me to the coach and his boss, the Cal Athletic Director, explaining that the women were providing much more

financial support for the Club than the high school crews. And unlike the high school crews, the women had not run shells up onto the dock. There was actually no conflict between the high schoolers and the women.



Women rowing at Aquatic Park. Left: Ilene Wagner, coaching from a single. Right: the team. bow Alexis Lumsden, 2 Pat Patton, 3 Kathy Dietrich, stroke Carol Simpson, standing the author, sitting unidentified. Photos by Wayne Fogle.

Racing by Cal Women

By 1969, I needed to focus on graduate school. Ilene and I were a couple, and we needed to move on with our lives. Art had tried vigorously to gain sponsorship from U.C. Berkeley, but he was rebuffed, partly because of his motto: “We row to race, and we race to win”. This was counter to the prevailing educational attitude that young women should not participate in “cut-throat”, varsity-level competition. Substantial Cal resources would have been required to rein in Art, to not violate the existing standards for women’s team sports. Without institutional continuity, Cal Women’s pre-Title IX crew, which lasted only four years, disappeared from history until a revival in 2023.



Cal Women’s Crew at 1967 National Championship regatta. Left to right: Chris Rakestraw, Pat Savercool, Ilene Wagner, Carol Simpson. Kneeling: cox Sydney Smith. Photo from race program.

By virtue of physical conditioning, the Cal crew won many races in Seattle, Corvallis, and Oakland. For example, at the Corvallis Regatta, the crew beat six others in the four-oared category. The crew also lost races. But win or lose, the crew obtained publicity through the *Daily Cal*, the U.C. Berkeley student newspaper. One memorable headline read, “Golden Bras Split” after a regatta in which Cal won one race and lost another.

One of the Cal rowers, Carol Simpson, continued to row, first in the Lake Washington eight that competed in Europe in 1969, and later with the early Long Beach sculling group. She won a couple of national championships and stroked a quad that competed in the European Championships in 1972. She then served on the Women's Olympic Rowing Committee that directed the first women's rowing events in the 1976 Olympic Games at Montreal.