

The Arks of San Francisco Bay

Chris Platzer

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Introduction

The story of the arks in San Francisco Bay is one of elegant Victorian era living on the water and its slow demise in the early part of the 20th Century. What follows is a description of the arks of San Francisco Bay, how they plied the waters of the Bay and what became of them. The paper will conclude with a discussion of how the house boating culture of San Francisco Bay might be resuscitated by emulating the unique design and form of the arks. The final aim of this paper will discuss how a modern incarnation of the ark could provide comfortable and affordable housing for the Bay Area.

House boating was a popular form of recreation at the turn of the 19th Century in San Francisco Bay. The local variation of these house boats was known as the “ark.” Arks were popular as summer hideaways for San Francisco families in an age when a vacation to Lake Tahoe meant an arduous and time consuming trip across major rivers and waterways in a horse and buggy on unpaved roads. In a quest to escape the summer fogs of San Francisco, families would gather up their things and embark on an ark for weeks at a time. (Miles, 2006) There is every reason to believe that the arks would congregate in the waters off Sausalito and Tiburon and in Richardson Bay and the Straits of the Mare Island channel. One description of the arks of San Francisco Bay is found in Albert S. Hunt’s *Houseboats and House Boating*, 1905. It is the only source of information that we have of the house boating culture of fin de siecle San Francisco. Families would raft their arks together in places like Belvedere Lagoon and while

away the summer. (See picture 1) Legend has it that on an ebb tide there was so much Delta water moving out the Gate that you could drop a bucket in the Bay and pull out fresh water. Water boats were the more likely source of drinking water for arks, which would pull up to the arks and supply water and other provisions. (Miles, 2006) A summer aboard an ark was an idyllic time. The boats were brightly painted, and glowed at night with colorful Japanese lanterns. Evenings were spent visiting between boats in neatly finished Whitehall rowboats. (NPS website)



(Picture 1) The ark *Minnehaha* near Belvedere Island. Guests gather under an awning and a sailing Whitehall boat is ready alongside. Photograph courtesy of Shaw Library, Fort Mason; Source: *Houseboats and House Boating* (Hunt, 1905).

There are no records of the size of the fleet of arks on the Bay. But as we shall see later in this paper, given the number of surviving arks located around the North Bay it would indicate that there must have been quite a few in the Bay at this time.

One thing that strikes a visitor to the ark (picture 2) on the Hyde Street Pier at the San Francisco Maritime National Historic Park is that the sanitation system went directly into the Bay. It is hard to say if this was normal for all house boats and boats in general, but it might be

an indication of the overall attitude toward the environment. Namely, natural resources are vast and plentiful and there is nothing that can be done to damage them. My examination of the ark at Hyde St. revealed no holding tank for black or grey water.



(Picture 2) The Ark at the Hyde Street Pier. Photograph courtesy of San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park.

The other noteworthy thing about the ark at the Hyde St. Pier is the level of comfort one experiences inside the ark. Entering the living room of the ark, one is reminded of the severity of the Victorian-era by the dark wooden paneling. But, the reed organ and the cast-iron fireplace suggest at least a bit of fun. The bedroom of the ark is smartly laid out with a berth that may be small but it is comfortable. There is not an inch of space that is not utilized in this room. Just like on a ship where space is a premium, nothing is wasted. You can take a virtual tour of the ark at <http://www.nps.gov/archive/safr/vrtour/vrmovies/akvr1hs1.htm> and experience what it must have been like.

There are numerous examples of arks which have survived to the present day and can be seen in many locations throughout the North Bay. Below are a few of the Grand Dames which have been converted into homes. Pictures 3 and 4 are a prime example of location, location, location. These onetime arks in Sausalito command prices which are out of the range of your average home buyer.



(Picture 3) These arks in Sausalito were placed on plies over 100 years ago and enjoy Million dollar views of San Francisco. Photograph courtesy of Sausalito Historical Society.



(Picture 4) Further along Main St. is Ark Row, a collection of restored arks that house a variety of boutiques and specialty stores.

This paper now turns to a discussion of what happened to the arks that plied the Bay. We are fortunate in Vallejo to have present day examples: 3 arks in exist 811, 813 and 815 Wilson Ave and are registered with the National Registry of Historical Places (Vallejo Historical Society Archives; Appendix 1). In the following photos this paper will trace what happened to the arks of Vallejo. Evidence suggests that a great many arks were dragged onto land, placed on pilings and turned into homes. I interviewed a lifetime resident of Vallejo, Nick Parsinos. Nick was born in an ark at the foot of Florida Street. He tells me that up until World War II there were dozens of arks along the Vallejo water front. (Parsinos, 2006) Propelled to find evidence to support this, I traveled to the National Archives and Records Administration in San Bruno. Located there is the photograph collection of the Mare Island Naval Shipyard. Upon examination of recently declassified U.S. Government aerial photographs of the shipyard, I made the following discovery: Picture 5 is a 1936 aerial view of Mare showing the presence of arks along the Vallejo water front.



(Picture 5) Vallejo waterfront in 1936 south of Vallejo Yacht Club to present day Harbor Way.
(Photograph courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration)

Further research at the Archives revealed an earlier photograph from the year

1921 showing the same area and the same concentration of arks in the same general area of the Vallejo waterfront. (See Picture 6)



(Picture 6) Vallejo waterfront in 1921 south of Vallejo Yacht Club to present day Harbor Way.
(Photograph courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration)

It is the contention of this paper that the use of arks as recreational houseboats saw a gradual and steady decline since the turn-of-the-century and the rise of the automobile. Furthermore, it made logical sense to reuse the arks as houses.

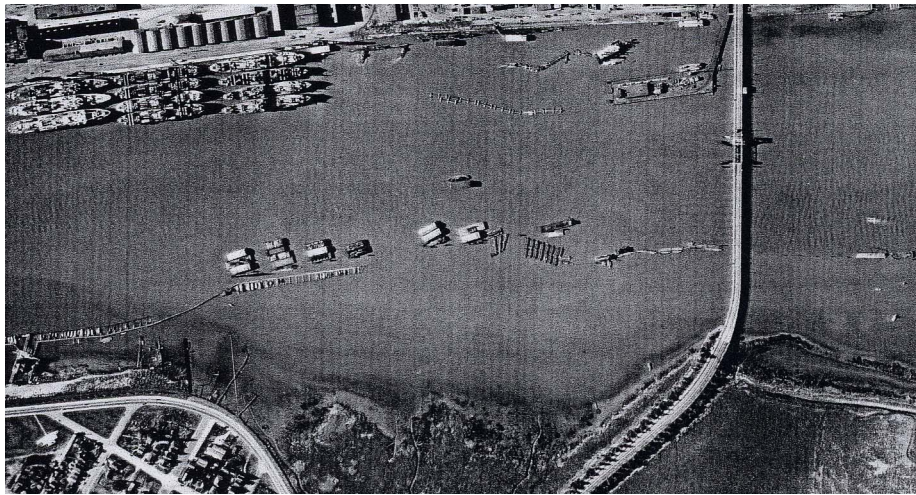
In research conducted at the Vallejo Naval and Historical Museum, I discovered a series of correspondences between Erin Wichels, a noted columnist for the Times-Herald (Vallejo's version of Herb Caan) and Les Taylor, a Southern Pacific switch operator at Sperry Mills. He writes in 1975 the following to Wechels about a SP land transaction:

In the portion the SP got, were a number of arks and shacks. Len Marisch of the SP engineering depart and I went to all of the occupants and with the one exception , had them sign leases, at a dollar a year, so that the SP title would be kept clear. I was the landlord for the SP. My job was to see they paid their yearly dollar and to keep the peace amongst the tenents etc.(appendix 2)

In the same research a map of the Sperry Mill's property was found showing the actual locations of arks in the southern Vallejo. (see appendix 3)

Then something happens. As can be seen from Picture 6 (the full version of this picture is

found in Appendix 4) of the waterfront north of the Vallejo Yacht Club taken in 1946, the arks in Vallejo disappear with the exception of the 3 found today on Wilson Ave. It is the contention of this paper that just as 9/11 caused a shake up in public security in this country, so too did Pearl Harbor. It seems plausible that the reason arks along the Vallejo waterfront disappeared is such a relatively short time was out of security concerns over their proximity to Mare Island and its importance to the war effort.



(Picture 6) Vallejo waterfront in 1921 north of Vallejo Yacht Club to the Mare Island causeway.
(Photograph courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration)

The remainder of this paper will discuss how arks could be made into an affordable housing solution for the Bay Area.

The ark as it existed had some design features which were unique to the Bay Area. The roofs were curved and there are galleries all around. Both of these features of the ark were not replicated on other houseboat designs. It would be interesting if these original design elements could be incorporated in to modern and marine tolerant building practices. The ark on the Hyde

St. Pier has the dimensions of 42 feet by 20 feet. This does not include the gallery which would add 5 feet to the beam of the ark. Altogether the ark has a living space of 800 square feet and in real estate terms can be described as a two bedroom one bath living arrangement.

It is important to draw a distinction between a houseboat and a boat. People who live aboard a boat are living in a boat. Yes, the accommodations can be comfortable. Expensive yachts have spacious staterooms and commodious heads. But it is still primarily a vessel used for sailing. A houseboat is just the opposite. It is a house first and a boat second. This is an important distinction to keep in mind in designing a modern version of an ark.

Before discussing the actual design of an ark, it is worth discussing the economics of the housing market in the Bay Area to establish a context for why arks make sense for the Bay area. In the last 8 years the Bay Area has witnessed an incredible rise in the real estate market. For the sake of this paper, I will limit the discussion to the real estate market in Vallejo. In 1996 when Mare Island Shipyard closed, the average house in Vallejo was selling for well under 100 dollars a square foot. As Vallejo slowly recovered for the shock to the local economy of the base closure, the housing market slowly began to recuperate. In the last 4 years, housing prices in Vallejo caught up to the rest of the Bay Area and peaked at approximately 400 per square foot. With the current real estate market in decline, prices are starting to level out at around 300 per square foot. At the same time, the rental market has remained basically the same over the last 10 years in Vallejo. In order to afford one of the McMansions on Mare Island (2500 plus square feet) you would have to be able to come up with \$5600 a month on an \$800,000 house with a 7% mortgage.

So what does that mean for the first time homeowner or the retired couple? The retired

couple probably bought a 1500 square foot three bedroom two bath house 30 years ago and are no longer making any mortgage payments. If they sell their house would get approximately \$360,000. But what they would not get is a downsizing option. If they stay in the same area they could probably afford to buy a small one bedroom condominium. Likewise, the first time homebuyer is priced out of the market unless they have equity in a house (thus making them no longer a first time homebuyer). Both of these individuals would be ideal customers for the type of living arrangement an ark could offer.

Now let's take about how you would design a modern day version of the ark. The old arks were built out of wood on wooden hulls. The disadvantage of using wood should be immediately apparent. Therefore, a modern material would be a better choice. A concrete barge might be a suitable choice. Construction time for a concrete barge is about a week. The concrete must cure for approximately 10 days or until the concrete reaches design strength. The design strength of the concrete is 4000 psi, which is normally reached within 7 days. When the foundation is completed, it can be launched and then towed to its location or berth where it would be moored with heavy polypropylene lines. As of 1/1/06, the price for a barge is \$50.00 per square foot; a 16x40x6 barge would be \$32,000. (AquaMaison, 2006)

Now let's talk about two different approaches to building an ark from a systems standpoint. If you were to build the ark as if it were a boat, then you would have to build a closed-system. That means that water, sewage and electrical would have to be self-maintained. The water system would consist of holding tanks for fresh water, grey water and black water. Both the delivery and pumping out of the holding tanks would have to be accomplished through a contracted service. The electrical on most boats is 12 volts and requires batteries. These

batteries need to be recharged. This is accomplished in one of two ways: 1) a motor is connected to an alternator which needs to run in order to recharge the batteries; 2) a battery re-charger can be connected to shore power. The other approach is to be completely connected to conventional sources of water, sewage, electrical and gas. The advantage to doing so would be that the “house” could be built using standard romex and lighting fixtures and receptacles. In this case, the shore connections would have to be made to allow for the twice daily changes in tide.

The “house” itself could be built quite readily using standard building materials. Using marine tolerant exterior finishes and a smartly laid out floor plan, the construction costs of the house construction could be kept under \$50,000. Appendix 4 is an example of a possible floor plan of two bedroom two bath design. Its overall dimensions are 48 feet by 24 feet with 1125 square feet of living space. Essentially the ark could be offered at approximately \$150 per for \$172,800.

Now that we have built it, we need to find a place to berth the new ark. This raises a number of considerations. First, the Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) considers anything that “casts a shadow” on the water to be landfill and prohibits it. Therefore, the ark would have to be able to propel itself through under its own power in order to be considered a boat. This would require the inclusion of a motor. This would affect the design of the barge. If however, you could get BCDC to accept the idea of the ark as affordable housing you would still have to berth it some where. BCDC has a rule in place that says a marina can not have more than 10 percent of its slips occupied by live-aboards. If it exceeds this limit it fails into the category of a houseboat marina.

In conclusion, overcoming all of the objections and obstacles, a modern version of the
arks of San Francisco Bay would provide a solution to the affordable housing problem in the Bay
Area.

Sources

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Miller, T. (2006). Interview with Assistant curator Ted Miles, Shaw Library, Shaw Library, Fort Masson, San Francisco, CA, Summer 2005.

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Hunt A. (1905). Houseboats and Houseboating. *Penguin Books*, 1st Edition

National Archives and Records Administration, Mare Island U.S. Navy Photograph Collection, Nov. 7 2006.

National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/archive/safr/vrtour/vrmovies/akvr1hs1.htm> retrieved Nov 1, 2006.

Ricio Romero. <http://www.rocioromero.com> Retrieved Nov 1, 2006.

Vallejo Naval and Historical Museum, Research Library finds on correspondence between Les Taylor and Erin Wichels. Researched on Nov. 8th, 2006.

Appendix 1

2. Historic name, if known: _____

3. Street or rural address 811, 813, 815 Wilson
 City: Vallejo ZIP: 94590 County: Solano

4. Present owner, if known: Mary Smith Address: 310 Wilson Avenue
 City: Vallejo ZIP: 94590 Ownership is: Public ☐ Private ☒

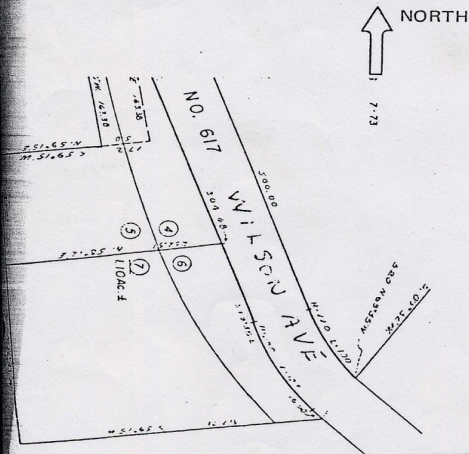
5. Present Use: Residence Original Use: Residence
 Other past uses: None known

DESCRIPTION

6. Briefly describe the present physical appearance of the site or structure and describe any major alterations from its original condition:

This row of three one story structures are in fact grounded boats of the type popularly called arks. The roofs are curved like awnings and there are galleries all around. The arks are up on pilings, slightly removed from shore and are reached by short bridges. There have been various minor alterations and additions.

7. Locational sketch map (draw and label site and surrounding streets, roads, and prominent landmarks):



8. Approximate property size:

Lot size (in feet) Frontage 280
 Depth 300
 or approx. acreage _____

9. Condition: (check one)

a. Excellent ☐ b. Good ☐ c. Fair ☒
 d. Deteriorated ☐ e. No longer in existence ☐

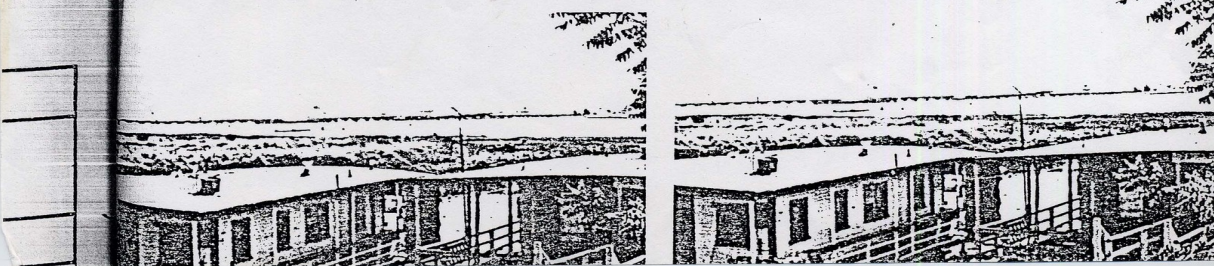
10. Is the feature a. Altered? ☐ b. Unaltered? ☐

11. Surroundings: (Check more than one if necessary)

a. Open land ☐ b. Scattered buildings ☐
 c. Densely built-up ☐ d. Residential ☒
 e. Commercial ☐ f. Industrial ☒
 g. Other ☐

12. Threats to site:

a. None known ☐ b. Private development ☐
 c. Zoning ☒ d. Public Works project ☐



Appendix 2

NOV-09-2006 01:15 PM VALLEJOMUSEUM

7076432443

P.02

Woodbridge July 22

Dear Fran:-

Thanks for your letter and the comments.

Strangely, I did not think my epistles would be in the Historical records, but I am glad they will be. It is something like the way I broke into the athletic columns of the Sacramento Bee recently, and which really gave me many laughs. That cartoon was delightful.

Back,
About the arks and their inhabitants. Bay in the 1850's the US gave a forerunner of the California Pacific quite a large right of way through Vallejo. What happened to that, I never did know. Maybe some day I'll find out from the General Office. They are very kind in giving me information I ask for.

In 1923, there was a tideland settlement by the US, giving the city of Vallejo, the Southern Pacific, and the Daniels Construction Company portions of the water front. Daniels got their portion for that riprap wall they had put up along the water front in the 1920's, or thereabouts.

In the portion the SP got, were a number of arks and shacks. Len Mayrieh, of the SP engineering dept. and I went to all of the occupants and with one exception, had them sign leases, at a dollar a year, so that the SP title would be kept clear. I was the landlord for the SP. My job was to see they paid their yearly dollar, and to keep peace amongst the tenants etc.

Those lease files were kept in the office at Vallejo, with all the correspondence about each, and the changes in ownership. When the station was closed in 1969, everything was taken from the depot except the safe and the lease files. I obtained the safe, and delivered it to a church in Tracy, by authority of the SP Treasurer, who was custodian of all safes. The lease files, I managed to sneak out, and have them here at my place. The garage roof went sour, and the files got pretty dirty. Each had a small map of the area. Several maps I had are in storage at Dr. Letcher's home in Lodi. He was a railroad buff, and had about the finest private collection of railroadiana I have ever seen. When he passed away last year, I took over the job of sorting his things, and disposing of them.

Amongst the lessees were a retired madam, a bank robber, bootleggers, a house of filles de joie, etc. I'll get out my lease files, and try to work out from memory, what I can of the nice people I was landlord of. Quite interesting. I'll mail it as soon as accomplished.

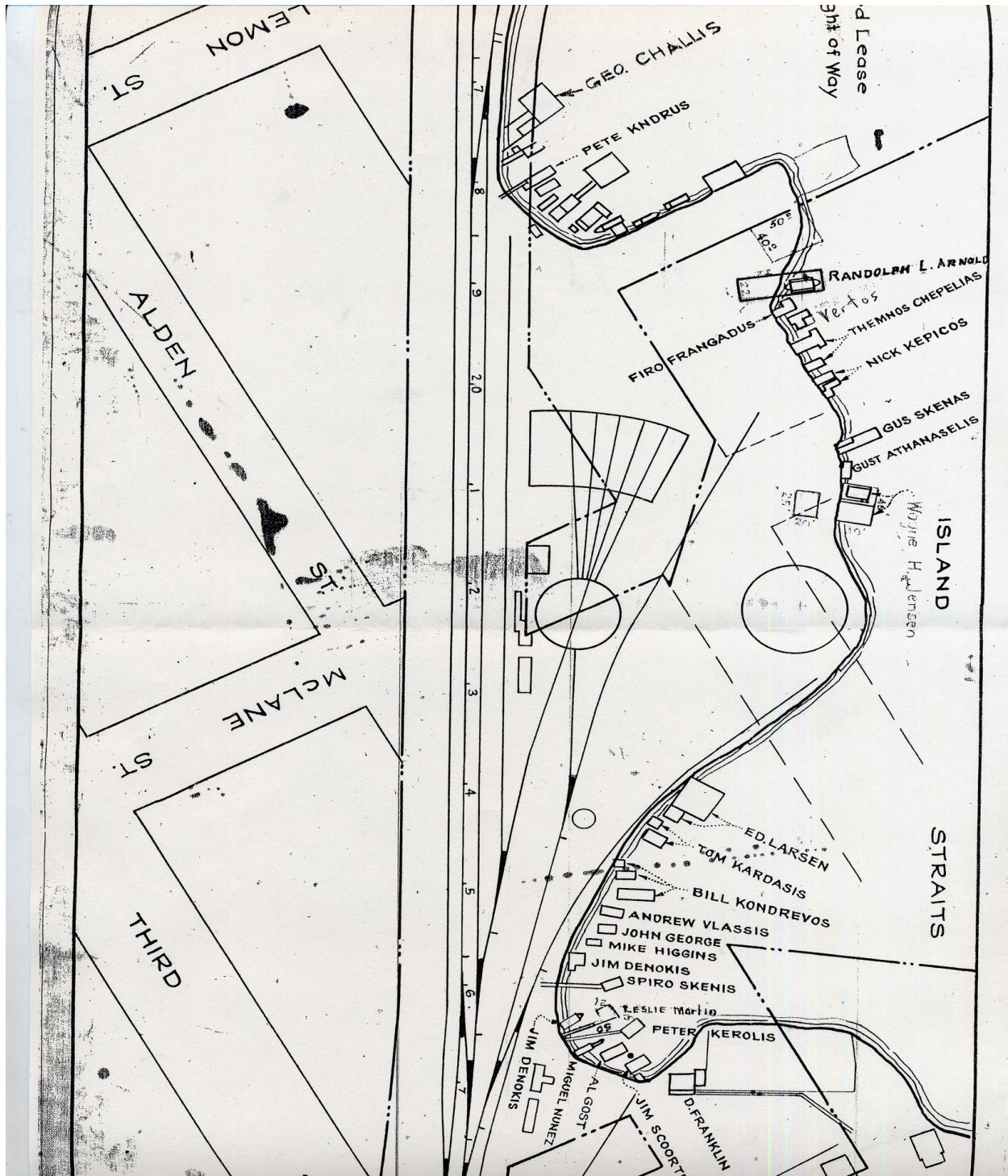
About Lou Martin. Along towards the last of his life, he was sick and George Winegar went to visit him one day, taking along a tape measure, and in fun, measured him for a coffin. I do not think Lou liked it.

Best regards to you both

Sincerely

Les

Appendix 3



Appendix 4

1941-1951



3

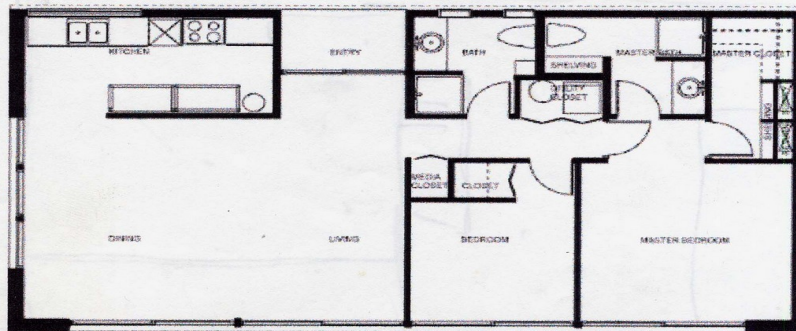
Appendix 5



plans & information

(updated April 2004)

Please e-mail us for more details or click here for an LV Home Brochure!



(view larger floorplan)

LV HOME SPECIFICATIONS

PROGRAM

A small home that includes a master bedroom, master closet, master bathroom, second bedroom, small closet, bathroom, kitchen, living room, dining room, utility room with laundry and water heater, and closet for HVAC or Media closet. This home can easily be reconfigured to be a deluxe one bedroom one bathroom home as well as fully handicap accessible.

SQUARE FOOTAGE

Approximately 1150 sq/ft.

OVERALL DIMENSIONS

48'-6" x 24'-6"

CEILING HEIGHT

9'-1-3/4"

Additional Pictures



A SAN FRANCISCO HOUSEBOAT INTERIOR.



A HOUSEBOAT IN SAN FRANCISCO HARBOR.