

San Francisco Chronicle
Tuesday, Sept. 15, 1981

S P O T L I G H T



Photos by Fred Larson and Eric Luce

Betty Boatwright shares with other houseboaters on Mission Creek a genuine love for the community despite drawbacks like the constant drone of cars on the nearby freeway

An Offbeat Urban Houseboat Haven

Curving spans of freeways crisscross overhead like approaches to a city on another planet. The hum of cars traveling above provides a steady background of sound, punctuated intermittently by the roar of huge trucks en route to warehouses on nearby streets.

Central to this panorama is a gently flowing creek, sparkling in the sunlight. On a rainy day, the peaceful stream turns into a festering slough, awash with raw sewage and the bodies of drowned rats.

The scene is Mission Creek, a channel in the China Basin area

visit grandparents or a divorced parent.

The residents are independent to the degree that many are heard to admit "I never have known his last name," speaking of a longtime neighbor.

Yet every September they gather on a waterside deck furnished with old car seats and weathered picnic tables for a "blowout" — cases of beer and wine, fresh seafood, steaks and live music that plays far into the night.

And they have joined together in the Mission Creek Marina Asso-

Picturesque Mission Creek, tranquil and sparkling on a sunny day, becomes a festering slough during the rainy season

South of Market that is home — and a cherished one — to a handful of people.

Geographically, this community of 20 houseboats and about three dozen craft in various stages of repair is about a mile from the heart of San Francisco; in spirit, it is far far away.

Habitues of Blanche's, an off-beat cafe on the creek's bank at Fourth Street, can see the row of boat berths from their outdoor tables. But many people who have spent all their lives in this city don't know such a place exists.

The community was spawned 21 years ago when houseboaters were forced to move north from Islais Creek to make way for the development of some new shipping piers. Like any community that is isolated — in this case by locked gates on one side and a waterway on the other — it has developed its own particular spirit.

The residents are about evenly divided between retired persons, some of them disabled, and working people.

A new litter of kittens and their mama frolic on the dock, and dogs pop in and out of some houseboats, but children can be seen only on weekends and during the summer when they come to

ciation to fight against eviction and for a long-term lease with the Port Commission.

"It is a unique community," said Bob Palm, a heavily tattooed ex-Navy man who has lived in a big old scow schooner at the west end of the dock for three years.

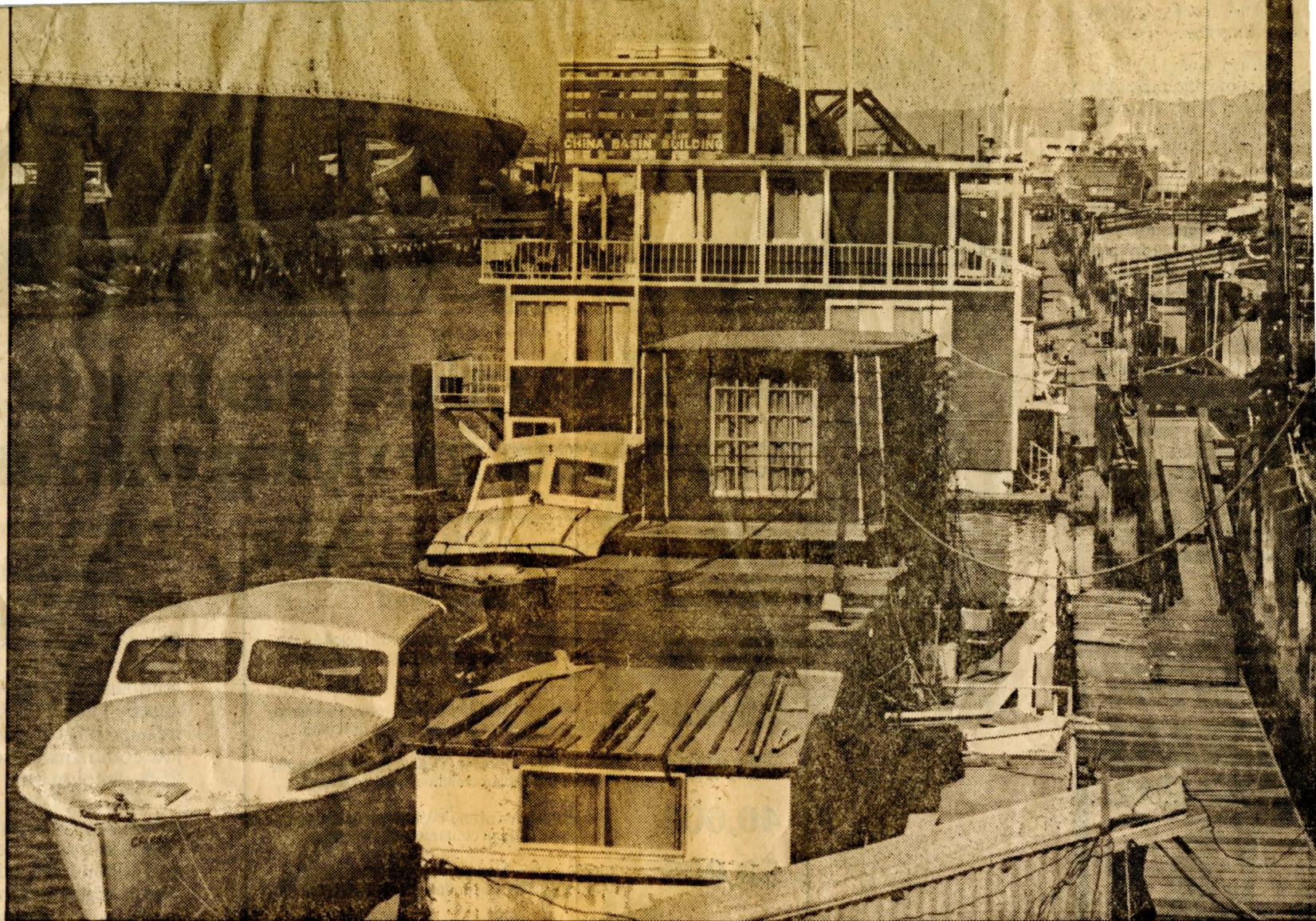
"Though people here are very diverse, they pull together. They mind their own business and yet they're super-friendly, if that makes any sense."

"Everybody here does his own thing," commented Ruth Huffaker, one of the longest residents, executive secretary, unofficial harbor master and "mama" of the community.

The community has its share of "slobs," as former resident Mel Ortner put it, "but there are slobs everywhere."

Of the 55 berths on Mission Creek, the Bay Conservation and Development Commission grants live-aboard status to 20. The waiting list to get in grew so long that it was closed off several years ago. Residents say that there are a few "sneak-boards" who stay on their boats without permits, but the number is small.

The monthly rent paid to the Port is \$800, split among the 55 berth tenants; additional assess-



A dilapidated charm characterizes this community; in the foreground, the Huffaker houseboat, behind, the Boatwrights'

ments collected by the Mission Creek Marina Association cover maintenance (the tenants have improved sewage and electrical lines, pay their water and garbage bills and maintain the sparsely planted parkway that borders the channel, for instance) and special events, such as the yearly party.

If the houseboat marina in Sausalito is uptown chic, Mission Creek is midtown shabby. On a sunny summer afternoon the view, while not picture-postcard spectacular, has its appeal: fog sliding over Twin Peaks, Financial District skyscrapers in the distance, egrets and ducks on the creek.

But it also has a scruffy look that keeps it from being a paradise. Some of the houseboats are ancient, leaky vessels ("Some people clean their houses on the weekends; we clean out the bilges," one woman remarked); others are only half built.

Probably the most elegant on the dock is a three-story model that Jack and Betty Boatwright built of redwood on a concrete float and furnished with fine old furniture they accumulated during 40 years of marriage on dry land.

Despite complaints, it is hard to find a Mission Creek resident who would choose to live anywhere else.

"I love it with a passion here," enthused Palm. His scow schooner was owned before him by one of the first residents of Mission Creek and its unofficial harbor master, Frank Leslie. Palm works on the boat when his bad back allows; he has added a big room on the upper deck that houses an unfinished kitchen and a living room with picture windows that look out past freeway pilings to Twin Peaks.

Up top is a sundeck that will eventually have an outdoor wet bar. Tied up outside is his dinghy,

Junior, which he uses to sail off to nearby Mission Rock Resort for lunch or, on a hot night, to pass out slices of cold watermelon to his neighbors.

As with other residents, living on a houseboat was a natural extension of a love affair with sailing for Ruth and Steve Huffaker. Beginning in 1959, they spent all their off-work hours working on their boat at Mission Creek.

Eventually "it seemed that we preferred being here to home" (a house in Bernal Heights) so they moved down and converted a Navy landing craft into a home with a bedroom, a bath, a galley kitchen and a small living room.

The space is tight; every nook and cranny beneath staircases and in room dividers are used for storage. An electric frying pan is stashed in a wooden box that serves as a stepping stone to the power boat outside. The rest of their

belongings goes into several sheds the Huffakers own on the creek bank.

Today, Ruth, whose chronic asthma is somewhat relieved by being near the water, says, "I would hate to move back to the beach," her term for dry land and a frame house.

"It's the best place in town," her husband added. "There's no crime. And the weather here is the best in the city."

Betty Boatwright, a handsome woman in her 60s with a husky voice and silver-gray hair, is another who "had always wanted to live on a houseboat." She hasn't changed her mind, even though she has to take a Dramamine when her house begins to roll on stormy days.

The residents say they get used to the constant buzz from the freeways overhead; close your eyes

See Page 17, Col. 1

The Offbeat Lives of Urban Houseboaters

From Page 16

and it almost sounds like the crashing surf.

But most remain acutely aware of the floodgates on the creek that the city opens periodically, particularly during the rainy season, to release overflow from the sewage system.

"Believe me, when you have a dinner party, you look at your tide tables," said Palm. There have been times, after the first autumn rain, when he has looked out his dining room window and counted "more than 100 dead rats" floating by.

On those days — an average of 81 a year, Palm said — it is obvious why Mission Creek is sometimes called S--- by those who live there.

But even that annoyance — and the potential health hazard — is downplayed. Betty Boatwright said the first time she saw the flood gates open opposite her houseboat, "I talked about the beautiful waterfall. Then someone said, 'Don't look at it too close.' It's all in the eye of the beholder.

"Sure, I suppose (the sewage) bothers me," she added. "We hope that no one falls in, and if they do, they take a shower right away.

"But when you travel as much as we do, you can't be too fussy ... I'm just not a worrier."

Always downplaying the negative, the Huffakers said that Mission Creek is a lot cleaner than it was when they moved there 20 years ago.

The dust that filters down constantly from the freeway is another annoyance, as is the "white-out" that occurs sometimes on the creek, caused, the residents feel sure, by a paint company upstream dumping some white waste in the water.

But the biggest worry is the uncertainty of how long the Mission Creek community can survive.

Some of the residents refused to discuss for publication the issue of leases that has been in limbo for at least five years. But the fact is the Mission Creek Marina Association and the Port Commission have met dozens of times to iron out the problem of a lease, which was approved in 1976 but never signed.

Steve Huffaker said that the association is asking for a 10-year lease, with a 10-year option to renew. Port



On a bad day, ex-Navy man Bob Palm has counted more than 100 dead rats floating by

Director Ed David said that the term of the lease is the "real issue" and that the two sides are "a lot closer to agreement than we were six months ago."

David said he feels "an obligation" to provide the longterm tenants with a settlement so that "they can live out their natural lives there." He and the Port Commission are not so concerned about guaranteeing a permanent home to newcomers.

They and some of the houseboaters worry more about controlling the speculative sales prices and windfall profits that might result from the intense demand for berths at Mission Creek. The only way to get into the marina now is to buy a boat that is berthed there.

If worse came to worse, and the community were forced to disband, the houseboaters would not go gently.

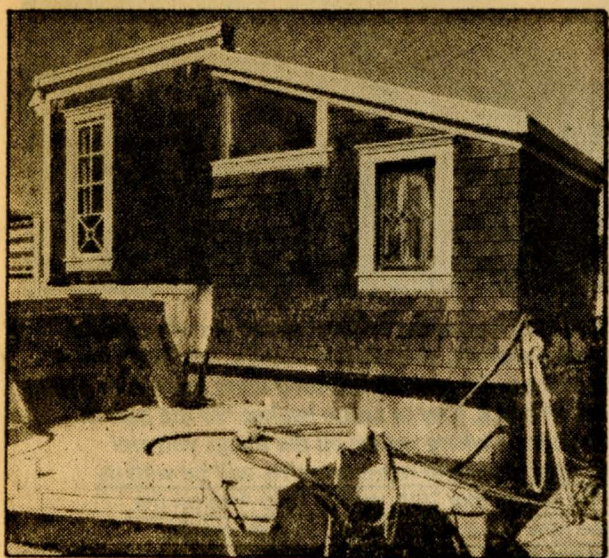
"I think I'd call my Irish up ... We really want that lease," said Ruth Huffaker.

"I think we would call our lawyer," her husband interjected.

"I would probably borrow bus fare out to the Golden Gate Bridge," said Palm with a slim laugh. "My vessel is virtually worthless without a berth."

Given the fixed incomes of some of the Mission Creek residents and the demand for marina space in the Bay Area, Palm expressed a common sentiment when he stated, "There's no place else to move."

*San Francisco Chronicle
Tue. Sept. 15, 1981*



On a sunny day, the houseboats sparkle