

The Wall Place

December 16, 2012

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Aquatic Park, San Francisco ~ The Wall Place

A tricycle or wagon was often resident at “the wall place,” the long crescent shaped fishing pier at Maritime Park, San Francisco. Four year old fishing toddlers could charge around on the trike among the local anglers and fishing families without worry, working class San Franciscans and poor blacks fishing for dinner would all watch and monitor youngsters.

My father would wet a number of lines, plus a crab trap. My brother Larry and I would each have our own line, my Dad two. My fishing rig consisted of a stubby rod and open spool reel, as big as my head. Holding that pole over the solid concrete railing was genesis of the name, “the wall place” to Larry and I. A kid could catch fish all day.

The “wall place” was thus named because we, my brother and I, would hold our rods over the top of that concrete railing, facing the wall while intently staring up at the tip of the rod, waiting for that tug on the line to bend the rod tip. We could not see the water. Doug taught us to pull back on the rod if the tip wiggled in order to set the hook, then start reeling in the catch. In this fashion I caught countless smelt, bullheads and flounder.

There was no casting for a youngster, just hold the rod tip over “the wall” and let the spool unwind until the weight hit the bottom. At “the wall place” I recall learning that

there are consequences to actions and inaction. When the young angler dropped their lead weighted line to the sea-floor, the free-falling lead weight abruptly stopped, while the old open-reel spool would continue to spin and feed out line. A “snarl” of line is formed when the line stops feeding out from the rod, while the spool keeps spinning out more line. My Dad showed me a number of times how to keep my finger on the line to slow the spool and prevent the line from playing out too quickly. Controlled drop prevents a snarl, I knew that.

Dad untangled many of my snarls. Eventually Dad cleared my last snarl, and patiently taught me that I must untangle the next one myself. Still nothing had really happened, there had been no consequence for my day dreaming.

His unspoken look conveyed, ‘one takes responsibility for their actions’, as I looked toward him after the snarl formed. He had been monitoring my actions: bait the hook, get the rod over the wall, drop the lever on the spool, put the thumb on the line as the line plays out. Uh-oh. I recall picking apart the tangled snarls for long periods, while standing at the wall, my Dad not far away tending his line and monitoring my progress.

Doug is patient, a fisherman who meditates on the rhythm of the waves and breath of life. It was quite clear to me at the time that I would remain at station with that snarl until untangled. We were fishing, there would be many hours, no escape; plus those guys were catching fish while I toiled in purgatory. By about five or six years I was able to bait my hook and make a controlled drop without snarling.

We fished “the wall place” many times in the late fifties. The fish, people and action around the pier was constant. Families of anglers would set-up for the day on concrete benches, blue collar whites mostly, sometimes shoulder to shoulder. Striper and rock cod could be caught, while trash fish like bullheads and smelt could be taken up on virtually every drop by a child. Dad brought a Dungeness crab trap that he would bait with a fish head from a striper, perhaps spiced with bacon. An early conservationist by practice, Doug would throwback red-crab, waiting for the white Dungeness, prized on the pier.

My earliest memories include holding a rod next to my brother Larry staring at the wall. Unlike myself, Larry is not squeamish and would cut open fish, dissect organs and explore anatomy. I would get freaked out, which he would of course, enjoy.

An indelible memory from those fishing days at “the wall place” is Alcatraz. The prison was operational, support boats left from the North side of pier. A man sat on a chair, head down, inside the cage. The cage boat bobbed in the water as guards and boatmen prepared to depart, his dark silhouette sliced by the steel bars of the cage. Thick vertical bars formed the cage on all sides, so one could look right through the enclosure. He sat in the middle of this cage, head down, bobbing in the waves, waiting to be taken to the rock. Like some movie, the man sat waiting his passage to living hell. Unforgettable.

Treasure Island was an active Navy Base induction and training center. Doug's permanent ship, USS Nickel stationed at TI, was a training vessel for newly inducted sailors before their permanent ship assignments. The Bay was active with Naval vessels and planes on training missions.

Perhaps seven years old, while fishing from the pier's end, "When a submarine is moving underwater with the periscope up, does it look like a big straight up stick going through the water?" Typical kind of child question. "Well, I guess it would look something like that pal", looking toward his tasks. "That must be one over there!" said I, pointing over the waters. Cruising within one hundred yards was the six-to-eight foot tapered periscope, visible bow-wave foaming behind the slow moving pole. Doug fixes his gaze where I am pointing, responding with, "sure enough, that is a submarine periscope over there". Submarine periscopes moving through the water is the stuff of movies, except during 1960.