

The History of the Resilient San Diego Rowing Club

By

Joey Seymour

“San Diego is the capital city in water sports on the Pacific coast. Having established that fact, it is easy to prove that the clubhouse of the San Diego Rowing Club is the capitol (1917).”¹

The story of the San Diego Rowing Club (SDRC) is unique because it tells the tale of a club established in 1888 by thirteen rowing enthusiasts that grew into the city’s most prominent male club, boasting a membership of 1,200 in the 1930s and



San Diego Rowing Club's Boathouse circa 1902. This was the club's home for nearly eighty years. Courtesy of SDRC.

Joey Seymour, author of *San Diego's Finest Athletes*, University of San Diego alumnus, wishes to thank Dr. Molly McClain, David Frost and the San Diego Rowing Club for the opportunity to work on this fascinating project as well as Dr. Iris Engstrand who assisted in the research and selection of the photos contained within this article.

1940s. Men of stature and wealth as well as every day laborers were members of the club and all rowed, laid about nude on the sun deck, played handball, basketball, and/or baseball together. Rodney Brink wrote in 1917, "Practically every profession, business and craft is represented in the membership of the club. To know all the members of SDRC is to have a wide acquaintance among the men, young men and older men, who are at the helm of business in San Diego."²

Former SDRC president, Jerome (Jerry) Navarra of Jerome's Furniture, captured the essence of the club's early days with his comment that "The place was filled with real characters. It truly was a place where two men could be sunning in the nude while discussing the economy; one a cab driver, the other one a bank president."³ Time, two World Wars and a decline in interest in rowing, however, saw the once mighty club battling to save not only its famous clubhouse, but its club as a whole. Yet, through all the high and low points, SDRC has survived and continues to introduce the sport of rowing to new generations.

The origin of sculling, a form of propelling a boat with a long, single oar off the stern, dates back to the early 1700s in London, England. Mark Sauer traced the sport's roots in 1985, "The only bridges across the lower Thames were the London and the



The rowing club featured many other activities including handball, baseball, and basketball. Courtesy of SDRC.



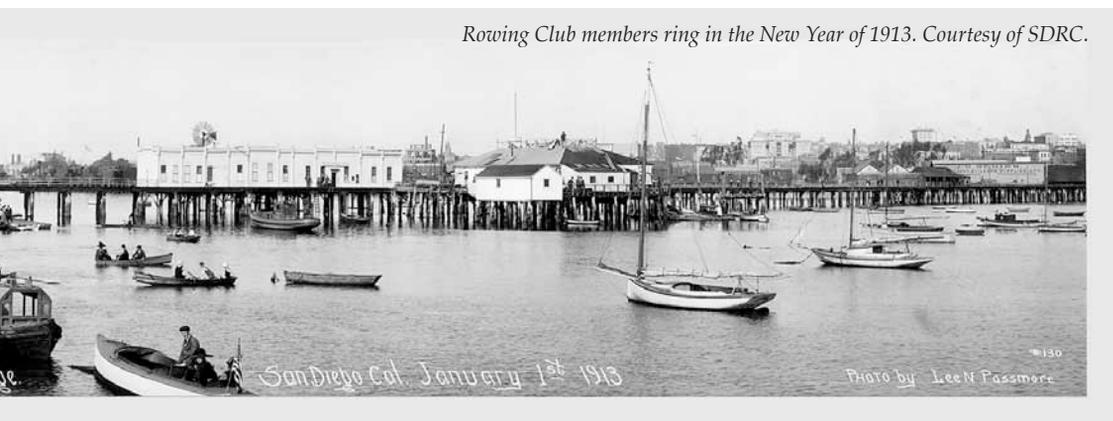


A flurry of activity at the club on a windy day in 1905. Courtesy of SDRC.

Chelsea. Those wishing to cross the river elsewhere had to hail a ferry, typically a light sculling boat operated by a ‘waterman.’⁴ The watermen began to wager on who could scull the fastest from bridge to bridge. In 1715, Doggett’s Coat and Badge, the first organized race between the London and the Chelsea bridges, took place and has occurred every year since.

A Club is Born

“On the evening of June 7, 1888, a group of thirteen men gathered at Steadman’s Boathouse and formed the Excelsior Rowing Club.”⁵ It was on this day that the San Diego Rowing Club was born. In an effort to have a more regional sounding name when competing, the club name was officially changed on September 2, 1891, to the San Diego Rowing Club. In 1921, there was an attempt to change the name to the San Diego Rowing and Athletic Club because the club had much more to offer than just rowing.



Rowing Club members ring in the New Year of 1913. Courtesy of SDRC.

In the 1950s, a proposal not only to move to Mission Bay, but to change the name of the club to reflect the move came up to the members, but was vehemently voted down.

Besides constantly considering a change of their name, SDRC members spent the first twelve years of their existence moving from boathouse to boathouse, while at the same time fighting to keep up membership. The first location, Steadman's Boathouse, was SDRC's home for only a year. The location was ripe with issues, including the resignation of R.B. Steadman from the Excelsior Rowing Club. From 1889 to 1891, the club rowed out of the D Street Boathouse on Atlantic Street (now Pacific Coast Highway) between E and D streets. The members were not satisfied with this location however, and on July 11, 1891, SDRC moved for a third time to L. A. Chandler's Boathouse at the foot of Fifth. The club would remain there for nine years, during which time memberships began to increase significantly and enough monies were saved to justify purchasing and building their own clubhouse.

On January 1, 1900, a housewarming was held to welcome the members to their new home at the foot of Fifth Avenue (525 W. Harbor Drive) on the bay. The *San Diego Union* reported, "The new boathouse of the San Diego Rowing Club on the steamship wharf was completed last week, when the members moved in and took possession of their new home, which represents an outlay of about two thousand dollars."⁶ Several prominent architects, including William Templeton Johnson, who designed the Serra Museum, San Diego Natural History Museum and San Diego Museum of Art, were asked to submit prospective plans for the clubhouse, but the winning design—mostly based upon cost—went to club member Harry K. Vaughn.⁷

To celebrate the architecturally stunning new clubhouse in 1900, a few members jumped into the 58-degree water. This has since become a tradition that the club continues to this day. Every January 1, members jump into the bay to welcome in the New Year and celebrate their past. On the 68th anniversary of the annual "dip," the *San Diego Union* noted in 1957, "Polar bears like to swim in cold water. Most people don't. The San Diego Rowing Club has more people than polar bears, but for 68 years members have been plunging into the bay on New Year's Day anyhow."⁸ In 1971, SDRC president, Percy A. Rooks said, "It's the best cure we know of for a New Year's Day hangover."⁹

In 1934, the clubhouse had an unexpected, but incredibly appreciated, expansion when "part of the harbor was dredged for the clear passage of large Navy ships, the scooped up bottom of the bay was dumped in this place near the Fifth Avenue ending. They wanted to connect it and make a pier for lumber carriers, but they never did."¹⁰ The man-made island would become known as Brennan Island after former port director, Joe Brennan. SDRC leased Brennan Island, landscaped it with beautiful palm trees, geraniums, and some annuals to go along with the grass fields. They also built a brown building that would become home to the club's famous handball courts.

Reporter Lew Scarr wrote, "It is an island that is used only for fun. Nothing is sold there; no one is imprisoned there and no immigrants are detained there. But you can swim there; you can play handball there; you can have a picnic there."¹¹

The new clubhouse would remain SDRC's home for seventy-nine years and would see many of San Diego's most important men serve as not only members, but also as club president, as was the case with James Wadham and Harley Knox.¹² Also a considerable number of its members would serve in both World Wars. In 1920, John W. Swallow reported that "more than 180 members of the San Diego Rowing Club served in some branch of service during World War I."¹³ During the height of the club's popularity, any man wishing to make a name for himself in San Diego would pay the minimal initiation fee (\$15) and monthly dues (\$1) to become a member. Their membership would grant them access to all those with influence and power in the city.



Courtesy of SDRC.

Prominent Club Members

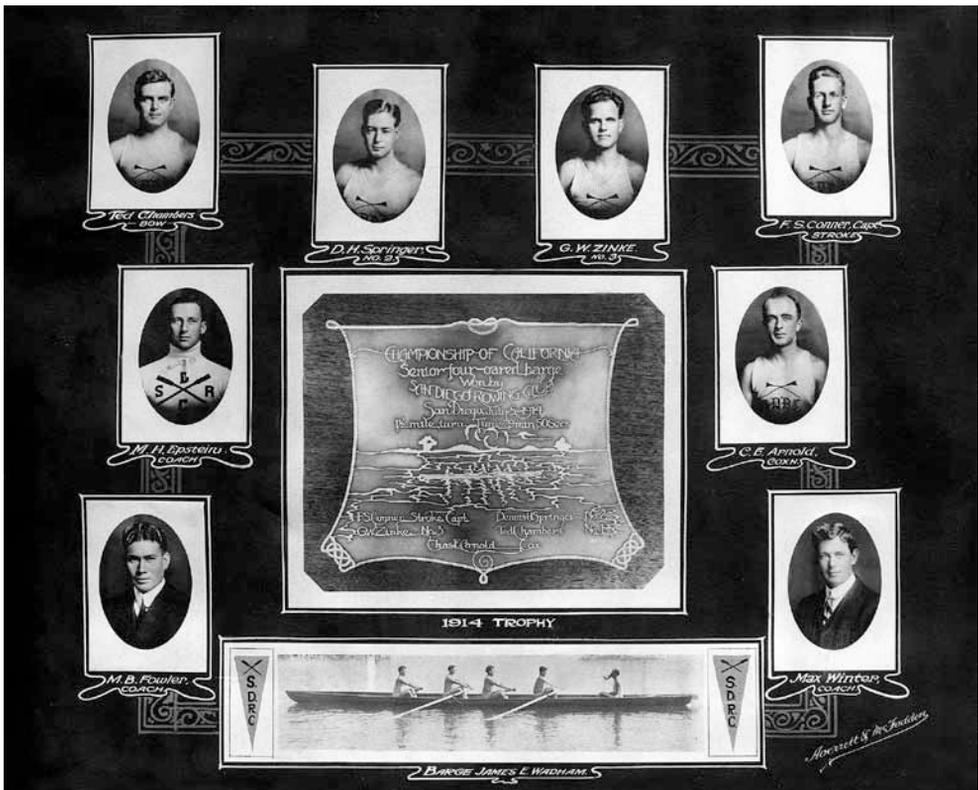


Courtesy of SDRC.

In 1973, well-known San Diego sportswriter Jack Murphy wrote of the San Diego Rowing Club, "There was a time in this city when a man couldn't very well get elected mayor unless he passed some of his time exercising or loafing, or both, at the San Diego Rowing Club."¹⁴ From 1911 to 1963, nine of San Diego's fourteen mayors were reported to have been members of SDRC. The mayors served a combined 42 years in office, leaving only a cumulative 10 years during that 52-year span in which a mayor of San Diego was not a member of the Rowing Club.¹⁵ Dick Barthelmass, a former captain of SDRC and *San Diego Sun* columnist who penned the popular column "Rowing Club Gossip," wrote in 1960, "The dividends of healthful exercise and stimulating companionship found in this lusty organization are being reaped today by hundreds of men who have become leaders in the community. They are indebted to that little group of pioneers who knocked together a ramshackle clubhouse at the foot of E Street away back in 1888."¹⁶

Beyond political figures, there were also heads of banks like Anderson Borthwick and leaders of local business like Hiram Gould of Pioneer Trucking, real estate and civic promoter David C. Collier, and Joseph and Richard Jessop of Jessop’s Jewelers. According to Aviation-Maritime writer Ken Hudson, “In its F. Scott Fitzgerald-era heydays, the San Diego Rowing Club was an exclusive organization that counted many of the city’s most influential and wealthy businessmen and public officials as members.”¹⁷

James E. Wadham served for only two years as mayor of San Diego from 1911 to 1913. He had come to San Diego via Illinois in 1870. Wadham witnessed the birth of the San Diego Rowing Club and became one of its early members alongside “San Diego’s First Citizen,” George Marston. Marston ran for mayor after Wadham decided not to run again in 1913, but was unsuccessful. He lost to Charles F. O’Neill, who served as mayor from 1915 to 1917 and belonged to SDRC as well. During Wadham’s short tenure as mayor, he found himself in a sticky situation when riots between the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies) and local vigilantes sprang up in



A trophy celebrated the Championship of California in 1914. The barge was named for San Diego mayor, James E. Wadham. Courtesy of SDRC.

1912. Wadham had passed an ordinance making any form of public demonstration illegal. The Wobblies continued to protest, despite the ordinance, and a group of San Diego vigilantes fought back by dragging the protestors out of town.¹⁸ Wadham's warnings were not heeded, unfortunately for their leader—known anarchist Ben Reitman—who was abducted from his hotel room and allegedly tortured. Mayor Wadham's views were nevertheless echoed by San Diego conservatives, and the mayor later served as president of the San Diego Rowing Club in 1918.

Like his predecessor James Wadham, John L. Bacon moved from Illinois to San Diego, arriving in 1914. He was a civil and structural engineer who aided in designing aquatic features for exhibits that were showcased at the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in Balboa Park. Bacon was elected mayor in 1921 and served until 1927. One of his main goals was to promote tourism. In 1922 he stated, "I would rather see 100 tourists come to San Diego, spend a month or a season, be busy every minute with healthful, outdoor entertainment, and go back home to tell their relatives and neighbors that San Diego is the greatest town in America than to have 10,000 tourists come, stay 24 hours, and go away 'knocking' because they had a dull time."¹⁹ A popular mayor at first, Bacon was forced to deal with the main issue of the day—the construction of water projects. He was unable to overcome the litany of problems that enveloped him and the daunting tasks left undone. He thus declined to seek re-election in 1927. Ironically, after his term as mayor, Bacon served as president of the Boulder Dam Association, seeking to raise funds for the construction of the dam later to be called the Hoover Dam. Bacon's successor was fellow SDRC member Harry C. Clark, mayor from 1927 to 1931. Clark lost his bid for re-election due to the same issues that plagued Bacon. The \$8.5 million spent in water projects, such as the Lake Hodges Dam, were seen as failures in the eyes of taxpayers. Clark served as the rowing club's treasurer from 1920 to 1922.

"Don't ever do anything you're afraid will be found out – and then you can say what you think,"²⁰ was one of Mayor Percy J. Benbough's favorite sayings. He was a colorful mayor that served San Diego during the early days of World War II. Born in London, England, in 1884, Benbough and his family moved to San Diego because his parents had been advised that it "was a good town in a fine new country for boys to grow up in."²¹ He had an interest in sports, which brought him to the San Diego Rowing Club, but the club could not fulfill his real passion, auto racing. He was elected mayor in 1935 and overwhelmingly re-elected in 1939. His final term in office took place in what was referred to by the *San Diego Union* as, "The greatest period of expansion the community has ever known."²² Benbough was an extremely popular no-nonsense mayor who died while in office on November 4, 1942, at the age of 58—the only mayor of San Diego to die while serving. The city mourned and flags were flown at half staff.

Harley Eugene Knox was the second of San Diego's mayors during this time frame to serve as president of SDRC. Knox joined SDRC in 1922 and served as president, presiding from 1937 to 1941. Harley's foray into rowing occurred after an insult. He was told, "You're too light to race; you wouldn't stand a chance against a full-size crew."²³ Knox led his crew, the "Mighty Mites," to two consecutive victories over the first-string team. In 1928, then serving as captain of the varsity squad, Knox coached the team that made it to the finals of the Olympic trials, only to lose by mere seconds to the team from Harvard.

Knox, born in Nebraska in 1899, moved to San Diego in 1912 and became a dairy owner. He was elected mayor in 1943 and served until 1951. Knox's mayoral successes included the development of Mission Bay Park, San Diego's freeway systems, and the creation of the San Diego County Water Authority. In 1944, only a year into his first term, Knox was injured in a plane crash. The health problems stemming from the accident would continue to bother him for the remainder of his life. Harley Knox died at the age of 57 in 1956. He is one of the few San Diego mayors to have a biography penned about him.²⁴

SDRC member John D. Butler may very well have been the best athlete to have



John Butler as Mayor. Courtesy of SDHC.

served as mayor of San Diego. He was also the first mayor to have been born in San Diego. Butler was an All-Star football player at San Diego State College and was one of the many rowers to serve in World War II. After Knox, sidelined by health issues, decided not to run for a third term, Butler rose to the challenge to fill the seat of his SDRC comrade. According to his wife Virginia (Kirk), "He was very proud of San Diego and was very much a home town boy."²⁵

During his term from 1951 to 1955, Butler continued many of Knox's programs including progress on Mission Bay, the one-way street system downtown, and

the urging of San Diego residents to conserve water. Instead of seeking another term (because the pay was too low), Butler, an attorney, bowed out to another fellow member of the San Diego Rowing Club, Charles C. Dail. In 1984, Butler was inducted into the San Diego Hall of Champions. Butler and Joseph Jessop are the only two members of the San Diego Rowing Club to have been given this prestigious honor by the Hall of Champions.

Even though a discussion of politics was frowned upon while relaxing at the SDRC clubhouse, the fact that from 1935 to 1963 each mayor of San Diego, including Howard B. Bard appointed after the death of Benbough in 1942, had also been a member of the San Diego Rowing Club is no coincidence. This trend concluded with Charles C. Dail who served from 1955 to 1963. When Harley Knox decided to run for mayor, his Fifth District seat became available. Dail won, unopposed. Dail was an accomplished politician who also continued to promote Knox's projects, created the metropolitan sewage system, the seawater conversion plant, and joined the city of San Diego with Yokohama, Japan in the sister city project. As



Anderson "Andy" Borthwick. Courtesy of Donna Knox Sefton.

was the case with Benbough and Knox, Dail died of a cerebral hemorrhage at the early age of 59 on July 13, 1968. According to the *San Diego Tribune*, Dail oversaw, "many changes which led to establishment of San Diego as a forward looking, prosperous and cooperative city during his administration."²⁶

Many San Diegans in 1969 considered Anderson "Andy" Borthwick "San Diego's most popular citizen."²⁷ His athletic accomplishments were rivaled only by his lengthy list of charitable community projects. Reporter Carl Ritter called Borthwick "the epitome of the civic-minded, straight-shooting man of his word."²⁸ In his profession, Andy Borthwick excelled in banking for 54 years, many times taking chances on loans that would end up saving local businesses. As a civic leader he was director of the YMCA, San Diego Hospital Association, Downtown Association, Fiesta del Pacifico, Isotope Research Institute, the California and San Diego Chambers of Commerce, and the local chapter of the American Cancer Foundation to name a few.

In 1918, young Andy joined the San Diego Rowing Club. He joined in the club's handball and bowling activities, sports aided by the fact that he was ambidextrous, but his true passion was rowing. He said of rowing, "most people who meet at a sporting event forget each other in a week, but not oarsmen. That's a big part of what makes this sport so special – the tremendous fellowship."²⁹ Andy was No. 4 oar in a four man shell that included H. DeGraff Austin, who would later become a county supervisor and president of SDRC, remaining one of its most active and tenured members until his death in 1980, and banker C. Arnholt Smith. Smith owned the San Diego Padres during a portion of their minor Pacific Coast League years and the team's first five seasons in Major League Baseball from 1969 to 1974. In 1928, Andy was on the rowing



Banker, philanthropist, and original owner of the San Diego Padres, C. Arnholdt Smith out for a row. Courtesy of SDRC.

team coached by Harley Knox that lost in the Olympic trials in 1928. The team would attempt to represent the United States in 1932, only to lose again in the finals. In 1973, Borthwick assisted his friend Joseph Jessop in starting the San Diego Crew Classic that has since become one of the city's most anticipated regattas. The Crew Classic is known as "America's Premier Spring Regatta." Anderson Borthwick died on October 10, 1982, leaving behind a legacy of athletic endeavors and civic generosity.

In 1978, Dick and Joseph Jessop sat down with Jack Murphy to discuss the third annual San Diego Crew Classic. Dick noted, "It will be one of the best and largest regattas ever held in the U.S. That pleases me because rowing is a clean, honest sport. Of all our sports, rowing has the best reputation."³⁰ The Jessop brothers worked tirelessly and spent much of their own money in developing the San Diego Crew Classic. They were assisted by ZLAC rowing club member, Patricia Stose Wyatt.³¹ ZLAC (the first initial of the four women who founded the club in 1892) is recognized as the oldest women's rowing club in America.³² The Jessops were one of the most influential of the early families, having moved to San Diego from England in 1891. After a few years of struggling as ranchers, they assisted their father, Joseph Sr., in the opening of a watch shop on F Street, which developed into Jessop's Jewelry, still a staple in San Diego. Dick joined SDRC at the age of 16 and in 1908, along with his teammates, won the Pacific Coast rowing championship for the San Diego Rowing Club. At that time the club boasted 1,000 strong members. Dick and Joe Jr.'s love for



Member of Handball Champion Team of 1924. Courtesy of SDRC.

rowing had translated into the Crew Classic, but the Jessops also helped save the struggling San Diego Yacht Club when its membership had dwindled to only 11 after World War I (six were Jessops).³³ They also donated funds to help San Diego State University purchase shells for its crew team. It is without a doubt that the Jessop brothers gave a substantial amount of time and money to develop the sport of rowing in San Diego.

San Diego Rowing Club in Competition

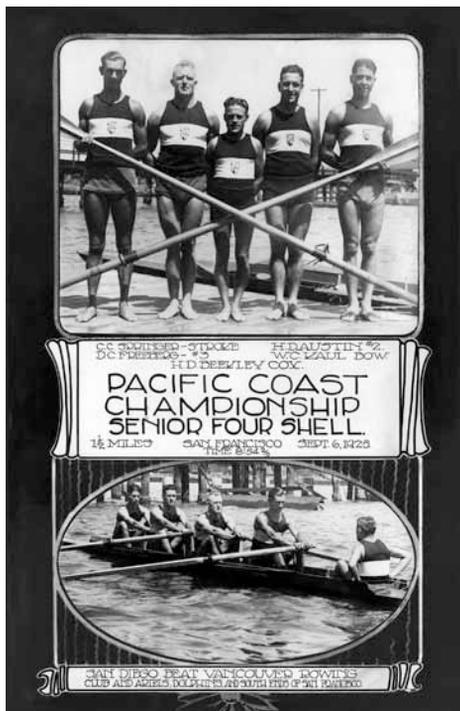
Patricia A. Schaelchlin wrote in her 1984 book, *The Little Clubhouse on Steamship Wharf*, "Regattas and competition became an important part of the club life in the years before World War II. The club competed for the western coast championship through the Pacific Amateur Association, rowing against Vancouver and Victoria in British Columbia, and against San Francisco, Alameda, and Long Beach in California. They competed nationally against the Philadelphia and Chicago teams in the National Association of Amateur Oarsmen."³⁴ Today the club is a member of the United States Rowing Association, the national governing body for the sport of rowing.

Long time member and former president of SDRC, DeGraff Austin stated, "We always aspired to be an organization giving a service to the young men of the community to learn the lessons of an amateur sport in a clean, decent place and without any particular sectarian dedication and it worked splendidly."³⁵ It worked so well that the club began amassing numerous titles in competitions—first on the west coast and then on the national scene, almost immediately after its inception in 1888.

According to Dick Barthelmass, "The year 1919 will long be remembered by old-timers as the one when the club's 'Big Crew' brought home the bacon from the Pacific Association of Amateur Oarsmen's regatta at San Francisco."³⁶ The club won again in 1920, with one of its most notable members, H. Del Beekley, serving as coxswain. Beekley, a San Diego High School



Courtesy of SDRC.



The 1925 Pacific Coast Champions, including Del Beekley. Also pictured are H. DeGraff Austin, C.C. Springer, and D.C. Freeberg. Courtesy of SDRC.

alum, coxed the team as they went on to compete for national titles in Philadelphia in 1928, 1932, and 1956. Del, as most of his friends called him, joined SDRC in 1917 and remained an active member until his death in 2001 at the age of 102.³⁷ He was not only a member of several championship teams from SDRC, but is also credited for reviving rowing at San Diego State University. As World War II veterans were coming home and taking advantage of the G.I. Bill, there was a renewed interest in rowing. Beekley restarted the program at SDSU in 1946. The program was discontinued after the 1948 season and then revived once again permanently in 1960. He retired as the Aztec's coach in 1971, but remained on board as an advisor to the team until 1982. In 1975, when the Mission Bay Aquatic Center was opened, the wing that currently houses the rowing teams of SDSU men and women was dubbed the H. Del Beekley Rowing Center.

Beekley, who stood barely 5 feet tall and weighed 110 pounds, was a loud and boisterous coxswain, coach, and ambassador for the sport. Even at 96, he would attend to the matters of repairing racing and rowing equipment as well as cleaning and organizing the boat house of the San Diego Rowing Club. From 1935 to 1963, Beekley worked for Prudential Insurance. He, like many SDRC members, would walk from his downtown office to the clubhouse at the foot of Fifth Street for a mid-day break to go for a row or enjoy the club's famed sun deck. He would often be joined by George Chambers who, it was reported, "religiously hung out a sign 'Gone to Rowing Club' on the locked door of his place of business on Sixth Street, every noon. Sometimes he would inadvertently lock an absent-minded customer inside, and it would be up to the cop on the beat to solve the problem. His daughter was none other than San Diego's famed swimming star, Florence Chambers."³⁸

When the Jessops began the San Diego Crew Classic, Del Beekley was on hand to assist in any way that he could. When Mark Sauer, staff writer for the *San Diego Union*, asked Beekley in 1985 to describe why he was so drawn to rowing, Beekley replied, "This is the ultimate team sport, I liken it to a performance by a symphony orchestra. Everyone has to work together exactly; everyone has to do the very same thing at the



Olympic silver medalist, Jim Storm, preparing for the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo. Courtesy of SDRC.

same time.”³⁹ Beginning in the 1920s, the San Diego Rowing Club sponsored a Sea Scouting ship. A division of Boy Scouts of America focusing on nautical skills, Sea Scouting teaches children the lessons emphasized by the Boy Scouts. Eugene Storm, a junior high school vice-principal, was a leader of the Sea Scout ship when his young son Jim enrolled. In February 1957, Jim Storm, at the age of 16, had become a member of the San Diego Rowing Club. His size (6’8” and 209 pounds), strength and dedication set him apart from other rowers of his age. While Beekley missed competing in the 1928 Olympics by a mere two seconds, Jim Storm not only competed, but brought home a silver medal from the 1964 summer Olympics in Tokyo.

Leading up to the 1964 Olympic Games in Japan, Storm was approached by Seymour Cromwell, who asked if Storm would compete with him in the Double Sculls event. “I felt like a kid being asked by Mickey Mantle to play for the Yankees,” Storm recalled.⁴⁰ A number of members of SDRC came together and raised money for Storm’s trip to Tokyo. All were proud when the native San Diegan, along with Cromwell, won silver. In 1967, Storm, along with his partner Jim Dietz of the New York Athletic Club, won gold at the Pan-American Games in Winnipeg, Canada. After the win, Storm focused his attention on schooling. He graduated in 1971 from the University of

California Medical School and became a practicing psychiatrist. Today he lives in San Francisco and is one of SDRC's most famous and longest tenured members.

There is one name that has become legendary within the San Diego Rowing Club—Kearney J. Johnston. In 2003, *San Diego Union-Tribune* sports columnist Bill Center penned, "Kearney didn't make rowing in San Diego. He didn't help create the Crew Classic or relocate the San Diego Rowing Club. He didn't have the money or political punch to make those things happen. No, Kearney Johnston didn't make rowing in San Diego. He just made rowing in San Diego better."⁴¹ For over 70 years, until his death at the age of 93 in



Kearney Johnston joined in 1930 and remained so until his death in 2003. Courtesy of SDRC.

2003, Johnston was the San Diego Rowing Club's most revered member. Born on November 17, 1910, Johnston attended Jefferson Elementary, Roosevelt Junior High, and San Diego High School. Early on Johnston showed athletic promise. He learned to wrestle at the YMCA downtown and competed in both the 112 lb. and 118 lb. divisions through his high school career.

While a member of the Sea Scouts, Johnston became interested in rowing. He was enamored by the beauty of the shells, and within a few weeks of his first lesson, his talent became evident. In 1930 he wanted to become a member of the San Diego Rowing Club; his job working the printer at the *San Diego Union*, however, did not earn him enough to pay the \$25 initiation fee. He was making only \$14 a week. A local businessman and father of one of Kearney's fellow Sea Scouts purchased 10 memberships for several young men, including Kearney, who would remain a member for 73 years.

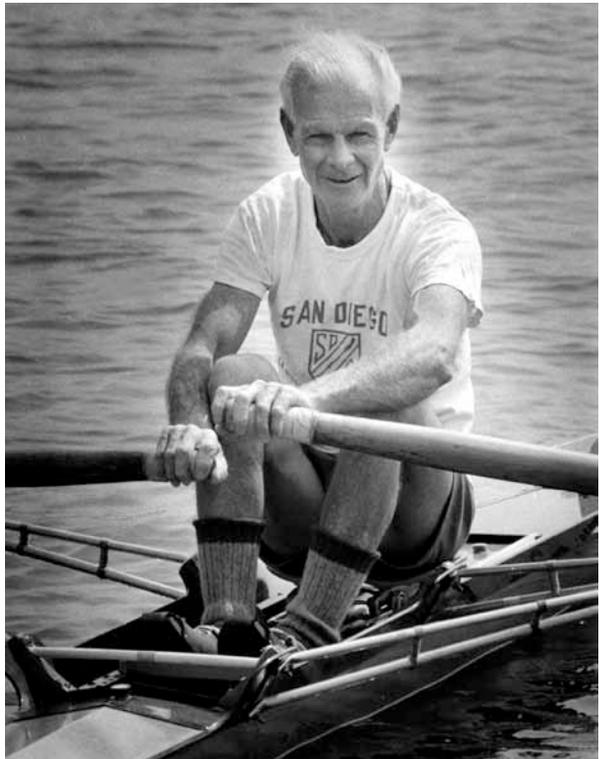
During the club's golden age, Kearney was one of many who gathered at the San Diego Rowing Club after work. At 5:30 in the morning when the papers were finished pressing, he would arrive as the sun was just rising and go for a row. Johnston had some local sculling success early on, but it wouldn't be until the ripe age of 63 when he truly began to compete, and win. Upon his retirement, Johnston dedicated himself to being in the water every day. With the exception of a few weeks each year during the holidays, Kearney would venture to SDRC every day either by trolley or bus because he never learned to drive and row 1,000 meters. After his row, he would teach anyone who sought his tutelage about sculling and then tend to the business affairs of the club.

In September 1974, Johnston and his wife Hilda traveled to Bern, Switzerland, for the first International Veterans Rowing regatta. He was the only representative from

the United States, traveling for the first time on an airplane. Kearney competed as a single rower and amazingly won the world championship in the 52-and-up single sculling race. Vern Griffin reported, “He had a two-boat-length lead at 100 meters, pulled out to three lengths at 500 meters and held that lead over the rest of the 1,000 meter course.”⁴² Johnston came in second to a Frenchman 20 years his junior in the 45-year-old and up race. It was the beginning of an incredible career that would see him win three more world championships—1978 in Mexico City as a single sculler, 1980 doubles with Joseph Goldbart of Israel in Kerteminde, Denmark, 1985 doubles with Mario Castelli of Long Beach in Toronto, Canada and numerous national championships. The San Diego Hall of Champions honored him with four Breitbard Certificate of Athletic Achievement awards throughout his career.

Probably the most impressive accomplishment of Johnston’s career is the number of people he taught to row. As of 2001, he claimed to have had 969 students. Whether or not that is an accurate number, it is safe to say that Johnston’s passion for rowing was shared with anyone who was interested, and his influence on the sport was vast. Members of SDRC referred to Kearney as “Mr. Rowing Club.” At the age of 87, as manager of SDRC’s boathouse in Mission Bay, it was reported by Dorothy O’Donnell that, “In addition to teaching and competing, Johnston bustles about the boathouse performing a variety of tasks that help keep the club running smoothly. In exchange, he pays no dues for his club membership. On any day, he’ll be repairing sculls, answering the phone, and washing the piles of towels used to dry the boats. But he’s never too busy to forget to feed the gulls and sandpipers that loiter around the club from his stash of bread crumbs.”⁴³

Kearney Johnston passed away on November 22, 2003, a few days after his 93rd birthday. Even though he is gone, his legacy and accomplishments live on in the club’s new facility at El Carmel Point. There can cer-



Kearney Johnston rowing into his nineties. Courtesy of SDRC.



Members lounging on the famous sun deck circa 1924. Courtesy of SDRC.

tainly be no accurate account of SDRC without detailing the importance of Kearney Johnston. He may no longer be sweeping sand off the patio or taking his shell, the “Hilda J,” out for a row, but his presence remains.

A Club in Crisis

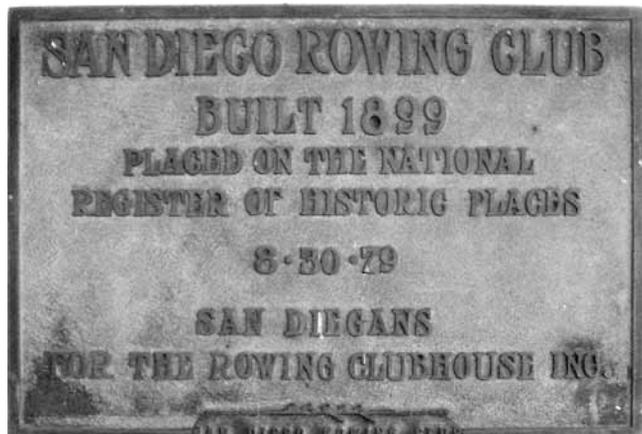
With the onset of World War II, the San Diego harbor became increasingly busy with naval traffic. The members of the San Diego Rowing Club began to dwindle due to water conditions as well as a migration to the suburbs. In the 1950s and 1960s, many members requested a move to Mission Bay—a project proposed and developed by many of the influential members of the club. There were those few, however, who were stubborn and wanted to stay in their long-time location at the foot of Fifth Street, despite a building in desperate need of repair and resting in polluted waters. In the post war years, the club that once boasted 1,200 members dwindled down to 20, and a clubhouse admired for its unique architecture literally began to sink into the bay. Battles with the San Diego Port Authority and a chain restaurant nearly killed the club’s identity, but SDRC would have a happy ending thanks to a few supporters who refused to give up.

In April 1971 the winds of change began to swirl around the eighty-three year old San Diego Rowing Club. Membership had been reduced to fewer than 200, with the majority of members remaining solely for the social aspect. The facility was

showing signs of age, especially when the boardwalk causeway that led to Brennan Island, home of the club's handball courts and other amenities, was closed by the Port Authority due to missing pilings and overall safety issues. Port Director Don L. Nay quipped, "Maybe they can row out there."⁴⁴ This initial confrontation with the Port Authority turned into a decade-long battle, specifically when Nay and the Port Authority commissioners refused to renew the club's lease after it expired in 1972. The club paid rent on a month to month basis, with the Port Authority having the ability to evict them at a moment's notice as well as raise their rent which they did several times. Between 1971 and 1978, the rent was raised from \$186 per month to \$473, an amount the club could not handle.

With only 25 of their 200 members actually rowing on a consistent basis, the club decided to lift the ban on women. In 1974, Karen Proskauer became the first female member of the San Diego Rowing Club. The inclusion of women did not bother Kearney Johnston one bit, as he would say on numerous occasions, "It's easier to teach women than men to row...men won't listen. Women learn to feather more readily. They are also faster to learn the technique for getting into a shell without upsetting it or punching a hole in its delicate bottom."⁴⁵ In fact, many of the female members spearheaded the effort to save the clubhouse.

Ken Hudson wrote in 1975, "The venerable San Diego Rowing Club—perched precariously on aging wooden pilings and a few steel rails is getting close to the point of going under."⁴⁶ The building was beginning to sink into the bay. Yet, the members believed they could raise enough money to renovate the clubhouse, if only the San Diego Port Authority would give them a long term lease. A catch-22 dilemma was created for club president, Jerry Navarra, who joined the club in 1971 as a third generation member. The Port Authority would not extend a long term lease until sufficient plans were produced to repair the building, yet neither investors nor members would donate enough funds for repair of the building until they were assured of a long term lease. Members did get together in May 1975 for "Survival Day." The day was utilized to paint and clean up the old building as well as renovate a few features, but the efforts were not enough. The club was the only remaining facility on the bay that was leak-



Plaque on original clubhouse on San Diego Bay. Photo by Iris Engstrand.

ing raw sewage and in March 1978, the Port Authority sent the rowing club's insurance agent an engineering report noting the building as a "hazard to all who enter it."⁴⁷ Thus the club's insurance was revoked, making it a liability.

The San Diego Union in March 1978 noted another issue for SDRC, "Part of the demise of the rowing club has come from the demise of the influence of its members."⁴⁸ Many of those members joined the Cuyamaca Club or the University Club or just became too aged to row. Yet, a small group of determined members and preservationists banded together to at least save the clubhouse, if not the club, for history. The group was led by Patricia A. Schaelchlin, author and president of San Diegans for the Rowing Clubhouse, Inc., and Carol Lindemulder, president of SOHO (Save Our Heritage Organization). In July 1975 San



Jerry Navarra in 1975. Photo private collection.

Diego's Historic Site Board listed the clubhouse as a historic site. Then in September 1978, the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. "When we received the historical designation, I almost had a heart attack,"⁴⁹ noted Jerry Navarra. Despite these victories, in December 1978, fire inspectors deemed the building to be an "immediate hazard" and the San Diego Rowing Club was evicted.

Looking back on the club's crusade to stay in the harbor, Navarra passionately stated, "Although there is probably disagreement, Mission Bay is a better location for the club. It is much safer. The typical route was to cross the bay to Glorietta Bay in Coronado. You had to deal with tugboats and boat wakes. I don't recall anyone getting swamped, but there were times when you had to row like hell to get out of the way. On the other hand, the club was a historical landmark with a rich tradition, and it is a shame that it is not in operation today. It could have remained as a downtown club for cards, handball, socializing, exercise, all the things you could do there, and less serious rowing."⁵⁰

A New Beginning for the San Diego Rowing Club

As they fought to save their clubhouse, members of SDRC knew in September 1979 that they would have to relocate. A temporary facility in Mission Bay at Santa

Clara Point became their new home after occupying the clubhouse at the foot of Fifth Street for nearly eight decades. A core group of 25 members vowed to keep the club alive. While they worked on finding new recruits and a permanent location for the club, the efforts to save the clubhouse for historic purposes took a positive turn. Patrick Goddard, vice president of Chart House restaurants, visited the location and developed a plan to save it. In 1968, Chart House renovated the Coronado Boathouse and turned it into one of its fine dining destinations. It was the first time the chain had taken on the daunting task of renovating a historic site. In turn, the restaurant generated the company \$1.5 million per year.

A surprising 5-1 vote by the port commissioners on June 2, 1981, approved plans for the Chart House to move in and renovate SDRC's clubhouse. *The Evening Tribune* reported on July 3, 1981, "Chart House says it will save as much of the old building as possible. It wants the real thing, not a replica. It says it will get to work as soon as a lease is signed and permits granted."⁵¹ Goddard dedicated \$1.5 million to the project and, in June 1983, the clubhouse of the San Diego Rowing Club was reopened as the Chart House restaurant. A dedication ceremony, much like the one held in 1900, took place on January 1, 1984. Members of SDRC gathered at the restaurant for their annual dip into San Diego Bay.

On March 15, 1978, SDRC unceremoniously moved out of its old clubhouse and while they would continue to house some of their items including shells there for another few months, they were to begin anew in a small, temporary location on Santa Clara Point, which some members referred to as "the garage." The club strained to remain relevant until the death of one of its long time members, A.W. Coggeshall, in 1987, gave it new life. The club found itself with an inheritance of \$850,000 to be utilized in the construction of a new and permanent home on El Carmel Point. Carol Olten wrote, "Before his death, Coggeshall was known as an eccentric with large holdings in downtown real estate, including the Carnation Building, where he ran a business in plumbing fixtures. But early in his life, Coggeshall was a champion oarsman for the club. He was part of the 1928 San Diego team that lost to Harvard by two seconds in the U.S. Olympics trials. An automobile accident resulting in a smashed elbow cut short Coggeshall's rowing career. He remained close to the club however, furthering efforts to find a new location after the club's historic bay front boathouse was taken over by the Chart House restaurant in the early 1980s."⁵² In 1991, SDRC moved into its new state-of-the-art facility, thanks to Coggeshall's generous donation. Both the University of San Diego and University of California, San Diego men's and women's crew teams currently row out of the Coggeshall Rowing Center.

SDRC enjoyed a resurrection after moving into their new location at Santa Clara Point. Memberships increased from 25 in 1978 to 257 as of December 2010. Efforts to bring back the social aspect to the club became a priority in 2006 when the Garty



New SDRC clubhouse on Mission Bay. Photo by Iris Engstrand.

Family Rowing Pavilion was constructed next to the boathouses. It is a 2,000 square foot facility that houses all of the club's memorabilia as well as social gatherings. The facility won a 2006 San Diego Orchid award for its modern design. Architect Randy Hanna, former president of SDRC, when talking about the club recalled his inspiration for the pavilion. Hanna said that

The narrow site area necessitated a very linear solution, so we used the analogy of rowing shells in our design. This is expressed through a dramatic curved ceiling flanked by skylights, resembling the bottom of a boat that promotes light to stream into the space in striking patterns, reminiscent of the light on water in the early morning hours. The space is purposefully tall in effort to be both inspirational and to maximize wall space for the memorabilia of over 100 years. Oversize, pocketing glass doors open to create a seamless, symbiotic connection of the pavilion to the bay.⁵³

The retrieval of the memorabilia to be housed in the Garty Family Rowing Pavilion was yet another battle the club had to fight.

Patrick Goddard, in wanting the Chart House restaurant to be authentic and respectful to SDRC clubhouse, sought to get many items representing the club's rich history showcased in the restaurant. He noted that "Once everyone saw what we were doing, people started bringing in things from their attics—boats, trophies, photographs of relatives—because they wanted to fill the new[ly] restored structure

with the life of the rowing club."⁵⁴ In 2003 however, another chain restaurant, Joe's Crab Shack, purchased the Chart House and began to erase the history of the location. *San Diego Union* columnist Maureen Magee wrote, "At Joe's Crab Shack on the San Diego waterfront, tarnished trophies, broken plaques and historic photos are on display alongside plastic lobsters and foam lifesavers as tourists toss back beers and fried fish."⁵⁵ Members of SDRC and president Randy Hanna made it a priority to have all the items returned to the club. Yet, Houston-based Landry's Restaurants, Inc., owners of Joe's Crab Shack, stated that they had sold all the items to J.H. Whitney and Company who would be taking over ownership of the restaurant, believing that the items became their property when they purchased the Chart House and not on loan, as Goddard noted they were.

After hundreds of letters and phone calls were made, along with the impact of Maureen Magee's original article, it only took a month for the J.H. Whitney and Company to return every item to the club. These are now on display in the Garty Pavilion. Randy Hanna said, "We couldn't be happier. We've been grinding away on this for a couple of years, thinking one day we might get the collection back. We are all surprised by the support we have been getting."⁵⁶

The San Diego Rowing Club and its members have weathered many storms since they first took to their shells and began rowing as a club in 1888. Despite the ups and downs, the generosity of members and passion for the sport of rowing has kept them going. Generations of children have learned to row at SDRC and moving forward, that is the main goal of the club's current president, David Frost, who stated, "Effectively carrying out our non-profit mission to provide water safety and rowing instruction for youths of all ages,"⁵⁷ as his top priority. Stu Neffeler, a long time member of the club and a champion in his own right said, when asked what makes SDRC so special, "To me, it's nearly a century and a quarter of not only being still alive, but significant as well. For this to continue we need both a willingness to compete on the highest levels, and to cherish our heritage."⁵⁸

As the club rang in 2011, the



The SDRC members ring in the New Year of 2011 at the site of the old clubhouse. Photo by Iris Engstrand.



UCSD and USD facilities at new SDRC clubhouse on Mission Bay. Photo by Iris Engstrand.

members, as they always had, dove into San Diego Bay on January 1. The current membership roster includes representatives from ten foreign countries—Mexico, Argentina, Australia, Canada, Ireland, Scotland, Netherlands, Germany, New Zealand, and the Czech Republic.

It may no longer reside in a historic building, but SDRC's rich history and traditions are continuously honored and remembered for the significance that the club played in San Diego history. At the same time, club leaders and members look to the future and the advancement of the sport of rowing. "Rowing is an endurance sport, both mentally and physically; you get out of it only what you put in," commented *San Diego Union-Tribune* sportswriter Bill Center, and for 123 years the San Diego Rowing Club has endured.⁵⁹



"The Mighty Mites" the team coached by Harley Knox (rear) that made it to the finals of the Olympic trials, only to lose by mere seconds to the team from Harvard. Photo courtesy of Donna Knox Sefton.

NOTES

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