

Primary Sources

Source 1: *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 22, 1939

Article 1: New Mecca for Motorists

Built by the Works Progress Administration and the city of San Francisco as sponsor, San Francisco's newest recreation center, Aquatic Park at the foot of Polk street, will be dedicated at ceremonies in which Federal and municipal officials will participate this afternoon. The main building of the park, a party of motorists in a Pontiac sedan furnished by George Daniels, San Francisco Pontiac dealer, found it has been erected in approximately the center of a 1800-foot promenade. The structure resembles a luxurious ocean liner tied up to her dock. Inside may be found facilities to accommodate 8000 bathers, a mural room, a restaurant and a pilot room. The illustrations show the Pontiac along the north side of the building at the right and at the left the car with Miss Adrienne Sausset is on the driveway which passes below one of the modernistically designed loudspeakers.

Article 2: Aquatic Park Ceremonies, Easy to Reach by Car, by Frank J. Maloney

San Francisco's newest recreation center becomes the property of the city this afternoon.

Begun three years ago—and built at a cost of \$1,500,000 by the Works Progress Administration and the city of San Francisco as sponsor—Aquatic Park, located at the foot of Polk street, is to be dedicated at colorful ceremonies which start at 1:30 p. m. today.

High light of the program will be the presentations of the deed to the water playground by William R. Lawson, Northern California WPA administrator, to Mayor Angelo J. Rossi. Following the Mayor's acceptance of the gift, he will transfer it to Commissioner John J. Lerman for supervision and administration of the playground by the Park Commission.

Immediately following the talks a program of skiff, barge, and pleasure boat races—the latter with girl coxswains—and tub tilting by members of the Dolphin, Ariel and South End rowing clubs; kayak races and aquaplane riding is scheduled to get under way. Pilots of the aquaplanes will be Loraine Todhunter, Lillian and Patsy Robretson, Kada Weed, Ilene Marks, and Marge Anderson of the Mariposa Boat Club, and Gayl Caygill.

LITTLE DIFFICULTY

Motorists will have little difficulty reaching Aquatic Park from any part of San Francisco as a party in a Pontiac Sedan sent out by George Daniels, San Francisco Pontiac dealer, learned yesterday. Drivers may go west on Van Ness avenue, turn right on Bay street, and then left at the intersection of Bay and Polk streets. Or, from the down town section, they may proceed out Stockton street to Columbus avenue, thence to North Point and to Polk streets.

San Francisco's Aquatic Park today stands out among the finest municipal water playgrounds in the world. Protected on one side by a 500-foot breakwater and on the opposite side by the curving arm of Municipal pier, the park's basin opens directly into the bay. On the landward side has been build a curved sea wall, more than 1800 feet long, with a wide promenade stretching its entire length. More than 10,000 persons could stroll on it comfortably and yet leave room for other thousands. The seaward side of this wall has been build in three levels, stadium fashion, affording seats for thousands who desire to sit at the edge of the beach.

AN INSPIRING VIEW

From the promenade and the sea wall seats is afforded an inspiring view—the bay, the Golden Gate and its bridge, the forests and hills of the opposite Marin shore.

The main building, resembling a luxurious liner at her dock, stands at about the center of the promenade. Its ends are rounded, its upper stories set back, its windows resemble portholes and its rails are like those of a ship.

The exterior of this structure offers two outstanding decorative schemes, the slate marquee at the main entrance and the tile mosaics at either side of the doors leading onto the promenade.

The marquee is faced with one of the largest slate sculptures in the world. The sculptpre [sic] is five feet wide and 48 feet long ad [sic] is incised to a depth of two inches with marine and nautical designs. The wall of the lower deck promenade is set with more than 2600 feet of tile mosaic, applied with a new technique which eliminates the plaster divisions usually found when small pieces of tiles are used, each piece being cut to fit exactly into its proper place. The result is startling, for the entire design assumes the appearance of a painting, as the eye passes from one end to the other.

WPA PROJECT

All interior decorations in the Aquatic Park buildings have been designed and executed by the WPA Federal art project. More than 5000 square feet of mural paintings cover the walls of the main building. New colors and fascinating themes have been woven together, all presenting different phases of marine and under sea life and organisms, and all blending perfectly into a complete whole.

Source 2: *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 23, 1939

Article #1: 10,000 Help Dedicate \$2,000,000 Playground by Neil Hitt

The old swimmin' hole at North Beach took on class yesterday.

It was officially opened as "San Francisco's \$2,000,000 Aquatic Park"

Ten thousand San Franciscans were there for the dedication. They listened to speeches, sat in the spacious concrete stadia, walked the rim of the sea wall, saw water sports in the great semi-circle of lapping tide inside the sheltering arms of the breakwaters.

Center piece of this delightful spot was the big casino that cost a million and a half dollars. It is a four-story affair of concrete and looks like a four-decked ferry boat, as conceived and executed by a wedding cake chef.

A COUPLE OF SPEECHES

Little dried-up Jim Cronin leaned over the rail of the quarter deck of this magnificent palace by the sea and said:

“There were bathhouses here 50 years ago, but they didn’t look like this one. Over there to the west was the Kelly sisters’ bathhouse and down at this Van Ness avenue end was one run by Fanny Annie. They charged 10 cents a suit, and a lady wore a lot of bathing suit at that time—went in with nearly all her clothes on. Now there was Mrs. Adam Schuppert; she went swimming here until she was nigh onto 80.”

Attorney Hugh McKevitt brode in:

“This beach reached at least two blocks farther inland than it does now. I remember when we used to swim around Alcatraz Island from here and think nothing of it. This beach was ruined—utterly ruined by the dumping of the earthquake and fire refuse here in 1906. Why, the Symen brothers alone—you know, the wreckers—dumped at least 17,000 tuck loads of red brick from the old Palace Hotel right here and the WPA hasn’t finished picking up brick yet. Yes, sir, they literally ruined this beach.”

“It was 15,000 loads,” corrected a white haired man near McKevitt.

“O. K.,” said McKevitt. “This man ought to know—he’s one of the Symen brothers.”

THE BANDS PLAY

There was a musical offering by the Municipal Band, Phil Sapiro directing. Then one by the San Francisco Federal Dance Band, Sam Stern conducting. Alma Michelini trilled the “Star-Spangled Banner.” William R. Lawson, WPA administrator for Northern California, made a speech presenting the deed to Aquatic Park to the City and County of San Francisco.

Mayor Rossi was there to receive it. It was his 61st birthday.

“I am 59,” he protested in the pilot room topping the casino. “When I reached 60 I started back.”

He cut four birthday cakes after unloading the gift to John J. Lerman of the Park Commission. Lerman made a speech. So did William Mooser Jr., who designed the casino.

A bottle of champagne was swinging from the edifice by two yellow silk ribbons. It sway outward and back in the breeze. The crowd was more interested in whether it was going to smash prematurely than in the speaking. Mrs. Rossi, “first lady of San Francisco,” eventually smashed it.

The crowd was let into the casino. They saw marine murals that had taken four years to paint. They looked exactly like fishes and seaweed and what one would imagine was at the bottom of the ocean.

On the beach deck were all sorts of rooms for men, women, and children to put on bathing suits, pass through showers and disinfectants and go out to swim in the bay. The next deck up opened from Polk street and had the marine trimmings. There were balustrades made of rope hawsers, which the WPA artists had so violently protested. But they had been whitewashed out of deference to these artists who had called them “dirty ropes.”

BUFANO’S NUDE

Diminutive Beniamino Bufano, who did the controversial statue of St. Francis, was walking around. Cameramen wanted him to pose with a nude but there wasn’t any nude. He had one nude that was to adorn the main floor but it was in his studio, together with 17 other pieces of statuary that will go into the casino.

What do you call this nude, Mr. Bufano?

“It is just a nude. I call it “Torso”—it hasn’t got any name.”

A female torso?

“A female torso.”

The press agent for Leo Gordon, who has the restaurant concession at \$1000 a month, was heartbroken. He had arranged to have Mayor Rossi take off a shoe and a sock and stick his foot into a block of wet concrete to be placed at the entrance way.

“I am not going to stick my foot into it,” said the Mayor, with some determination. “I have stuck my foot into many things, but not intentionally. It is undignified and besides I don’t know if I have a hole in my sock.”

The red plush furniture that the WPA artists had complained of—that one of them had resigned over—was nowhere in evidence in the eating quarters.

“We got rid of it,” said the press agent. “The artists were right—it stunk.”

“Yes,” said the concessionaire’s son, Ken. “It was all my fault. I don’t know anything about art and when I saw this saloon fold up I bought these red plush love seats at \$150 apiece. They’re out. We’re going to get something else.”

Will the public be allowed on the two top floors of the casino—that is, if they don’t eat?

“No,” said Ken, “they won’t. It’s small and crowded up here. We couldn’t let them. They have the bottom two floors.

The crowd surged in and out. The program was over but minor politicians were allowed to use the microphone to tell their constituents that they had worked for the aquatic park from the beginning, “nearly a quarter century ago,” and that, next to his excellency, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, President of the United States, the late Mayor Rolph, Mayor Rossi, the Park Commission and the WPA, they personally were responsible for this magnificent gift to the city.

Source 3: San Francisco Chronicle, April 30, 1939

Article #1: Aquatic Acrimony

For over a quarter-century the project of building an aquatic park in San Francisco simmered. In 1917 the city entered an agreement with the Southern Pacific Railway, obtained the railroad's land at the bottom of Van Ness avenue.

Legal technicalities help up the project and work on the pier, first unit of construction, did not begin until July, 1931. Five years later the WPA started work on the first building unit.

At the year's beginning the white concrete ark at the bottom of Van Ness avenue was on the point of being opened to the public, when WPA Muralist Hilaire Hiler, given carte blanche authority for the decorations, flew into an artistic tantrum, sent in his letter of resignation.

He charged he and his helpers, including sculptors Beniamino Bufano, Richard Ayres [sic], Sargent Johnson had been rudely brushed aside, that a "dirty rope" was used for a handrail, "a large and horrendous" clock, green and orange cocktail lounge furniture had been installed over his objections.

Assistant City Engineer Clyde Healy, co-ordinator of projects, retorted angrily that the artists had to be removed so that the park could be opened on schedule.

Last week, three months after the completed projected had been formally handed over to the city, announcement was made that the Aquatic Park would get another six-month treatment from 100 WPA workers starting May 1. Improvements to be made were listed as convenience stations, a sewage pumping plant, children's playground, beautification of boat houses, completion of landscaping.

Captain P.B. Lamb, Park Commission secretary, stated that the shiplike building had not come into full use. He explained that swimming was not permitted by order of the Health Department; bath facilities had gone unused; the restaurant concessionaire had not been held to his contract calling for a guarantee of \$1000 a month rent, payable as soon as the building is completed.

Co-ordinator Healy disputed Lamb's explanation, countered that the Park Commission had failed to purchase and install furnishings for which it had the money.

Next day shaggy-maned Sculptor Bufano protested by letter to WPA Administrator William Lawson, asked that installation of his 14 commissioned pieces of statuary be delayed. His reason: That the project has deteriorated into a private enterprise; an average person "is placed in an embarrassing [sic] position if he does not purchase refreshments while passing through and...the very people for whom the center was created are discouraged."

Source 4: *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 4, 1939

Article: Aquatic Acrimony (Cont.)

In your article, "Aquatic Acrimony," published in last Sunday's THIS WORLD, you indicated that public money is again being used for a private enterprise. It is also suggested that the full truth is yet to be told about the administration of Aquatic Park, for there is an extraordinary conflict of opinion among the city officials whom you quote.

Captain Lamb says "the building has not come into full use and that the Health Department will not permit swimming." Co-ordinator Healy disputes Lamb's statement, as does Dr. Geiger.

Most important of all, restaurant facilities have been operating for some time and the concessionaire is not paying rent to the city of the ground that the building is not completed. Business has been solicited and secured by the restaurant people in direct competition with private enterprise catering to such business. In other words, it's a free ride on the public funds for the benefit of one individual who thus enjoys an unfair advantage over his competitors in this city.

As a taxpayer, I would be interested in learning (1) whether it is safe to swim at Aquatic Park (2) why the sun decks of the Casino are not available for sun bathing, (3) why certain rooms are roped off and (4) why, above all, the city permits a so-called public project, built with taxpayers' money, to operate commercially without asking for a return? C.A. Nielsen, San Francisco.

1-Swimming is permitted, although water is polluted as at all San Francisco beaches. The Health Department has asked the Park Commission to curtail swimming as much as possible by notifying the public of pollution. —Dr. Jacob C. Geiger, Director of Public Health.

2-Sun decks probably never will be used for sun bathing. It is planned to put porch lounge furniture on the sun deck as soon as it arrives. Concrete bleachers outside may be used for sun bathing. —A Park Commission official.

3-Aquatic Park is an unfinished project. WPA workers are busy completing it, will probably take 60 to 90 days. Rooms barred to the public are being painted, decorated. Upon official completion Aquatic Park will be entirely open for public use. —Herbert Fleishhacker, president of the Park Commission.

4-Financial adjustments will be made in the case of Concessionaires Kenneth and Leo Gordon when Aquatic Park is completed. —Herbert Fleishhacker.

To date Concessionaires Kenneth and Leo Gordon have paid nothing to the city for their use of Aquatic Park. Their contract is understood to read that no guarantees will be asked (of concessionaires) until completion of the building. —Ed.

Source 5: San Francisco Chronicle, April 23, 1939

Article: The WPA Artists Lean on Their Brushes by Alfred Frankenstein

The largest and most comprehensive exhibition of works done on the Federal Art Project ever gathered together in one place opened last week at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum. It was organized by Dr. Heil of the de Young in collaboration with the WPA authorities, and represents a local effort to secure a Nation-wide cross section of Federal Art activities. In this it is eminently successful, and it should eventually tour the country. Since the show contains 435 works by 324 artists residing in 29 States, it is as big and important as the contemporary American section in the Fine Arts Palace at the Fair, and, like the Treasure Island show, is far too large and significant to be dealt with in one review. Since it will be at the de Young for the next eight months this department will from time to time return to it for detailed comment.

As the exhibition clearly shows, the Federal Art Project's work falls under two headings. First of all is the provision of relief for artists who need it. This is the temporary, incidental, and, from one point of view, the less important heading, although it is the first cause of the Project's being. The second division of the work constitutes a kind of artistic resettlement administration—the provision of works of art where such were never known before. This, from the long-range, cultural point of view, is the thing that counts most. The concentration of artists and the market for art in the large, glutted metropolitan centers is being broken down in many different ways. These new directions and new points of departure established by the Project account for the title given the exhibition as a whole—"Frontiers of American Art."

That American art has indeed frontiers to conquer is shown by a letter once published in the papers from the superintendent of certain small-town schools in the South which stated, among other things, that many teachers of art in these schools had actually never seen a "hand painted picture" until the Art Project began circulating its accumulation of works. This, then, is one of the most important of the "frontiers"—the circulation of some 48,000 oils and water colors and some 84,000 prints to thousands of schools, community centers, hospitals and libraries, and, in some cases, through the libraries to individual homes.

Allied to this is the setting up of some 66 art centers by the project itself in smaller cities throughout the country. In these centers exhibitions, demonstrations and classes are held, the whole claiming an audience of over 5,000,000 in the past three years. Classes are also held in the big cities.

The most permanent and obvious of the Project's "frontiers" is that of the adornment of public buildings with mural paintings, mosaics, sculpture, and so on. Some 1300 such works have been installed in tax-supported structures. This is the most risky of the several directions in which the Project is going. A bad picture can be taken down, but once a mural or sculpture is set up in a public building it is going to stay there a long time, and unless the work is of very high quality its effects will be bad. Such achievements as the murals in the Fleishhacker Mother House, the George Washington School and Aquatic Park are triumphant, but there are others, here and elsewhere...

On the purely educational side are the efforts of the Project in the creation of posters, dioramas, models, and so on for various governmental purposes, from health and safety propaganda to scientific demonstrations for the national parks. And one of the most important of the educational efforts is the Index of American Design, which is making a permanent record of American arts and crafts from earliest times to the present.

Source 6: San Francisco Chronicle, April 30, 1939

Column: Will Connolly Says

Article: Be Honest—Have You Seen Aquatic Park Casino Yet?

The Treasure Island people won't be mad at us, we hope, if we put in a good word for the Casino at Aquatic Park, foot of Polk street.

It seems that in the wall paper publicity heralding the World's Fair, the humble dedication of the casino last January was overlooked. Not many citizens venture in that neighborhood since the Golden Gate bridge caused the Sausalito ferries to fold and we're willing to wager 90 per cent o the population hasn't even seen the finished casino.

We drove by there the other day and saw it for the first time, although our friends tell us we were there in spirit upon the occasion of the newspaper guild housewarming last March.

In a measure, Aquatic Park is a junior or boy's size Fair in itself and if it hadn't been for the impending opening of Treasure Island, the casino would have been the proudest showplace of our town.

Now that the weather is listening to reason, we urgently recommend that you cart the little woman and offspring there of [sic] a Sunday, if only to marvel at the lush luxury of the building. You need not roll up your pants legs and wade in the bay if you are not athletically inclined.

The casino was constructed at a WPA cost of \$1,200,000 and looks like the Normandie cast up on the beach. The building is done in four stories, or decks, following a nautical motif and once you're inside, the Friday fish market murals and braided rope banisters will you to believe you're aboard ship if you have any imagination at all.

Outwardly, the casino is done in bright chromium and concrete so futuristic in design that our town wits describe the place as Flash Gordon's bathroom.

This summer, we are assured, the salt water park will be the scene of swimming, canoe, kayak, and skiff races within the protected area between the 500-foot breakwater and the curved sea wall, 1800 feet long.

By nature, we are a timid creature and we are almost afraid to use the bathing facilities, so elaborate are the preparations. Before a citizen may dunk his toe in the waters, he must enter one of the four large dressing rooms for men and boys, or women and girls, depending upon his age and sex; deposit clothing in a stainless steel can which is later sterilized by live steam; pass through a

chlorinated shower and wade through a pool of foot disinfectant to prevent hoof and mouth disease, we guess.

The ol' swimmin' hole was never like this. On the other hand, the ol' swimmin' hole wasn't a very good place to swim in, except in fond adult reminiscences which are 90 proof lies.

Source 7: San Francisco Chronicle, April 27, 1939

Article: Aquatic Park: WPA Called in the Finish Job by Ben Kline

A new WPA project to complete the city's supposedly already finished million-dollar "jewel-box" recreational center known as Aquatic Park has been inaugurated and will be under way by May 1 with some 100 men employed for a period of five or six months, it was learned yesterday.

The improvements include convenience stations and a sewage pumping plant to remove objections to surf bathing by Dr. J.C. Geiger, director of public health; a children's playground, beautification of boathouses, electrical and tile work, installation of stainless steel around plate glass and completion of landscaping.

That the Aquatic Park had not been finished was news to many San Franciscans. IT was turned over to the city by the WPA three months ago as completed.

But the elegant shiplike pavilion and beach has not come into full use, Captain B.P. Lamb, secretary of the Park Commission, said yesterday.

He explained that, by order of the Health Department, swimming is not permitted, and bath facilities have gone unused. The restaurant concessionaire, he said, has not been held to his contract. This contract called for payment to the city of 8 per cent of gross receipts with a guarantee to the city of \$1000 a month.

Thousands of relief workers, skilled and unskilled, had participated in the work, which cost an estimated \$1,000,000 for labor and materials.

Clyde Healy, city's WPA co-ordinator, disputed Lamb's explanation.

"The Park Commission has failed to purchase and install furnishings and equipment for which it has the money," Healy said. "People do bathe at the sand beach. They dress outdoors instead of indoors because receptacles for clothing have not been provided by the commission, not because of any Health Department order."

Source 8: San Francisco Chronicle, April 8, 1939

Article: Aquatic Park Fixtures Assailed by Bufano

To a growing series of complaints over asserted incompleteness and improper use of Aquatic Park, San Francisco's new million-dollar playground, was added the voice of Beniamino Bufano yesterday.

Bufano, central figure in the famed St. Francis statue dispute, has announced he is holding out 14 pieces of his art as a protest against “the hopelessly bad taste of the furniture which the restaurant people bought. [sic]

Bufano’s action was made public yesterday in a letter to William R. Lawson, State WPA administrator, whose advice he sought as to whether he would be forced to release his work “before this project, which has deteriorated into a private enterprise, is returned to the control of the people.”

Source 9: *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 23, 1939

Article: City Hall: WPA Approves Aquatic Park Operation Plan

And dissatisfaction that the WPA may have had with the way its most magnificent local project, Aquatic Park, is being operated by the city apparently was erased at a conference in Mayor Rossi’s office yesterday.

The meeting was attended by W.R. Lawson, California director, and other WPA representatives; Herbert Fleishhacker president, and John J. Lermen of the Park Commission; Controller Boyd and Assistant City Engineer Clyde Healy.

LEASE SPACE LIMITED

Lawson, announcing agreement on the following points, said he was quite satisfied with the outcome of the conference:

The concessionaires, Leo and Kenneth Gordon, to be limited to space as specified in their lease, third floor banquet room to be used for private parties only after 5 p. m., during the day being available to the public for supervised recreational activities.

The city to take steps to promote popular use of the pavilion.

The city to appoint a caretaker, one of whose duties shall be to see that the concessionaires are limited to space over which they have jurisdiction.

BEAUTIFICATION PLAN

The bathhouse to be public and designated with a sign to encourage public use.

The State Federal Art Project to be asked to carry out its tile murals project for beautification of the pavilion.

The city to hasten completion of the sand beach.

The WPA to earmark funds from the recently approved general park project for completion of the bath house and pier comfort station.

A new WPA project to be submitted for completion of the park in place of the one previously rejected.

NEW PLAYGROUND

The city to demolish the old pump house west of the bath house and create playground for women and children, completing a concrete wall along Van Ness avenue.

Complete landscaping of the area, including improvement of the lot east of the bath house purchased from the California Packing Corporation.

The meeting in the Mayor's office was said to have been suggested by WPA officials after study in Washington of a report based upon Federal investigation of Aquatic Park.