



San Diego Ship Modelers' Guild

1306 N. Harbor Drive

San Diego, CA 92101

February, 1997

NEWSLETTER

Volume 21, Number 2

THE GREAT SEAMEN'S FLEET

A failed bank's maritime collection faced disruption

BY SARAH BOXER

It appeared to be one more bad, expensive day in the banking crisis: On Wednesday, April 18, 1990, federal regulators seized New York's Seamen's Bank for Savings, which had lost an estimated \$168 million over the first nine months of 1989.

But this was no ordinary bailout. Chase Manhattan Bank, which paid \$5 million to acquire Seamen's 13 branches and \$2.1 billion in deposits, turned its nose up at Seamen's irreplaceable 2,000-piece

The FDIC's first task—moving the stuff—was performed without ceremony. In not much more time than it takes to open a trust account, the FDIC stripped all 13 Seamen's offices of every piece of nautical art and spirited it all away in plastic bubble wrap to an air-conditioned, fireproof warehouse in Jersey City, N.J.

But what in the world

more at stake than money in this bankruptcy. Even while a steady stream of ship modelers, sailors, marine-art dealers and galleries phoned the FDIC to inquire about the seafaring booty, a handful of museum curators was trying just as hard to hold together this chunk of nautical history.

There they were, a bunch of bean counters, trying to turn a national treasure into—what? More beans? "The banking crisis is one thing," said Peter Neill, the president of

New York City's South Street Seaport Museum, "but if the government is not capable of preserving a small portion of history, that is a second crisis. They are going to liquidate our culture."

A tiny exaggeration perhaps, but this much is clear: The demise of Seamen's, which was founded when thrift was a virtue and which managed

to survive seven major wars and even more financial panics and crises, marks the end of an era. And the sale of its collection of maritime art had the potential to destroy one of the most telling records of that era.

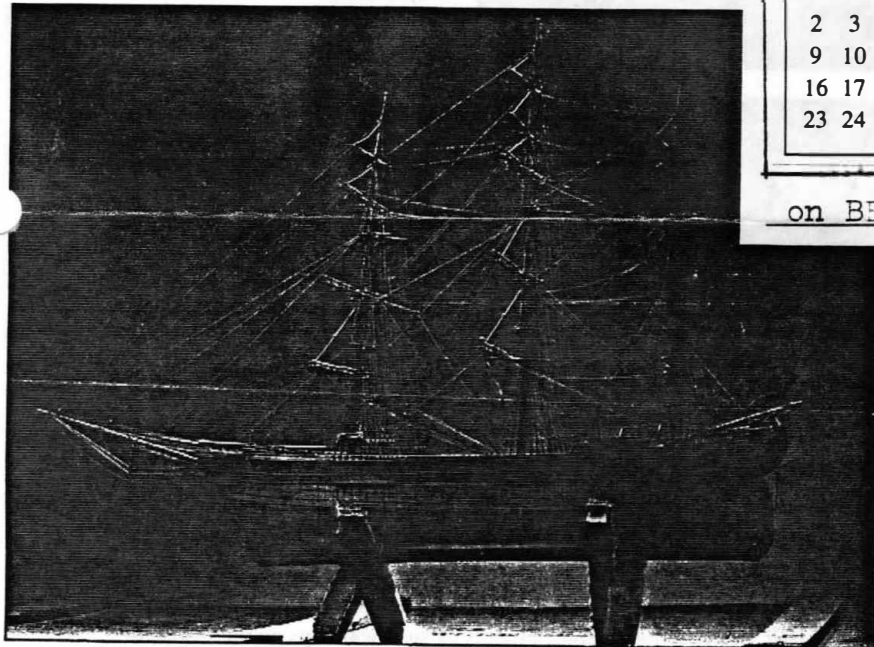
On May 11, 1829, the Seamen's Bank for Savings opened its doors to New York seamen with the express goal of encouraging them to save their money "in order to relieve improvidence and promote soundness of character." (The idea for the bank came in part from the Bethel Union and the Society for Promoting the Gospel Among Seamen in the Port of New York.) That noble charter did not, however, put an end to the notion that Seamen's was simply cashing in on the dangers of maritime life; rumor had it that Seamen's Bank vaults held "untold millions of unclaimed deposits belonging to sailors lost at sea."

Seamen's first customer was one James Chappel, a stevedore for the Swallowtail Line and an exemplary model of thriftiness. Ushered into the bank by his own employer, Moses H. Grinnell, senior partner of the company that owned the Swallowtail Line, Chappel deposited \$233, a sum larger than the annual salary of the bank's sole accountant. If the Seamen's

Next MEETING

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on BERKELEY



Awaiting rescue in a warehouse, the three-masted clipper "James Baines" displays its rigging and planked hull construction (inset).

collection of ship models, ships in bottles, nautical paintings, prints, scrimshaw, ship's clocks, barometers, captain's spyglasses, oil lamps and ship's logs. That left the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) holding the bag. Overnight, the FDIC had become the reluctant owner of one of the nation's most impressive collections of marine art. A privately done audit of the collection was reported to have valued it at \$4 million, but this sum was very conservative, according to most collectors. Art dealer Graham Arader says, "Given the fact that times are very tough, if the entire Seamen's collection were put up for auction today, it would probably bring \$10 million."

was the FDIC going to do with all this great stuff? At first the answer seemed relatively straightforward: Sell the collection for the highest price possible. After all, the banking crisis could cost the nation billions; the Seamen's contribution to that sum has been estimated at \$350 to \$400 million. The best the FDIC could do to replenish some of its dwindling funds would be to squeeze as much money out of the art as possible. In a word: liquidate.

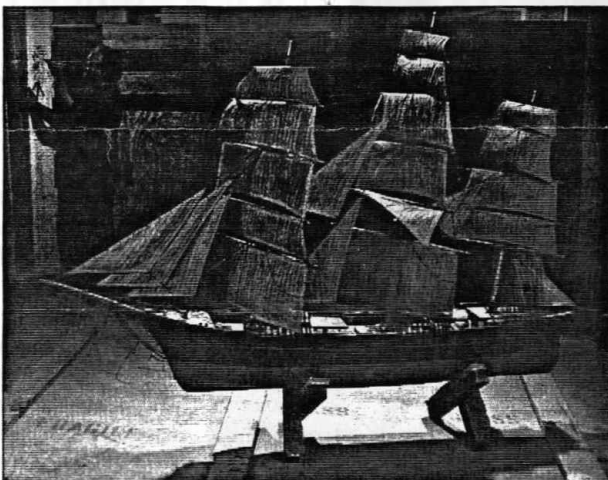
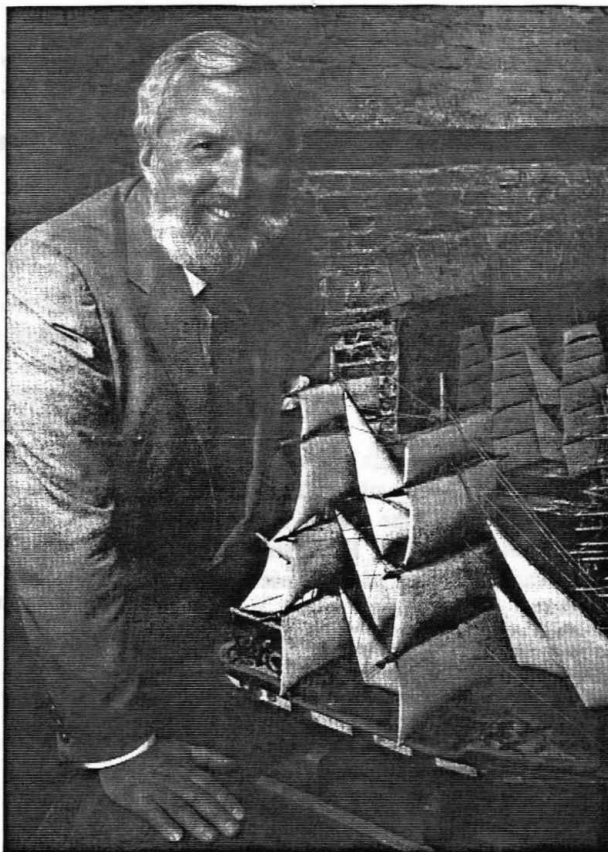
As the FDIC quickly learned, there was

savings bank's first depositor was received with a great deal of fanfare, no one seems to have noticed who brought the first ship model to the bank. At that time, says Shirley Dutton, the last curator for the collection before it became FDIC responsibility, "shipbuilders liked to keep a model of their favorite ships in their offices." And since many of the bank's officers owned their own ships, they too decided to decorate their offices that way.

When New York was the most important port in the nation, maritime artists were a dime a dozen, and Seamen's was able to buy nautical paintings and ship models cheaply until the end of the 19th century. The bank had come by its collection so easily that it was not until the 1960s, says Dutton, that Seamen's officers "realized that they had something good." Prices of nautical art had begun to soar. Finally, in the 1980s, when Seamen's long decline began, the bank stopped buying art. By then, though, it had amassed a fleet of models that numbered 335 vessels and represented nearly every sort of ship—commercial and sporting—that had sailed in New York harbor.

The rarest models in Seamen's collection are the five or six small ships carved from bone. They were made by French conscripts held captive by the Royal (British) Navy in rotting prison ships during the Napoleonic Wars, from 1803 to 1815. At auction before knowledgeable collectors, these diminutive ships, with their rigging made of spun human hair, might command as much as \$50,000 each, according to James Walpole, one of the FDIC's liquidators.

To the untrained, the turn-of-the-century sailors' models are certainly among the most appealing items in the Seamen's collection. These, says ship and model builder Glenn Braun, were built by sailors to pass time during voyages, those



"long stretches of boredom punctuated by stretches of terror." Given that merchant voyages often lasted from months to years, Braun acknowledges that on some of these models "the proportions are all out of whack, because the sailors never saw a blueprint nor their ship from a distance." But, he says, they're valued because "they have an aura of authority, despite their warped perspective."

At the other end of the craftsmanship

Neill was aghast at the thought that the "Glory of the Seas" (below) might be auctioned and lost to public view.

spectrum are the "admiralty board" models. "If the Navy wanted to build a ship," says Braun, "ship designers would show an exquisitely built model to convince the [often] landlubbing admiral that the ship would be a valuable addition." These models would be built with the same techniques required for full-sized versions: steamed ribs, trunneled (wood-pegged) planking and full rigging done in miniature with painstaking accuracy.

Seamen's was understandably keenest about acquiring models of merchant ships of the 19th century, especially the clipper ships that plied the seas during the California Gold Rush, which started in 1848. After all, these ships, many of which were built in shipyards along the East River, were most closely tied to the Seamen's bank. For instance, the model of the *Flying Cloud*—a particularly beautiful clipper with a slim hull and towering masts—was not constructed until several years after the actual vessel, built by Donald McKay, had made a record-breaking passage (89 days) from New York harbor to San Francisco. Other clipper ships in the collection include the famed *Cutty Sark* and the four-masted *Great Republic*, the largest clipper ever built. Some of the clipper models, says Walpole, would go for as much as \$10,000 apiece in an open auction.

Seamen's also stockpiled historical models of such warships as the *Constitution* and the *Constellation*; miniatures of such whalers as the *Viola* and the *Success*; a downsized version of the seven-masted *Thomas W. Lawson*, the largest schooner ever built; models of the *Albion* and the *Dreadnought*, packets that shipped American goods to faraway ports and transported immigrants to New York on the return legs of their journeys. There are

JANUARY MEETING NOTES:

Seventeen members were present when the meeting opened with several more coming in later. Besides bringing a model, "KC" Edwards brought his daughter, "Kristi". A guest, John Bilbay, came seeking information on building "FRAM I", a Gearing-class destroyer.

CONT'D. next page

(January Meeting Notes - continued;)

Model Shop. Our file there is now complete from 1977 to date and is laid out in three 3 ring binders. It forms a twenty year history of our club and should be of interest to many.

SHOW & TELL FOR JANUARY:

Gordon Jones brought some photos to illustrate different sailing rigs on the Wawona in Seattle. Gary Emery passed around info on using the "WEB" to obtain info from the Nautical Research Guild. Phil Matson brought photo-etched hinges for the gun ports for his model of the "Alfred." He thanked John Fluck for helping him out with the computer art work involved. K.C. Edwards brought in his finished sailboat, the same type built as a museum work project last fall to show various sailing rigs for small boats. Fred Fraas passed around a couple dozen snapshots taken with a "pin hole" camera lens of his scratch-built S.S. United Victory in 1/16 scale.

This meeting had another unusual "first." Joe Beauchmin not only brought his wife, Karina; but also his young son and each of these three family members had their own period sailing model. Joe launched a discussion on the feasibility of producing a beginning modelers kits which would include a few basic tools to start with. His basic premise was, "if I and my wife and son can build models such as these, anyone can." His sons' model was a lobster boat. Joe was very much interested in the Estes Industry proposal discussed earlier.

Jack Klein passed around some sanding blocks with different grades of grits which he obtained through a woodworkers catalog.Over-all, our January meeting was one well worth attending and we would hope that future meetings will be as interesting and successful. (see p. 4)

"FLEET" Cont'd.

numerous models of sleek cruising and racing yachts. Although the preponderance of the collection is devoted to sailing ships, it also includes a model of the side-wheeler *Savannah*, the first vessel with a steam engine to cross the Atlantic.

But it is not so much the individual pieces as the whole fleet and how it was acquired—its provenance, as curators and collectors say—that makes this a historic treasure. The collection grew of its own impetus over 150 years. It parallels the nation's shipping industry, the port of New York and the Seamen's Bank. "You can't get a collection like this by going out and looking," says Dutton. "It's like the forests and wildlife." Says Braun, "It's a time capsule."

While others lamented the seemingly inevitable dissolution of the collection, Neill was fighting to hold the fleet together.

er. "I got on this the moment I heard the bank was in trouble," he says. "Like any good museum person, I was drooling over it. I contacted the liquidators the day they closed the bank. At first they wouldn't meet with me. But then I worked my way up as high as I could get."

That was high indeed. Neill wrote to William Seidman, the chairman of the FDIC, to New York Senators Alfonse D'Amato and Daniel Patrick Moynihan and to President Bush, pleading his case in the most vivid terms. "If this collection is sold in a private auction," Neill said, "... the bidders will leave the auction with their neat-looking models and put them on their mantel in the offices of partners at some brokerage, and that's the end of it."

Neill even found a way to rationalize why the FDIC should sell the Seamen's collection to the South Street Seaport at bargain-basement rates. The FDIC, he pointed out, is "committed to get the maximum return from its assets, but that

does not necessarily mean it's supposed to get the maximum money." Indeed, he said, "part of the public agency's trust is to allow the public to benefit by seeing [the collection]." And, by implication, what better display place for the public to see the biggest collection of American nautical art than the South Street Seaport Museum, which is devoted to the maritime history of New York and the role of ships in its ports?

On Nov. 13, the South Street Seaport Museum announced that the FDIC had agreed to sell the Seamen's collection of maritime art to the museum for the sum of \$3.4 million. The fleet had been saved.

"It's a miracle," said Neill. He is confident that the museum will be able to meet the FDIC's price by the February deadline—a member of the museum's board has already donated the \$212,000 down-payment. If all goes well, portions of The Seamen's collection could go on public exhibit as early as next June. ■

Guildmaster Tom Taylor offered some apologies for the lack of scheduled speakers in 1996 and requested that we hold a Steering Committee meeting right before our February meeting. First Mate Jack Klein recommended we appoint a "Nominating Committee". They would come up with suggestions for club officers for 1997 which would be reported in our February meeting and for votes at our March meeting. Volunteering to serve on this committee were Purser Ed White and "95/"96 Regatta Commodore Dave Manley.

Tom Taylor opened a discussion about changing our meeting nights to facilitate some who can't attend on Thursdays. Of nineteen present, ten voted for Wednesday night while eight more voted for "any night." The remaining lone vote was for Monday. An absentee ballot will be included in this newsletter and those not present for the January meeting are requested to make their desires known.

Model Curator Bob Crawford reported writing to Estes Industries in response to their "Sterling Model Maritime Design Program". (The application and info appeared in last month's newsletter.) Bob suggested they consider both the "Star" and Medea and sent plans for both for their consideration.

Tom Taylor made a recent trip to Ventura, CA. and made a visit to Cole's Power Models located there. He gave a very favorable report of their line and operations, passing around their latest catalog (Number 26) which features British Stuart steam engines, boilers and accessories as well as books they stock. The current catalog costs \$5.00 and may be obtained by writing to:

Cole's Power Models, Inc.
P.O. Box 788
839 East Front Street
Ventura, CA. 93002

CORRECTION - CORRECTION - CORRECTION: (Thanks for Jan. notes, Fred)

Close, but no cigar. In our January newsletter, Purser Ed White's address had the wrong ZIP code. It was listed as 92121, when it should have been 92120. If you haven't mailed in your 1997 dues yet, send them to:

ED WHITE
/redacted/

Your January editor apologizes for any inconvenience this may have caused.

***** NEW from the *****
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

**The MARITIME ADMINISTRATION
COLLECTION of SHIP PLANS, 1939-1970**

Listing of 55 sets of design drawings of Liberty and Victory Ships, SS United States, etc., with ordering instructions. Send U.S. \$10 check payable to SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION to: Ship Plans, NMAH-5010/MRC 628, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560 USA

June 1997

Monthly Planner

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
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July 1997

Monthly Planner

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San Diego Ship Modelers' Guild⁷

1306 N. Harbor Drive

San Diego, CA 92101

NOTE: Do not vote if you attended our January meeting as your vote has been counted. Please mail this in if you are not planning to attend the February meeting.

OFFICIAL BALLOT

"Change of Meeting Nights"

I would like to see our meeting nights held on:

- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday

It does not matter which night.

Suggestions for improving our guild:

Suggestions for improving our meetings:

Additional comments:

Please fold and staple----thanks.

Official ballot for
Meeting Night change

San Diego Ship Modelers Guild
c/o Maritime Museum Assc. of San Diego
1306 North harbor Drive
San Diego, California 92101

Attn: Bob Crawford



DEL-MAR FAIR COMING UP---Tuesday June 17th. thru Monday, July 7th.

Believe it or not it's getting to be Del Mar Fair time again. The fair opens Tuesday, June 17th. and ends Monday, July 7th.

We now are looking for some Good-Hearted-Men to man our exhibit. Can you give four (4) or eight (8) hours between 10 a.m. & 6 p.m.?

Those who give four hours will be awarded ONE FREE PASS. An eight-hour shift will earn 2 free passes. Or, if you can serve two different times of four hours each, three free passes will be given to you.

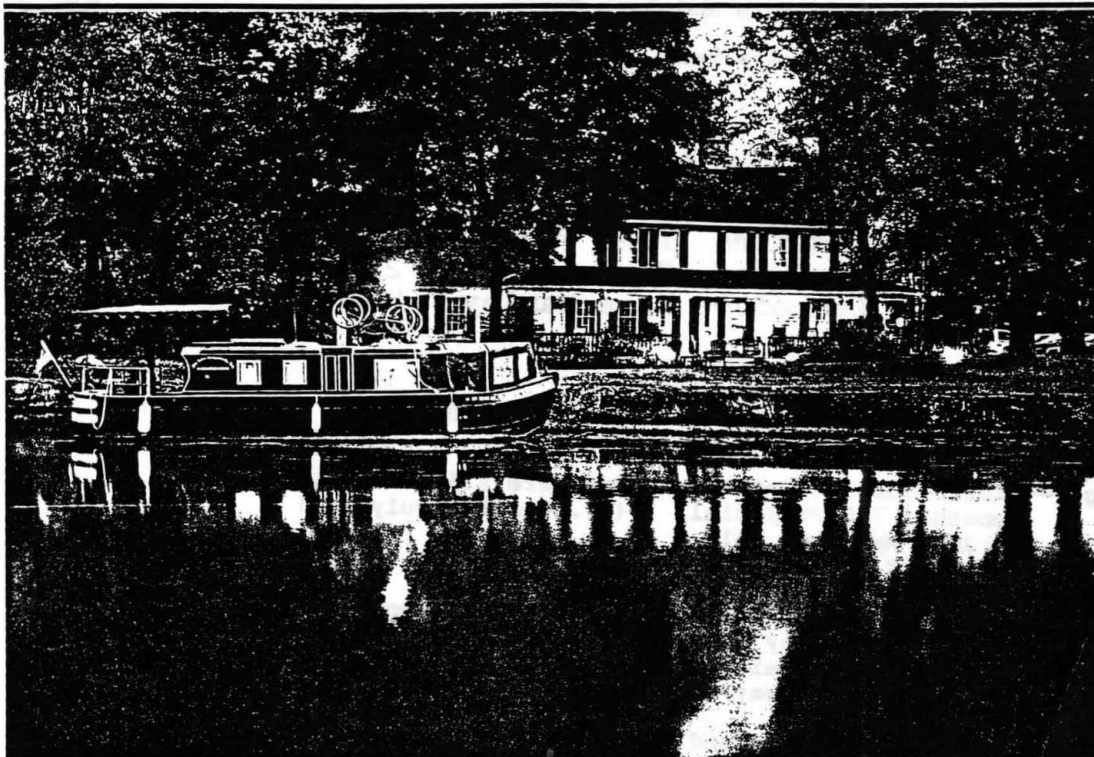
CALENDARS for the months of June and July are attached herein. We would appreciate your marking the times you can be present at our booth to explain our exhibit to passers-by and also answer questions about ship modeling as a hobby. And a word about the San Diego Maritime Museum would be appreciated also, for without it we are "homeless".

SEND your choices to: Jack Klein, /redacted/.

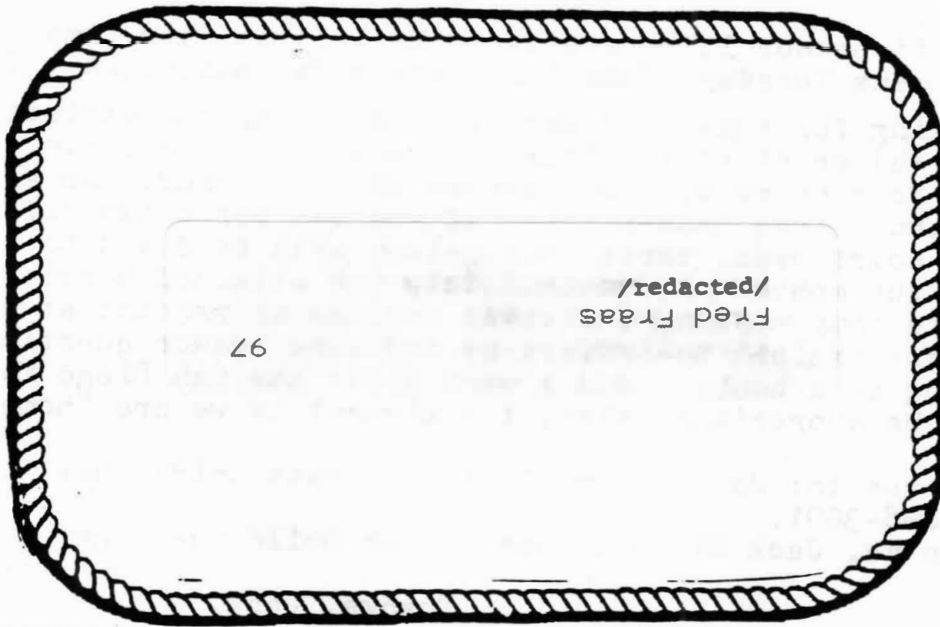
OR, give it to me, Jack Klein at one of our Guild meetings.

Thanks, Jack.

Next month we'll share with you a story "Chugging on the E-RI-EE"
sent in by Bob Willis. (Ed)



Oliver Loud's Inn
The adjacent tavern, circa 1818,
is the oldest
on the Erie and
a popular stop
for visitors.



/redacted/
Fred Fraas

97



San Diego Ship Modelers Guild
c/o Maritime Museum Assoc. of San Diego
306 North Harbor Drive
San Diego, California 92101

San Diego Ship Modelers Guild

Officers for 1996

Guild Master	Tom Taylor	/redacted/
First Mate	Jack Klein	/redacted/
Purser	Ed White	/redacted/
Logkeeper	(open)	
N'letter Editors	Fred Fraas	/redacted/
	Gordon Jones	/redacted/
Regatta Commodore	Dave Manley	/redacted/

Schedule of Activities:

Meetings -- Third Thursday of the month. 7:00PM Social, 7:30PM Meeting, held on board the ferryboat "Berkeley."

R/C Operations -- Saturday mornings at the Model Yacht Pond. (Mission Bay)

Annual Regatta -- Third weekend in June.

Membership:

Dues are \$15 annually (\$7.50 after July 1st)

We strongly encourage all to join the San Diego Maritime Museum as an expression of appreciation for the facilities they provide for our benefit.
