

# The Great Tide Pool

**TALES OF PACIFIC GROVE, CALIFORNIA**

by local award-winning author, Brad Herzog

## SWAN DIVE

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When the weather agrees and the sun casts its ray on Pacific Grove, Lovers Point Beach is a magnet for out-of-towners. From as far away as Seaside and Salinas and San Francisco, beachgoers congregate at the sandy respite tucked into a cove alongside Lovers Point. Surfers anticipate the waves. Scuba divers weave their way through the underwater kelp forest. Sun worshippers lay out a blanket and bask amid the bustle. All of them make their way to the beach past a quirky object displayed at the entrance – and it’s likely that few bother to inspect it any further. After all, the beach calls.



But the replica boat resting behind protective chains at the entrance to the cove has had a fascinating story of its own, dating all the way back to the 19th century. In an era in which donkey carts, horse tandems and surreys carried sightseers through town, a fellow named Ross Sprague came up with the idea of building a glass-bottom boat and ferrying folks around, allowing a downward glimpse into the “Marine Gardens” teeming with flora and fauna below the surface. Education disguised as entertainment.

Soon, Sprague had assembled a little fleet of these boats, decorated with hand-crafted swan heads fore and aft, painted to resemble Venetian gondolas. A dozen passengers could crowd into the vessels. They sat on either side of a plate-glass viewing area. When it was time to marvel at the undersea attractions, dark curtains were lowered from the overhead canopy for better viewing.



Sprague operated the fleet for the next-half century, then his son Russell ran the concession until 1966. A postcard from back in the day touted how “a trip in the Glass Bottom Boat will take you into a Marine Fairyland of fantastic shapes, a wealth of color, and undreamed of strange creatures of the plant and animal world.” Unfortunately, the enthusiastic marketing didn’t have staying power. Within a decade, the boats had been retired, a once-ubiquitous sight in PG relegated to history, likely to be forgotten by most, especially when it became apparent that the last remaining boats proved too fragile to be restored.



So therein ends the story... until... the Heritage Society did what it does best - preserve history. Some \$14,000 was raised, and a scaled-down steel version of the once-beloved swan boats was constructed at Monterey Boat Works under the supervision of a master boatbuilder named Frank Siino. In 1997, the replica boat was christened (with two champagne bottles, of course, because there were swan heads - salvaged from the last of the original boats - at each end). It was called the Margruss, after Margaret and Russell Sprague.

The boat's maiden voyage was pretty much its last. It was lowered into the water by crane, and a series of local dignitaries took turns paddling and riding. Nine years later, it was displayed in a place of honor at Lovers Point, where it sits silently, its swan eyes watching the comings and goings at perhaps the busiest pedestrian spot in Pacific Grove.

But if you think about it, that replica vessel represents some of Pacific Grove's finest qualities - an appreciation of history, a willingness to recognize that quirky can be compelling, and an understanding that we are stewards of the sea, obligated to celebrate the natural wonders of a wondrous place.