

Old pier held many fond memories

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Sadly, the old Huntington Beach pier, originally built in 1914, is no more.

In its place, the city is building a fabulous, brand-spanking-new, built-to-withstand-any-storm, \$11.7 million pier.

The prized jewel in the city's ambitious downtown redevelopment crown is scheduled to open in early 1992.

But I'll have to admit my heart was torn a bit as the last pilings from the old pier were ripped from the ocean floor last week.

I loved that venerable pier the



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Editor's
Notebook

way Cubs fans love Wrigley Field, San Franciscans the Golden Gate, New Yorkers Central Park.

I got to know the pier intimately during my four summers as a lifeguard for the City of Huntington Beach, and here are some of its secrets, known only to lifeguards, fishermen and other folks who carried on the love affair with the 77-year-old landmark.

Did you know that the grand old pier ran a quarter mile out to sea?

I first discovered this fact on a cold and stormy spring morning along with a hundred or so other lifeguard hopefuls who were ordered to swim around it. I, a skinny 17-year-old, thought I was going to die trying.

During the swim, I remember looking up at the intimidating pier with each stroke, my body numbed by the bone-chilling water and bashed about by the surf, wondering when I'd ever reach the end.

The pier's length was deceiving. Lifeguards routinely rescued folks who decided, apparently without an ounce of common sense in their body, that it would be a kick to swim around the pier. Most of them didn't get half-way.

Did you know that the pier stood 35 feet above the water?

I was reminded exactly how high that meant many times, usually the instant before I jumped from it, buoy in hand, to make a rescue.

Since many rescues near the pier were caused by children slipping into the natural trench that surrounds each piling, pier jumps sometimes took place in very shallow water. Imagine jumping 35 feet into three feet of water. Technique was everything.

And we learned from the best. I'll never forget the last day of lifeguard training. Bill Richardson, who now heads up the city's marine safety division, wanted to show all of us rookies what it was like to jump into really shallow water.

He leapt from the pier into a tiny pocket of water — just yards from the shoreline — and, with his body covered with sand, came up smiling. Any questions, gentlemen? We couldn't believe it.

Did you know that the loudspeakers on the pier's lifeguard tower were powerful enough to be heard miles away?

I realized this about 6 a.m. one morning when I made an announcement ("No dogs are allowed on the pier. Thank you.") and didn't realize the loudspeakers were set at full volume.

I got a quick call from my boss who had been sleeping in his home — miles inland from the pier — and wanted the volume turned down — NOW!

Did you know that the barnacles on the pier were razor-sharp?

I learned this quickly and so did panicked swimmers who, carried by a strong current but not wanting to go through the pier, latched desperately onto the barnacle-encrusted pilings until a lifeguard pried their lacerated arms off.

Or how about this: Did you know that a foot or so below the water line, the pilings were covered only with soft algae/moss?

This was good to know when you're trapped under the pier with a 15-foot wave about to break on you. What did you do? You simply went underwater and, using the piling as a shield against the wave, hid behind and grabbed onto the slimy concrete pillar.

Did you know that from the tower on the pier, lifeguards could spot rescues a mile away?

Veteran lifeguards, working alone on the beach in the early morning, had been known to spot a swimmer entering the water in the area of a rip current a mile down the beach.

They then climbed into their jeep, raced off the pier and down the beach and jumped into the water, reaching the victim just as he began to sense he was in trouble. It was amazing.

Did you know the pier was home to some of the Orange Coast's most colorful characters?

There was Ella and the folks at the ill-fated End Cafe, and there were the fishermen.

And finally, did you know the old pier is going to be sorely missed?

It was old and crumbling, but the pier always maintained a certain majestic quality that made it special.

Newport and Balboa are fine piers, but they are nothing like the Grand Old Lady that guarded the Huntington Beach shoreline for six decades.

We'll miss you.