Warships, Canneries and Floating Cranes: Melancholy Memories of the Terminal Island We've Lost

The ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, 1964. *San Pedro is in the foreground, beyond is Terminal Island and the Long Beach Naval Station and Naval Shipyard. | Dick Whittington Photography Collection / USC Digital Libraries*
By D. J. Waldie

We were lost, my friend and I, trying to get to Terminal Island. The tangle of roadways that ended ar stacks of shipping containers on the Long Beach side of the harbor seemed designed to be disorienting. Terminal Island was to the west of us — where we wanted to go — but now we were driving east again.

This wasn't what I remember. I remember the scruffy seaside of the Long Beach port, the military bases, and shipyards of Terminal Island and the canneries of San Pedro. That had been another world entirely.

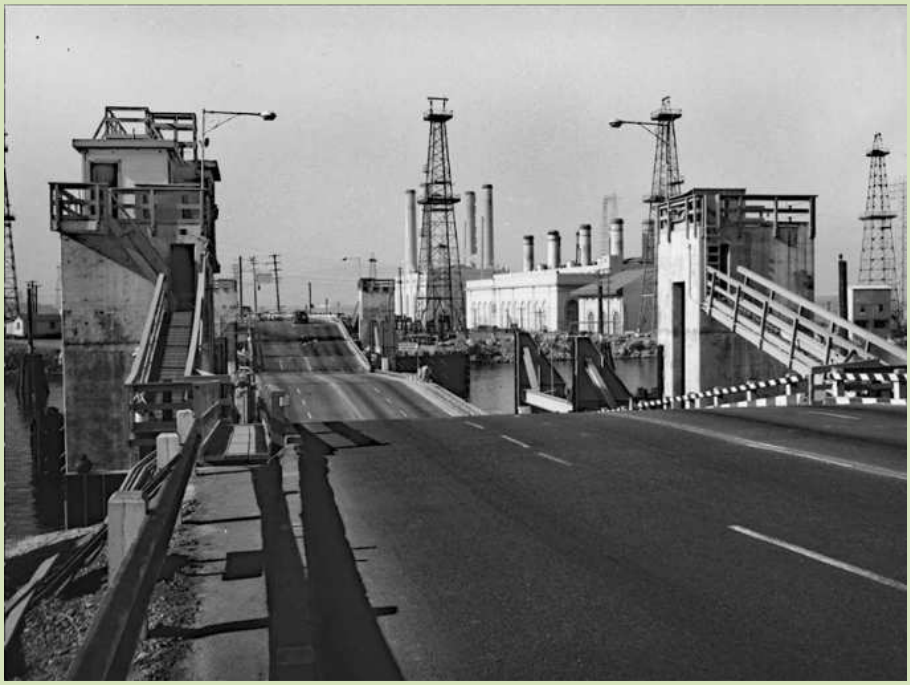
Littoral

I'm from a watery family. Four generations of us made a living at sea or fought on it in various wars. My father was one who fought, and in the years after he returned from the Pacific in 1945, he would drive on Sunday afternoons to Terminal Island — to the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and the Long Beach Naval Station — with my mother and my brother and me. Freighters would be tied up to piers. Warships rode at anchor outside the Naval Shipyard. If the tuna fleet was in, the boats would berth near the canneries in San Pedro's Fish Harbor. The Islander ferry took cars and pedestrians across the channel separating San Pedro from Terminal Island. The voyage took just 10 minutes.

Anything of interest on these aimless drives was concentrated where sea and land interleaved in the lap of waves against pilings, the creak of hawsers at a mooring and in the widening horizon seaward. It was the littoral edge that my father found irresistible.

The side-by-side ports were connected to their parent cities, but the docks and Navy facilities constituted a separate place. They were a single "port town" in my boyhood memory, the shore where Japanese fisherman and their families had lived until their internment in 1942, where Navy sailors and non-coms bunked between cruises, where goods left California and goods arrived and where castaways gathered.

Bridges



Pontoon Bridge, 1958. *We took the "temporary" pontoon bridge to get from Terminal Island to San Pedro. | Port of Long Beach Photographic Archive*

We'd drive to Terminal Island on the ridiculously short Terminal Island Freeway or on Ocean Boulevard from downtown Long Beach. If by Ocean, we'd cross to the island on the pontoon bridge. It was supposed to be temporary; it lasted nearly 25 years.

The idea of a bridge that goes down to the water rather than over it is odd enough. But a bridge that rises and falls with the tide is even more peculiar. Crossing the pontoon bridge — at the posted speed of 15 miles an hour — could be a thrill ride: a plunge from one shore down to the floating deck and then a steep climb to the opposite shore.

There might be a long wait when the deck split, and the two halves withdrew under their piers to allow a ship to pass. That made it a risky bridge. Between 1944 and 1968, as many as seven drivers died after failing to reach the opposite shore. Many more drivers were successfully fished from the channel by the bridge crew or the Harbor Patrol.

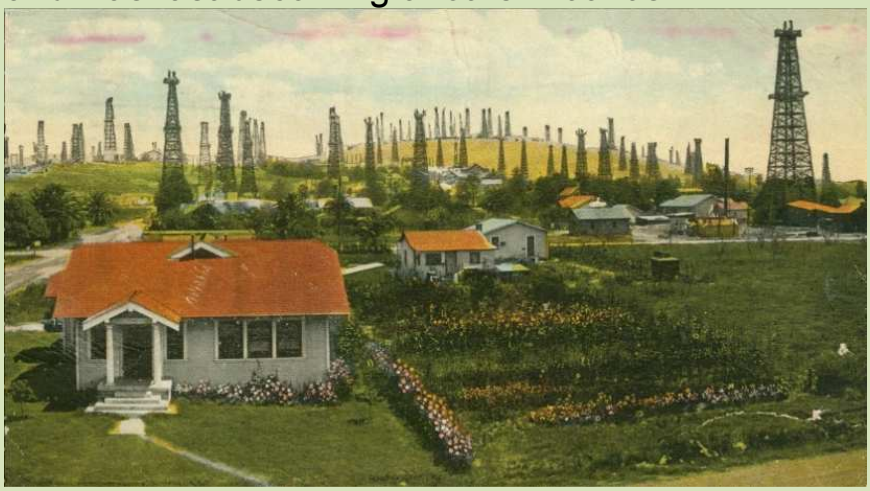
Freeway and Heim Bridge, 1953. *The Heim Bridge to Terminal Island was at the end of the short Terminal Island Freeway.* | *Ralph Morris Collection, Los Angeles Public Library*

We usually left Terminal Island by the Commodore Schuyler F. Heim Bridge. High and long, the Heim Bridge had a different terror for me. The center deck of the bridge could be raised to permit ships to pass and so was more lightly constructed. I could look out the car window and down through gaps in the deck grate to see dark water far below. The sound of the car's tires over the grate had a peculiarly ominous hum. I could hardly wait for that sound to end.

Subsidence

A bridge that rises and falls is unsettling. But the sinking land around it was even more troubling. Ground subsidence in the harbor area, begun in the 1940s, accelerated in the 1950s. Bridges were occasionally impassible. Sewer lines backed up. Rail lines and pipelines warped. Unexpected dips appeared in portside streets. Protective sea walls surrounded parts of the Navy shipyard.

In an eerie foreshadowing of sea level rise because of climate change, working-class neighborhoods in the harbor "subsidence bowl" flooded in 1951 when high tides flowed up storm drains. With wharfs awash and industrial sites dropping below sea level, Terminal Island was fast becoming another Atlantis.



Read: When Oil Derricks Ruled the L.A. Landscape – by Nathan Masters

Oil had done it. So many barrels of oil had been pumped out of the loose sands of the Wilmington Oil Field that parts of the harbor area eventually sank nearly 30 feet. The effects of subsidence even reached downtown Long Beach, five miles away. Pine Avenue — then the city's main commercial street — was already two feet lower by 1950.

Sinking, 1951. *As city officials sought ways to stop ground subsidence, residents of working-class neighborhoods coped with rising seawater.* | *Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library*

By 1956, subsidence affected 22 square miles of Wilmington and Long Beach. New state legislation and the threat of lawsuits led 400 well operators and dozens of property owners to adopt a mitigation plan based on pumping hundreds of millions of gallons of seawater into the oil field. Amazingly, the plan to replace the missing oil worked. By 1966, subsidence stopped.

It didn't restore the landscape, however. Parts of the harbor area remain several feet lower than they were before oil extraction began. The ports lost some of their industrial base when worried manufacturers moved out. The Navy, formerly one of the region's biggest employers, eventually left as well.

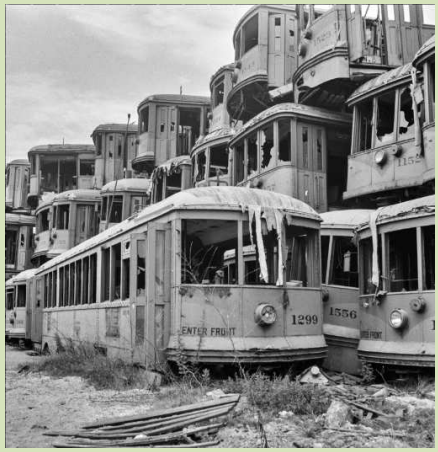
The German

Herman the German, 1957. *A giant floating crane - NavSource Online, Service Ship Photo Archive*

Looming over the Naval Station and Naval Shipyard was a German — Herman the German — a 374-foot-tall, self-powered, floating crane, one of the largest in the world. It had been built by Germany's Nazi regime for the shipyards at Kiel on the Baltic Sea. With a hoisting capacity of more than 300 tons, the German could lift a submarine directly from the water and lay it down gently in a dry dock. Allied forces took the German as a "prize of war" in 1945. The captive crane served the Navy shipyard from 1948 to 1994. Sold to the Panamanian government and renamed Titan, it lifts heavy loads on the Panama Canal today.

The Navy occupied nearly 1,000 acres of Terminal Island in the 1950s. My father, who had a Naval Reserve card, could get us waved through the gate at the entrance to the Naval Station to drive along the two miles of the Navy mole that angled into to the harbor. Returning, we would occasionally give a lift to a sailor making the long walk back.

Terminal



Castaways, 1957. *Terminal Island lived up to one meaning of its name when hundreds of Pacific Electric trolley cars were junked there in the 1950s, a melancholy backdrop to my island visits.* | *Ernest Marquez Collection, Huntington Library*

The stacks — massive walls, really — of junked street cars and Pacific Electric trolleys waiting to be broken up for scrap in the 1950s were another symbol of Terminal Island, at least for me.

In my memory, Terminal Island was inside a zone of petroleum storage facilities and gigantic industrial plants set among oil wells and derricks. Salvage yards looked as if a tsunami had washed into them a century of marine debris: anchors, hoists, cables and decaying boats resting on cradles or beneath a web of nets.

The island lived up to its name as a place of endings as I grew up. The Ford assembly plant closed in 1958. The Procter & Gamble soap plant closed in 1988. The Todd Shipyard closed the following year. San Pedro's tuna canneries shuttered in 1995. The Naval Shipyard lingered past the closing of the Naval Station until 1997.

The island I knew as a boy is gone, replaced by a highly efficient but barren landscape of dockside cranes, intermodal rail yards and truck pads. The culturally and economically complex Terminal Island that was my "port town" has been reduced to the anonymous uniformity of the standardized shipping container.

Container Port, 2016. *The socially and historically complex Terminal Island became a mono-culture of standardized, containerized commerce by the 1990s.* | *Wikimedia*

Without familiar landmarks, my friend and I remained lost.
We never made it to Terminal Island.