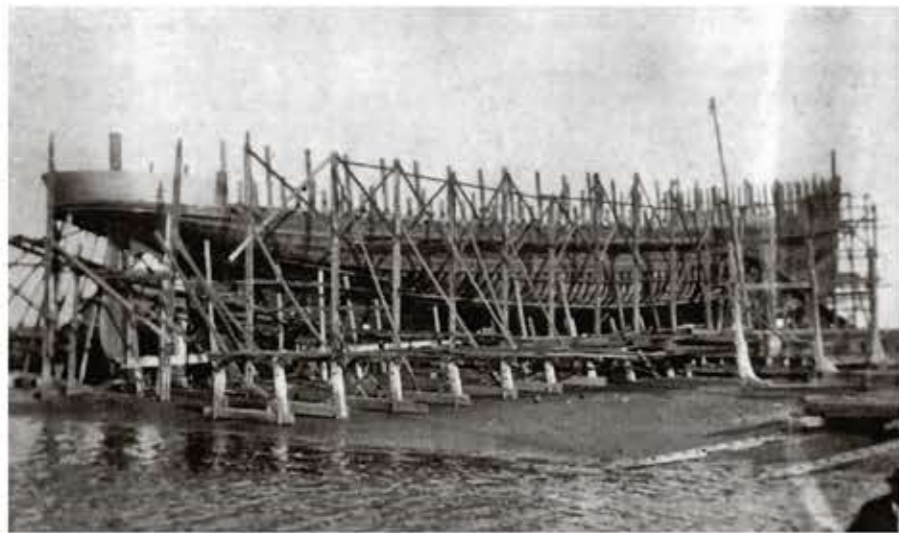


The sad remains of the SS *Cabrillo* during December 2022. As can be seen, the surviving component is basically the steamship's hull from the waterline on down.

# GHOST STEAMER OF THE NAPA RIVER

ONCE AN EXTREMELY POPULAR ATTRACTION ON THE SAN PEDRO TO CATALINA ISLAND RUN, THE SS *CABRILLO* IS RETURNING TO MOTHER NATURE - BY ROGER CAIN  
AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY PILOT JERRY ANDERSEN



The *Cabrillo* under construction.



SS *Cabrillo* departing San Pedro for Catalina Island.

We were flying low over the Sacramento Delta region looking for items of nautical interest and we had one particular target in mind while making a sharp left turn to follow one of the tributaries of the Napa River. There she was — grounded in the mud and slowly returning to nature as plants and trees had taken root in her wooden hull. Jerry made a couple of slow turns over the area while I snapped away with my cameras in an attempt to record the earthly remains of the SS *Cabrillo*.

The once glamorous steamship was literally rotting into the mud and it was difficult to imagine that this vessel previously led a life as the “Queen of Catalina Island.” Even during the late 1800s, the area comprising southern California was greatly expanding and people wanted something to do in their free time. Well, the Banning Brothers of Wilmington wanted to fulfil that desire while also making a profit for themselves. Just off the coast was picturesque Santa Catalina Island and the brothers owned Wilmington Transportation Company and this organization supplied the wooden steamships needed to transport visitors to the “magic isle” and they did just that.

The steamships plied the usually placid stretch of water between Wilmington/San Pedro and the city of Avalon on Santa Catalina. Visitors

flocked to the location for a day trip or for a weekend, taking advantage of the beaches and “mountain” hiking trails (the tallest point on the island is Mt. Orizaba and it rises some 2097 feet). During this time period, technology was rapidly changing and the steamships were being replaced on a regular basis. However, in 1891 an opportunity was presented in the form of a deal the brothers could not refuse.

Going back to pre-history, the island had originally been inhabited by many different native tribes but by mid-1800s it was basically abandoned except for a few sheep herders. George Shatto, a real estate speculator from Grand Rapids, Michigan, decided that it would be a good idea to develop the small encampment and harbor at Avalon into a major real estate attraction. Accordingly, he purchased the island in 1887 for \$200,000 (about \$5.5 million in 2022 dollars). This was at the top of the southern California real estate boom. All booms can become busts and this is what happened to Shatto and even though he had built up Avalon, opened a hotel, and added a pier and other attraction, he



The steamship arriving at Catalina. The trip took about two hours.



Bushes and small trees are growing in the aft portion of the hulk.

The SS *Cabrillo* during its glory days.



SS *Cabrillo* had its moment on the silver screen during 1939's *The Real Glory*.

defaulted on his loans and the island went back to the estate of James Lick, who had owned the island for the previous quarter of a century.

The Lick estate quickly sold the entire island to the sons of Phineas Banning and they moved forward to make Shatto's grand dream a reality. The brothers began to build all manner of buildings but they wanted to create a pair of fine steamships that would transport tourists in great style. They designed the ships specifically for the Catalina run and the first was the SS *Hermosa II* followed by the SS *Cabrillo*.

Once construction of the *Hermosa II* was underway, the brothers realized the ship would not be big enough to cater to the rapidly growing number of tourists. Before the launch of *Hermosa II*, construction of the larger SS *Cabrillo* had already begun. During the early morning of 15 February 1904, the SS *Cabrillo* was launched and it quickly became the finest ship on the short run. *Cabrillo* was bigger, faster, and better than any other vessel on the mainland to island run and it quickly filled its maximum capacity of 1200 passengers. The steamship had