

Life in the Slough

By Gary Lee Evans

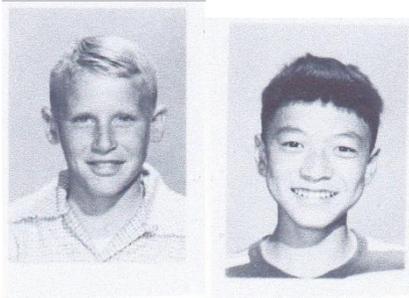
Chapter One

The year is 1954 I was 12 years old and the adventures of Life in the Slough's began. Home Base was 642 Corvina, Imperial Beach California. My Father VR and Mother Louise bought the house on Corvina in 1947. I was in the 1st class of students to attend West View Elementary School.

I had just turned 12 and not being athletically gifted. I longed for something that I could excel in. Fishing seemed to fit as my father loved to fish and I always tagged along on fishing trips to the San Diego Bay, North Island Naval Base and the Slough south of Imperial Beach (IB).

The Slough was an area just south of Imperial Beach and at the foot of the Tijuana River Valley. This wet land area is home to marine life and water fowl. Access to the Slough was gained by two ways: walking along the Beach on the West side which was pristine with sand dunes dotted by pickle weed or by a dirt road on the East side that bordered the US Navy Air Field, known as Ream Field. An old rock crushing plant located in the central area was also accessible by this dirt road.

Dad bought Calcutta bamboo blanks that were at least 10 foot long and attached eyes, tip and reel holders to make a surf fishing rod. They were my first surf fishing rods. The longer the pole the farther you could cast if you had a very flexible pole. In those days custom rods were very expensive, so you made your own. My first reel was a hand me down Pen Surf Master that was well used but still was one of the best reels that you could get at the time. Now that I had the fishing gear I had to learn how to cast. I would attach a 4oz rubber weight on the end of the line and go out in the street in front of the house and attempt to cast it down the road. At first I could only cast it a few yards and I would get the worse back lash (tangles) in the reel that took hours to unscramble. I was getting frustrated and my Dad showed me how to thumb the reel as the line was spinning off the reel to slow down the speed and to control reel over speed. I was getting the hang of it; however I did get a lot of thumb burns and blisters. After days of practice I thought I could cast a mile. Overhead power lines lined the street. On occasion while casting, I would snag the lines, resulting in a loss of a few yards of line and a sinker. In those days the line was made of braided nylon. Monofilament was just being introduced and was very expensive.



One day as I was practicing casting, my friend Sing San Chang, with whom I became good friends with at West View and lived a block away ask me what I was doing He and his siblings were immigrants from China. Their father was a Master Chief in the US Navy. I replied that I was getting ready to go fishing off of the IB pier and boardwalk. Watch how far I can cast. I then catapulted the weight up in the air and the line got tangled again in the power lines. Sing just laughed and laughed and poked fun as friends will do. After watching a few more casts he wanted to try. The competition of who could cast the farthest had started. We spent hours after school each day trying to out cast the other. We lost a lot of weights on the power lines but thankfully we did not hit any cars or people walking by. In our minds we became the professional surf casters. One Saturday morning Sing and I went to the IB pier to try out our new skills with hopes of catching the big one.

It was known that the big fish always cruised just outside the breaker line and if you wanted to catch them you had to cast your bait out there.

We casted and casted and thinking if we could just get it out just a little farther the big one would bite. I guess we just did not let the bait stay in the water long enough thinking we were not out far enough. We came home with no fish that day but excited that we could reach the breaker line. However we were the kings of surf casting.



Fishing pier at foot of Palm.

The best fishing in the surf was off the Sea Wall North of the Pier at the US Navy Radio Station. At high tide the fish was in close to feed on Sand Crabs and we could cast out just past the breaker line and reel in the bait real slow. This seemed to work best and we always came home with what we thought was the biggest Surf Perch in the Ocean.

A Board Walk that was built on **piles with a deck** attached to the old Life Guard Station and ran north a few hundred feet. This was also prime fishing at high tide and you did not have to hold your pole. You could cast out and rest the pole on the safety railing and set the alarm on the reel and wait for the bite. The best bait was Sand Crabs or Blood Worms. Sometimes we would use Shrimp or Clams.



Boardwalk remains after the big storm.



Original site of the old pier. Life guard station at foot of Palm and 1st street.

The Slough's was a paradise for fishermen and a gold mine for fish bait. Razorback, butter, Pismo, and Gueyduck clams were abundant and easy to get. Also there were all kinds of bait fish like smelt and yellow chubs. At high tide the water would fill up the Slough and the big fish would come in to feed and spawn, then leave at the tide change to low tide.

At low tide you could walk out on the mud flats and dig for clams. The mud was thick and black and if you tried to wear shoes they became lost in the mud.

On the Ocean side about ½ mile south of 1st and Coronado, was an old Shack made of drift wood, tar paper, tin and who knows what else. An old hermit lived there and we called him the Bait Man. I rember his name was Jack. He looked like Gabby Hazes the movie star. He would go out on the mud flats and dig clams, blood worms and sell them to the fishermen that would hike down to fish the Sloughs or the Surf. My Dad would drive Sing San and me down to where the road ended and then we would hike down to the Bait Man's shack to get bait. Jack took a liking to us and offered to show us how to get the razor back clams as they were the best bait to use. He told us to come back at low tide and bring a bucket and some metal clothes hangers. The next low tide we showed up early and he took us clam hunting. We found out that day that you did not wear shoes, the mud was deep and when you stepped in it you sank up to your knees and the suction would pull your shoes off. After a while we learned just where to step and how to walk in the mud. Jack took the hangers and straightened them out, bent a small 180 degree hook on one end and made a loop for your hand on the other. As we walked on the mud little holes would appear and water would shoot out of the hole. He then would poke the wire down the hole, wait a few seconds and the pull it up. Low and behold a clam would be clamped on the wire and could not slide off because of the hooked end. Now it was our turn, we tried and tried but came up empty. The old man said we needed to hold our breath and when we needed to breathe pull the wire up. Guess what! It worked. We had mastered how to get Razor Back Clams. We promised the Bait Man, who we now called Jack, that we would not tell anyone his secret. We would go clam digging with Jack every chance we got and Jack would put the clams in buckets and pour salt on them to preserve them. Salted clams were ok bait for fishing for surf perch but fishing was best if they were fresh. They would last about two days before they had to be salted. To get butter clams all you had to do was dig in the mud and they would be their just like digging up potatoes. Gueyduck Clams was another story. You had to wade out in the water and look for their long necks sticking out of the mud and the dig with your hand as fast as you could and grab them before they could dig themselves deeper in the mud. We learned that by swimming instead of walking we could find them before they retracted their necks. They were by far the best clams for fish bait that you could get. Pismo Clams were easy to get but they were on the surf side of the slough and you found them at low tide by looking for what we called hair or there beard sticking out of the sand. When you see hair you dug with a 3 prong fork and the Pismo clam came popping out of the sand.

Now that Sing San and I were masters (so we thought) at clam digging we could get bait and go fishing as often as we wanted. We found that our surf poles were too big for fishing the Slough so we tried using our freshwater gear. A great move for us because we did not need to cast as far like surf fishing because it was like fishing in small ponds or rivers. The best eating fish that we caught on light tackle was a flat fish called Turbot. They looked like a small Halibut and were just as tasty. We found that we could catch them on small jigs called flatfish. The orange ones with black spots worked the best. Another fish that we caught was called a Bull Head, the ugliest fish in the Slough. They were greenish black, had a big head like a cat fish and had a spine like spike on the back of the head. If you got stuck by the spine it was very painful. They also had slime covering them and you had to have gloves or a rag to hold on to them. We just put our foot on them to get the hook out and kick them back into the water. They were not good to eat or to cut up for bait, just a plain nasty fish. I think nature put them there to clean the bottom of the Slough. There were so many Bull Heads that it seemed like you got one every cast. Fishing at low tide was the worst time for them. When the Slough was full it seemed they did not bite as much.



Bull Head

Fishing the surf was a great time during the summer months. We would take our surf rods to the beach and drive a sand spike (a long metal stake with a rest for the butt of the poll) into the sand to hold our polls. Then we would dig for Sand Crabs. When the waves came rushing up on the beach we would watch it reseed and look for the crabs feelers sticking out of the sand. The feelers made sort of a V shape in the sand as the water receded. Then we would run to the spot and either dig with our hands or if we had a shovel, scoop out a big lump of sand and scatter it on the beach. If the crabs were in the scoop they would try to dig themselves back into the sand. You had to be quick to grab them before they disappeared. When we had a bucket full of crabs (about the size of a quarter) we had enough bait to go fish. The Sand Crabs were the best bait for the perch but sometimes we would use the clams and blood worms that we got at the Slough.



Sand Crab.

Now we could use the skills we learned at home in casting a long way out. We always used a pyramid sinker because they would hold well in the sand and the wave action would not move it much. We always caught good size Surf Perch. Sometimes we waded out in the surf up to our waste just to cast past the breakers. We always thought the big ones were out there.

Dad told us about Blood Worms and Ghost Shrimp we could catch in the Sloughs that he liked to use when fishing the Bay. The next time we were at the Jacks Shack we ask him if he could show us how to catch them. Turns out all we needed was a shovel. At low tide we would dig a big hole in the mud and then stomp around like we were smashing grapes. The stomping action would pump the mud and the Ghost Shrimp would rise to the surface and all we had to do was pick them up. As far as the Blood Worm you just had to dig out a big ball of mud and scatter and pick them up. I hated the blood worms because they have a sucker on one end that they can attach to you and suck your blood like a leach. The big ones can really hurt.



Blood Worm

The place to fish for big fish was at what we called the Mouth. The water entered the Slough at high tide and drained out at low tide. The Mouth was very wide and deep, too deep to wade across and the water ran very fast like a river. We would cast into the surf side of the Mouth and let the current carry out bait back into the Slough or if the tide was going out just the opposite. Large Sand Bass, Croaker and Halibut were the desired catch. Old Jack always warned us not to wade into the Mouth as the current was so strong that it would take us out to the Coronado Islands. There were lots of rumors of people who drowned trying to cross the Mouth, so we were very careful not to wade out in it. At times between tidal changes the water was slack enough and you could get across. We were always afraid that we would get trapped north of the mouth



Mouth to the Slough.

My Dad and Mom even at our age had a lot of trust in us to be alone while exploring and fishing Slough and the Beach. In those years there were no Cell Phones, but I'm sure they checked up on us without our knowledge and of course Jack the Bait Man always looked out for us and all the kids that roamed the Sloughs.

On the days that we did not go fishing Sing San and I would walk down to the Beach and explorer 1st Street. In the early days of IB 1st Street was the place to be for kids. The one Store that I remember the best was a Stationary/Book Store where they bought and sold Comic Books. New ones sold for 10 cents and used for 5 cents or you could trade in your used for a new and get it for 5 cents. They also had the best collection of penny candy in the County. So for a dime you could get a Comic Book and some candy and go sit on the beach and enjoy them and see if anyone was catching fish. Fishing tackle was also sold there and we always picked through the sale stuff looking for the best hooks and sinkers. We lost a lot during our fishing trips. Some of the old stores along 1st street still had wooden sidewalks on the beach side and the building were painted green with white trim. As I remember there was a market with an old fashion meat counter and a soda fountain. Mom and Dad always shopped at the market because it was too far to go to Chula Vista or Coronado just to get meat, milk and bread. Also on the East side of the street was the US Post Office. Most everyone in town had a P.O. Box for their mail. Home delivery was not offered in some parts of I.B.

Another popular store was the Rexall Drug Store at Palm and 1st. They had a lunch counter and the best milk shakes in town. They made shakes in a tall tin container and when done they poured it into a tall glass and left the rest in the tin on the counter. It was like getting 2 shakes for the price of one.



Hiking along the beach was a favorite thing to do when not fishing. The Navy used the Ocean as a dumping ground and you never knew just what would be found. Sand Dollars were everywhere and we would gather them up skip them across the water for fun.



Sand Dollars.

When Sing and I were not fishing or exploring the Sloughs we would hop on our Bikes and peddle down highway 78 to Coronado. The ride was 8 miles and it took us an hour or two. We would take the Ferry to San Diego and back and pretend we were on a around the world trip.



Coronado to San Diego Ferry.



Saturdays was special too because the Palm Theater always had a morning showing of a double feature and a serial episode. Roy Rodgers and Lash La Rue were our favorites. Frosty Freeze soft ice cream for a nickel was a big treat too.



Palm Theater at 9th and Palm.

CHAPTER 2

OFF TO NELLIS AFB

Dad being in the US Navy got orders to USN Lake Mead Base in Nevada located North of Nellis Air Force Base in the foot hills. We lived in Base Housing at Nellis Air Force Base. I was going on 13 at that time. There was no middle school at the base so 7th and 8th grades had were bussed to North Las Vegas High School. The school was split in half, 7&8 grades on one side and 9 thru 12 on the other.

It was a hard time at the NLVH School because the civilian kids did not like the Air Force brats going to their school. So we got harassed every day and there was always a fight during class changes or lunch time. One day during class change a group of 5

toughs caught me in the hall way and pushed me around trying to get me to fight. As I was talking to one of them the leader punched me on my blind side and I fell into an open classroom door. The door flew open and the Gym Coach was inside and came out to see what was going on. It did not take long for him to size up that a gang had just singled me out. He took us all to the Gym and put the Boxing Gloves on me and then asks the 5 who was the toughest. He got the gloves too. Into the ring we went with the coach and he said to settle it like men. Well the guy I was fighting was big, heavy and slow so I got the best of him because I could move faster. After about 3 rounds I got in a good punch and blooded his nose and he started crying. The Coach stopped the fight and sent us back to class. I never had any more encounters with the tough kids after that day. The word got out and I was the Hero on the bus ride home.

Fishing was out of the question in the Las Vegas Desert so I had to find something else to do. I joined an Explorer Scout Troop and we went hiking and camping most every weekend. One of the favorite things we liked to do was hike out in the desert behind a Drive in Theater. After dark we (the kids I ran with) would sneak under the fence and stake out a spot on the last row and watch the movie. Some weekends we would camp out overnight. There were 3 mountains behind the Base and we climbed to the top of each one. We thought we had conquered Mt Everest. Dad was told about some caves in the hills behind the Navy Base and one weekend Dad took us on a trip to explorer them. We thought they were like Carlsbad Caverns but in reality it was just a big hole in the ground with Bats in it. We found a lot of animal droppings and in our minds it was from Dinosaurs.

It was always hot so I would go to the swimming pool at the Air Base. The Officers had the best pool so I always went there. The pool manager said my dad had to be an Officer to use the pool. I told him my Dad is a Chief Petty Officer, I guess he was not familiar with the Navy so he let me in. I was a good swimmer, guess my swimming in the surf at the beach helped. They had tryouts for Jr. Olympics and I qualified for the dashes. At the swim meet I placed 1st and received a Gold Medal for the 50 meter and 2nd place silver in the 100 meter. I also got a 3rd place ribbon for the 4x100 relay.

Dad taught the Explorer Scouts to spin ropes like the Cowboys. We marched in a Parade in Downtown Las Vegas spinning our ropes to the cheers of the crowd. The highlight of belonging to the Explorer Scouts was a winter camping trip to Charleston Mountain which was my first experience camping in the Snow.

CHAPTER 3

HOME AGAIN

It's now 1956 and Dad got orders to return to North Island in Coronado Ca. What a happy camper I was to be going back to the Slough's and the Beach. I was now 14 and a 9th grader and enrolled at South West Jr. High School. I hated it but only had to worry about one last semester and then I would be a sophomore at Mar Vista High. The worse class that I had to take was Music. It was a requirement if you were not in the Band or a Jock. The teachers name was Mr. Joseph and his thing was classical music. We had to study all the composers and write about them, had to listen to a classical music station on the radio and report on who was the composer of each piece played and name all the interments. I hated this class as Rock and Roll was just taking off and that is what everyone wanted to hear.

I reunited with Sing San and we returned to fishing and exploring the Slough the first weekend back home. Now that we were older and wiser (so we thought) we ask our parents if we could camp at the Slough. At first they were not too thrilled but they gave in. After all, I had been an Explorer Scout. We packed up our camping gear and set out for a weekend of camping and fishing in our favorite spot among the sand dunes. Old Jack was still there and I renewed our friendship and shared my experiences of living in the Las Vegas area.

Camping in the Sloughs was exciting and we thought we were all grown up. Some of the sand dunes were quite tall and we would pitch our tent between them to escape the wind blowing in from the Ocean side. We could fish the surf on one side and the quiet waters of the Sloughs on the other. At night we would build a fire from drift wood and roast marsh mellows on a stick, tell stories and burn anything that we could find to throw into the fire. Sometimes old Jack would sneak up on us and try to scare us; however we knew it was him so we pretended to be scared just to make him laugh.

Our parents would come down during the day to check on us and bring things to eat because at that age we were not good at cooking over a camp fire. Dad always brought a cooler full of sodas and water so we would have plenty to drink.

The Helicopters flying out of Ream Field at night would shine their spot lights on us while hovering overhead. I think they were practicing search and rescue using us as targets. We would hide in various spots among the dunes and they would fly around and come back and they always found us. It was a very exciting game to play with them.

We road our bikes to the Ferry in Coronado and took it to San Diego. Broadway street in San Diego was a haven for the Sailors and there were locker clubs on every block. The locker clubs were established for the Sailors to keep their civilian attire and other things that were not allowed aboard ship. They all had Pin Ball Machines and you could play for 5 cents. If you were good enough to rack up points you could play for hours on a nickel. Also on Broadway there were lots of Bars that had Go Go Dancers and some advertised Nude Dancers. We would try to sneak a peek inside but the doorman in most cases would catch us. This was a highlight of the day if we did get a look inside. We could go to the Zoo for free because we were under 16 and that was the age that you had to pay to get in.

Otay Lake was another place that we camped and fished. Riding our bikes would take about 2 hours to get there and camping in a primitive area was free. Sometimes Dad would take us there in the car so we could have all the camping gear we needed and he always paid for a spot with shade and water. Fishing was good for Bass and Blue Gill but we liked to fish the Sloughs better.

CHAPTER 4

MAR VISTA HIGH SCHOOL

1957: I was 15 and enrolled as a sophomore at Mar Vista High. Exciting times were to begin. Because I lived close to the campus I had to walk to and from school. Not a big deal it only took about 15min to get there. I could ride my bike to school, but that was for little kids not for me, I was in High School. Not much happened my first year in High School. I did not play sports and the only thing I liked to do was fish and swim in the Ocean. So I muddled threw that first year, and hung out with friends that had the same interest. Sing San, Jay Robbins, and Jimmy Starr were some of those that I remember.

Then in the summer of 1958 I became 16 and got my driver licenses and my first car. A 1949 Ford Coupe. Black in color. It had a flat head v8 and 3 speed stick shift on the column. I thought I was king of the road. Now I could drive to school and would be recognized as Cool. Girls wanted a ride to and from the school so they did not have to take the bus. Now my 15 minutes to school took around 45min to an hour because of making rounds to pick them up. But then I was Cool.

The Slough now became a bigger adventure. It was a place to go to be alone with your girlfriend if you could find a hidden parking spot not occupied by someone else. The road to the back side of the Slough was accessed off of Coronado Ave. In the early days of I. B there was a rock crushing plant located midway down the road. A lot of Cat Tail Reeds were past the old rock plant and that was the best spot to park. There was no Sheriff back then, only the I.B Police. The Police Force was small in numbers so they had no interest in a bunch of teenagers hanging out in the Slough. Once in a while one would take a ride to the Rock Plant and just sit there for a while and then leave. I think they just wanted to see how many kids were down there. No one ever caused trouble as they just wanted to be left alone with their girl. During the day it was a place for riding motor cycles. A small dirt track was carved out by the riders and on most Saturdays an impromptu race would develop. If you were fishing on the other side you could see the dust in the air from the racers.

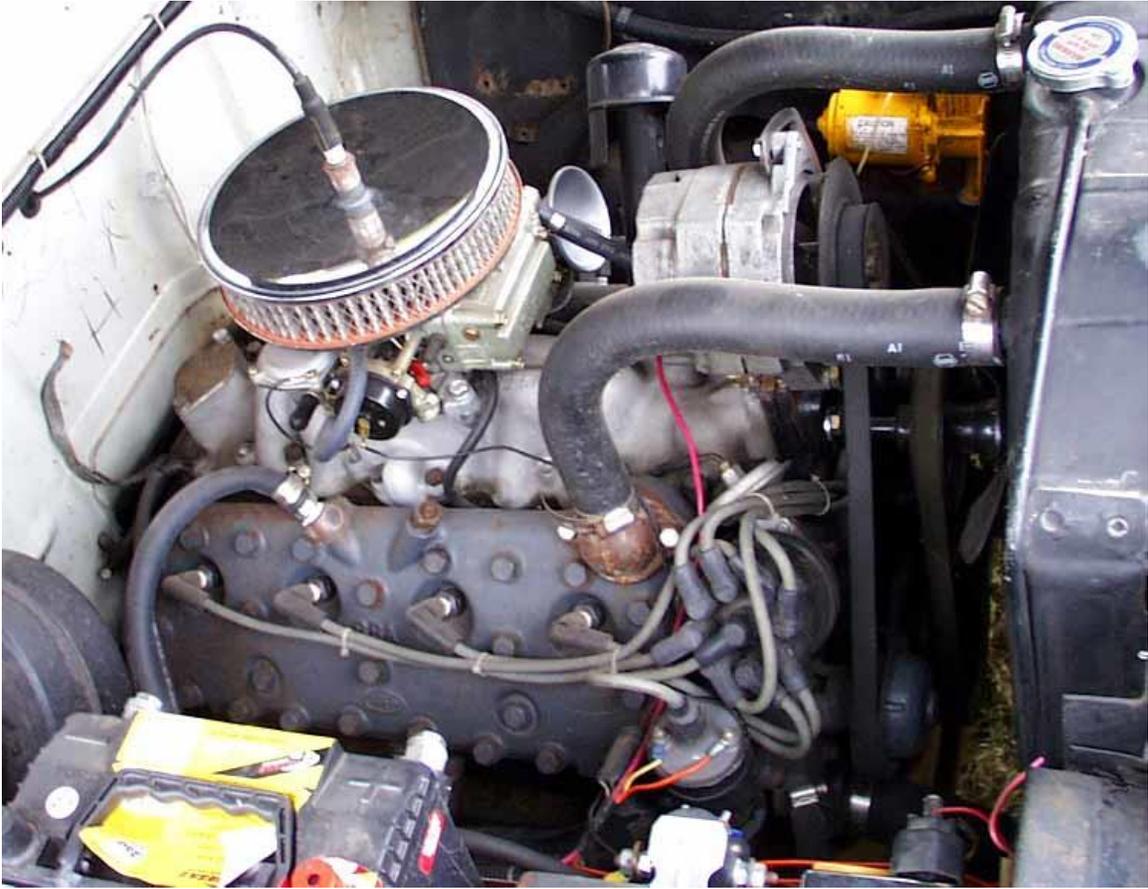
In the winter there was Duck Hunting in the back water area past the rock plant. But that did not last long because a City Ordinance was passed to prevent hunting in City Limits. That did not stop a few hardline hunters that had hunted that area for years, including my Dad.

Old Jack's bait shack burned down and he just disappeared. I never found out how the fire started and what happened to Jack. The City Crews cleaned up the remains of the shack and took it to the dump. That was a sad day for all the fishermen that relied on old Jack for bait.



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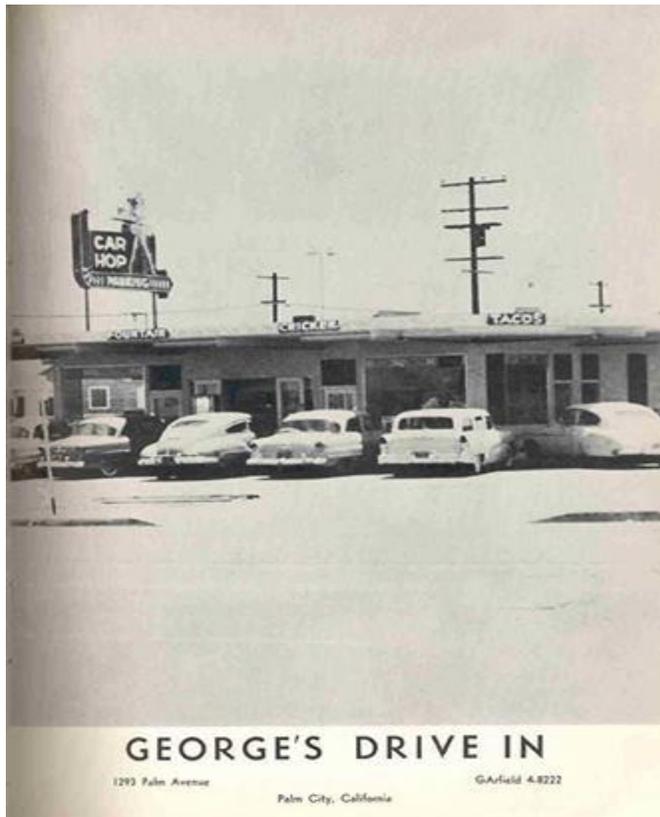
old Ford



The old Ford needed some work Dad bought it from a Sailor for \$150. It needed a new muffler and tail pipe so I talked Dad into putting on Dual Exhaust. I found a muffler shop next to Pep Boys in Chula Vista that would install the pipes for the same price as a stock system. So I got 10 inch glass pack mufflers. The sound they made was incredible. Dad was not too happy but he came to like it too.

Chapter 5

GEORGE'S DRIVE IN





George's
DRIVE-INN

EASY to Take Home

Golden Fried Chicken .89	Fried Jumbo Shrimp with Special Sauce .30
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WE CAN PREPARE ANY ORDER ON THE MENU TO TAKE HOME

Cheeseburger50
Hamburger40
French Fries20
Tacos with Cheese35
Malts30
Shakes30

The place to be seen and to hang out with other teenagers was George's Drive In. For every one that seen the movie American Grafette, this was Imperial Beach's version. Every night the teens would show up with or in someone's hot rod or family car to hang out to show off their latest car or addition to it. Duel Exhaust with glass pack mufflers was the big thing or some addition to the motor. Fancy hub caps were also popular as there was no such thing as mag wheels. The best wheels were chromed but very expensive.

One of the happing's was to put your car in gear and idle around the building to see how many times you could rack up before having to stop to let someone out of a parking spot. While doing this the radio was always turned to Wolf Man Jack and the tune he was playing. All the parked cars tuned in too and it was like being in a Wolf Man Jack Concert. Girls would jump from car to car begging for a ride. If successful they would exit Georges, turn west on Palm Ave, peel out and rap the glass pack pipes. Then return for another trip around the building. The girls would always get someone to agree to show off.

George's had Car Hops that would bring your order to the car and place a tray on the door. Burgers, Fries and Cherry Coke were the choice of most. Food was cheap and a dollar went a long way.



If a challenge of speed was made (drag race) it was always made at George's and held on 19th street or on 78 highway. Then return to George's for bragging rights. I tore up a lot of transmissions in my Ford trying to be the fastest. I fact I was nicknamed Gears by my peers, posted in the MVHS 1960 year book. George's was the place to be after a Football Game. If we won George treated the team with a Steak Dinner.

He was every teens surrogate father in I.B. The fame of George's traveled across the San Diego area and soon became a popular spot to show off your car and challenge a drag race.

I had made new friends with Larry Hagen and John Haggard. Larry bought a 1951 Ford; it had a Six Cylinder flat head and it was not very fast, however it was a nice ride. Jay Robbins had a 1950 Ford too. We became known as the Ford Guy's at MVHS. For those that remember, Larry's mother owned Jessie's, a 2nd hand shop at 3rd and Palm. Jay's mother owned Sara's Coffee Shop at 1st and Elm. John Haggard lived across the street from Larry's house. Larry wrecked his Ford and the engine in mine was worn out so we decided to swap them out. There was a stand of trees at the corner of Rainbow and Palm and we used one of the limbs to attach a rope to lift out the engines. It took us all day and into the night to finish. We left my old V8 hanging by the rope intending to return the next day to retrieve it. Upon return it was gone; the rope was cut and still tied to the tree limb. We never did find out who took it. I traded my 49 Ford for a 41 Ford Coupe and then sold it.

In my senior year I got a classic. It was 1951 Mercury. It was not as fast as my 49 Ford but a great car to cruise around. Pictured is the old Mercury need much work. Gas was 18 cents a gallon, however money was tight and everyone carried a 5 gal gas can and a hose just in case. I will leave it there as I am shure you know why.

I graduated from MVHS in June 1960. Joined the US Army one week later, I was 17 at the time and would turn 18 in July. A new Adventure Began. I returned home in 1966 to resume fishing in the Slough.



I hope you enjoyed a small sample of the Golden Years of living in Imperial Beach. For those that lived it, I miss you all and our adventures and history will live forever.

