

Fort Ord Beach: beautiful, deserted and unspoiled



Local
columnist

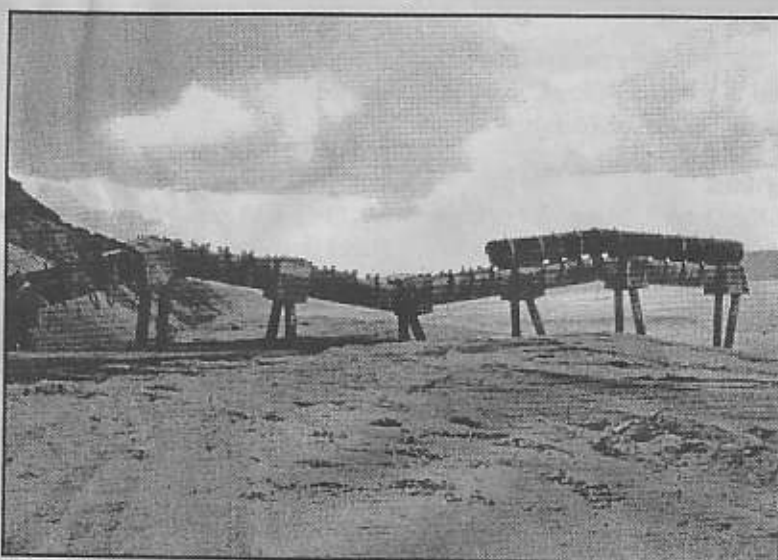
M.L. Fischer

We have a beach lovers' treasure in our neighborhood, an almost natural, unspoiled and deserted beach.

For decades the five-mile stretch of beach along Fort Ord was closed while trainees on the other side of the high dunes fired endlessly at paper targets. The rifle ranges are deserted now, and the beach, while closed from the highway, is open from both Marina and Sand City.

My curiosity about this stretch of beach dates back to when I was one of the trainees, awkwardly pointing a rifle toward the dunes. I finally satisfied that curiosity a few hours after the first rain of the season. With a friend along, we parked one car in Sand City and drove the other to Marina, parking at the southernmost access, just past the Marina animal shelter. There is a small parking area and a trail over the dunes.

After climbing the steep trail we were struck by the size of the dunes. There is a vast ecosystem between the face of the dunes seen from the road and the beach, hills and valleys with scattered stands



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Fort Ord beach between Sand City and Marina.

of native vegetation and nesting areas for birds. We were high above the town, and with the recent rain, we could see both ends of Monterey Bay as if they were a few blocks away.

Down on the beach it was clear that this wasn't a typical beach. After walking a few yards, looking up at the dunes, we quickly realized that there was almost no access. The dunes were so steep that any attempt to climb out would be like trying to climb to the roof of the gym on the stair step machine. In the entire five miles, there were two places low enough to climb, plus two gullies which the army had used for outflow pipes. These apparently lead back through the dunes and were perhaps made by seasonal creeks.

The vertical dune faces had a layer about half way up that looked like rock strata, but was a crusted region of sand, a temporarily stable balance point between the upward push of the wind and the work of gravity.

Massive clouds rolled above us and seemed to lodge over the far Santa Cruz Mountains. At one point the gathering dark shapes broke open in a light rain that only seemed to affect our small stretch of beach.

Big waves crashed against the shore, making it necessary for us to dash toward the dunes from time to time. Beyond the waves, dolphins and sea lions played, while groups of pelicans and gulls followed schools of fish.

On the beach, with no one to

tidy up, there were the remains of dead seals, otters and gulls that had washed ashore. One carcass was surrounded by vultures, which retreated to their perches in the dunes as we passed. Odd pieces of flotsam and jetsam had found its way to the beach: old shoes, bottles, wads of fishing net and pieces of lumber.

We were almost constantly entertained by flocks of sanderlings and godwits as they rushed back and forth in their efforts to comb the beach for every morsel. On the sand or in the air, the flocks created artistic, flowing patterns of life.

The only impediment to our walk was Stillwell Hall, the old officers' club. In an effort to impede the inevitable retreat of the dunes, many tons of rock were dumped below the structure, which is now just a skeleton. While it's likely one could walk around these rocks at low tide, our high tide passage forced us into a 100-yard scramble through the boulders.

Stillwell Hall and the remains of two old outflow structures were the only signs of the previous bustle of military activity. Other than that, we'd left civilization behind for three delightful hours.

The trail over the dunes to Sand City was easy to spot, and after a short walk through the sand, we found the bike trail that took us to the car.

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