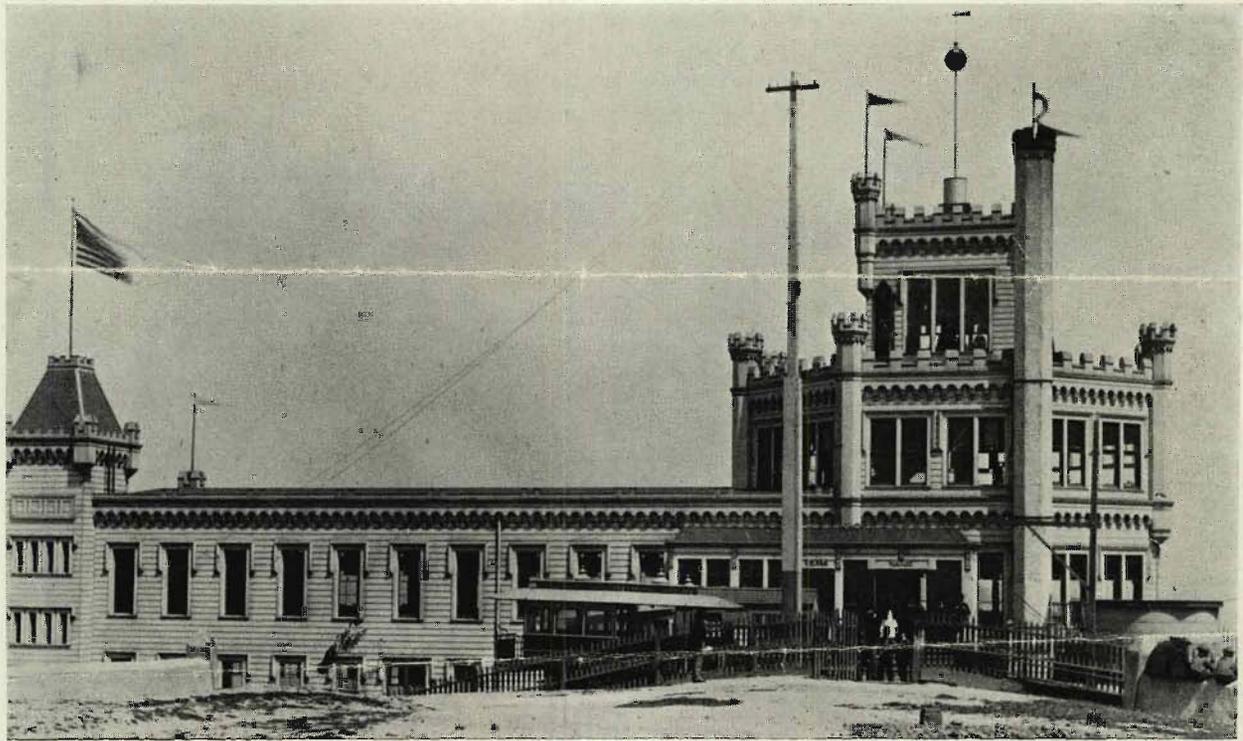


# San Francisco's Marine Exchange

1849 — One Hundred Years — 1949



An old photograph of the building atop Telegraph Hill where the semaphores were located to inform the people of a ship entering the bay. Note the cable car waiting at the platform. Photo courtesy Society of California Pioneers

**T**HE new day is breaking, but only the clock gives evidence of this for a heavy dark fog wraps a thick blanket of mist over city and sea alike. The all-enveloping fog seems to show particular attention to the waterfront, with little outside a radius of a few feet being visible. Noise and activity, however, is overwhelming. A chorus of fog horns is heard, and the slow, regular, metallic peals of the bell buoys add a rhythm to the great voices of the fog. To the "land-lubber" and to the average San Franciscan all this means nothing more than another damp morning with but little inconvenience. Yes, a heavy fog, but not much to worry about as they climb aboard the cable cars or drive their automobiles cautiously along the slick streets on their way to work. Those "noises"—the deep resonance of the horns and the clanging of bells do not disturb the city, but there are those to whom it brings anxiety and consternation—each sound a meaning, each with a warning.

At Point Lobos, just this side of the Cliff House, is the outpost for the Marine Exchange. It is here in a little house, far up on the bluff, that a man keeps his lonely vigil and makes the first contact

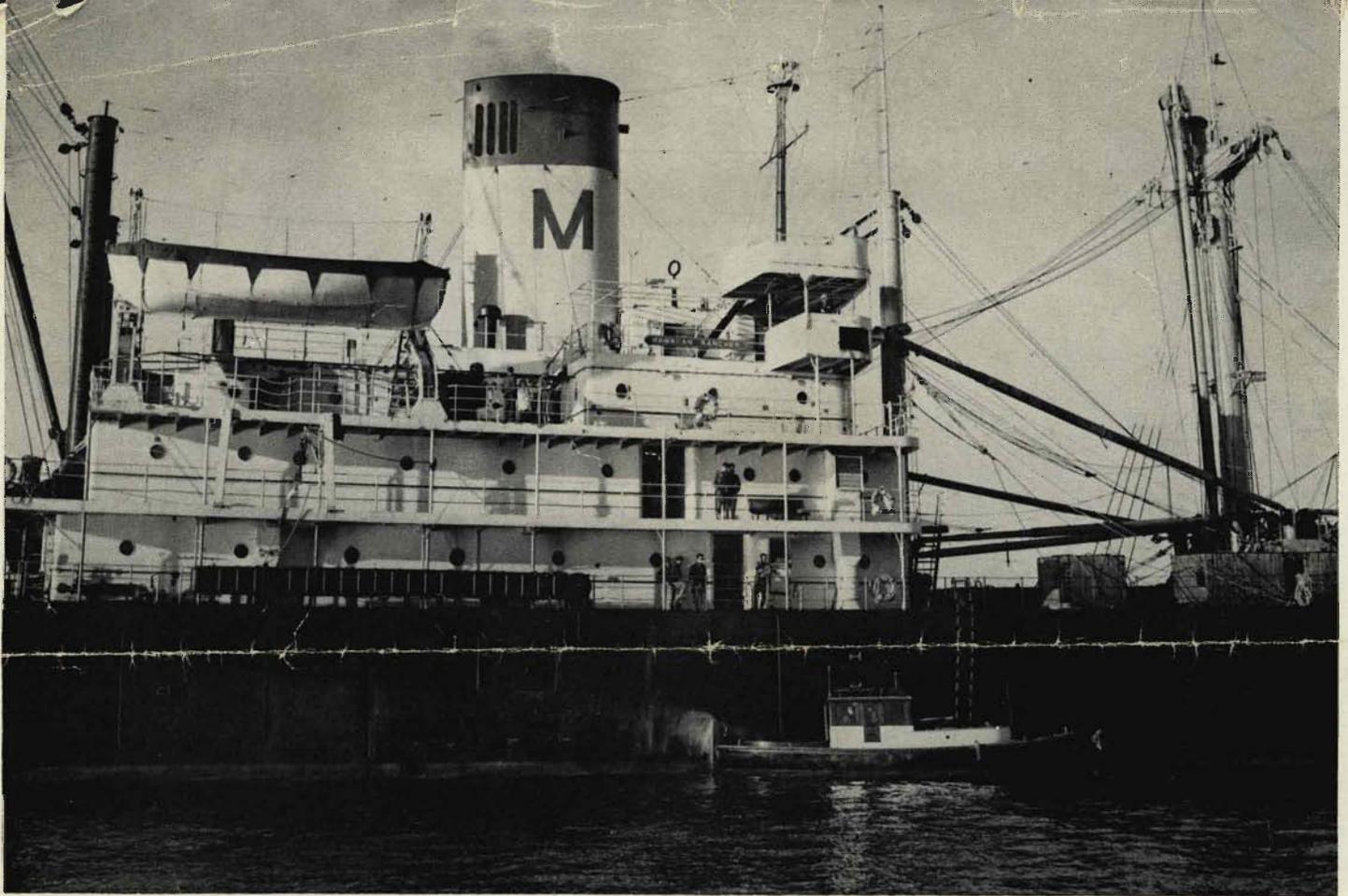
with vessels entering the port. This morning being very foggy and visibility practically zero, he takes his post at an open window to catch these "voices" from the depths of the fog. They tell him a story in a language all their own. There is the 3-second blast of the diaphone every 27 seconds from the Mile Rock lighthouse, the high pitched shrill of the horn at Point Bonita across the channel—two unequal blasts every 30 seconds—the tolling of the bell buoys as they dip with the rolling sea. There is yet another voice, a horn with a new note sounding at regular intervals of once every minute that tells those that know a vessel is slowly entering the Golden Gate.

Though nothing was to be seen through the fog and wet mist, the operator turned and noted his book. This must be the Matson Lines' *Hawaiian Rancher*, due in from Honolulu about this time. Slowed down by the dense fog, she had waited outside for daybreak and then was proceeding into the crowded harbor, guided by the horns and buoys. Moving slowly forward, she was making her way to the quarantine anchorage just off the Marina.

At the foot of Hyde street in a small station at the end of the pier, Edward F.

McCarthy, veteran of 35 years with the Marine Exchange, answered the telephone and took down the report from Point Lobos that a ship was now entering the Golden Gate. Joe Verhalen, the launch driver for the Marine Exchange, was standing by and knew without asking what was expected. Casting off, he proceeded to the familiar anchorage, where he sought the vessel. The fog had lifted somewhat as he drew up alongside, and through his megaphone he conveyed to the Master the orders from the Matson Marine Department for the ship to proceed directly to Pier 34 for discharge. After learning the voyage itinerary, he returned to the station, where the information he had secured was relayed by phone to the headquarters of the Exchange at 318 California Street. The Marine and Terminals departments of Matson were also notified of the vessel's arrival, thus affording them an opportunity to order the necessary longshoremen and clerks and to prepare equipment for discharge of the vessel's cargo.

This method of notification has not always been so easy, and its development makes an interesting story that goes back a hundred years, to September 10, 1849, when the Marine Exchange first had its



The launch of the Marine Exchange comes alongside the *S.S. Hawaiian Rancher* upon her arrival from Honolulu.

beginning. The original headquarters of the Exchange were located at Washington and Montgomery Streets after it had been started by an enterprising businessman, E. E. Dunbar, who realized that news from the outside world, brought in on the sailing clippers, was almost as important to the early Californian as the gold he was seeking.

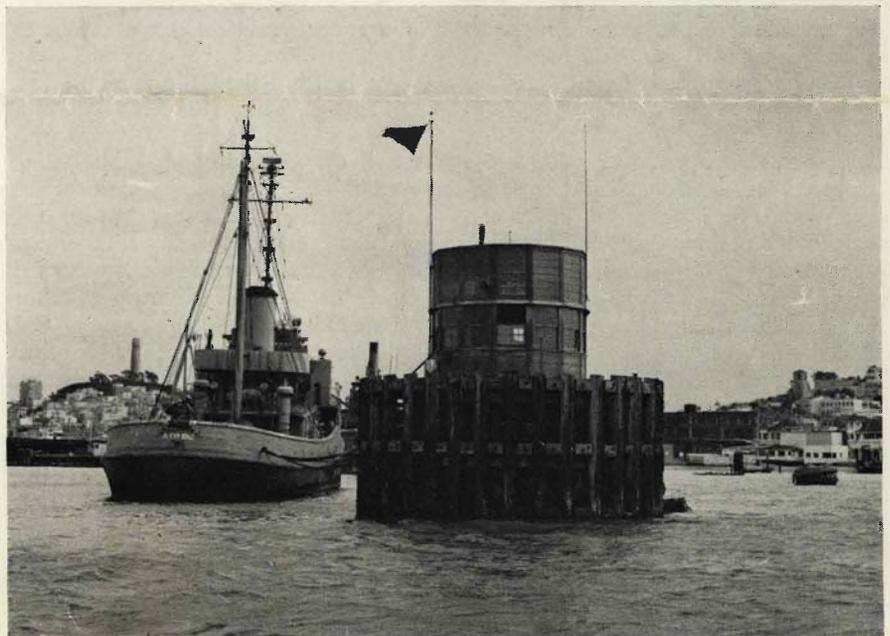
It wasn't long until competition arose, and by 1850 two more companies had entered the field. They all had lookouts at Meiggs Wharf at the foot of Powell Street, and at Baker's Beach just inside the heads. By 1865, the firm of Sweeney and Baugh had all but crowded out competition. However, before long a group of shipping men belonging to the Merchants Exchange decided to organize their own company. Semaphores were set up at Point Lobos, Fort Point, Russian Hill and Telegraph Hill, the latter so named for the wig-wag equipment placed atop and because of its advantageous position. Rivalry grew keener, and before long lookouts were posted as far away as Pigeon Point, forty miles south of San Francisco, to sight the sailing ships and relay the news. When the fog was thick, and semaphores were of no use, men, mounted on fast horses, rode in relays and raced the news to town. In 1869, Sweeney and Baugh sold out to the Merchants Exchange. In 1923, the Exchange combined with a Hearst service, and became known as the Marine Exchange.

With headquarters now at 318 California Street in the Cahill Building, the Exchange has at last given in to the interests

of progressive, modern business. It moved to this location in 1947, but from 1903 to that date was located in the Merchants Exchange Building. These old quarters, steeped in tradition, were not exactly offices, but more a gathering place where through the years businessmen, shipping officials, and captains gathered to discuss events, of how fortunes were built and lost, and politicians made and broken. It resembled a private club with its paneled walls, its murals of the sea, and relics and

models of ships. It was here on one occasion that ten million dollars was raised in fifteen minutes to finance the Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915.

These colorful days have passed, the old landmarks gone, but the Marine Exchange carries on. It remains the pulse of ship movements in and out of this port; however, instead of hours for this news to be made known to the steamship companies and the public, it now only takes a matter of seconds.



The lookout station at the foot of Hyde Street with the flag flying above giving a small craft warning.