

Salty the Seal was one of the performers during the Atlantic Aquarium's short run as an entertainment destination, from 1973-1975...



The building remained empty for nine years, with its weathered, dolphin-shaped sign the only indication of what it once housed...



Former Atlantic Inn owner Elaine Nardo, who donated the huge saltwater tanks to a marine center on the Cape, posed as they were removed in 2006, much to the chagrin of the crane operator hired to do the job. [Photos courtesy of Richard W. Green (top), Charles Nardo (middle), and Christopher Haraden (bottom).]

Tale of Atlantic Aquarium tells of a dream dashed on Hull's shores

EYED NOW FOR A POT GROW FACILITY, SITE SCENE OF MANY USES, FEW SUCCESSES

By Chris Haraden

Although its dolphin shows and sealife exhibits enchanted patrons for only 2½ years in the mid-1970s, the Atlantic Aquarium has had a long-lasting impact on this community.

Situated at the entrance to Nantasket Beach, the boxy gray building has housed several enterprises since it was constructed in 1972. But the original business venture – a year-round maritime educational center featuring 31 exhibits of marine life and three dolphins performing five shows daily – is why natives and newcomers have always called 120 Nantasket Ave. “the aquarium.”

The proposal for a marijuana cultivation and medical dispensary is the latest incarnation in the long history of the property, which also was the site of a bathhouse beginning in the 1920s. The current building opened as the aquarium in the 1970s and later was transformed into a motel and restaurant, music club, and classrooms for a charter school. Plans to rework it into a multilevel restaurant and performing arts center more than a decade ago never materialized.

The landmark site was developed almost as an afterthought, as amusement operator John Hurley owned the swath of property stretching from present-day State Park Road to Atlantic Avenue, encompassing several acres up and over the

hillside known as Atlantic Rocks. Hurley's own home, a 12-room estate with elaborate porches and a commanding view of the beach, burned in March 1923. The hill was dotted with cottages that he rented in the summer; the enormous stone foundation of the burned-out main house remained a landmark on the crest of the hill for decades, known to neighborhood kids as “the castle.”

In 1928, Hurley moved a building out of Paragon Park and across Nantasket Avenue to the foot of the hill, on the outer edge of the property. He renovated the structure to open Hurley's Bathhouse, a private business that rented umbrellas, beach chairs, bathing suits, towels, and clothing lockers to daytrippers, who could shower and change clothes before heading home or out to eat at one of Hull's restaurants.

After Hurley's death, his son, Arthur Louis (known around Hull as “Louie”), operated the bathhouse and lived on site with his family. As private bathhouses became less popular, Louie Hurley sought to repurpose his holdings, selling off some of the land for house lots and business enterprises, including the former Neal's Service Station (now Hull Bait & Tackle).

In 1968, Hurley proposed building a five-story, 94-unit apartment building on the hill behind

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In-person, remote, hybrid: schools given three options for reopening

IN POLL, MAJORITY FAVORS IN-SCHOOL OPTION

By Carol Britton Meyer

Hull School Superintendent Judith Kuehn and the three school principals presented preliminary school reopening plans to the School Committee on Wednesday, all in accordance with state requirements on face masks, social distancing, and other coronavirus-related restrictions.

“This is a very fluid information session tonight,” School Committee Chairwoman Jennifer Fleming said. “Everything is very preliminary at this time.”

Good communication among school officials, teachers, administrators, parents, and students is considered essential to alleviating stress and devising the best possible plans for reopening.

The district's Return to School Working Group and similar groups at all three schools – Jacobs elementary, Memorial middle, and the high school – are playing a key role in the process.

Each Massachusetts school district is required to develop three educational plans: in-school, remote, and a hybrid model, which combines in-person and remote learning. Those plans must be submitted to the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education by July 31, even though final state guidance has not yet been released. Final comprehensive plans from each district are due Aug. 10.

The results of a recently administered family

survey indicate that 65 percent of the respondents prefer that students return to school full-time for the new school year, although that may not be the final outcome.

If remote learning continues, the educational requirements would be more structured than they were earlier and the traditional grading system would be implemented.

The School Committee is expected to vote on which of the three plans to support at a meeting before the end of this month and could vote on a different plan for each school if they feel it would be appropriate. “Our preliminary plans are changing every day,” Kuehn said.

The preliminary Hull Public Schools reopening plan calls for a social distance of 3 feet between students in classrooms at the middle and high schools and 6 feet at Jacobs, which has more classroom space.

If school officials decide in favor of the hybrid model, students at all three schools would attend classes on a rotating basis – Monday and Tuesday for one group and Thursday and Friday for the remaining half of the students. Half of the school day on Wednesday would follow a remote learning format, with teachers communicating with students and parents, preparing lessons, cleaning classrooms for the next group of students, and collaborating in the afternoon.

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Atlantic Aquarium history

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the bathhouse. Area residents objected, and in September 1971 he sold the bathhouse and several vacant lots atop Atlantic Rocks to the newly formed Atlantic Aquarium Trust for \$100,000. Today, a sign outside the aquarium at the Nantasket Avenue edge of the property marks a small square dedicated to Arthur Louis Hurley, a veteran of World War II.

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The Atlantic Aquarium was the “vision” of Kenneth G. Tong, an Allerton Hill resident with a degree in science communications who worked for J. Wiley & Sons, a New York publishing house, and GTE Corp., which later became Verizon.

His son, Dean, said his father was not an oceanographer, but wanted to combine his love of the sea with Hull’s unique location.

“The vision was just iconic,” Dean Tong said. “It was a family-oriented business that gave the public something fun and educational. I thought it was just fantastic for the tourists and families of Hull.”

Attorney Lawrence Kellem, who did legal work for Tong and his partner, George Naddaff of Newton, this week recalled Tong as “an idea man” who was passionate about the concept of education and marine life.

“He was seriously in love with aquatic life,” said Greg Sandonato, who worked alongside Tong in the planning stages of the aquarium and served as its assistant director. Sandonato said the aquarium was Tong’s second idea for the area – the first was a 1,320-foot wharf, modeled after San Francisco’s Municipal Pier, that would have started at the base of Atlantic Hill. But the shorefront landowners whose property would have been needed were not interested, he said.

“A quarter-mile out, you can catch almost anything,” said Sandonato, who owned Nantasket Pier Marine for many years after the aquarium closed. “It would have been something.”

Dean Tong, an author and legal consultant who now lives in Florida, said that while the aquarium’s main attraction was the dolphin show, visitors were greeted with a display of local sea life when they ascended the seven steps from the street level into the lobby.

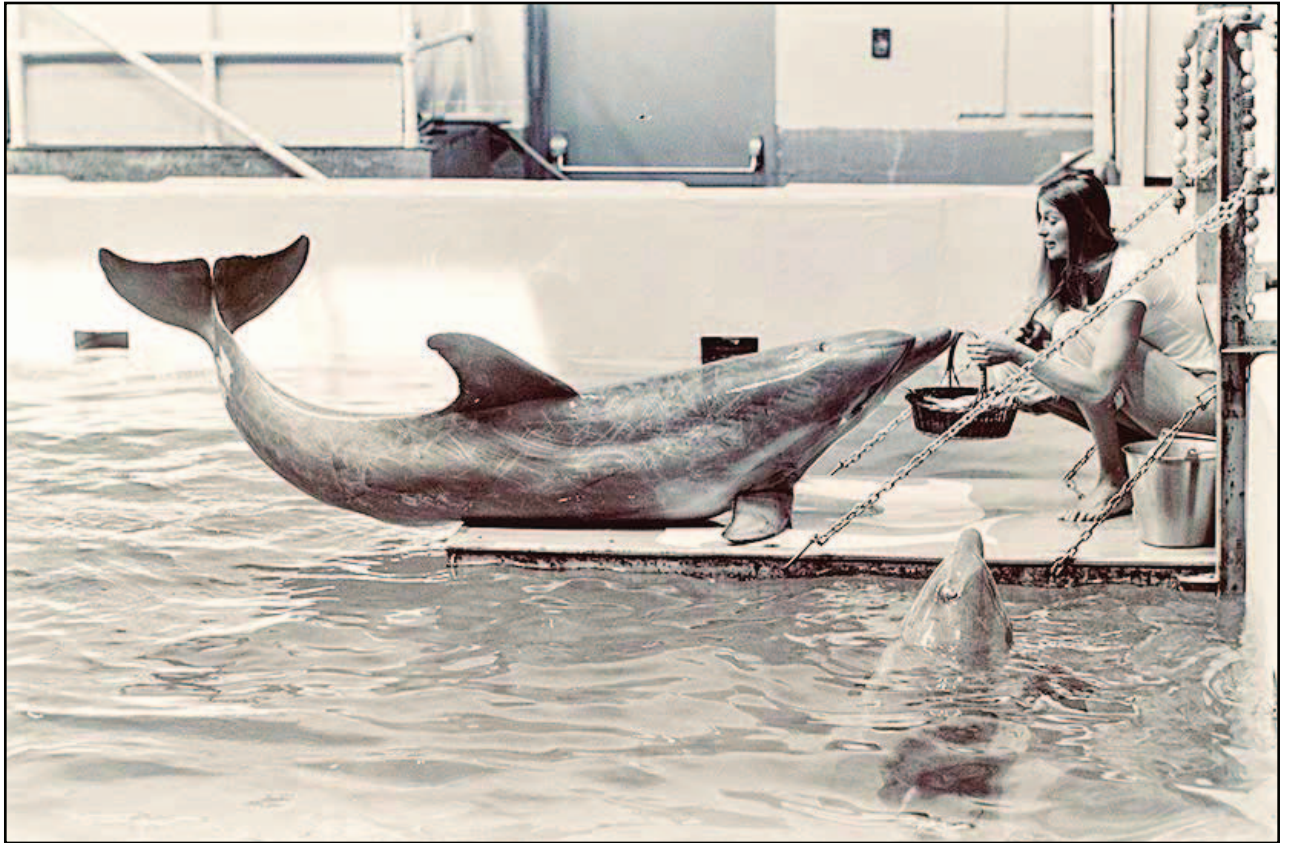
“The first thing you’d see was a huge circular tank,” Tong said. “We filled that with stripers and bluefish. ... My Dad and I would catch them ourselves in Cohasset and out by Harding’s Ledge.”

While Tong, who died in 2018 at age 87, focused on the concept, Kellem said the funding for the venture came from Naddaff, a serial entrepreneur who in 1971 had just sold a number of Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises and had started a chain of day care centers called Living and Learning Schools. Naddaff later went on to lead the expansion of Boston Chicken, now the Boston Market chain of restaurants, and other franchising pursuits.

With a \$1.6 million investment, the Hull project launched in October 1971 with the demolition of Hurley’s Bathhouse and submission of plans for two high-rise towers on the hill, above an aquarium building drawn more elaborately than what was eventually built. Given the neighbors’ negative response to Hurley’s housing plan, Tong and Naddaff shelved their high-rise aspirations quickly, so quickly that Kellem said he doesn’t recall the idea moving off the drawing board.

Instead, the partners focused on developing a maritime facility that balanced education and entertainment. “It will offer far more than many aquariums by way of educational exhibits, films, and programs, particularly for young people who are concerned with trying to save our environment and natural resources,” Tong told the Boston Herald Traveler in June 1971.

Dean Tong, who was a teenager during this period, recalled traveling to Florida with his father to meet Lucky, Lady, and Sprite, the dolphins who would perform at the aquarium, and their trainer, Sherry Gleason. Sandonato said the dolphins were purchased from the Provincetown Marine Aquarium, which was closing, and sent to Florida while their new home was constructed.



Dolphin trainer Sherry Gleason worked with Lucky, Lady, and Sprite while they were at her family’s aquatic center in Provincetown, and followed them when they were purchased by Atlantic Aquarium owners Kenneth Tong and George Naddaff to star in daily performances in Hull. [Richard W. Green photo]

Back in Hull, work progressed on the dolphin pool in the far left section of the building, along with stadium seating accessed through a central tunnel from the lobby. Sandonato said numerous local workers were hired for the project, giving many Hull families an affinity for the aquarium.

On the right side of the building, nearly three dozen tanks were filled with fish, sharks, and other marine life. “The fish gallery is unique in that the environment in each tank – rock formations, coral, and underwater vegetation – was obtained from the actual environment from which the fish were taken,” Tong told The Boston Globe in 1973.

To supply salt water, Tong and Naddaff obtained an easement from the state to install a salt-water intake pipe that stretched 380 feet beyond the mean high water line and was buried 5 feet below the existing level of the beach. The outlet pipe to return water reached 40 feet past mean high water and was buried 2 feet below the sand. Two 10,000-gallon saltwater storage tanks sat next to the building in order to exchange the water in the tanks consistently throughout the day.

By April 1973, a month before the grand opening, the facility was ready to welcome its star performers from Florida. According to the Globe, “The porpoises will make the four-hour trip in hanging swings in a special compartment of a private plane. They will be constantly wet down with salt water en route by trainer Sherry Gleason and owner Kenneth G. Tong.”

Sandonato made the trip to help care for the dolphins in transit. He also recalled the spectacle of the dolphins inside a tractor-trailer truck being escorted by the State Police from Logan Airport down the Southeast Expressway and into Hull.

Once settled, Lucky, Lady, and Sprite performed five times per day, year-round, drawing visitors from the beach and school field trips. Admission was \$2 for adults and \$1 for children. In the early years, Sandonato said the aquarium was visited by six or seven busloads of schoolchildren per day. Many were drawn to the facility because it featured dolphin shows, an attraction that Boston’s New England Aquarium did not offer.

Buses parked across the street, next door to Howard Johnson’s and another venture Tong and Naddaff launched in 1972, the Nantascot Antique and Gift Center at 133 Nantasket Ave., at the corner of Atherton Road. The 6,000-square-foot building featured 27 shops under one roof, selling items ranging from art and antiques to jewelry and clocks. But it was hard to make it work in the winter months, and the center lasted only a few years. Former Selectman Myron Klayman reopened it briefly after Paragon Park closed to sell

carousel memorabilia, but that incarnation also was short-lived. It was torn down in 1986 to become part of the parking area for the Ocean Place Condominiums.

Sandonato said the Atlantic Aquarium found itself over budget as it entered the 1975 season, with high overhead costs and attendance cut short by the nationwide gasoline shortage that limited auto travel. Both Sandonato and Kellem recalled that the decision by schools in Boston and surrounding areas to cancel dozens of field trips to save on gas proved too difficult for the fragile business.

“We had 45,000 kids booked for the year ... and then everything just shut down,” Sandonato said.

“Without the schools, they were in serious trouble,” Kellem said. “They couldn’t hold on.”

Compounding their challenges, Lucky, the 9-foot-long, 610-pound dolphin that Sandonato said was one of the largest in captivity, developed mouth cancer. Although large, Lucky easily could jump to touch a ball hanging 25 feet above the dolphin tank, a crowd-pleasing performance that inspired the Atlantic Aquarium logo. Lucky died three months after becoming ill.

The aquarium stayed open that summer, but behind the scenes, creditors demanded payment. The bank holding the mortgage started foreclosure proceedings in July, and the business shut down for good in October.

The closure of the aquarium began an eight-year dormant period for the windowless gray building. Kellem said that if the economics had worked, the aquarium likely would have found its footing and thrived.

“I think that they would have kept improving it and professionalizing it,” Kellem said.

Sandonato agreed, noting that Tong had fielded interest from potential buyers like the Cous-teau Society, but found local officials uncooperative when he reached out for assistance.

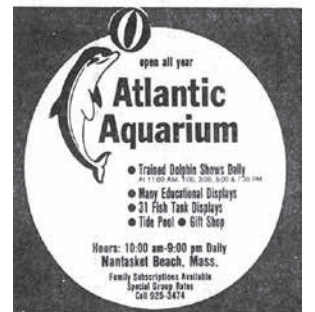
“There was a very good chance it would still be here today,” he said. “It’s too bad.”

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For the rest of the 1970s and into the ’80s, the boarded-up building, with shards of blue-and-white glass missing in the dolphin-shaped sign on its façade, silently greeted visitors to Nantasket. Invisible to the beachgoing public, however, changes were taking place that would drastically shape its future.

The property had been divided into several lots, splitting the aquarium from the land atop the hill. The vacant land, including the “castle” foundation

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of John Hurley's old house, was purchased by a group of investors, and the town of Hull, owed more than \$50,000 in unpaid property taxes, took possession of the aquarium in May 1978.

A year later, in 1979, researcher Robert Rines and the Academy of Applied Science in Boston paid \$6,000 to rent the aquarium from the town as part of an expedition to prove the existence of Scotland's infamous Loch Ness Monster.

Rines, an inventor, "developed electronic gear to improve the resolution of radar and sonar images that is used in Patriot missiles, found the wrecks of the Titanic and the Bismarck and helped pave the way for ultrasound imaging," his 2009 obituary in The New York Times noted, adding that "his patented hinge for chopsticks is less noticed, but quite clever."

Rines enlisted the help of noted dolphin trainer Rusty Nielsen, who had purchased Lady and Sprite at the Atlantic Aquarium auction three years earlier, and brought them back to train in their old performance pool. Rines imagined outfitting the dolphins with cameras and sonar equipment to try to film the creature. He also was developing a method for the saltwater dolphins to survive in the freshwater Loch Ness.

The expedition was called off after Sprite died during training at the Hull aquarium on June 22, 1979. In a 2008 Boston magazine article recounting the episode, "Rines believed the dolphin, who had never before been separated from its handler, had died of 'a broken heart.' He was so upset that he shipped the other dolphin back to Florida and called off the scheme."

Two years later, Lady and Molly, a third dolphin that was to be used in the Loch Ness experiment, were trained to hunt for treasure in shipwrecks off the coast of Florida. Lady died of a liver ailment in 1994 while awaiting shipment to a marine life sanctuary in the Florida Keys.

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During this period, forces beyond the town's borders carried profound influence on the peninsula. Around Memorial Day 1978, news of the opening of a casino in Atlantic City, the first outside of Las Vegas, buzzed through town. Just a year before, Hull's voters overwhelmingly approved a nonbinding referendum on gambling – agreeing, by a vote of 2,263-1,270, to welcome a casino within its borders. Three years later, MGM Grand Hotels Inc., one of the largest casino companies in Las Vegas, bought the undeveloped Hall Estate at the entrance to town. Gambling was still illegal in Massachusetts, but supporters felt momentum building and predicted that Hull would soon be a gambling mecca.

Hull residents Albert and Elaine Nardo sensed an opportunity and approached the town about buying the old aquarium. They envisioned reworking the layout of the building to incorporate an inn and restaurant, with a long-range plan of repurposing the aquarium features to include a saltwater swimming pool and a dance floor, their son, Charles Nardo, recalled.

The couple purchased the building from the town in March 1984 and went to work on Phase 1 – converting the fish exhibit section into 14 hotel rooms and renovating the lobby. The first step was clearing out the enormous tanks.

Albert Nardo planned to recycle the components as best he could, until contractor Joseph A. DiVito and his son, Joe Jr., visited the site while working at a nearby property.

"Albert was going to take the glass out because that was expensive, quality stuff," DiVito said. "I thought, this would make a nice swimming pool."

Not just his for his own yard on Allerton Hill, it turned out. Using a local marina's boat trailer, DiVito removed four tanks from the building, after removing the plate glass windows and entry doors at the front of the aquarium building.

With a police escort – similar to the way the dolphins arrived in town – the crew moved one tank to the Nardo home on Atlantic Avenue, one to a property in Quincy, and a third to the Highland Avenue yard of businessman Daniel Prigmore. Before starting the procession down Nantasket Avenue to his own house, he customized the tank with a message to his wife, Lynda.

"It was her birthday, so I wrote 'Happy Birth-



Hull Police lead the way as one of the Atlantic Aquarium tanks makes its way up Nantasket Avenue to Albert and Elaine Nardo's home on Atlantic Hill. The Nantascot Antique Center is the white-roofed building at left, and Paragon Park's Giant roller coaster looms in the distance. The Nardos transformed the aquarium into the Atlantic Inn, which used a dolphin in its logo as a nod to the past. [Photos courtesy of Charles Nardo]

day Lynda' on the glass, so when it went by, people would see her present," DiVito said.

At his home, DiVito had an engineer develop a plan to secure the 7,200-gallon shark tank and installed decking and a ladder. Swimmers now look out the glass windows that once were peered into by aquarium visitors more than 45 years ago. Similarly, in Hull Village, DiVito and his crew carefully slid the tank down the side of the hill to a base installed in the cliff overlooking the bay. Current homeowners Kate and John Brigham said DiVito proudly described the process and shared photos of the move with them, ensuring that future generations will remember the source of their property's unique swimming pool.



Contractor Joseph DiVito salvaged several tanks from the old aquarium and installed them at private homes, including his own on Allerton Hill. Family friends Landy, left, and Max Vittorini enjoy a swim in the 'shark tank' earlier this summer. Photo courtesy of Jason Vittorini.

With most remnants of the aquarium removed from the lower section of the structure, the Nardos pushed ahead with the renovations, installing the building's first windows for the 14 hotel rooms. The Atlantic Inn, with a dolphin logo inspired by the old aquarium, opened first, followed by a two-story restaurant and lounge, Elaine's Seaside Restaurant, which featured large picture windows in the upper floors. Although spacious, the restaurant and lounge area took up only half of the old dolphin show area, having been built over the upper levels of the bleacher seating. The performance pool remained untouched, although out of public view.

The renovation won awards for its adaptive reuse of the building, and the Nardos decorated the hotel lobby and upstairs restaurant with vintage memorabilia purchased at the 1985 auction of Paragon Park. Brightly colored vehicles from the amusement park's Kooky Kastle haunted house ride sat in the hotel lobby, while the upstairs dining room featured unique arched windows salvaged from the park's former roller-skating rink and video arcade.

Albert Nardo died in 1988, and Elaine Nardo closed the full-service part of the restaurant several years later, although it did reopen for a brief period as a supper club. The restaurant featured many Italian dishes from Elaine Nardo's home recipes, and her grandson, Joseph, has car-

ried on that tradition with a culinary career that stretches from No. 9 Park in Boston to his own venture, Nardello's Fresh Pasta in San Francisco. Charles Nardo said his son was too young to have worked at Elaine's, but he would frequently be at his grandmother's side in her own kitchen as she taught him her cooking secrets, continuing another legacy of the aquarium building.

With the prospect of casinos clearly out of the question, the Nardo family kept the business operating through the ups and downs of the economy of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Elaine's transformed into a music club that featured bands from across the region.

"Running the hotel and the restaurant was a 24-hour-a-day, seven-night-a-week job," Elaine Nardo told The Hull Times in 2006. "I couldn't step out of the place to go to the post office without someone there to replace me."

Elaine's and the Atlantic Inn closed for good on June 30, 1996, when Nardo signed a multi-year lease with the South Shore Charter School, which used the building for its high school classrooms until moving to Norwell in 2004. Charter School trustee William Smyth recalled the school reconfiguring the hotel rooms for student use, with one significant advantage – each one had its own bathroom.

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In 2005, with the building vacant after the charter school relocated, Elaine Nardo offered the building for sale for the first time in 21 years. In December 2006, The Miroj LLC, a company owned by Jay I. Hanflig of Cohasset, purchased the building and its 21,700 square feet of land for \$1.25 million.

Hanflig, a ballroom dance enthusiast, proposed converting the dolphin show area into a stage for all types of performing arts. In the area that had been hotel rooms, he planned a series of classrooms and stores for music-related businesses. The centerpiece of the project would be a multi-tiered restaurant called Nantasket Legasea, for which he won town approvals and a liquor license.

The plans for the rehab of the property stalled, but not before Hanflig removed the aquarium's saltwater intake lines under the ocean floor and capped off the portion of the piping under the state Department of Conservation and Recreation parking lot. Prior to selling to Hanflig, Nardo had donated the twin 10,000-gallon tanks to the National Marine Life Center in Bourne.

With the aquarium infrastructure removed, Hanflig went further, gutting the entire building from end to end, opening up the inside of the building in a way that hasn't been seen since it was built. In December 2019, Latitude 42 Real Estate LLC paid \$900,000 for what is essentially an open structure. Gone are the classrooms, hotel rooms, restaurant, stadium seats, dolphin tanks, and all other marine life equipment. Only the outline of the paint on the walls marks where the bleachers climbed high, and a photo left hanging on the side wall for nearly 50 years is the only remnant of what once was – a crowd gathering to watch one of the aquarium's dolphins being lowered into the main tank. **HT**