



Queen of the Huntington Beach Pier

After 31 Years, Ella Christensen Is 'Kind of a Legend'

By ART VINSEL *Los Angeles Times (Orange County) Sept. 13, 1982*

Some call her the Queen of the Pier, or simply the Bait Lady who dispenses salt anchovies, mussels and squid, but to nearly three generations familiar with the Huntington Beach ocean front, she is a beloved fixture.

Ella Christensen, 69, is as permanent as pier pigeons, wheeling gulls or the enduring sea breeze.

The longtime operator of a tackle shop and two small cafes, Christensen is a tireless promoter of the town and its landmark pier, on which she has spent half a lifetime earning a living.

In rapid-fire order, she will expound on shortsighted management of the municipal pier, slip a piece of sliced ham into a roll, comment on the sanctity of marriage, draw a cold, foamy beer, remark on the glory of that day's sunrise and then send you out, finally, wanting to do a kindness of some sort for your fellow man.

A Great Lady

She's just Ella to most, a good old gal and a great lady.

She is a farsighted, if unofficial, pier community spokesman, a Dear Ann or Dear Abby with fish scales on her clothes, and often a freelance probation officer who will tell a wayward kid to go out and get a job, then give him one.

And in the words of one high city

official, Ella Christensen is a tough old barracuda at business and in critiquing the way City Hall handles its most precious assets: miles and miles of magnificent beach and the 68-year-old pier.

Today, an ailing Ella is just back on location at California's longest fishing and strolling pier after one of the most extended absences since she and her late husband Carl quit Colorado and arrived here 31 years ago.

Once a farm wife, she considers 12 to 16 hours a day, 7 days a week, January through December, quite a normal work schedule, provided a person puts in a bit of therapeutic fishing daily.

Recovering From Illness

But the venerable entrepreneur, born one year before the pier was built in 1914, has been too busy recently, and lately she has been ailing, although she admits that could easily have been avoided.

"The month I should have been working the most, I worked the least," she says of August, which she spent mostly in a recliner chair or on crutches recovering from aggravated arthritic back problems.

The problems arose when she decided her crew was not unloading a truckload of Pepsi-Cola fast enough and she jumped in like a diminutive stevedore to do the heavy job for

them, she confesses.

"It's my own darn fault. These muscle spasms really get you," says the peppery Queen of the Pier.

The Christensens took over the Tackle Box in 1951 at the height of the Korean War, but he became ill and they moved to the desert for two years in the 1960s, leaving their daughter to manage the shop. Carl Christensen died in 1971.

Sitting in her Hartford Avenue home near the old downtown area — one could almost hit it from the pier with a long cast on a four-ounce lead sinker — Ella tells a few truths she says she has learned about people.

She says that not only longtime employees, but policemen, lifeguards and firemen, many of whom worked for her as boys and whom she now calls Her Boys, pitched in to help keep her needs met and her businesses running smoothly.

"I've told some people," she says, "that my host of friends will take me a lot farther than all their dollars will ever take them."

Chico, a toy terrier-dachshund mix who is her constant companion, listens intently to her mistress's voice. Ella says Chico is losing her sight and hearing.

"She's 18½ years old, equal to 126 human years," says Ella. "We have the awfulest time around here

together."

The phone rings and Chico perks up as Ella reaches for her wireless, walkie talkie-type receiver on an ironing board piled with business papers.

Working by Telephone

"I've been operating almost entirely by telephone," she says.

Kelly Grunbaum is calling from Neptune's Locker, one of Ella's two

cafes, to report a crisis of sorts — a shortage of shortening — at the Captain's Galley, 20 feet across the pier.

This is no trivial matter on a day when about 50,000 people are sunning and swimming in the area, working up huge appetites. The Galley offers hot snacks like hamburgers, fries and corn dogs.

Neptune's Locker sells cold beer

in frosty mugs, along with smoked fish, peanuts and pickled eggs to go with the beer.

Huntington Beach Police Sgt. Ed McLaughlin, after years of almost-daily contact as a day shift patrol squad commander supervising the pier area, says that Ella is a born people-manager.

"It (the pier) is a refuge for every

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type, beach bums, surfers, drunks and derelicts as well as kids of all ages and families," McLaughlin says. "She can work with them all at the same time and she has no trouble."

He suggests that the Queen of the Pier has unsnagged so many fish-hooks from the seats of small boys' pants over the years that it is nothing for her to threaten to kick the seats of bigger boys if they start to get out of line.

Ella Christensen is a practical psychologist who never took a class.

Value of Ocean

She'll prescribe her own brand of therapy for whatever ails you, her true daily spiritual ritual that has worked without fail, although neglected in recent years. Moslems pray, Buddhists meditate, Ella fishes — if and when she can.

But even when she's working at the Tackle Box, Neptune's Locker or the Captain's Galley drawing pop or beer with one hand and making sandwiches or change with the other, there is always the enduring sea, always as near as the window.

One hour beside the green, ever-changing ocean is worth two hours on a psychiatrist's couch, Ella believes.

"The ocean is so restful. And no two days in a row are exactly alike," she says. "It has its moods. It's tem-

peramental one day or maybe it's happy. Sometimes it is sad . . . sometimes it is vicious.

"When the waves are small and it laps along the beach just like a little brook, that's happy ocean," she declares. No mealy-mouthed mysticism — just the observations from her 31 years beside the sea.

If the ocean is sometimes happy, it was in a towering rage that day in 1939 when its hurricane-whipped swells bludgeoned and bent the concrete, steel and timber pier, destroying 300 feet of the seaward end.

The battering the pier takes from the ocean waves, and the city's apparent complacency about its future, are sometimes heavy on Ella's mind.

She has seen time and corrosion take a toll of the pier over the decades since the Christensens arrived.

"I don't know how long it's going to take them (city officials) to understand that people come here for the pier and the beach. They don't come here for our shopping centers," she declares.

Her community still has its beach and pier, but it needs more planned, year-around activities and events centered there; such as a recent championship surfing contest, Ella says.

"We need more things like that," she says, adding that the entire

business community benefits, not merely shops and restaurants near the pier.

Huntington Beach police agreed afterward that the surfing tournament was phenomenally successful. Patrol Lt. Tom Patton said only one arrest was directly attributed to the contest crowd of 40,000 to 50,000 and that was only a spectator too drunk to care for himself.

Remedial plans and funds to carry them out are imperative to save the old pier, Ella says, but she is not optimistic.

"They (city officials) are goin' to be fussing and bickering about it for years to come. They've been doing that since 1951 when we first came here," she says.

Credited With Saving Lives

Ella once was appointed to a citizens' fact-finding committee on the future of the pier back in the mid-'70s and did considerable research, but she says she became frustrated and discouraged.

Ella's concern for the pier doesn't end with the structure itself, but includes the people who use it and the ocean that surrounds it.

"She's kind of a legend," says Max Bowman, a former Huntington Beach lifeguard captain who is now the city's deputy director of community services.

"She's the watchdog of the pier," Bowman says. "She's been our unofficial 'coast watcher,' and espe-

cially so back in the '50s, before we had our lifeguard tower right on the pier where we can keep an eye on things out there.

"Ella actually has been responsible for the saving of a number of lives that way. And we've honored

her for it, too."

But those who know her say it is another form of lifesaving for which Ella merits recognition, and some of Her Boys, the policeman in particular, maintain she is far too modest about her dealings with wayward or

delinquent kids.

They say she has changed lives for the better, or at least influenced them when it mattered deeply, by the fact that someone really cared.

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