

TIBURON'S RAILWAY PALM

By Susan Cluff

When people still travelled by ferry and rail, most passenger stations in the North Western Pacific (NWP) railway system had at least one large palm tree planted nearby. Tiburon was no exception and today, the "Railway Palm" still stands at the intersection of Main Street and Tiburon Boulevard to remind us that from 1884 to 1967 Tiburon was a railroad town.

The railway palm is hard to miss, where the freight yard, repair shop and roundhouse once dominated Tiburon's waterfront there's now a large lagoon with jetting fountains. At the south end is the majestic 40-foot palm planted there by the NWP in the early 1920's. Protected during construction of the Point Tiburon development by Innesfree Companies that opened in 1986, the Tiburon Heritage & Arts Commission placed a plaque at the base of the tree in 1988 to mark the location where "hundreds of workers toiled to keep the railroad system and ferry boats operating."

You can also see Tiburon's railway palm at the Railroad & Ferry Depot Museum. The scale model there shows the complete NWP railroad yard in October 1909 with the palm, although actually planted later, included as a point of reference. Landmarks Archivist Dave Gotz says it's one of the key features he looks at when trying to deduce the dates of historic images. "I look at the buildings, signs, tracks, people, clothing, cars and roads, but often it is the railway palm that provides the best information," he says. "It has grown quite slowly, so that makes it easier to estimate the date."

Canary Island Palms (Phoenix Canariensi) often grow 40 to 60 feet tall with a 20-foot spread, live up to 200 years and are native to the Canary Islands off the coast of Portugal. Introduced in the 1700s by Spanish missionaries and colonizers, palms were often planted beside California mission churches so there would be fronds for Palm Sunday. The tall waving palms acted as living flagpoles to indicate important locations when people traveled on foot or horseback; so owners of ranchos, large homes, and later hotels, resorts, and civic buildings planted them too.

Early California residents were enamored with ornamental palm trees which were elegantly exotic, easy to grow and need little maintenance. Bay Area nurserymen featured them in 1880s plant catalogs and in 1915, the California Nursery Company supplied over a hundred mature palm trees to line "Palm Avenue" at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. Railroad companies like NWP and Southern Pacific, who wanted people to travel and settle in California, planted palms near railroad stations, hoping their passengers would feel they'd arrived in paradise.

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1. The Tiburon Railway Palm today.

2. Looking down Main St. from Corinthian in about 1940 with the palm tree just where it is today.

3. In the midst of Point Tiburon construction in 11/1984, the palm tree was carefully protected as the last vestige of the railroad yard. (Photo by Jocelyn Knight).

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