

## A Co-op letter from America



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# Members rock the boat for the vote

HOUSEBOAT co-operatives are certainly something special. They all have incredible histories of immense struggle. After all, houseboat co-ops often occupy waterfront views that others would pay millions for.

Here in California, on the San Francisco Bay, there are two houseboat co-operatives that overcame the odds to beat the get-rich-quick developers. The origins of these two houseboat co-ops began in the shipbuilding frenzy around San Francisco Bay during the Second World War.

Shipyards in the area turned out almost 1,000 naval and merchant ships and were famous for building a Liberty Ship every 42 days. More than 70,000 workers came to Sausalito alone to work here. Shanty towns of barges, floating platforms and old ships sprung up where thousands could bunk up cheaply.

A property boom began in Sausalito in the 1970s. Standing in the way of the development of the waterfront was the “bohemian” boat population. To fight for their disappearing rights, two of the floating communities created co-operative associations.

The Galilee Harbor Community Association was founded on August 4, 1980. Through fighting strenuously for decades for their rights to stay on the water, they arrived at a legal compromise. Today, they own the land and the water parcel at 300 Napa Street in Sausalito.

### Affordable

Galilee Harbor has 38 slips where members can moor boats that must be seaworthy and navigable. The members of the co-op must earn their livelihood from maritime work or be working artists. Incomes are checked annually to make sure the community meets the agreement it made with the city of Sausalito and other housing agencies. Galilee Harbor is now officially an affordable housing community.

The members elect board members for a one-year term and the board meets twice a month. However, the members also meet once a month to vote or comment on issues the board feels the entire membership should make. The board is served by eight different committees and there are frequent work days to keep their land and the docks shipshape. The quality of life and the location mean that turnover in the co-op is low. At most, only one or two members leave each year.

Competition to buy the slip of an exiting member is serious. A vacancy is filled by first applicant who gets approved by the membership committee, which then recommends them to the board of directors.

The new members who get selected are those who have attended activities, participated in work days, gone to meetings and made the effort to get to know as many members as they can. The second co-operative, The Gates, emerged from a group of houseboats moored close to the old Gate 6 of the Marinships shipyards in Sausalito.

At one time there were about 115 houseboats of one form or the other in that area. In the 1970s the tension between



**ROOMS WITH A VIEW ...** Houseboat co-operatives have fought long and hard to save their communities from the threat of redevelopment in the San Francisco Bay area

the authorities and the boat owners became known as the “houseboat wars” and a film is being made about that era.

Plans were afoot to build Waldo Point, a marina that would clear the Sausalito waterfront of its colourful, but now unwanted, community of beatniks and hippies. A combination of regulations and permits were used to manicure the offending houseboats and one by one the owners were picked off.

The dwindling band of water squatters realised they needed to form an association to have legal standing in their ongoing struggle. These houseboat activists formed the Gates Co-op in 1979, just in time to be beset by a raft of lawsuits designed to eradicate them.

Fortunately, the laws around property rights for houseboat owners moored on water are not very clear. Lacking precedence, it was difficult for the authorities to close down the Gates Co-op with its remaining 38 members. But neither was it possible for the Gates Co-op members to gain property rights. Law suits dragged on for almost three decades.

Finally, a truce was declared. Most of the boats were towed to the junkyard to make way for a new state park where the Gates Co-op had once existed. The 38 members would be given low-cost loans to buy houseboats that met code. They were provided with moorings at the new Waldo Point where they would qualify as low-income housing.

Fortunately, about 30 of the boats were moored together at one dock where they rebuilt their unique community. The others would be interspersed at nearby docks. Less than one family a year leaves the co-op so its character will definitely be retained.

Both houseboat groups have lived to tell their passionate story of squatting, struggling and surviving. Were it not for their co-operatives, the two groups would have disappeared long ago and their colourful waterfront history with them.

Thankfully, out there, among the million-dollar yachts, there will be two co-ops still practising “one boat one vote”.