

# A century after Monterey bought it, Fisherman's Wharf comes full circle.

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Nic Coury

Angelo DiGiralamo has been in business on Fisherman's Wharf for 75 years. He claims his family restaurant made the world's best cioppino.

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Sara Rubin | [0 comments](#)

Monterey businessman Thomas Larkin was tired of getting his feet wet during cargo deliveries. So in 1845, as historians tell it, he started building what would become Fisherman's Wharf with just \$4,059 worth of materials – [\\$127,000 in today's dollars](#).

That dinky wharf was slowly expanded by Pacific Coast Steamship Company before it ascended as a tourist attraction. "When the Hotel Del Monte opened in 1880, that changed everything," local historian Tim Thomas says.

Thomas, who leads monthly walking tours of the waterfront, carries on his keyring a clunky brass key – the key that was once used to change the train-track routes, directing visitors to Monterey.

More than a century ago, visitors traveled to Fisherman's Wharf for glass-bottom boat rides and shopping at fish markets. Before the wharf was used commercially, it served – as it does today – as a tourist destination. Sport fishermen first developed efficient fishing technologies like trolling that later drew commercial fishermen to the area for salmon, and Japanese divers for abalone.

During the three-month salmon season of 1909, Monterey Bay fishermen landed more than 1 million pounds. That massive catch set the city on a new path toward fish canning, with roots at the wharf – though Cannery Row later claimed the historic industrial glory.

Most canned salmon was exported to Europe until World War I cut that market off, and a fear of submarines kept East Coast fishermen onshore. The Monterey sardine business exploded.

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“That’s when the city said, ‘We should buy that wharf, because there’s money to be made,’” Thomas says.

Monterey City Council voted in December 1913, 100 years ago, to buy Fisherman’s Wharf, with plans to lease it out to commercial fishermen – against the wishes of Hotel Del Monte, which preferred tourist attractions.

The wharf fostered a thriving fishing culture (enough to support the construction in the ’20s of Wharf 2, still largely a commercial fishing space today) until the mid-century sardine crash. Fisherman’s Wharf needed a new identity – which would come to look strikingly similar to its old identity.

In 1946, having just returned home from World War II, Angelo DiGiralamo saw an opportunity and opened the wharf’s first seafood restaurant.

The eponymous Angelo’s (where Isabella’s is today) was staffed by family members. “I can’t even boil water,” DiGiralamo says. “They didn’t want me in the kitchen; nobody did.”

Now 92, DiGiralamo runs the Bruce Ariss Wharf Theater and art gallery, claiming the title of longest-tenured businessman on the wharf.

DiGiralamo served on Monterey City Council from 1963-67, just before Peter Coniglio was elected. Before becoming mayor, Coniglio helped found the Fisherman’s Wharf Association and lobbied to get long-term city leases for business owners. In exchange for 50-year contracts, businesses pay below-market rents (on the order of \$0.54 per square foot) but take on costly repairs, namely for pilings, the support beams below the wharf. DiGiralamo spent \$130,000 – about as much as Larkin spent on the original Fisherman’s Wharf – to redo the pilings under the theater.

Lately the leases have come under fire, [criticized as sweetheart deals](#) for old-time wharf families.

“There is a school of thought that people are getting away with murder,” says Coniglio, now an attorney. “That’s not true. They built that wharf.”

The cheap leases from the city were intended to give wharf business owners the cash they needed to build up colorful storefronts and restaurants. But DiGiralamo says those leases themselves have become more lucrative than the stiffly competitive restaurants and gift shops that rent subleases at far higher rates. “The only way to make money on this wharf is to sublease [out],” he says.

After 37 years in business, DiGiralamo sold his restaurant to Nino Palma (who subleases to the Shake family of restaurateurs) and now rents the first floor of his theater building as a gift shop.

He worries critics of the leases, combined with stiff competition, bode poorly for the wharf's future. "I like to think I could foresee this stuff," he says. "It's happened before, when the sardines disappeared. Now there are too many restaurants and gift stores."

As Thomas sees it, though, that honky-tonk element is true to the wharf's touristy roots. One hundred years later, having evolved from a visitor attraction to fisherman's workshop and back again, it's a mirror to the city itself.

**HISTORIAN TIM THOMAS leads walking tours of the Monterey waterfront the first Saturday of every month (next: Oct. 5) from 10am-noon. \$20/adults; \$5/children 10-15. RSVP. 521-3304, [timsardine@yahoo.com](mailto:timsardine@yahoo.com)**