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PENINSULA PAST

The Hermit Philosopher of Malaga Cove and his 20-cent castle

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Special to the News

“This building cost but little money but much work, without which life affords no satisfying kick.”

This brief statement was carved into a wooden board onto what can be generously called the cornerstone of Flotsam Castle, a seaside dwelling built by a down-on-his luck hermit, pie-maker, former lawyer and part-time philosopher named Louis C. Dart.

Dart built his castle on the rocky bluffs of Malaga Cove near present-day Torrance Beach in the early 1920s. Made entirely of materials salvaged from the ocean, his seaside cabin grew from a crude shelter into a two-story structure that featured a living room, stairs, kitchen, sleeping quarters, basement and an open-air pavilion with a lunch counter.

The story of how the mysterious drifter came to the area is as intriguing as his improvised seaside dwelling.

According to Census records, Dart was born about 1859 in Missouri where his father was a farmer. News accounts state that he graduated from an Iowa law college and was a prosperous attorney in Western Nebraska and the Midwest before he got sick, lost his voice

and was unable to plead at the bar. Dart claimed doctors diagnosed him with Bright's disease (kidney disease) and abandoned him after his money was gone.

Like countless others, Dart migrated west. For 15 years, he worked as a cook in mining and road camps. The 1910 federal Census places Dart in Oakland where he was a lodger and listed his occupation as inventor. Still struggling physically, he couldn't work for more than a few weeks at a time.

Dart eventually moved to Southern California and made his way to the Palos Verdes area, drifting and convalescing in the open air between Portuguese Bend and Malaga Cove for about seven years. Still weak, he was unable to scramble up the hills to fetch drinking water.

This is where the story gets interesting. With no money and struggling in poor health, his one remaining ambition was to die alone in the desolate cove. But Dart's luck would quickly change. He met an old Spanish lady who was looking for clams and worked on the Palos Verdes ranch. She advised him to seek out a spring at Malaga Cove with water that would cure his ailments. Even though Dart had lived in this area for years



he had never before stumbled upon this "fountain of health."

For six weeks, Dart lived without food or shelter, and drank only water from this spring. As he grew stronger, he climbed the bluff, ate tomatoes at the top and also scooped snails from the rocks for a snail-broth. Soon he was physically "sound from head to toe." He boasted that he had gone back in age from 65 to 45 and was "so tough and hard that if a mule were to kick him he would not know it except by change of location." Exact dates are unknown, but this was likely in late 1919.

Around this time, a 45-foot yacht named the Genevieve anchored in the kelp beds nearby broke from its moorings and wrecked near Malaga Cove. Dart was paid \$5 to guard the wreckage overnight.

"Then I began to eat!" Dart exclaimed, pleased that he was able to expand his scavenger diet.

He also assisted in retrieving the contents of the vessel and was allowed to keep many articles from the boat, earning \$85 from salvage.

The return of his physical strength along with the "jingling of coins in his pockets" motivated Dart to build his castle made of the abundant driftwood nearby and other items that "Neptune's white horses" laid at his steps. Not surprisingly, Dart constructed it right near the spring.

The "driftwood domicile" was said to have been built at the expense of about 20 cents (to cover the cost of nails). It had to be reconstructed several times; the first version resembling a "peasant's precipice-hung hut" before it developed into a landmark over two stories tall. A large gray cat and a beady-eyed black-nosed guinea pig were Dart's roommates.

In short order, his "seaside castle" drew thousands of visitors from almost every state in the nation and from cities worldwide. They sat at cable-spool tables, guzzled soda pop and dined on homemade pies made by Dart on the castle's little four-burner stove. Dart baked about 8,000 pies (and admitted to eating about 500 of these himself). Artists loved his shelter and begged him not to tear it down. The Boy Scouts visited.

Louis Dart became a minor celebrity. In the roaring 1920s he and his castle were profiled in *Popular Mechanics*, the *Los Angeles Times* and newspapers across the nation — and in countries such as Australia and New Zealand.

When not building his castle or baking pies for his many guests, Dart engaged in the more cerebral pursuit of philosophy. No doubt remembering his earlier struggles, he opined: "Until you learn the difference between your needs and your wants, and are more anxious to have a sound body and a clear brain than to indulge your perverted taste, anything I might tell you would be in vain."

News accounts indicate that Dart had abandoned his driftwood mansion as early as 1925. He was definitely gone by May 1930, when a reporter ventured to Flotsam Castle and confirmed that Dart had left the area for good. The castle was still standing but seemed "like a body which had lost its soul." Shortly thereafter the owner of a nearby fashionable subdivision torched Flotsam Castle and burned it to the ground within 60 minutes.

After he left the Malaga Cove area, Dart moved to Arlington, near Riverside, where he built a "quaint little abode on a hill" from pieces of wood he had scavenged. He left this home after thieves had continually robbed the place while he was away.

Dart then moved to Riverside where he lived in a rooming house and received aid from the county welfare department. He had reportedly refused help from his friends to try and contact his family in Idaho for help, and died on March 3, 1932.

Although his castle was destroyed, Dart's legacy and philosophy lives on. In one of his pamphlets the hermit philosopher of Malaga Cove left us with this: "The real purpose of our being is to add to the sum of human happiness. Success and contentment come not from what you get, but from what you give."



To learn about the hermit philosopher of Flotsam Castle and other unique aspects of Palos Verdes history, please visit the Local History Room at the Peninsula Center library.

Dennis Piotrowski, adult services librarian, and Monique Sugimoto, adult services librarian, local history, work with the Palos Verdes Library District.