

An informal story of
GRINDSTONE JOE

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BENEVOLENT RULER OF THE ISLAND HE BUILT
IN THE SAN JOAQUIN DELTA

BY
INGRAHAM READ

SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

MCMLXVI

AN ADDRESS BY INGRAHAM READ BEFORE THE ASSEMBLED
MEMBERS OF GRINDSTONE JOE ASSOCIATION
INDEPENDENCE DAY, 1966

When I was asked to make a few remarks here today about life with Grindstone Joe I was happy to go along with the idea and to meet some of the members who came after my time.

Joe Attel or Attello (we will never know exactly how he spelled his name) was a native of Chile and ran away to serve in the Chilean Navy when he was just a boy. He sailed the Seven Seas under several flags and somehow around the turn of the century wound up in San Francisco.

He reached Terminous in a rowboat and settled on this spot to make a living fishing sturgeon, bass and catfish for the market. When the fishing for sturgeon was closed, Joe went to work as a squatter developing this home where he spent the rest of his life.

No one knows how many tons of earth he moved with his own hands, but we see what he planted. He built about six floating docks and was in business. In those days there were only a few spots such as Steamboat and Sutter sloughs where sailboats and cruisers from the Bay Area tied up in the summer under big trees. When yachtsmen heard about Joe's, there were many who wanted to use the facilities and enjoy this beautiful spot.

In my remarks I will try to tell you something about Grindstone Joe as my wife Florence and I knew him. Anything people might tell about him that would go back beyond 35 years is hearsay so far as we are concerned.

Joe was a real friend to a limited number of the boating fraternity. He was a passing acquaintance to many more. It would be very difficult to suggest a formula that placed some in his inner circle of friends or that covered others whom he merely tolerated or turned away.

I think of Joe as the benevolent dictator of his small domain. When Lou Boone introduced us to him on our first visit we were practically ignored, but he allowed us to tie up. When we left he didn't want to accept any money but I managed to stick a couple of dollars in his pocket and fearfully asked him if we could come back. As I recall he shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

As a source of income he probably planned to build up a small congenial group that would be the nucleus of his ever welcome guests. Joe was very observing, so I think the extended hand of Tracy and

Maxine Harron, Lou Boone and a few other regulars opened the door for the Reads for which we were most grateful.

Many wonderful summers at Joe's followed. Our son and daughter still talk about the fun they had 30 years ago.

When one day Joe called Florence "Lady Read" she knew she had been accepted. He hardly spoke to some of the wives. This was probably due to their manner of housekeeping and the way they wrapped their garbage. Remember this was Joe's small world and he didn't miss a trick. Occasionally he would say "That's a dirty boat." Joe was a very clean person, and although most of us didn't see the inside of his cabin until the end, it was immaculate.

We all recognized that there were two sides to the island kingdom — his side and ours. Joe's privacy was respected and no one who knew the ropes went over to see him on his side of the island short of an emergency.

Between five and six in the evening he would usually walk over to the docks with his collie dogs for a social visit. He had a wonderful sense of humor and would kid his best friends quite a bit. I recall that on these occasions some one of the "Johnny-come-lately" guests would try to offer him a drink. He would quickly turn his back on his would-be host and walk over to someone like Tracy Harron and say "Mr. Harron, I think I have a drink tonight." There was no doubt that he made his point. We never saw him accept more than one. Another strict policy he had was never to come aboard socially.

Joe and his collie dogs were inseparable. At one time he had three. Eventually his oldest female died and he felt very badly. By that time Florence and I thought we were close enough to Joe to make him a present. I got him a thoroughbred female pup and presented it to him — or rather I tried to. This pup had unusual markings for a collie, which were predominantly white. Joe was a little provoked and said, "Mr. Read, you kid me — this no collie — you keep," and he turned and walked away.

The next day Joe came back to our boat and in his most affable manner said, "Maybe this dog okay — I keep." Dena turned out to be one of the most graceful and beautiful dogs we have ever seen.

At one point I became Joe's S.F. purchasing agent for a few items of clothing. Comfortable shoes were his principle concern. San Francisco had the best selection of the particular high shoe he always wore. Usually he was pleased with the fit, but I remember that once something went wrong and I heard all summer about how his new shoes didn't fit.

After some of us were sure we were well accepted it seemed safe to occasionally leave our wives and children on our boats during the week while we men went back to work. The first time I did this, Florence told me Friday night when I returned that Joe had moved his hammock near the boat docks, and with shotgun handy, slept there each night. He even turned some men away whom he knew because they were on a stag cruise.

In those days Terminous, about a mile away, housed many turbaned Hindus and other tough-looking characters who worked in the asparagus fields. They were probably harmless, but to the ladies they looked pretty fierce.

Money wasn't very important to Joe. While he had to have enough to satisfy his simple needs he refused to take more from each of us than he thought we should pay. I don't think he took in altogether more than \$200 a month during the summer from his regular guests. He was very proud, so it was important that money transactions be conducted in private.

For an illiterate person, Joe was very knowledgeable. He knew what was going on around the world and somehow kept informed about World War II although he never seemed to engage in lengthy discussions.

This was a man of strong character. He was handsome with an appearance of determination. When he became angry over someone's conduct he would send him on his way, saying "You come back — I cut your line." They gave him no argument and quietly slipped away. Sometimes people didn't know exactly what they had done to offend, and the rest of us weren't always sure either.

Some of us occasionally thought Joe had made an error in judgment when he accepted certain people. If he liked them they could stay after committing sins for which others were kicked out. But he was the benevolent dictator, and the rest of us were happy minding our own business and basking in the warmth of his friendship.

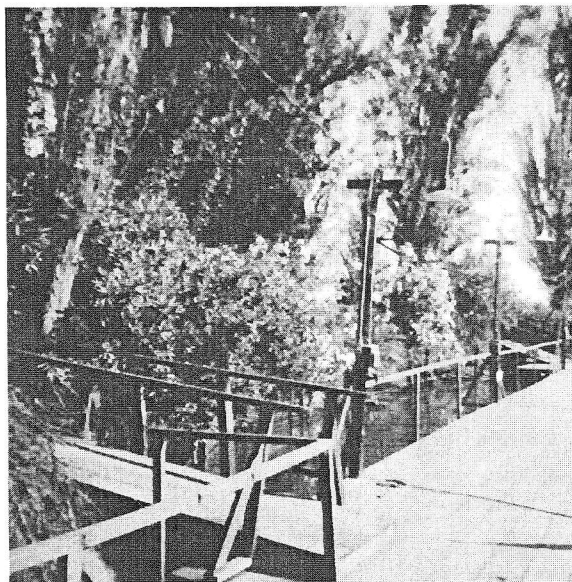
I think it was in 1943 that one day I stopped by the Western Pacific office located between Grindstone Joe's and Terminous and left my phone number with the man in charge. Our group thought that a man in his seventies might run into trouble and we wanted to help our friend if we could.

On July 31st, 1944, I received a wire from the Railroad man saying that Joe had been stricken on the road to Terminous. A few of us buried him in Lodi on August 4th. His passing was a great loss for many reasons that I am not capable of expressing adequately.

There are some here who can probably tell you more about Joe, but I have tried to touch on the little things that may interest you. Tracy seemed to get more out of Joe than the rest of us and I only wish he could be here today.

Although I helped as much as possible to get the Grindstone Joe Association going, it was really Tracy Harron, Herman Hogrefe, and Roy Stephens who did the early spadework. I know that many others here have made substantial contributions. Your association is to be congratulated for making all these wonderful improvements around here without losing the charming touch that Joe must have wished the place would retain.

Let's hope there will always be a Grindstone Joe's made up of the same kind of people.



MEMORIES OF GRINDSTONE JOE

by SABRA STAYNER

It was about the time of World War I (Some say even earlier, just before the earthquake in 1906) that Joe Attel and his buddy jumped ship in San Francisco. They acquired a rowboat, rowed up the San Joaquin to Little Potato Slough where they squatted; making their living by selling sturgeon, catfish, black bass and striped bass to the markets in Lodi and Stockton.

They took turns taking fish to market, and always it seemed that on the partner's turn he'd come back with less money than Joe figured he should get.

They had a violent falling out and Joe told him to leave. This he did, but as a parting gesture he deliberately broke Joe's grindstone which was of course a necessity in his work. Joe was furious. He took the grindstone, with the pie-shaped wedge out of it, and mounted it on his roof-top to "haunt" the departed partner.

During the winters Joe would snag large timbers floating down stream and managed to build some very substantial floats with them. At that time the land was just a spit, protruding into the slough beyond Joe's house about one hundred and fifty feet. So at low tide with shovel and wheelbarrow year after year, Joe completed building the Island in the circle as it is today. He drove in timbers and planted "Weeping Willows" all around the Island so their roots would form a mat to hold the earth. However, the willows being full of "Hants" were later cut down and instead he planted Lombardy Poplars, two rows, circling the Island, with roadway in between.

Being situated on the San Joaquin River, Duke and I spent many hours with Joe when there were no other boats in his harbor. We never could understand why he called Duke "Mr. McKenzie" and me "Lady McKenzie." On one occasion I took a huge casserole of lamb curry to him. In about half an hour he was back with the empty, clean casserole. I said, "Oh, Joe, you didn't like it — you gave it to the dogs!" He said, "No, I eat em; but let me tell you how to make curry."

Joe loved his dogs. The photo shows Joe, Dena and Baby, and was taken by Roy Stephens about 1943. Joe made a profound statement about his dogs. It seems that some of the children from one of the boats had fed his dogs candy. This led them to have a taste for alcohol. So after the boat departed the dogs ate fermented figs from the ground and got drunk. Joe said, "I don't never want nobody feeding no candy to no dogs of mine no time."



JOE AND HIS BELOVED DOGS

EXCERPTS FROM
CRUISING SPOTS ON THE SAN JOAQUIN

By ED FULD, IN *Yachting Magazine*, 1953

Summer Saturdays, the mate and I pile aboard with some food, beer and ice, and head down the river for Grindstone Joe's. Boatmen found his place a great many years ago. Many of them have kept going there throughout the years. Beside beauty and restfulness, it possesses what is referred to as "atmosphere," much of it created by Joe himself.

We first putt-putted into his harbor one very hot Labor Day some 12 years ago. As we cruised along Little Connection and Potato Sloughs, after leaving the main river, I kept repeating to myself the instructions of my friends. "Keep to the right bank," they told me. "When you see a large dead tree, cut to port at the next opening between the berms and follow the right bank again until you see his island. Don't come ashore! Wait until he sets out a garbage can which is his way of inviting you to tie up. You will have to do some real talking, because his pet dislike is sailboats."

The tall poplars of Grindstone Joe's loomed ahead, and we prepared to meet our storybook host. We rounded a bend and before us lay his harbor lined with trees that came almost to the water's edge. Beyond the grass-covered levee is a circular lagoon that fills and empties with the changing tide: docks were to the left with a dozen cruisers tied up in brilliant whiteness against the green of the trees.

Our friends saw us. They waved. I cut my motor and waited. They were talking with a short, dark, short-sleeved fellow around whom his "guests" were seated. He shook his head. Our hearts sank. More palaver. Perhaps they were telling him that we brought gifts for the two handsome collies that never left his side. Eventually, he shrugged his shoulders. A garbage can appeared at an empty berth along the dock. We were in!

The history of Grindstone Joe is shrouded in mystery. He rarely spoke of his years before he landed in the delta region. Some say he had a "past" to which an eruptive, excitable temperament lends credence. The generally accepted story is that he was a Chilean sailor who "jumped ship" at San Francisco. Somewhere unexplained, he picked up a rowboat with a small sail. Together with a chance acquaintance, he set out to explore the inland waters. They landed eventually on the doughnut-shaped berm that is Grindstone Joe's and decided to settle there. But his companion complained of the lonely life and struck out for himself after a year or two. Joe remained, planting the fringing row of towering Lombardy poplars which now ring his former do-

main. With shovel and wheelbarrow, he shaped and created, planting lawn and flowers. He laid claim to his island, and protected it until his death against those from the world outside, who would rob him of it.

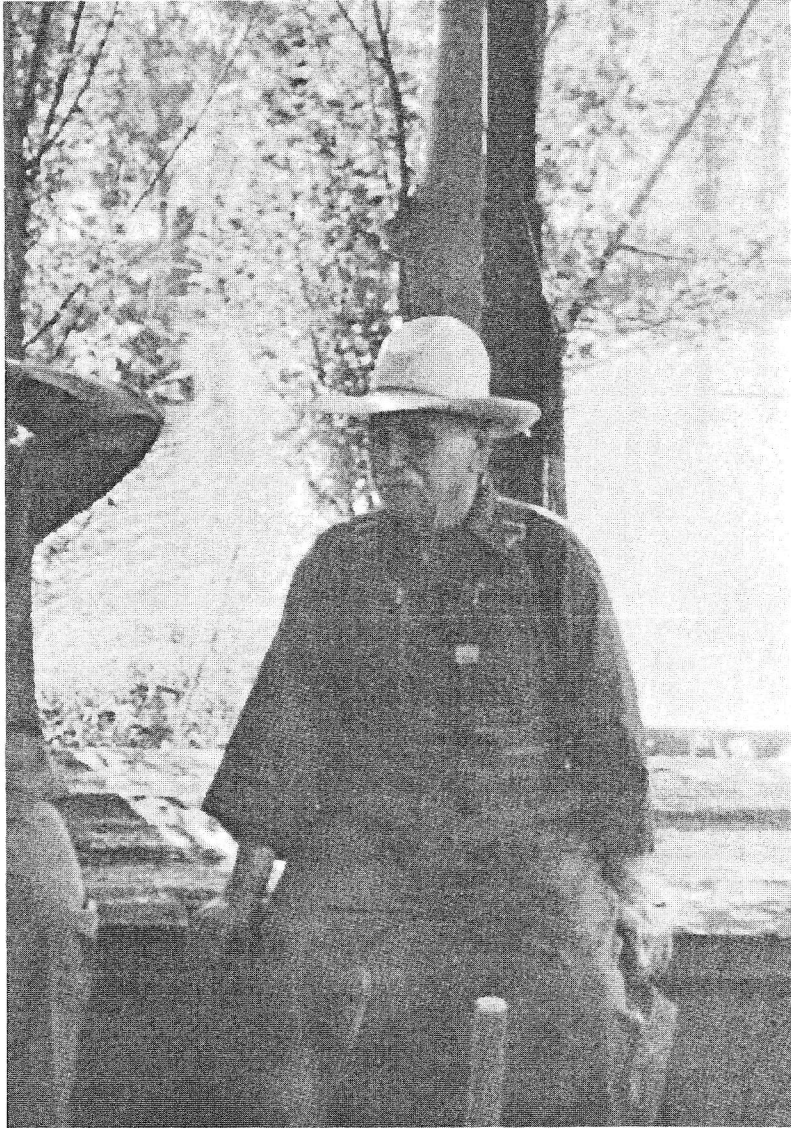
How did he get his picturesque name? The club, which, in honoring his memory, stands at its meetings for a minute of respectful silence, treasures and displays prominently a broken grindstone. It is said to have been the ballast beneath the floorboards of his tiny boat. That's as good an explanation as any.

The traditions of Grindstone Joe's are many. The evening starts at about six o'clock when the boats unload their human freight onto the levee. There has been a general sprucing up after a lazy day, although faded blues and shorts are favored over more formal woollens unless the evening is cool. Most everyone is carrying the "makings" for the cocktail hour which proceeds for two or three hours with great informality. In the meanwhile, charcoal fires are lit in the two huge barbecue pits. The flames die, and over the glowing embers start the preparations for the evening meal.

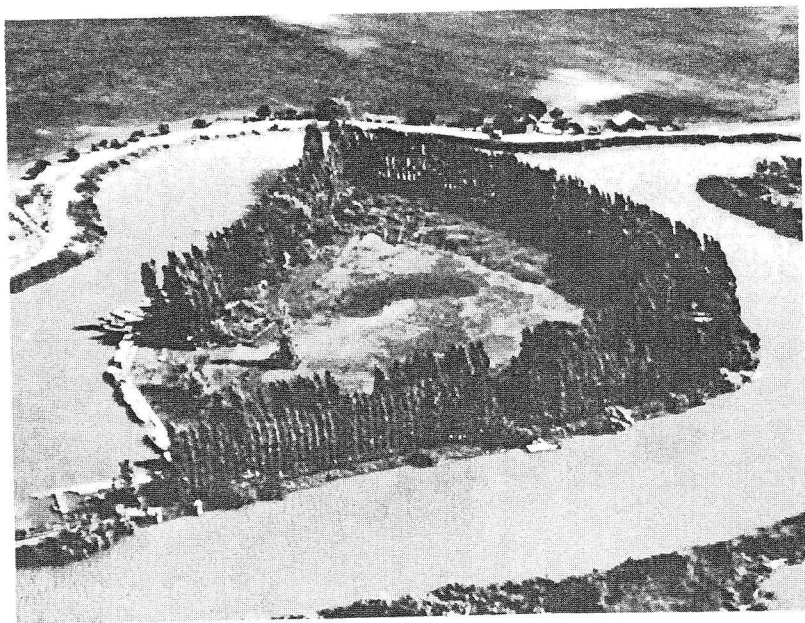
Grindstone Joe's has always been like that; a small group, congenial friends, informal at all times. Joe saw to it that things went smoothly. He tolerated neither boisterous nor quarrelsome conduct. You just weren't invited to come back again. He was a discriminating host.



THE ROADWAY THROUGH THE POPLARS



GRINDSTONE JOE



THE ISLAND

“Joe himself moved tons of dirt. He laid planks on the lake-bottom at low tide, filled a wheelbarrow, dragged it ashore, emptied it on the bank, and went back for more. He planted the poplars, roses, fruit trees, built the floats, kept the place immaculate, and ruled it as a patriarch. Anyone that appreciated the fact that the “island” was his home, and respected that idea, had no trouble getting along with him.”

TRACY HARRON



“He had an extraordinary sense of what was right and what was wrong. It was a privilege to have known him.”

TRACY HARRON

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REPRODUCED IN 2005 IN HONOR OF MY FATHER, LELAND CONNICK
AND *THE NIRVANA* AND *THE BOUNTY*—RICHARD CONNICK

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