

Academics at the Beach



The Sophomore-who-was-now-a-Junior came back to his room after his last final, stacked a spare Blue Book at the top of the pile of miscellany on his desk, and lay down to daydream awhile before he began the complicated business of moving out for the summer.

It just wasn't the same this year, he thought. Finals weren't the Days of Reckoning they had been last year, but just a sort of anticlimax to the work of the term. Last year, too, he had dreaded the summer, because it meant spending three months in the suburban tepidity of Pasadena, at a job he didn't like. But this year he was going to the Institute's Marine Laboratory at Corona del Mar. For the next five weeks he would be within diving distance of the ocean, studying biology — without integral signs, slide rules, and Gauss's Law to bother him. Of course, he would

have plenty of time to swim and bask in the sun and still study hard enough to get an A in the course.

His daydream was disturbed by the entrance of his roommate, singing "Finals are over!" off-key, in his usual near-tenor voice.

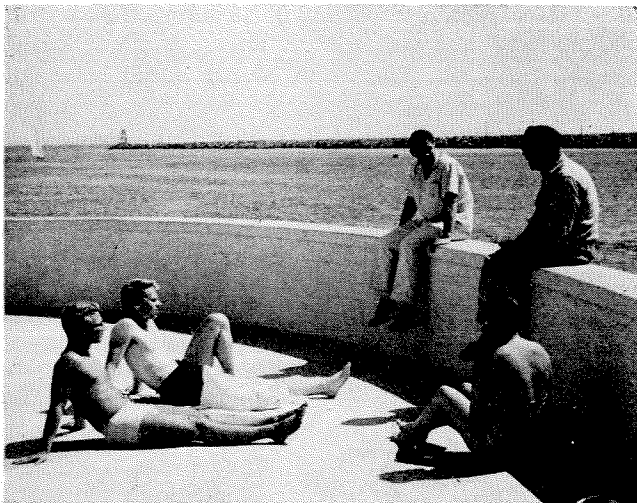
"I hadn't noticed," the Junior said, grinning and getting up to leave. Moving could wait; right now he was going to look at some skin-diving equipment.

It had been a long, hot drive through the thick air of Los Angeles and the congested traffic of the beach cities, and the ocean had never looked quite so inviting, surrounding the Marine Lab at the bottom of the bluff.

Captain Smith, caretaker and boatsman of the Lab, welcomed him. "If you would like a place to sleep tonight, you might find it valuable to give a hand with pitching the sleeping tent on the roof. Doing so would also keep the students who are *already* at work from pounding *large* lumps on you when they get around to it. You see, you are quite late." There was a twinkle of sorts in his eyes.

Well, that swim will have to wait, thought the Junior. On his way up to the roof he passed a girl and remembered that there were to be some students from Pomona taking the course, too. He paused to think for a second but continued up to the roof after deciding that they couldn't possibly let the girls use the sleeping tent too.

Now the tent was up, but it was dark and he would have to wait until the next day to break in that skin-diving equipment. Besides, he was content to sit on the balcony facing the Newport channel, wishing that he owned one sailboat or another and listening to Captain Smith tell how those fishing boats had long



Captain Smith, caretaker and boatsman of the Lab, conducts an extracurricular session.

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bowsprits because they were used in the spearing of broadbills and how 30 years ago — no, it was nearly 40 years now — he had run an ocean-going tug that had helped haul the rocks that formed the west jetty, across the channel there.

And the Junior thought of the girl he had passed. What was she like and who was she? Well, there would be five weeks to find out; it was time to sack out now.

“Yo-ho HOOOOO! The wind blows free . . .” A near-baritone this time. What a hell of a way to get up in the morning, thought the Junior. He made his way down to the kitchen, where he found an assembly of the other ten students taking the course, along with Dr. Pequegnat, the professor in charge.

“I have called you together to discuss something dear to the hearts of us all — food,” the professor began, looking slightly bored. “We are going to talk about the preparations of our meals for the next five weeks. Lynne, here — your teaching assistant — will give you the details. And I hope you can figure out something quickly for breakfast, because I’m famished.”

The Junior recognized the girl as the one he had passed on the stairs.

“We are going to divide you into three committees,” she began in a businesslike manner, seemingly ignoring him — not at all an easy feat, considering that his mouth was hanging quite agape.

Breakfast was palatable but brief, as people began to leave the table to make their way up to the classroom. The first lecture; he had best not be late.

“Your assignment for the first week is Chapters one through fifteen,” began the professor. “You will also be held responsible for the scientific names of 30 or so of the more common animals in this area. In addition, you will spend your lab periods this week learning to identify the components of the plankton of the water in this vicinity.”

“The animal kingdom is divided into several groups called *phyla*. Singular, *phylum*”

Phylum, plur. *phyla* went into the Junior’s notebook, and academics at the beach had begun.

Diving lesson

Now it was time to break in that skin-diving equipment. But it didn’t take him long to realize that it would be some time before he would be able to dive more than five feet. The annoying thing was that Lynne was consistently going down three times that far. “Keep your mouth open. It keeps the pressure off your ears,” she said, hardly noticing him.

He tried it, but only managed to come up coughing and choking. “Your mouth — not your lungs, silly,” she said. The water in his lungs was almost worth it. She had smiled at him.

Cooking lesson

By some draft system he did not understand, the Junior had been chosen to make spice cake for dinner that evening. And when the time came to make it, it was Lynne who showed him how to grease the pans, light the oven, and even how to hold the mixing spoon. Then, over an after-dinner cup of coffee on the balcony facing the channel, it was Lynne who told him that no one could really expect that his first spice cake would be perfect and he shouldn’t worry about it and maybe he’d better study a little now.

And so he studied a little and went to sleep and dreamed of being able to dive 50 feet and make good spice cakes.

“Today,” began the professor, “we will consider the phylum Protozoa.” And so went five weeks. Skin diving, cooking, washing dishes, studying, taking tests every Saturday morning.

The final was over. The Junior was “swabbing down the deck” under the careful supervision of Captain Smith.

“This reminds me of the time I sailed from Acapulco in an old one-lunger —” the Captain was saying, but the Junior had heard this one before. He began to think about what he had gained in his short time as a beach boy. All the zoology I know, he thought — the names of a gross or so of the beasties of the Pacific Ocean. I didn’t get that A, but there are other things. A suntan. Stronger ear drums. New friends . . .

Lynne? Well, the course was over now. He would be going his way and she hers. They would write occasionally, but she was of course pinned to this fellow at Pomona, and he of course would be seeing this girl in Pasadena.

The Marine Lab had received its final cleaning, to the satisfaction of Captain Smith. He finished his story about the one-lunger and the Junior made his way back to Pasadena. Academics at the beach were over.

As he first caught sight of the smog in the Los Angeles basin, he mused one final time about Lynne and couldn’t help thinking about how beautiful the moon was at Corona del Mar in the summer and about how he never did make a spice cake that didn’t taste as if it had been marketed by Goodyear.

— Stan Sajdera '61