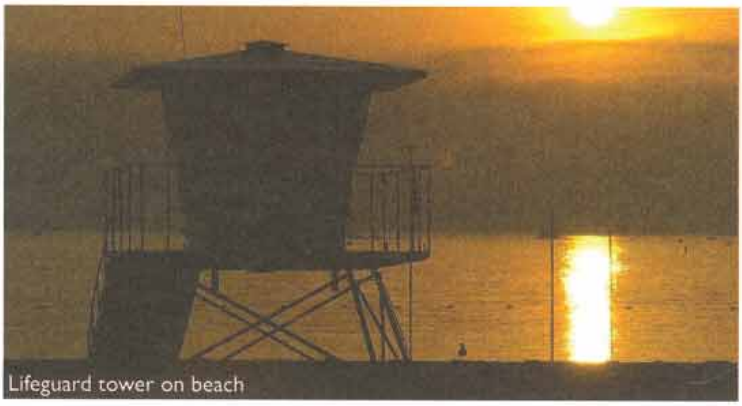
# THE LEGENDARY GRUNION OF CABRILLO BEACH

## IN THIS LAND OF FADS AND SPECTACLE, HOW DO LEGENDS BEGIN?

Start with a unique talent and an air of mystery, add a fabulous locale and a sexy summer ritual, and a star is born!



Lifeguard tower on beach

Thanks to Cabrillo Marine Aquarium and its many friends, California grunion are true celebrities. These slender silversides gather offshore on summer nights. Gradually, following a secret signal, they surf in waves to emerge on the beach, looking for a mate. Drenched by an occasional wave, the silver fish leap and jostle across the golden sand, searching for that perfect someone. Their eggs, buried under the sand, remain above the water line for the entire period of incubation until hatching at the following high-tide cycle. The process repeats every two weeks on moonlit spring and summer nights.

**AS WITH ALL CELEBRITIES, RUMORS ABOUND.** Carl Hubbs wrote the first description of grunion spawning in 1916, from a fisherman's tale he hoped could be verified. Two years later Will Thompson described grunion spawning runs scientifically, but he was vague on the timing. Predicting grunion runs used to be more good luck than science. Many people consigned visions of dancing fish to local myth, products of fanciful imagination and moonlight, maybe a little moonshine. People waited, cold and wet, for a disappointing glimpse, not the fantastic runs of legend.

By 1927, grunion were so scarce that the Department of Fish and Game instituted measures to preserve this vulnerable fish from recreational overharvest, including gear restrictions so strict that only bare hands may be used and "No Take" during the peak spawning period. These regulations are still in place today, and still needed.

Soon after grunion runs were first described, Cabrillo Beach was created in Los Angeles Harbor. This manmade beach quickly became a romantic getaway for California grunion, reported by biologist Francis Clark. Thus began a love affair that continues to this day. Spawning grunion attracted sport fishermen and recreational fishers over the years, but it took a local lifeguard to discover their true star quality.

Lifeguard John Olguin first saw the grunion through a child's eyes, when she asked him about the wiggly creatures she discovered in beach sand after adding seawater. Astutely deducing the true nature of these baby fish, Olguin began to spread the word at any civic organization, church meeting or youth group. Olguin told stories about this amazing fish that springs from the sea to enact its mating rituals on shore. He kept a bucket of sand with grunion eggs in his lifeguard shack. Every visitor was treated to the story of the grunion and given the opportunity to release the babies by the simple magic of seawater.

One fateful day Olguin stated on television that if anyone wanted to see the grunion run, they should join him at Cabrillo Beach that evening. His return to the beach was almost blocked by a traffic jam of hopeful grunion watchers. Buoyed by this outpouring of enthusiasm, John began to offer public grunion programs on Cabrillo Beach. One day a local chef offered to host a barbeque during the run. Her team set up kettles over bonfires, to fry and serve the grunion right there on the beach. An impressive run

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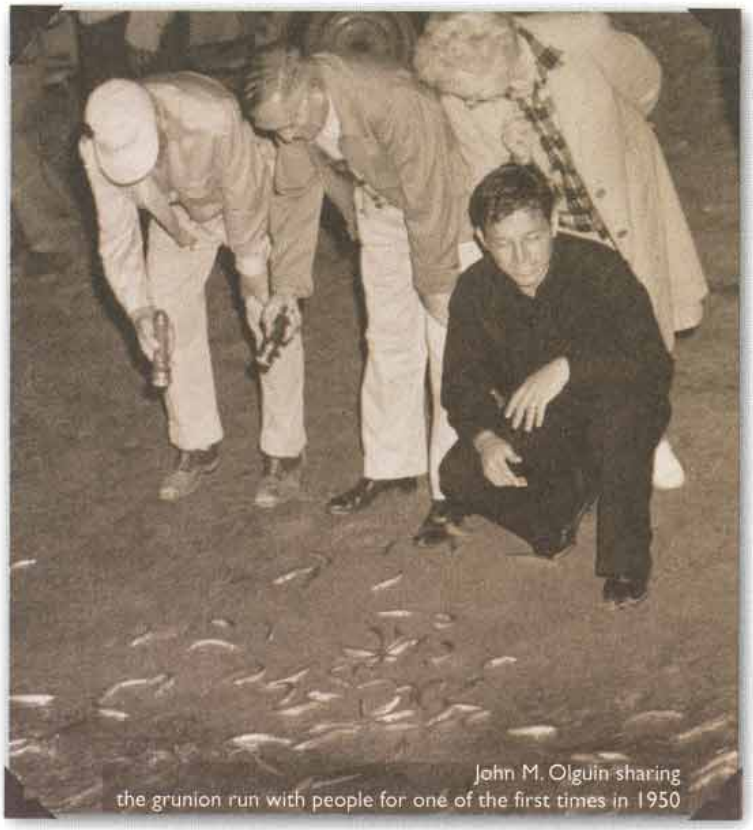

John M. Olguin sharing the grunion run with people for one of the first times in 1950

Clarence Groat (in hat), of the California Department of Fish and Game (John Olguin's father-in-law) was one of the participants in the early public grunion runs

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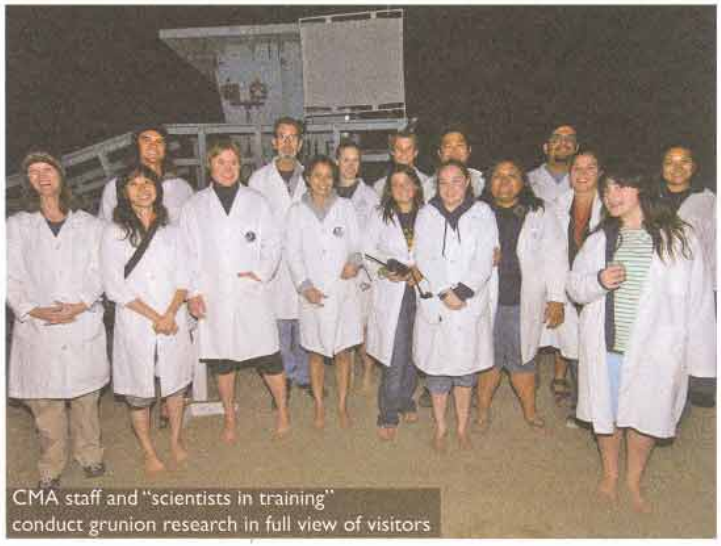
ensued, and the delighted audience greedily seized the moment and the grunion. Watching so many sizzling fish disappearing into people's mouths gave Olguin an epiphany. He realized with dismay that as the popularity of these fish increased, it would become harder to conserve this natural resource he had grown to cherish. As a result he developed a unique educational program that was interactive, not destructive. Thus arose the participatory "Grunion Dance," followed by shared hatching demonstrations and patient wildlife observations on the beach. Large crowds became more manageable when dedicated volunteers enforced lines on shore and controlled noise and flashlight levels.

The grunion run predictions we use today were developed three decades after Thompson's work by scientist Boyd Walker, who observed a beach for grunion runs nearly every night for three years. With this disciplined approach he connected the timing of spawning runs precisely to the tides. Walker is featured in "Fish, Moon and Tides," the film shown at every Cabrillo grunion program. He understood well the elusive and highly variable nature of the runs, calling his dates "possible run nights," not predictions.

Walker enlisted volunteers to watch grunion runs across California for two April nights in 1947 to better understand the timing and variability of the runs. Fifty years later, Mike Schaadt and Susanne Lawrenz-Miller of Cabrillo Marine Aquarium teamed with biologist Karen Martin to create a new metric for scoring the strength of runs, for comparisons across years and different beaches. This Walker Scale is now used by volunteer Grunion Greeters to report runs throughout the species range.

Although no one can promise the grunion will show up on any given night, Cabrillo Marine Aquarium puts on the premier public program for California grunion runs. A dedicated professional staff provides the educational and research components of the program, and this remarkable Cabrillo Beach consistently holds dramatic, impressive



CMA staff and "scientists in training" conduct grunion research in full view of visitors

runs that have made its silver surfers famous. The educational presentations delight thousands of people every year, continuing traditions started by John Olguin. The amazing grunion at Cabrillo Beach combine beauty, elusiveness and anticipation. Their star qualities create genuine astonishment in the presence of a natural phenomenon unlike any other.

Grunion spawning on Cabrillo Beach

KAREN MARTIN, PH.D.
FRANK R. SEAVER PROFESSOR OF BIOLOGY, PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, GRUNION GREETERS
kmartin@pepperdine.edu