

## Andy Pappas, Pacifica's Crab King

Written by Jean Bartlett, September, 2017

(A Pacifica Historical Society Project)

*(Note to readers from Jean Bartlett. On February 18, 2024, just six days shy of his 94th birthday, Pacifica's beloved Crab King Andy Pappas passed peacefully in Pacifica. Andy's fishing and crabbing escapades, and grand saltwater tales, as well as his great love of the city he called home since 1967, have left a forever smile on the hearts of all who knew him. This biography is my 2017 interview with Andy as it ran then.)*



Jean Bartlett photo

**Andy Pappas in his driveway, September, 2017.**

"I like to sit in my driveway and shoot the breeze with my neighbors," Andy Pappas not only notes but clearly lives. During this interview, part of which was conducted in his driveway, several of his neighbors came over to see what was going on and sit for a spell.

"She's interviewing me," Andy told them. "Though this interview can't take too long because I've got to watch Judge Judy. Ha! Ha! Just kidding!" ("Judge Judy" is a nationally syndicated television courtroom series which presents small, real-life claims cases for the real-life judge to dispense justice.)

Andy is not only known in his neighborhood, but all over Pacifica and beyond. His nickname is the "Crab King."

"Way back when, my nephew Jim and I would go out on the Pacifica Pier and catch the limit almost every day. That's how I got my nickname.

"One time I was in a department store in Seattle and this lady takes one look at me and says, 'Oh, you're the Crab King.' That happened to me when I was visiting New York. I was in an elevator when this guy says, 'Hey, it's the Crab King!' That happened in Lake Tahoe too. True stories!"

Andy has been catching crab off the Rev. Herschell Harkins Memorial Pacifica Pier since the Pier opened in 1973.

"Crab season usually starts the second Tuesday of November and runs through the end of June. For the exact opening date, check with our Pacifica bait shops. But I'm going to tell you right now, the first day of crabbing at the Pier can be like a day at a Giants game. Last year I pulled up the Saturday right after the season opened, and stayed in my car and took a look through my binoculars. It was shoulder to shoulder and bumper to bumper. My advice to the crabs on a weekend like that is run like hell!

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The story of Andy Pappas (page 2)

"I'm guessing people want to know what the best crab bait is. The most popular crab baits used are squid, mackerel and sardines. Some people use chicken but I always say, 'Do you ever see any chickens out in the water?'"

"The biggest crab I ever caught at the Pier was nine inches and I did not let that guy out of my sight. The best way to cook a crab is pretty simple. Bring the water to a boil, put some salt in there and cook it for 15 minutes. Then pull up a chair and do your duty."



Jean Bartlett photo

**Andy and a fellow crab king pose in the Pappas home in 2012, in front of an old *Pacifica Tribune* story on Andy. The Crab King has been featured in his local paper numerous times throughout the years.**

The longtime crabber and fisherman said while fishing on the Pacifica Pier is free, the Fish and Game officers visit frequently and check buckets and coolers. Not knowing the rules does not make one exempt from fines.

"Ten-bag limit for Dungeness crab and the minimum size is 5-3/4 inches. The red crabs, also known as rock crabs, can be four inches and you can catch a good amount, enough to feed your family. At the Pier you can keep the female crabs but most of us throw them back in the water. We want them to have a little hoochie coochie so there will always be plenty of crabs.

"Hey, you know what I always tell the crabbers at the Pier? 'Next time, bring me a ham sandwich!'"

Andy was a kid growing up in San Francisco when he started crabbing.

"We used to take the street car down to the Muni Pier (San Francisco Municipal Pier at the end of Van Ness Avenue) and I started crabbing there. I don't remember how old I was. But I do know that the first time I ever fished was with my big brother Pete. It was 1939 and I was 9. We went to San Francisco's Baker Beach to catch striped bass. I didn't catch anything that time, well no fish, just a huge love of

fishing. I caught my first fish at a place on 16th and 3rd in the City. Behind the Loop Lumber Company there was a pier and me fishing. I caught a perch. I learned from day one that whether you catch something or not, fishing or crabbing is peace of mind. And when you're older, you fish at all different times and get to see beautiful sunsets, beautiful moons and the stars at night. There is nothing like it."

Andy Pappas is the son of Steve Pappas and Annie Pappas. Born December 12, 1891, Steve Pappas was from Akrata, Greece. He arrived in San Francisco by way of Sydney, Australia, on May 14, 1914. According to his December 14, 1933 Petition for U.S. Citizenship, Steve's original name was Spiros Papageorgopoulos. Annie was born on August 13, 1897 in Itzehoe, Schleswig-Holstein, Germany. Her maiden name was Stahmer and her mother's maiden name was Beyer. Traveling with her family, Annie arrived in the United States through New York and entered San Francisco in August of 1898 or 1899. Annie and Steve were married in San Francisco on June 23, 1916.

Andy is the third of Steve and Annie's four children. His brother Pete was born in April of 1917, his sister Athena in June of 1920, Andy was born on February 24, 1930, and his brother John was born in September of 1931. "John and I are the only two left."



photo by Pete Pappas

With brother Pete behind the camera lens, Athena, Andy, dad Steve, John and mom Annie pose in front of their home in about 1935.

Andy was born on Gates Street in the San Francisco Community of Bernal Heights. At the age of 3, Andy and his family can be found on Shotwell Street in San Francisco's Mission District.

"But most of my childhood was spent at 1066 Florida Street in the Mission."

"During the Depression my father sold bananas from a horse-drawn wagon. Sometimes my mother would take on house cleaning jobs. Our place on Florida Street was a flat on the third floor and the rent was \$36 a month: three bedrooms, nice big kitchen. In those days on New Year's Eve, people used to bang on pots and pans through their door or window. I remember one New Year's Eve my mother went on the back porch to hit the pots and pans and a bullet went over her head and just missed her. I don't remember her doing that on the New Year's Eve after that or any New Year's Eve."

Andy's dad raised rabbits in the garden in the back and his mom grew some vegetables. Sometimes they went to 23rd and Folsom where food was given away, mostly beans. Once the hard times ended, Andy's dad went back to work as a chef. One of the restaurants he worked at was Dick's Diner on 23rd and Mission.

"My dad was a good cook. My mom was also a good cook. She made the best macaroni and cheese. In those days we also used to eat liver and onions. Very popular. I don't eat it now. Back then I loved it. My father made the best Greek soup (Avgolemono). It had chicken and rice and an egg on top. Really good. We had that every Sunday because we didn't have the bucks. Be sure to put that down. He used to make homemade wine down in the basement in oak barrels. Every Sunday dinner with the chicken soup, all the kids had a little glass of wine and you dipped your bread in it. That was a big deal."



Andy and his brother John, circa 1946.

Andy went to Bryant Elementary, Horace Mann Middle School and Mission High School. He graduated from Mission High in 1949.

"We had some great baseball players. One was Lloyd Dickey, he was a pitcher."

Lloyd played minor league baseball for the: Salt Lake City Bees, San Francisco Seals, Yakima Bears, Indianapolis Indians, San Diego Padres and the Seattle Rainiers. His baseball career ran from 1948 through 1956.

"I had a buddy at Mission High, Gus Triandos. He was Greek like me. He was a catcher with the New York Yankees (1953-1954). I remember one day I was crab fishing off the Muni Pier and he came out to talk to me. He told me he was going to be shipped out to the Yankees. He was kind of worried about going to New York so we talked about it for a while and of course he ended up going. That's a long time ago and that's the last time I saw him."

Following his time with the Yankees, Triandos played for: the Baltimore Orioles, 1956-1962; the Detroit Tigers, 1963; the Philadelphia Phillies, 1964-65; and the Houston Astros, 1965.

"I started working for Metz Cream Doughnut Company – 'Baked Fresh Every Day' – in high school. I used to walk from 1066 Florida Street all the way up to Mission High School on Dolores Street. We'd get out at 3:10 and I'd walk all the way back to 1066, then a half hour later I went to work at the bakery until 9 o'clock at night.

"At Metz Doughnuts, we were so famous for our French donuts that people would line up out front in their cars. It was across the street from the Roosevelt Theater and we sold our donuts for .38 cents a dozen. They were the best. I used to ice them. Henry Schneider was the chief owner. The donuts came out in a tray and my job was to fry them, ice them and put them on a rack. They sold almost before we were finished icing them. Everything was homemade – jelly donuts, snails, powder donuts and chocolate donuts. Henry made the best apple pie. He used to put some pineapple in it. We had a donut machine about 6 feet long, and the donuts would come down through a chute. My job was to put them in a rack and you had to keep up and make sure they weren't damaged.

"The bakery was at 2778 24th Street, phone: Mission 75736. I worked there on weekends too, seven in the morning until two in the afternoon. Then I cleaned up a little. My pay was \$1.50 per day and a bag of day old donuts. On Saturdays, after work, Henry loved playing the horses and we used to go to Bay

Meadows. He had box seats. My brother John also went. Henry would give me the money and write down what horses he wanted. I would place bets in the \$100 window and a lot of people would watch where I was in line to see what horses he was betting on. He won sometimes. The first horse I ever won on was called Happy Birthday. No kidding!"

Andy bought his first boat when he working at the bakery.

"Well, of course I did," he chuckled. "Fishing is in my blood. My first boat was Skippy. My next boat was Spiros. Then I got Andreas and my next boat was Happy Pappy."



Andy on his boat Happy Pappy, circa 1950.

Andy worked at Metz Doughnuts until May of 1951 when he was drafted.

"I was sent by the United States Army to Fort Ord in Monterey. Then I went to Fort Bliss, El Paso, Texas on the train. We were all nervous. 'What is going to happen to us?'

"We got off the train and they lined us all up to do roll call. The staff sergeant called everyone's name. He called out things like 'Atkins,' 'Collins,' and then he called, 'Mr. Potatoes.' He called it again, 'Mr. Potatoes.' Well I was next and I thought, 'What in the hell is he talking about?' Then he called the guy after me, let's call him, 'Peterson.'

"Finally he shouted, 'Did I get everybody?' I was scared as hell. 'No, you didn't get me,' I said. He said, 'What's your name? Step up!' I said, 'My name is Pappas.' And he said, 'From now on your name is Mr. Potatoes.' The staff sergeant was Hispanic and apparently if you take one "p" out of my last name you've got the Spanish word for potatoes. After that I was always, Mr. Potatoes."

After his training at Fort Bliss, Andy was shipped home for a couple of days. Then he headed to Seattle and shipped out to Korea on the Marine Adder. The Marine Adder made 17 voyages between March of 1951 through early September of 1953 to ports in Japan and South Korea. Andy arrived in Inchon "scared as hell."

"Then I was transferred to Kimpo Air Base near Seoul. They asked each of us what we did for a living and they decided to put me in the kitchen. But I didn't know doodily doo about cooking. But I knew how to do stuff from the bakery and I had seen my folks cook. I got to be pretty famous. I knew how to make cakes and donuts and they hadn't had any of that there. I made them for the colonel and the officers. I got to be in charge of the mess hall. I was a head cook. We worked one day, one day off. We came in at 1 p.m. to make dinner. Then we did breakfast and lunch. I had the key to the mess hall and we used to cheat sometimes. We used to come in and make some of the guys spam sandwiches. The cooks and the mailmen were pretty darn popular."

Andy started out as a private and then made corporal. The colonel in charge liked Andy's cooking. One of Andy's favorite colonel quotes is: "I know Pappas is on duty because that's the best stew I ever ate."

"One day the colonel entered the mess hall and told me I was now the mess sergeant. I made Sergeant First Class in 16 months. That's a record! I cooked for 165 people and stayed at the Air Base the entire time.

"All the cooks lived in a barrack by ourselves because we had to get up early in the morning. I had a houseboy and his name was Park Nam Young and he lived in Yeongdeungpo. He was probably 10 or 11. He used to come in and do all the washing and shine shoes. He got to be like a son. I used to send money home to my sister Athena and she would send clothes for Park Nam Young. He was the best dressed of all the houseboys. When I shipped home he came to say 'goodbye.' I got letters from him for a while. I still have some of them. We were family during the War."

When Andy came home he lived at his folks flat on Florida Street and went to work for J. Borg Building Supply out in the Mission.

"I eventually became part owner and I loved the job from the start. We were in the salvage business in the beginning. That's how we got started. We sold everything from lady's underwear on down."

Andy met and befriended a lot of Pacifica residents who came to his supply shop including Sam Mazza, who bought Pacifica's castle in the late 1950s, as well as the Denman family, who founded and still own the Shamrock Ranch in Pacifica.

"I stayed with my mom in the flat on Florida Street after my father passed in 1960. When I bought my first home in Westborough on Erin Place, my mother came and lived with me. And of course I went fishing every chance."



**Andy with a string of black bass caught at the Russian River in Forestville, CA, 1955.**

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The story of Andy Pappas (page 7)

"I met Vivian at J. Borg Building Supply when the shop was still at 251 South Van Ness. This is 1954 and it was love at first sight. She was wearing a blue and white polka dot dress and she came in to buy a wall heater. We dated for 13 years, although a lot of that was long distance. She had been married before and had a daughter Sandra. When she and I met, Vivian and Sandra were living with Vivian's mother in San Francisco. Vivian was working as a secretary for Bigelow Carpet Company and had been there for a long time. When the company moved to Nevada, she flew there during the week and came home on the weekends and we would spend Saturday and Sunday together. We used to go to Nick's here in Pacifica every Saturday night and have dinner.



**Vivian and Andy Pappas, 1968.**

"Funny story. I'd come home from J. Borg on Saturday and my mother would have dinner ready. Of course, I was going to take Vivian out in two hours. So I used to have two dinners. I put on a few pounds during that time. I couldn't say 'no' to my mom. She was looking forward to it too.

"When Vivian was working locally, I used to put signs on the road: "I Love Vivian."

On September 16, 1967, Andy Pappas married Vivian Meinzer in San Francisco. She was 41 and he was 37.

"I still surely miss both my girls. Sandra was born in July of 1946 and we lost her to breast cancer in December of 2008. She was such a nice person. I lost my Vivian in 2011 from the complications of Alzheimer's. There were some signs before, but that really came on in 2008 after Sandra died. I took care

of Vivian at home. One of the best and one of the hardest things I've ever done. There were times I didn't know if I would make it through the next day."

By this point in the interview, Andy and I moved into his living room which has a spectacular view of the Pacific Ocean and the beach side of the Pacific Manor District. His home deck is an easy visual for people traveling in and out of Pacifica on Highway 1. With the homeowner's approval, it is a favorite place for Pacifica residents to hang temporary banners. And always there is a U.S. flag waving proudly from the Pappas deck.

"It was my brother Pete who first introduced me to Pacifica in 1957. Fishing, of course. I used to fish right in front of Nick's Restaurant, one of my favorite places to fish."

Andy has a lot of fish tales.

"One day I was fishing in Pacifica with my trademark red, white and blue on my fishing rod, and this whale came by and took the whole thing - line, reel and rod. So somewhere out there is a whale carrying the red, white and blue!"

"One that's got to be in the top five was the time I wasn't even planning on going fishing. I'm at my house. We're having a party. I'm all dressed up. My brother Pete calls me on my CB radio and tells me he's fishing at the north end of Pacifica on the beach. I can see him from my house and he's running up and down.

"I jump on my motorcycle, in my suit, and head to shore. I'm just going to be there for a minute. I toss out my line and catch a 42-pound salmon immediately. I had to hitchhike home because you can't carry a 42-pound salmon on a motorcycle."

Another time Andy made the *Pacifica Tribune* after a 36-pound catch. Once again, it was Pete calling in with a surprise fishing report and Andy came running to do something about it.



1972. The fisherman and his 36-pound salmon catch, made the paper and struck a pose for the camera in Andy's driveway.



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"When Chris Hunter was the publisher and editor of the *Pacifica Tribune* (1990-2007), I used to send him a Letter to the Editor every fishing and crab season opening. I've met so many great people fishing and crabbing off of the Pacifica Pier, and frankly so many great fish and crabs, that you just got a share the news."

One of the best years for catching king salmon off the Pacifica Pier that Andy recalls was 2004.

"The Pier was loaded with anglers and everybody was catching something. 2005 and 2006 weren't so bad either.

"I caught a 30-32 pounder in 2006. One of the fisherman reeled in a 50-pounder. That salmon was an eye opener!"

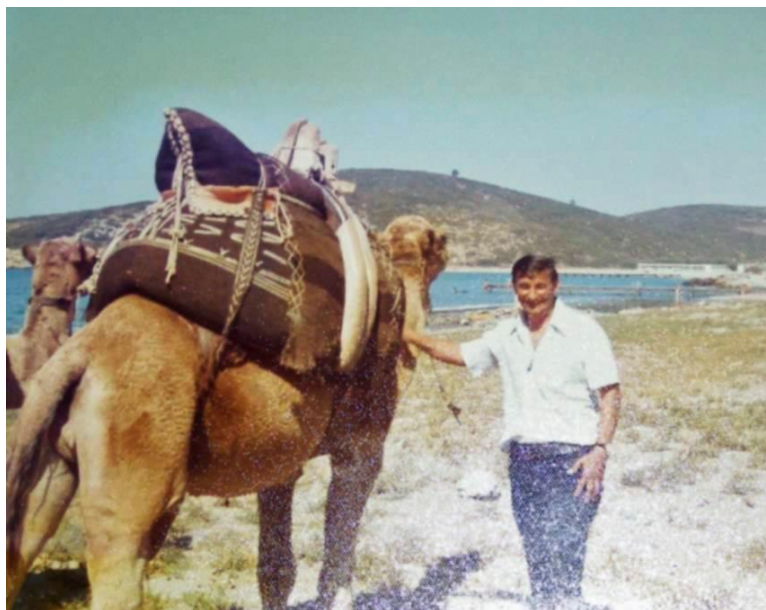
Also known as the "chinook," king salmon can reach up to 135 pounds. Most of the salmon caught off the Pier are in the 10-20 pound range. The chinook runs through Pacifica in the spring and summer, though the season is officially from April to November.

"The best sign to catch salmon is when the anchovies are in. You'll know they're there because seagulls and pelicans are diving in the water. The other sign for salmon are when people are jumping for joy on the Pier and hollering at someone to get the net. That's the hint to run to the Pier.

"When you catch that salmon, fry it or bake it and the results are delicious. Just add a little oregano and a little lemon."

Andy and Vivian bought their home overlooking the Pacific in 1967. They paid \$29,000 for it.

"I bought this house in 10 minutes. Vivian and I were living on Oceanside Drive, her house. We put a down payment on a house in Pacifica but they didn't fix something we wanted so we changed our minds. One day I came home from work and I was tired and Vivian told me, 'You've got to see this house.' I didn't want to go but when I get here, the living room drapes were closed and Vivian said to the real estate people, 'Could you open them, please?' And that was it. When people come to the house and look at my view they say, 'Oh, you're on vacation every day.'"



Speaking of vacation, Andy poses in Greece, 1973, on the Isle of Patmos.

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After 30 years with J. Borg, the building supply company went broke. Andy signed on with Goodman Lumber in San Francisco and worked another 10 years. Along the way and after he retired, he and Vivian did a lot of traveling, including to Greece, Italy, Turkey and Mexico. But one thing they did not do was go fishing together.

"My beautiful wife did not like crab or fish," Andy laughed. "She liked Lobster Thermidor and you know, that is pretty darn expensive."

Besides being Pacifica's Crab King, Andy also became the Birdman Charmer of Pacifica.

"In 1973, Vivian surprised me with two doves. We called them Andy and Vivian, the Love Birds. Up until that point, I had never owned a bird in my life but I loved those birds immediately."

Andy built the doves an aviary in the couple's backyard.

"It's about seven feet high and nine feet from left to right. In the very earliest days, before I became an expert at opening and closing the door, they flew off a couple of times. But they always came back. They liked the food. Then they had a family."



Jean Bartlett photo

**Andy at home with his bird family, 2012.**

By 2015, Andy had approximately 26 doves, some of them Ringneck Doves. That number climbed a little by 2017, and by the time of this interview, Andy had found a home for some of them with a bird rescue group. He's got about 10 now. "Just the right amount!"

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"I feed them every day and make sure they have fresh water. It's just regular bird feed and sometimes I throw in some bread. I clean their home at least twice a week and I always talk to them. When I hear a storm coming, I cover them up and they survive it just fine. Sometimes when I take that cover down, a few of them are sitting on nests. Romance is good for everyone."

Andy also feeds visiting sparrows and Blue Jays every day as well.

"They are all waiting for me when I step into the backyard. I give them bird food but the Blue Jays also get peanuts. They love those. And everyone gets along. They all know they will get their share. Nobody is left out."

Andy also has his dear friend Honey Girl. The tortoiseshell cat moved in with Andy not long after Vivian died.

"I've always loved cats. So did my mom. I remember we had a beautiful white cat when I was a kid and over the years, I've had a number of felines that were part of the family. And I'll tell you just like my wife Vivian and our beautiful city of Pacifica, Honey Girl and I pretty much fell for each other the moment we met."



Jean Bartlett photo

Andy and Honey Girl at home, 2012.

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There are so many things the Crab King is known for, including his generous neighborhood crab feeds and his home bird tours which he gives to local kids. His home garden has received "top summer garden honors" from the Fairmont Garden Association. Every year he works with children on the Pier to teach them how to fish. For a long time he was a part of POPS (Preserve Our Pier Supporters). "I'll always support the Pier," he noted. In 1994, Pacifica Mayor Ellen Castelli gave Andy a Commendation Plaque for flying the flags of a great number of countries in front of his home. "Pacifica should have a flag. Someone needs to get the ball rolling on that one."

He was a participant in the 2012 "Fishing for Words: the Pacifica Pier Poetry Walk." That event was created by Bay Area author, Pacifican and San Francisco State University creative writing professor Toni Mirosevich, in partnership with Pacifica's Environmental Family, to: "Celebrate the iconic—and sometimes ironic—Pacifica Pier."

Andy, as it turns out, is no stranger to poetry. Back in 2012, I interviewed the fisherman poet for the *Pacifica Tribune*.

"While I have written poetry, I never really thought about how good it makes a person feel," Andy said. "When I talked to Toni, I realized that when you write a poem or hear something that someone else has written that you like, it really warms the heart. And when you hear a poem that makes you feel good, you want to hear another."

His poem "Lost Pier Lovers" is a dedication to the many friends he has met throughout the years, all lovers of the Pier, who are now only a memory.

"While Vivian did not fish, she loved our beautiful Pacifica, the Pier and the ocean and all that Pacifica has to offer. And she would have loved the poetry on our Pier."



Vivian and Andy, 1994.

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In a prose work entitled "Incredibly Crabby," Andy wrote: "If the crab did not exist, the comic book would have to invent it. The crab is horrifyingly beautiful in a space-alien kind of way, clever and comic in its sideways scuttle, armored like a robot, defended by claws that bring to mind Popeye's forearms, and all-seeing with its complex eyes extended on stalks. What animal is better as a Pacific Northwest superhero?"

Andy said that he took Toni, the creator of the Pacifica Pier poetry event, along the Pier to meet all his good fishing buddies back in 2012. (Toni is the daughter of a fisherman.)

"You cannot tell by looking at somebody who they are inside," Andy noted in that earlier interview and wanted to reiterate in this interview. "Some of these guys can look pretty rugged. But what great people are out here and a lot of them have been fishing the Pier for a long time."

"From my living room and from my deck I get to see so much of the world's beauty: whales going by, dolphins, all kinds of birds, beautiful sunrises and sunsets, and always our extraordinary Pacific Ocean. And I'll tell you something, there are big ships and there are little ships, but do you know what the biggest ship of all is? Friendship. Be good to yourself. I'll see you at the Pier."



Jean Bartlett photo  
Andy and his view of Pacifica and the Pacific Ocean, 2010.



[Jean Bartlett](#) is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco.

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