

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Frank Wright

**Ed Ricketts Pal, Army Vet
and Monterey History Buff**

Frank Wright is a wealth of stories. A Berkeley native, he arrived on the Peninsula as a skinny young Army Private during World War II and met another recruit, Ed Ricketts, proprietor of the Pacific Biological Laboratories, close friend of author John Steinbeck and a pioneer in modern marine biology. Despite their two-decade age difference, the pair became good buddies, fueled by their mutual interest in ocean science. At 93, Wright is one of only a handful of people still around who knew Ricketts personally.

After the war, Wright returned to Cal to study marine biology ("because of Ed") but sidetracked into a successful career as a mortgage loan officer in Salinas. He has made his home in Carmel's Mission Fields neighborhood for many years.

In an O. Henry-esque twist of life, in the 1950s Wright fell in with a group of men who purchased his old pal's lab for use as a clubhouse. The group sold the building to the City of Monterey several years ago, but as one of three surviving club members, Wright retains the right to visit. "Frank is devoted to the memory and accomplishments of Ed Ricketts," says Cannery Row historian Michael Hemp, "and has made his remembrances and access to the lab available to anyone who has a serious interest in Ed."

Q: How did you meet Ricketts?

A: I'd studied marine biology at Cal, and knew the names of a lot of the ocean creepy-crawlies. When the Army assigned me to the Presidio of Monterey, Ed was there too, working as a "lab-man," processing medical tests for new draftees. We bonded on zoology.

Whenever I got a three-day pass, I would hang around Ed's lab on Ocean View Avenue [now Cannery Row] helping out, sipping Burgermeister Beer, philosophizing with the eclectic group of friends that surrounded Ricketts. We ate a lot of *Haliotis rufescens*, red abalone. My job was to tenderize the abs by pounding them with a mallet. The lab was my home away from home.

Q: What was he like?

A: Our friendship was remarkable. He was a great guy, easy to know, very witty and charming. Just a fun guy to be around. Calm,

soft spoken, wonderful sense of humor. He was 5'7" but I remember him as being 10'8".

As you probably know, Ed was a close friend of John Steinbeck's and was the model for "Doc" in "Cannery Row" and "Sweet Thursday." He became kind of famous for that and people were knocking on his door all the time asking "Are you Doc?" It drove him crazy but he was very polite. If people came, he talked to them. If they were interesting enough he asked them in. That's the kind of guy he was.

Q: How did your ownership of the lab come about?

A: Harlan Watkins was a Monterey High School English teacher who owned and lived in the lab after Ed died. He got married and his wife wasn't interested in living on Cannery Row—it was a gritty place in those days—so he put together a group of guys to purchase the property as a clubhouse. I was flattered to be invited to join.

We were a bunch of guys who agreed that we didn't like to join clubs. So we became a social group that got together for dinner. It started out as nine men, and at one point was up to around 25. There were guys from all walks of life; some had money, some didn't. But egos and rank were always checked at the door.

It was very special. A dinner in that place is like nothing else...it's magic.

Q: And now?

A: When we sold the building to the City of Monterey, it was with the caveat that the owners retain our keys and have access. At this point there are three keys left, mine being one. I'm not sure what the City plans to do with the lab after we're gone.

These days I show people around who have a genuine interest in Ed Ricketts. I tell a few stories and hopefully give them an understanding of just how huge his influence on the science of marine biology was. And of what a special, wonderful man he was as well.

—Michael Chatfield