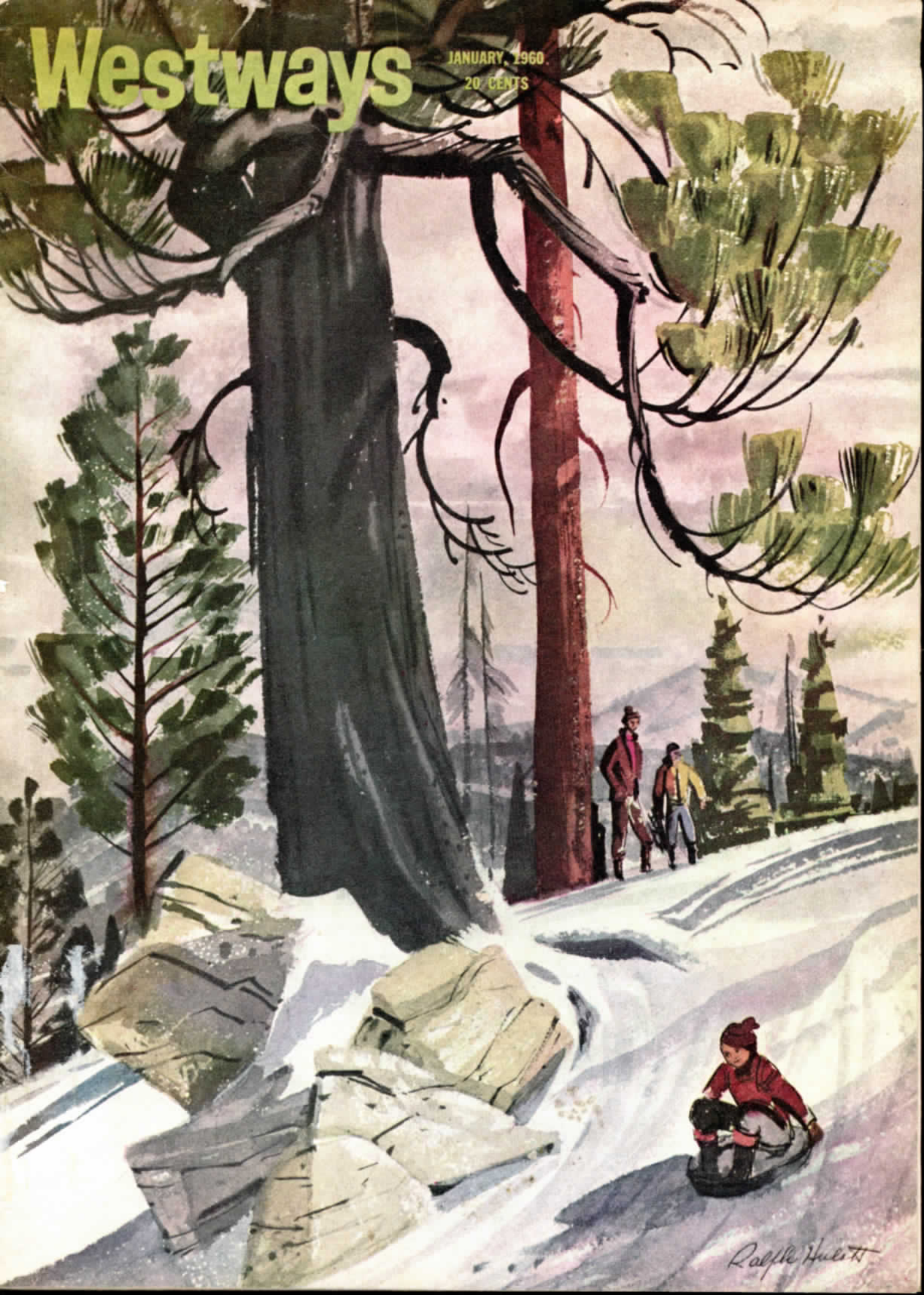


Westways

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20 CENTS



Ralph Hulst

THE ISTHMUS on Santa Catalina Island could have come right out of the pages of *Treasure Island*, it's so beautifully unreal.

At this point the island slims to its narrowest—about 600 yards. On the north shore is Union Bay, containing two small coves—Fourth of July Harbor and Fisherman's Harbor. These are comparatively shallow indentures. But on the south side is historic Catalina Harbor, a beautiful, landlocked basin.

The Isthmus itself, less than 100 feet above sea level, is about 300 yards long, with hills rising abruptly on the east and west.

Above the beaches the soil is dry and

isians on both sides, and there were some mighty active Donnybrooks.

California gold was playing a big part in the Union's war effort, for federal credit was low. Every possible measure was being taken to guard the gold cargoes out of San Francisco.

Then, about midway through the conflict, in 1863, prospectors began to overrun Santa Catalina Island, until then a sleepy pastoral locale off the coast. In Cherry Valley, Johnson's Cove and Silver Canyon were hundreds of claims for gold, silver and lead.

This activity on the island did little to assuage the anxiety of the pro-Union element on the mainland. They surmised that

to Captain West, the occupying force consisted of one subaltern, one assistant surgeon from the First California Volunteer Cavalry and eighty enlisted men.

The troops and their supplies were loaded aboard a vessel which proceeded across the channel and anchored 150 yards off the beach at Union Bay. From here, the soldiers were ferried ashore, and they stormed up the sandy strand on the alert.

But there were no Confederates! All they could find were farmers, stock raisers and miners. Well, not quite all—there were thousands of wild goats roaming over the heights, a few foxes and squirrels!

The troops bivouacked on the Isthmus, and on January 4, Lt. Col. James F. Cur-



By Ted Krec

powdery, covered with a heavy growth of dry grasses. Stately palms and eucalyptus trees dot the landscape. And it's quiet—unearthly quiet.

On this small neck of land was enacted one of the strangest dramas of California history—the old Army game of “hurry up and wait.”

It began during the Civil War. Bloody battles were raging in the eastern states, and they had their repercussions on the West Coast. Southern California had par-

the prospecting boom was merely a front to conceal Confederate efforts, a threat to the gold shipments or maybe even invasion!

So loud grew the clamor that on January 2, 1864, a company of Union infantry was dispatched from historic Drum Barracks in Wilmington, to occupy the island and assume military possession.

The troops selected were Capt. B. R. West's Company C, Fourth Regiment, California Voluntary Infantry. In addition

tis, Fourth District, Southern California, accompanied by a Captain Morris, Assistant Quartermaster, U. S. Volunteers, Wilmington Depot, arrived on the island to make a reconnaissance and select a suitable point for garrisoning the troops.

In his report to Lt. Col. R. C. Drum, Assistant Adjutant, General Headquarters, San Francisco, dated Jan. 12, 1864, Colonel Curtis gave full details of the situation on the island, a description of the terrain, its flora and fauna, and then said

• Catalina Harbor could not have looked very different in 1864, when Union troops were sent to protect the island from the Rebels

• The occupying forces came ashore at this cove in Union Bay. Ready to meet Confederates, they found only farmers, miners and wild goats



that the Isthmus was selected for garrison purposes. The company quarters authorized by the general were directed to be built near its center. Colonel Curtis observed that the area recently had been marked off in town lots and three shanties and a sheep corral had been built. These were ordered removed to make way for barracks.

Another observation in Colonel Curtis's report, possibly a hint to early-day sportsmen, was that fish were found in the waters in abundance and variety.

He was most generous in his praise of the island and its climate, remarking that it was "more salubrious than that of San Diego or other portions of California," the "fogs of the coast rarely reach the island," which he found about ten degrees warmer than the mainland, and that "no more fitting place could be found for a general hospital or depot for Indian prisoners."

The garrison got busy and erected barracks, almost in the center of the Isthmus area, and a twelve-pound field gun with ammunition was sent to command the entire Isthmus and both harbors at short range. This was inspired, no doubt, by Colonel Curtis's notation that "Catalina Harbor is landlocked and will float the largest warships. Ten or more could safely moor within it . . . A harbor safe as Catalina upon a coast almost destitute of them would be eagerly seized by any maritime enemy unless occupied by forces of the United States."

Fresh water was obtained by drilling a comparatively shallow well and an enrolling officer visited the island to list its occupants. Colonel Curtis recommended that the few farmers and ranchers be permitted to remain, to prevent their financial ruin, but he saw no great loss involved if the miners and prospectors should be removed.

After these initial activities, the garrison settled down to monotonous occupation. The soldiers hunted the wild goats for fresh meat and one can almost picture them frolicking on the beaches—for there was little of a military nature to occupy them.

The troops remained on the Isthmus through September 1864, when they closed the camp and returned to the mainland.

Strange as it may seem today—almost a century later—one of these barracks buildings still stands; and it's in regular use!

I learned of its existence from one of the Long Beach lifeguards, who visits the island with some regularity. The barracks building is now occupied by the Isthmus Yacht Club.

To get there, I boarded a Grumman Goose operated on a regular schedule by

the pier. It's a low, rambling structure about a quarter of a mile back from the Isthmus beach. A tree-lined road leads up from the beach, past the old pavilion, refreshment stands and bath house to the front of the building.

There it stands, exactly as it did almost a hundred years ago, right in the middle of the Isthmus—its front toward Union Bay and its back toward Catalina Harbor. Just beyond the northwest corner of the building is an old windmill which once pumped water. The vanes of the windmill lie flat now, no longer swinging in the breeze which comes through the eucalyptus trees. Signs on the west side of the barracks and on the windmill tell the story of the occupation in a few sentences.

There are no mementoes of the occupation inside the building, which has been renovated for yacht club purposes.

A few electric wires and an occasional jeep churning up the powdery dust are the only concessions to modern times.

From down on the beach you can hear an occasional happy shout from a young bather cavorting in the bay—otherwise it's so quiet you can hear the click of your camera shutter.

The Union troops weren't the first to occupy the Isthmus. Years ago the Indians were there in large numbers, as evidenced by excavations in the area of Union Bay. Near the water line skeletons and artifacts have been brought to light.

But it's very possible that this Civil War activity may have been the last big-scale operation, for with the advent of the airplane, Catalina is only minutes from the mainland, obviating the necessity of occupation.

Standing there in the silence near the old barracks building and beside the aged windmill, one can almost recreate the occupation. You can see the whole "stage" from this point—from Union Bay where they landed, to Catalina Harbor where they patrolled.

And with a little imagination you can almost see a column of blue-clad infantry marching along in the dust cloud kicked up by that passing jeep.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR



• An old windmill near the barracks building no longer turns. It bears a sign telling of the historic events

Avalon Air Transport from Long Beach Municipal Airport. About twenty minutes later, Pilot Warren Stoner landed smoothly in Avalon Bay. There I disembarked and caught the *Blanche W.*, a commodious vessel which makes regular tourist cruises to the Two Harbors area. About an hour and ten minutes later, we were tied up at Two Harbors.

You can see the barracks building from

• Now used by a yacht club, the renovated building in the center of the Isthmus looks more like a farmhouse than a military barracks



• The soldiers landed here on January 2, 1864, establishing probably one of the most uneventful beachheads in American military history

