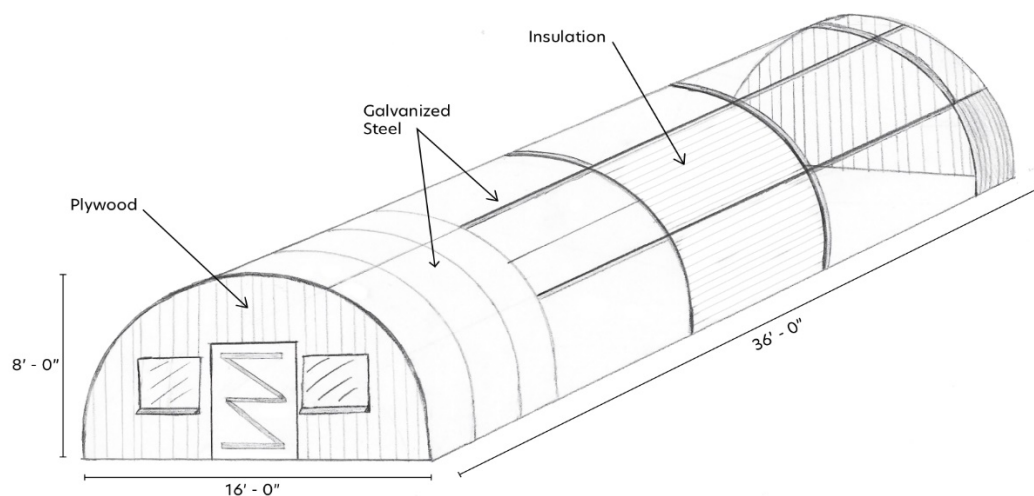


HIDDEN HISTORY: THE QUONSET HUTS OF MORRO BAY

What is a Quonset hut?

Beginning in 1941, in the middle of World War II, Quonset huts were first introduced as a housing solution for the United States Navy, who were in need of an “all-purpose, lightweight building that could be shipped anywhere and assembled without skilled labor.”¹ Named after Quonset Point in Davisville, Rhode Island where they were first constructed, Quonset huts are semi-circular housing structures, made out of corrugated or galvanized steel enclosed by plywood walls with doors and windows on the ends. The standard measurements of each hut included a base of sixteen feet by thirty-six feet, with semi-circular walls with an eight-foot radius (see Figure 1).² Their simplistic structures meant that assembly required little to no technical skill and made the structures extremely adaptable, allowing the United States Navy to utilize the huts as anything from offices to latrines to housing units.³ Additionally, since the structure itself is essentially a metal shell placed onto wood or concrete flooring, Quonset huts are very easy to disassemble and transport to wherever they may be needed.



Origins of Quonset huts in Morro Bay
Quonset huts started to appear all over Morro Bay during World War II. They were



especially common at the Morro Bay Base where Navy, Coast Guard, and Army troops practiced amphibious training, which can be seen in the image to the left. According to an article published in the *San Luis Obispo Tribune* newspaper in June 1944, the base became known as the U.S. Naval

Figure 2: U.S. Naval Amphibious Training Base, Morro Bay circa 1940.

Image courtesy of Morro Bay (Images of America).
Stimage, Raityn. "What is a Quonset Hut." *WorldAtlas*, 3 Feb. 2018, www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-is-a-quonset-hut.html.

³ Stimage.

tion, 26 Mar. 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quonset_hut.

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Amphibious Training Base, Morro Bay,⁴ and was filled with rows of Quonset huts that served different uses while the troops were training.⁵ Most often, the huts were set up as barracks and sleeping quarters to house trainees at the base. The Quonset huts at the Morro Bay base, “incidentally, are the same type [to those found] in South Pacific Islands which have been captured by similar amphibious trained troops, some of who may have been trained at Morro Bay.”⁶

Post-WWII Use

After World War II had ended and the U.S. Naval Base was no longer active in Morro Bay, the War Assets Administration began a program that sold the Quonset huts to veterans, and eventually civilians. In response to the “housing shortage” in San Luis Obispo after WWII had ended, the War Assets Administration provided “Quonset huts as one answer to the house shortage” by making purchase and shipping of the huts available to veterans who were searching for a post-war residence.⁷ One example of these sales to civilians can be found detailed in the SLO Telegram Tribune from November 6, 1947. The members of the 4-H Club of Morro Bay in the fall of 1947 fundraised

enough money to “buy a surplus Quonset hut from the Morro Bay school district, which had obtained it from the nearby naval base” and converted it into a clubroom for their meetings and events.⁸



Figure 4: Side view of the Quonset hut located on Embarcadero Street. (Taken by Riley Mete)



Figure 3: Construction of a Quonset Hut.
Image courtesy of quonset-huts.blogspot.com.

Where are they now?

Walking down Embarcadero Street in downtown Morro Bay, there is a noticeably large Quonset hut across the street from the beachfront distinguished by its curved body shape and tan color. With no indication of its history or usage, the hut blends into Morro Bay’s seemingly quiet past. This particular hut, however, has seen it all. According to the current owners of the Quonset hut, Mr. Thomas and his family, this particular building had been used for many purposes in the past, including storage of “bags of dog food... and as a bus barn when Morro Bay didn’t have a high school and [all the

⁴ “Activities of Morro Bay Amphibious Base Described.” *San Luis Obispo Telegram Tribune* 10 Jun. 1944.

⁵ Castle, Roger, and Gary Ream. *Morro Bay (Images of America)*. Arcadia Publishing SC, 2006.

⁶ “Activities of Morro Bay Amphibious Base Described.”

⁷ “Quonset hut is the answer to House Shortage.” *San Luis Obispo Telegram Tribune* 27 Jul. 1946.

⁸ “Morro Bay 4-H Grows Rapidly.” *San Luis Obispo Telegram Tribune* 6 Nov. 1947.

students] went to San Luis [high school].” At one point, previous owners even “cut big doors in the side of [the hut]. After that, a couple of sailboats were built inside”. Today, Mr. Thomas and his family run the Shell Shop just down the street from the hut and use it as a storage warehouse for their merchandise. Mr. Thomas mentioned one commonly asked question is how the hut got all the way to the end of Embarcadero Street. As it turns out, the original owner already had ownership of the land and when they bought the Quonset hut, after WWII, they decided to ship the pieces there.⁹

Another Quonset hut that can be found in Morro Bay is off of Main Street. This hut was transformed into an antique shop, Morro Bay Antiques, and has been renovated over the years. Chris Jules, the owner of the shop, mentioned that “the unique front of the shop was built onto the Quonset hut to give it an old 40s art deco look, but it was constructed in the 80s and the original hut shape is still preserved.”¹⁰ If you are wanting to take a look inside one of these unique huts, Morro Bay Antiques is the perfect place to go!

As you walk around Morro Bay you might stumble across one of these historical shelters. Take a moment to reflect on their rich history and all the lives that they have been a part of. As the Quonset huts show, Morro Bay might seem like a small, quiet town but behind the sunny beaches and friendly faces lies a whole world of history. Keep an eye open for other huts around the town, you might be surprised where you will find them.

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⁹ Thomas, David. Personal Interview. 28 Apr. 2019.

¹⁰ Jules, Chris. Personal Interview 28 Apr. 2019.