



The Couple That Dove Together

Alfred "Al" and Norma Hanson married in 1949 and spent most of their working lives together in hard hat diving gear. They had two children. In the brief TV series of 1958, "Danger is My Business" that featured people in dangerous occupations, they both played themselves as "salvage divers."

Al and Norma were both much more than salvage divers, though that was and is a dangerous job. Each went on to work on the frontier of deep ocean diving as a job and contributed to its safety and effectiveness.

Al had a yen for diving as a boy in Oregon and got a real taste of it working at the Kaiser Shipyard near San Francisco during World War II where he dived for tools overboard in used equipment. When he learned about the hard hat abalone divers of the central coast he knew what he wanted to do: move down to Morro Bay and become a commercial abalone fisherman. He had agreed to purchase a dive boat and was on his way down to Morro Bay on August 20, 1945, the same day abalone fishery pioneer Bill Pierce died in a diving accident.

Al worked as an abalone diver and owned his own processing shop in Cambria to market his catch as Hanson Fisheries product. But he left his mark through a number of innovations in diving gear that made the job a lot safer. The photo does not show the modifications he introduced in the helmet—telephone to the surface; better visibility; a safer lifeline. It does show the small ‘bail out’ bottle attached to the waist of both Al and Norma’s suits. This was filled with compressed air and attached to the diver’s breast plate so if the air supply was cut off the air could be released into the suit. The suit would blow up like a bubble and shoot the diver to the surface. Later in an accident where his air line was cut, the bail out bottle saved Al’s life. As Steve Rebeck puts it, “Al was killed multiple times...but always skillfully found a way to survive.”

Norma was a working diver, the second woman to join the Piledrivers, Bridge & Dockworkers Union where she worked on harbor maintenance and safety inspections below sea level. But she’s also well known for her entertainment of passengers of glass bottom boats at Catalina Island where both she and Al would dive over and over as the boats passed by (even when a great white shark threatened them!). In 1955 she was the uncredited actor playing the sea monster in “The Phantom from 10,000 Leagues.” Norma was inducted into the Women Divers Hall of Fame in 2001.

Happy Valentine’s Day!

(Thanks to Steve Rebeck for information on the Hansons and for sharing the Glen Bickford photo.)