

Ocean swimmer chronicling his beloved Dolphin Club, a home with â??soulâ?? for eccentrics who like their water icy

## Description

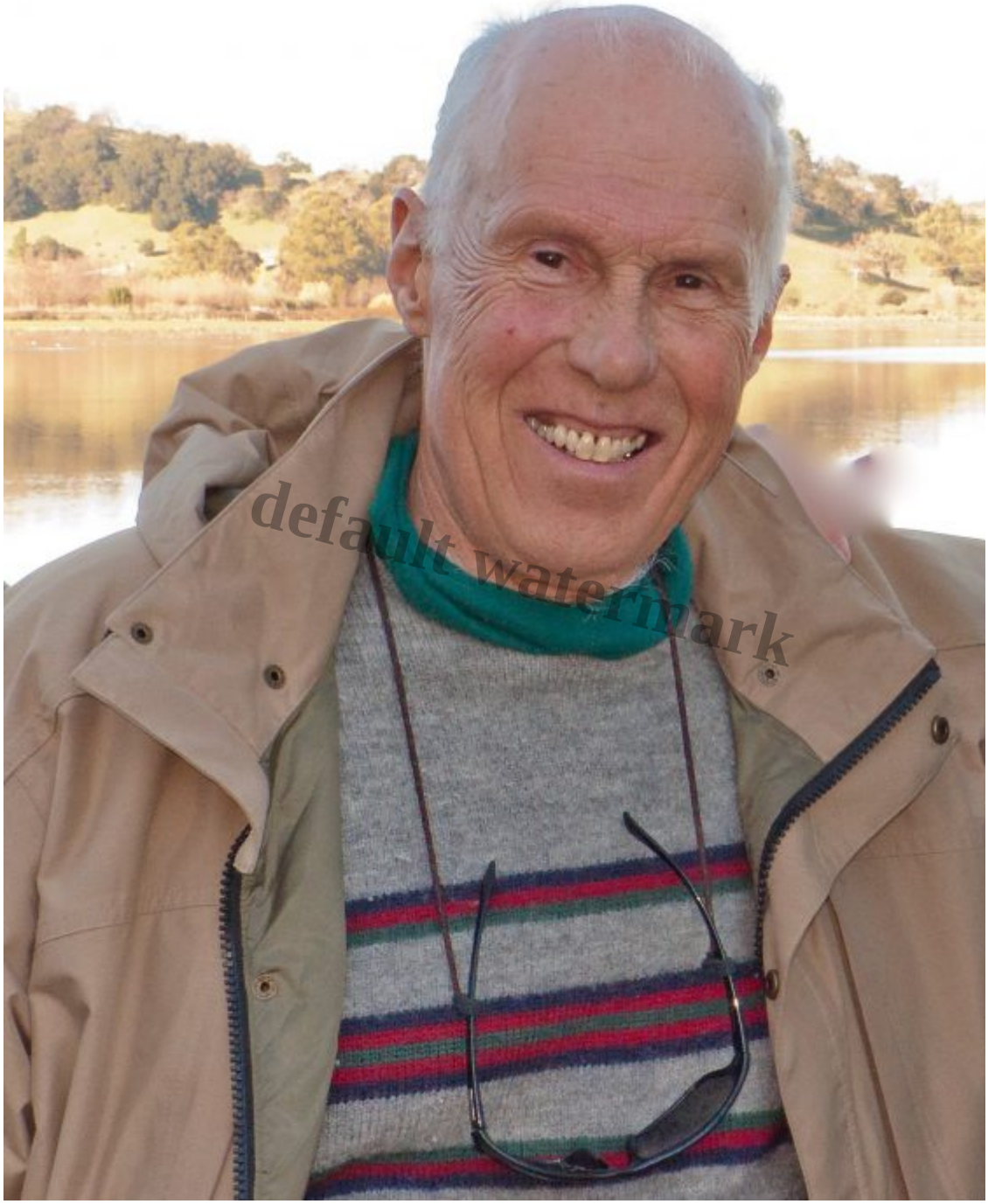
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Donâ??t talk to 85-year-old Sidney (Sid) Hollister about retirement. Heâ??s not ready, not while the pages of an unfinished manuscript on the early days of his beloved Dolphin Club crowd his desk. And not while there are still many dips in the icy waters of San Francisco Bay to come.

Hollister, a gig worker before â??gig workerâ?• entered our vocabulary, has been a writer, editor, translator, potter, photographer and film instructor. He admits he wasnâ??t as diligent about building a career as he might have been. â??I only knew I didnâ??t want a job where I had to sit down all day.â?•

## Chats in the sauna

Hollister isnâ??t sitting around much these days. Although heâ??s no longer up for a sprint from Alcatraz, he still spends long hours swimming and working out at the Dolphin Club, writing and having long, heartfelt conversations in the club sauna.




A childhood near the Atlantic introduced Hollister to ocean swimming. (Photos courtesy of Sid Hollister.)

â??Sid knows everybody. Some people just swim and leave, they donâ??t even think of striking up a conversation,â?• said Laura Atkins, a fellow swim enthusiast who met Hollister at the Dolphin Club. â??Sid has time to talk with everybody.â?•

A childhood near the Atlantic introduced Hollister to ocean swimming. But it was only when a Bay Area doctor suggested the symmetry of swimming as a treatment for his ailing back that he pursued his hobby in earnest. After a friend introduced Hollister to the Dolphin Club, his ex-wife gifted him with

membership. â??It was the best gift I ever received,â?• said Hollister, who lives in North Beach.

He mastered the Polar Bear Challenge twice, a designation given to members who swim 40 miles in the three months from winter solstice to the beginning of spring. He probably wonâ??t do that again. At his age, heâ??s become more sensitive to cold temperatures. â??The Pacific Ocean is always cold. Even when itâ??s warm, itâ??s cold.â?•

Heâ??s made the swim from Alcatraz and completed the Golden Gate Bridge swim five times. â??Commercial firms now sponsor swimming trips under the bridge in September and October when the water is warmer and calmer. Theyâ??ve made it so crowded itâ??s dangerous,â?• Hollister said. â??A guy drownedâ??not one of oursâ??and nobody could get to him.â?•

## Magical moments

Hollister usually swims in the late afternoon, those â??magical moments between daylight and evening when the sun is setting. This last November was a magical time, no rain, no wind. Day after day, the water was calm like burnished glass. We all recognized it was an enchanted time to swim.â?•

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But while he joined the club to swim, itâ??s those â??long healing hours in the saunaâ?• that sustain him emotionally. The sauna and the stories the men share after a cold swim are where Hollister found community. â??Being in this place creates this bond. We recognize weâ??re all eccentric by being here. Who else but eccentrics would swim in such cold water?â?•




Hollister, who has a masterâ??s in film studies and taught at the University of California, Davis, never wanted a job where he had to sit all day. (Photo by Sussane Friedich.)

â??Sid is unique,â?• said Atkins. â??Some people excuse themselves because of age. Sid never does; he still puts himself out there. Heâ??s at the club most every day.â?• And like Hollister, she believes that the best part of the club is getting to know oneâ??s fellow members.

The Dolphin Club was founded in 1877, making it the second oldest club in San Francisco. Only the chess club at the Mechanics Institute is older. About 1,600 members belong to the club, 200 of whom Hollister said regularly row and swim. Others come to exercise and catch up with friends.

## A club for all

Located in a white, two-story, wooden building with blue trim at the end of Jefferson Street bordering the Bay, the first floor houses the workout room, a small kitchen and wooden boats used for rowing practice and to accompany those who swim beyond Aquatic Park Cove. Locker rooms, meeting rooms and saunas are on the second floor. A deck and a pier are out back, along with a small beach shared

with the South End Rowing Club. During the cold months of winter, theyâ??re virtually empty, but good weather brings out parties and barbecues.

The club attracts people of all ages, ethnicity, religions and classes. You can be eccentric here, Hollister said, a welcome change from the class-conscious rigidity of his small-town boyhood.



Bayside at the Dolphin Club. (Photo courtesy of dolphinclub.org.)

Hollister grew up in West Hartford, Conn., a modest New England community. The younger of two sons, his family spent summers by the Atlantic Ocean where Hollister remembers walking around in â??a wool bathing suit that never dried.â?•

Hollister graduated from Loomis, an all-male, private prep school. After getting a bachelorâ??s degree from Yale in European history, he moved to San Francisco. Why San Francisco? â??It was the most foreign place I could get to with the money I had,â?• he said.

A masterâ??s degree in film studies from San Francisco State University led to jobs teaching film at the University of California, Davis, and the Bay Area Video Coalition. For 17 years, he was a volunteer driver for the San Francisco International Film Festival and wrote reviews for their program guide. He has been involved with the San Francisco International Ocean Film Festival. as a member of its screening committee almost from its start 18 years ago.

## A special place

He put that experience to use facilitating a neighborhood film group until the pandemic shut it down. But heâ??s still writing and hanging out at the Dolphin Club, swimming when the water temperature reaches 53 degrees or working out in the exercise room when it doesnâ??t. Followed by time in the sauna.

After seeing and admiring some of Hollisterâ??s photography, Atkins hung a selection of his work in her latest exhibit at Sweetieâ??s Art Bar in North Beach, where she works. His work was recently exhibited at the Third Annual Dolphin Club Art Show. Heâ??s planning other events for the club like sharing personal stories and a reading of his new book

â??I donâ??t know what Iâ??d do without the Dolphin Club. This place has a soul. Itâ??s the only place I ever joined where I feel I belong. It is a special place.â?•

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