

BLUE & GOLD'S REMARKABLE 40 YEARS ON THE BAY

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Photo by Joel Williams

BY JOEL WILLIAMS

This month, Blue & Gold Fleet is celebrating 40 remarkable years of ferry and water excursion services on San Francisco Bay. The company was founded by Roger Murphy and developer Warren Simmons at the same time as PIER 39 launched operations in 1979.

The company started by providing pleasure cruises from PIER 39's West Marina with a passenger vessel, *Oski*, named after the UC Berkeley mascot, and soon grew to three boats. (The Blue & Gold name also comes from Simmons' alma mater; the main competition at the time, the Red & White Fleet, was flying Stanford's colors.)

To get a true feel for the history of Blue & Gold Fleet, *Bay Crossings* visited co-founder Roger Murphy's son, Patrick Murphy, who was 12 years old when he boarded the first Bay cruise that Blue & Gold ran in May 1979. In 1982, at age 15, he started working for the company as a summer job, mostly working in the ticket booth. He continued working part-time through college, eventually becoming a full-time employee in 1989.

"My father felt like you had to work your way up on to the boats," Murphy said. Patrick got his captain's license in 1995 and worked in the wheelhouse for an additional 10 years until 2005. Then, he transitioned to the front office, first as an operations manager, moving up to director of operations and finally becoming the president of the company in 2017.

The family environment is pervasive at Blue & Gold Fleet even if your last name is not Murphy. "I'm so proud of our workforce," said Murphy. "When we started, it really was family oriented. My father hired three or four maritime people that he had met in the

industry—but the rest were my brothers and their friends and that family culture remains today.” Blue & Gold Fleet has gone from 20 employees to over 250 today. “But I still feel there is a family atmosphere,” Murphy said.

His father was well known for promoting from within and mentoring his employees, particularly encouraging woman and people of color to study for captain’s licenses. In fact, Blue & Gold Fleet currently employs more female captains than anyone else on the Bay.

“We have so many captains that have started out as deckhands and ticket sellers that have worked themselves onto the vessels,” said Murphy. “Even photo sellers have worked their way up the ranks to captain at Blue & Gold Fleet.”

After years of running pleasure and charter cruises, Blue & Gold Fleet began providing ferry service in 1991 with Oakland/Alameda and added the Vallejo route in 1994. These were contracted service by the cities of Alameda and Vallejo, as there was no government agency overseeing operations at that time.

In June 1997, Blue & Gold Fleet made a deal with Red & White Fleet to take over approximately 70 percent of Red & White’s assets—including service to Alcatraz Island as well as ferry services to Sausalito, Tiburon and Angel Island. During this period, Blue & Gold was omnipresent around Fisherman’s Wharf as it ran extensive operations out of the Pier 41 offices and docks. Alcatraz service alone accounted for several thousand passengers every day.

Alcatraz Island is run by the National Park Service, so ferry service to the island requires a federal contract. When the Alcatraz ferry operations contract came up for public bid in 2005, Hornblower Cruises won the contract over Blue & Gold Fleet and many changes ensued. In September 2006, Blue & Gold was forced to lay off 70 employees, sell a few of its vessels and move out of its waterfront office space on Pier 41.

There were some silver linings, however. “We began refocusing our energy back to what our original model was, which was providing Bay cruise services like we did in 1979. And 2007 still remains today as our best year as far as Bay cruises,” said Murphy.

When the Water Emergency Transit Authority (WETA) was established in 2011, Blue & Gold Fleet won the public contract to operate all its ferry services. Blue & Gold now runs the largest fleet on the West Coast, with seven pleasure and charter vessels along San Francisco Bay Ferry’s fleet of 14 ferryboats, which is expected to grow to 16 by the end of the year. As a matter of fact, several of the management staff at WETA now are former Blue & Gold employees. “It’s a validation that we are doing a really good job in my mind,” said Murphy.

The WETA contract also allowed Blue & Gold Fleet to return to its waterfront offices at Pier 41, where the company remains today. Blue & Gold is also still affiliated with PIER 39, which is a big plus as it attracts close to 15 million visitors a year. “Blue & Gold carries four million passengers annually. The operations required to do that are phenomenal,” said PIER 39 Vice President of Marketing Sue Muzzin. “It’s a fine-tuned machine.”

Taylor Safford, former Blue & Gold Fleet president and current president of PIER 39, summed things up like this: "I am tremendously proud of how far Blue & Gold Fleet has come in its 40 years of operation. From its beginnings as a Bay cruise tour provider out of PIER 39 to running the largest fleet of vessels on the west coast of the United States, Blue & Gold Fleet delivers every day on its promise to connect riders with the incredible beauty of the San Francisco Bay."



Current Blue & Gold Fleet President Patrick Murphy with outgoing Blue & Gold President Carolyn Horgan just before her retirement in 2017. Photo by Joel Williams



For 40 years, Blue & Gold Fleet has been providing visitors and locals alike with fabulous opportunities to enjoy adventures on the spectacular waters of the San Francisco Bay. Photo by Joel Williams