

Sea Beach Hotel and Its Gardens were Equal Landmarks

By Ross Eric Gibson

In the 1890s, the castle-like Sea Beach Hotel was listed among the state's top seven coastal resorts, in a sprawling style of Victorian construction called "rambles." These included the "Piedmont," "Cliff House," "10 Capitola," "Del Monte," "Manhattan Beach," and "Coronado." The Sea Beach gardens were an equal landmark to the hotel, with horticultural features that made them world famous.



The Sea Beach Hotel around 1908. The street car at the base of the hotel was west-bound on Beach Street. RAP-ed.

The hotel was built on Beach Hill in the 1870s by S.A. Hall, the former ship builder who built Soquel Congregational Church. He named it the Ocean View House after the westside racetrack. Hotel grounds were bounded by Beach, Second, Main and Drift Way.

In 1882 it was renamed the Douglas House after its new owner, a Chicago artist who enlarged it to 32 rooms with a third story. Douglas House soon started its fabled collection of California paintings. He sold the hotel to D.K. Abeel in 1886, who leased it to John T. Sullivan.

The barn-like hotel had been a money-loser, so the hotel was moved back toward Second Street, and remodeled with Queen Anne towers, porches, and art shingles. Sullivan named it the Sea Beach Hotel, with

tennis and croquet courts in the back. Botanist Sullivan replaced the front lawn with vast floral gardens of his design, including his own hybrid varieties. Abeel purchased the old Powderworks warehouse at Main and Second streets, whose bricks and 50,000 feet of lumber were dismantled, to construct a new hotel wing.

Sullivan regarded San Diego's "Coronado Hotel" as the finest prototype, which architect G.W. Page emulated in a castle-like Queen Anne with turrets. The white Sea Beach had a top floor of redwood color shingles, trimmed with a belt of honey-oak color. Elevators served the 170 guest rooms, each having a bedroom, parlor, bathroom, fireplace, electric lights and telephone.

One entered the lobby from the top of the hill, which from Beach Street was actually the second floor. An immense dining hall and dining porch overlooked the bay on this floor. The kitchen was excavated into the hillside, with a mini-railway to bring in supplies and send food to the dining room.

Its chefs came from Hotel Del Monte and Chicago's Palmer House, and for special occasions served nine-course meals.

A "Paris Opera" staircase descended from the lobby into a ballroom a bit larger than the St. George Hotel lot. One end had a stage, and the other a wall of windows looking out on the bay and bath houses. Dance was taught during the day, and every evening during the summer George W. Parkman's orchestra played, performing local songs like "The Sea Beach March." The ballroom also hosted conventions, exhibits, shows, and high school dances.

Those entertained here included royalty, two U.S. presidents (Harrison and Roosevelt), officers of the Atlantic Fleet, Thomas Edison's son, Andrew Carnegie, William Randolph Hearst, leading artists and writers, and Nob Hill socialites.

Santa Cruzan Rudolph Ulrich became superintendent of landscape design for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, and contracted with Sullivan to use plantings from the Sea Beach gardens. This brought John Thorp to Santa Cruz, chief of the fair's floral department, to also do exhibits for the Botanical Pavilion. He was so amazed at the varieties of pelargoniums Sullivan developed, that he brought a New York seed company to catalog 40 varieties, given names like "Sea Beach Beauty," "Pride of Santa Cruz," "Loma Prieta," and "J.T. Sullivan." The company sold the seeds worldwide as the Sullivan Collection, with the Sea Beach Gardens on each pack. The gardens were praised by visitors John Muir and Luther Burbank.

In 1898, Sullivan had to give up the hotel due to illness. Poor management following his departure almost led to the end of the hotel in 1901, until Fred Swanton came to the rescue, with the Sea Beach managed by the St. George Hotel and J.J.C. Leonard. This proved a boon to booking any size convention between the two hotels. The Sea Beach was enlarged, the ballroom became a banquet hall, and a new ballroom was built on Second Street. Its popularity increased as boardwalk attractions were built nearby.

Then in 1912 the hotel burned to the ground, with the heat felt by onlookers two blocks away. Only the new ballroom survived, and salvaged paintings became part of the De Young Museum.

Santa Cruz was never again a first-class destination. But the saddest sight was the hotel gardener wandering aimlessly through the grounds, mourning over the death of the landmark gardens.

Sources

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