

The Little Island That Could: Balboa Island, Now and Then

- [Hadley Meares](#)

June 4, 2015



In this undated photo, pedestrians walk along Marine Avenue on Balboa Island. | Photo: Courtesy [Balboa Island Museum & Historical Society](#)

Walking around Balboa Island feels like a [tour](#) of the good life, American preppy style. In true American fashion, parking is not pleasant, not surprising on a tiny island packed with tourists and satellite citizens. But once my friend and I get out of the car, we are utterly charmed by the seaside scene we see.

We stroll down Marine Street, a quaint downtown packed with shops filled with long, patterned dresses and seashell earrings. Mom and pop operations sell the island's most famous export: the Balboa Bar, a stick of ice cream dipped in chocolate and rolled in candy. On residential streets named after gemstones, whimsical beach cottages painted in bright colors crowd close together, each seemingly obligated to fly a flag for either USC or UCLA. Newport Bay is dotted with private piers, and sailboats are moored in Newport Bay. Older couples sit on miniature porches and greet strangers as they pass. Even the little ferry that chugs back and forth from the island to the mainland looks like some kind of toy from a [Martha Stewart](#) catalogue. Everything seems so clean, so above-board, so established. It is hard to believe that a little over a century ago this Mayberry of vacation homes and sunshine was just a mosquito infested mudflat, which one Newport Mayor unceremoniously referred to as a "dump."



Detail of Marine Avenue on Balboa Island today. | Photo: [Ryan Dickey](#)/Flickr/[Creative Commons License](#)

William S. Collins was a man with a vision. During the first decade of the 1900s, the unspoiled beaches of Orange County were being rapidly snapped up by developers, who were eager to [create](#) new towns to make use of new transportation opportunities. In 1902, Collins and his business partner bought approximately 900 acres of land centered around Newport Bay, including half of Balboa Peninsula and the swamplands that would become Balboa Island (named after Vasco Nunez de Balboa, who discovered the Pacific Ocean for Europe in 1513).

They teamed together with Pacific Electric baron Henry E. Huntington to form the [Newport Beach](#) Company. In 1905, Huntington extended his red car service to the new town of Newport. Collins began developing the mainland and peninsula, but his real dream was to create a series of small, luxury islands in the middle of the bay. It seemed like a pipe dream. But a dredger was purchased and an island was formed with bay sand and silt. What became Balboa Island was:



An archival photo of Balboa Island, an undeveloped Orange County mainland in the background. | Photo: Courtesy [Balboa Island Museum & Historical Society](#)

Creating a man-made island was -- unsurprisingly -- tricky business. In 1909, an L.A. Times article, which lauded the new Balboa Peninsula and Newport developments, explained progress at Balboa Island had "been somewhat delayed by the collapse of one hundred feet of sea wall, which was built too hurriedly. The dredger is rushing the work of deepening the channel in front of the isle and is working day and night with a large force of men." However, construction continued, and the Balboa Island Realty Company briskly sold the 1,300 lots to starry eyed Southern Californians, particularly upper crust folks from Pasadena. Waterfront lots sold for around \$650, while inland lots sold for \$350. Collin's realtors promised many amenities as an enticement to buy this seemingly unenticing property:

Substantial improvements are being established and a large cement bulkhead is being constructed around the entire island. Immediately inside the bulkhead, a broad promenade will be built. One of the most important proposed improvements for the island is a hotel which will cost in the neighborhood of \$35,000. The company has launched a ferry boat which will be used for transportation purposes between the island and the terminal of the Pacific Electric Cars. The ferry ... will easily carry four large automobiles in addition to 30 passengers. The inside trimmings are mahogany. A fine large observation deck is a particularly desirable feature ... The trip from the island to the mainland, a distance of 680 feet, is made in 4 minutes. (LA Times, June 27, 1909)

Collins sold off his other holdings to focus on this "pet project." He planned to make his man made utopia his home. He had a smaller island created next to Balboa Island that he named, appropriately, "Collins Island." On it, he built a "magnificent mission residence" of all concrete, designed by the firm of Dennis and Farwell. Another tiny island, now called "Little Balboa Island," was also created, supposedly to house a never built amusement park. By 1910, the island was open to the public, and though its amenities were primitive, it got rave reviews from a visitor from the L.A. Times:

In the case of Balboa Island, occupying the heart of Newport Bay, there is the double attraction of island and mainland. The shore of the big tract are lapped by waves that have no breakers, the front door of a summer home may open out upon a private landing for gondola or launch, an automobile road approaches by means of a graceful bridge, and the trolley car for the city is but a short distance away, with the ferry boat plying constantly ... At sunset the pathway of golden beams extends out across the broad sweep of the Pacific, with a foreground for quieter and more vivid color in the still waters of the Channel. To look across from Balboa Island, with the gondolas and canoes putting out from shore, the launches playing back and forth to Corona del Mar, the sailboats drifting lazily by, is to

float in a dream of repose, watching the world pass by, yours to join if you wish, or to escape if you choose to rest, content in a hammock or porch chair. Twenty houses have already been built on the island, although it has been open but a short time. ([LA Times](#), June 15, 1910)

But the beauty of this green island, planted with "rare palms of wide variety," masked mounting problems. Flooding was a frequent nuisance. The water and gas lines had been laid haphazardly at the bottom of the bay, causing constant outages due to boats snagging them. Electrical lines were not even installed until 1914, and the sewage lines were cheaply constructed, with waste emptying onto the beaches. Many disillusioned residents sold their lots, and those who did not complained continuously. Lot prices dropped to as low as \$25. Collins saw the writing on the wall, and in 1915, he sold all his Balboa Island holdings (including Collins Island) to J. Elrod of Portland. In 1916, failing Balboa Island was annexed by the prospering town of Newport Beach. In 1919, the mayor of Newport, irritated by Balboa residents' constant pleas for needed improvements, [complained](#): "The island is a dump. It was sold by a lot of damn crooks to a lot of damn fools."



The Fat Fairy went into service in 1920 carrying up to 20 passengers for 5 cents each. A year later, when a barge was lashed to it, it could also transport one automobile. | Photo: Courtesy [Balboa Island Museum & Historical Society](#)

Sheer will power turned the island's fortunes around. The Balboa Island Improvement Association, formed by concerned residents, took the island's transformation into its own hands. Citizens like Joseph Allen Beek, the future Secretary of the California State Senate, worked tirelessly to provide the island with every advantage. In 1919, Beek (the only bidder) won the contract to reopen the ferry service between Balboa Island and the peninsula. Manned by young, handsome men, "The Joker" ferry boat soon became a popular tourist attraction, with the unspoken rule that pretty ladies rode free. The seawall, bulkhead, and bridge were rebuilt or refurbished. By 1929, there were 100 people living on the island. It soon became a fashionable spot for summering Southern Californians. That year, it was reported that thirty houses were being erected on the tiny island. More and more vacation homes would be built over the years in kitschy, romanticized styles, often featuring distinctive double front doors.

For the next few decades, Balboa was an idyllic seaside hamlet, busy in the summer, quiet and close knit in the winter. There were [Christmas tree](#) parties in front of Hershey's Market, and the annual Christmas boat parade in Newport Bay. The Balboa Island Yacht Club, founded in 1922 by Carol and Joe Beek, became a children's institution -- featuring watersports and boating, it was (and still is) "run" entirely by kids, with a child always serving as "commodore." Life was free and easy. If you needed a ride on the ferry, you simply called the office and asked for a lift. Local resident Bill Fortner recalled to the L.A. Times, "It used to be after Labor Day this place would be pretty deserted. You could walk around the island at night and maybe see only three or four lights." Ruth Hershey Finley experienced an idyllic childhood:

I remember when I was a kid we used to row our little boats out on the mud flats. Tourists always came, but there were very few people who lived here. I had two or three little girlfriends, and there were several boys ... we'd have big octopus fights at the Grand Canal. The boys would put them on our backs and we would scream and shriek. (LA Times, Aug. 31, 1980)

Into the '50s, '60s, and '70s it was much the same. People congregated around the one gas station in town, run by Jim Jennings, or stopped in the tiny [Post Office](#) to gab with postmaster Jeff Reagan. A friendly feud developed between Dad's Donut and Bakery, and Sugar and Spice over who created the first Balboa Bar. The feud began in the 1960s and continues to this day. Life changed on Balboa Island in the '80s and '90s as Orange County (especially surrounding Newport) was transformed into a mecca for the wealthy. The island became more crowded and property values soared. For many natives, Balboa's small town charm disappeared.



The island's very own Balboa Bar, [chocolate dipped](#) ice cream rolled in candy. | Photo: [Trader Chris/Flickr/Creative Commons License](#)

Balboa Island, once an uninhabited muddy sandbar, is now one of the most densely populated places in California, with simple cottages selling for millions of dollars. The population is around 4,500 in the winter and 10,000 in the summer, when thousands of day tourists also flock to the little island. Balboa Island became a cultural touchstone during the early 2000s. The Bluth family, from the cult classic "Arrested Development," were the proud owners of a frozen banana stand (another Balboa staple) on the island. But despite its Hollywood success and new veneer of OC chic, the friendly, laid back attitude of Balboa Island persists. "If you don't like a lot of social contact, you shouldn't live on Balboa Island," Joseph's son Seymour Beak said in 2001. "I cannot walk from here [the ferry office] to home -- two blocks -- without seeing someone I know." (LA Times, surroundings, Balboa Island ferry: 19 July 2001)