



Neighborhoods

Barnum, Bailey and Balboa Island

By Duncan Forgey

Balboa Island is indelibly ingrained into people's psyche much like a tattoo is to the skin. Once the magical island captures your heart, it's as strong a bond as a young child's first trip to the "Greatest Show on Earth."

Under the Balboa circus's big top there were three rings delighting its customers. Balboa Island is actually three islands in one, each different from the others. The Main Island is a bee's nest of activity where people meet and romance is common; Little Island is the secluded section, quiet and neighborly; and Collins Island is the exclusive little tip of the iceberg where people live the life of luxury and visitors dream, "Someday maybe I can own one of these homes."

It all started in 1899, when W.S. Collins, the ringmaster, purchased 1,000 acres, reportedly for \$70 an acre, from James McFadden. This included Snipe Island, one of the early names for Balboa Island. To Collins, the man instrumental in linking Santa Ana to Newport Beach via the Pacific Electric Line railway tracks, dredging the bay to create an island seemed a most logical step. What existed was a flat submerged sand pit with a few high ridges showing tufts of wire grass in an irregular line along what is now the center of the island. A cement bulkhead had to be built to keep the high tides out.

To create interest in this fledgling neighborhood Mr. Collins developed some ingenious schemes. A \$100,000 150 room hotel was to be built. This would attract the Los Angeles crowd. He set out to build an automotive "speedway" around the island which would stage races and attract tourists. Joseph A. Beek, the eventual founder of the Balboa Island ferry, was hired to help construct the first bridge to the island. The Martin brothers, of Martin Aviation fame, were asked to put on air shows. Needless to say with these less-than-humble beginnings the three islands were destined to be the most unique and fun loving of Newport Beach neighborhoods.

The first home on Balboa Island was known as the Dickinson Place located at 404 South Bay Front. Mr. Collins built the second home. It was known as White Swan and he lived there until he built the Collins Castle on the island that now bears his name. His "castle" was neither modest nor unpretentious in those early years of Newport Harbor.

In 1907, the first waterfront lots on Balboa Island cost \$300 to \$600, depending on location. By 1914, just before the outbreak of World War I, the same lots were selling for between \$1000 and \$2500. By this time about 700 lots had been sold.

Today, with over 2,100 living units on the island, its density is said to qualify it as a ghetto. Pretty nice ghetto wouldn't you say? Today's values are \$700,000 and up, with bay fronts pushing high into the two million dollar range. In fact, in today's inventory-light market, the average listed price is \$1,665,250 and the average sale price over the past six months has been \$890,206. The most expensive home for sale is 351 East Bay listed at \$5,295,000 and is currently in escrow.

So, forget the lions, the tigers, and the bears, and get yourself down to our own three-ringed delight. Buy a cup of coffee at Dad's, shop at The Persimmon Tree or Hershey's, eat at Amelia's and reminisce about the great times at Jolly Roger or Bob's Big Boy, then grab a cocktail at the Village Inn and talk to a local about the days when school teachers and "stews" ruled the roost at the VI. Balboa Island is a bright light in a world of sprawl. It's as if Barnum and Bailey and Balboa Island were brought to us by the same god.



A cartoon from *Out West Magazine* showed this sketch depicting W.S. Collins in 1913 making riches from salt water by dredging Newport Bay to make Balboa Island. From the Newport Beach Historical Society's *Newport Bay, A Pioneer History*