



## Neighborhoods

### *From Begonias and Bay Watch to Poppies and Prestige*

By Duncan Forgey

Before the township of Corona del Mar was born, there was nothing but a wind-blown bluff overlooking the two earlier settlements of Newport Beach. To the north, Balboa and McFadden's Landing could be seen in the golden glow of the setting sun from the vacant mesa. In the early 1900s, locals declared there was nothing to recommend living in such a place. It was too far from the activity of Newport Harbor, and the Corona del Mar bluff had little useable water.

Known simply as Rocky Point, CdM's main function was that of a lookout. Huge waves and shifting sands made the jetty-less harbor entrance deadly in those early years. Many seaman and fishermen and their boats were lost to the churning waters beneath the bluff.

In the early 1920's, a Russian immigrant named Antra Deraga, concerned by the hazardous conditions surrounding the harbor entrance, positioned himself on the bluff. He warned and guided ships using a system of signal flags. Even with this effort and the building of rock groins, tragedy after tragedy continued. These deaths led Deraga to develop a "Life Saving Corps." These hardy Newporters, armed with paddleboards and dories, were the beginning of a lifeguard system, commonplace on today's beaches. Even the famous Hawaiian Surfer Duke Kahanamoku spent time at Corona del Mar's main beach, surfing and working as a lifeguard.

Early attitudes about Corona del Mar's livability began to change when George Hart bought the Corona del Mar section from James Irvine in 1904. Immediately, Hart started to ferry people and supplies to this new area. In 1915, the F. D. Cornell Company traded Riverside County land for 400 acres in CdM. The Cornell Company tried to name CdM "Balboa Palisades," but it never stuck. The Spanish *corona del mar* or "Crown of the Sea" was to become the sobriquet for this part of Newport Beach.

By the time of the great Depression, the actual settlement of Corona del Mar had begun to take shape. The Corona del Mar Hotel, later to be named the Palisades Inn, was the prominent fixture on the

bluff, and lots had been subdivided for homes. Also, the first upper bay bridge had been built, which alleviated the long drive from Newport Beach around the Back Bay.

Although the Corona Del Mar subdivision was a financial disaster and many of the original parcels went back to the county, some staked their claim and stayed. Boyd Stillings and his wife picked a lot on the corner of Dahlia and Seaview in the 1930's. They paid \$375 for their lot. Stillings and his wife lived there happily for 60 years.

In the 1970's the upper streets of Corona del Mar went through a huge transition – from a sleepy beach town to a year-round residential town. Young couples, unable to afford homes elsewhere in Newport Beach, bought duplexes. They lived in one unit and rented the second to help with the extremely high mortgage rates in those years. Soon these young trendsetters had helped stabilize the area. Many of the duplexes have since been torn down and rebuilt as homes or condos.

Prices in CdM today range from \$629,000 to \$1,195,000 for duplexes and \$649,000 to \$5,400,000 for single family homes. Price swings depend on location of the property. Values decrease as the addresses get higher and cross the Coast Highway. The many flowered streets (e.g. Begonia, Marigold and Poppy) represent the true nature of what "Olde" Corona del Mar has become. There is a wonderful combination of quaint single-family homes and duplexes, bisected by a village-like commercial center along the highway.

The great waves have been tamed and the shipwrecks have long since been eliminated by the twin jetties built in the 1930's. Their huge boulders are now home to adventurous youths chasing crabs, lovers holding hands, immigrant fishermen and colonies of seagulls resting after a big feed. The bluff top is still the sentinel of the harbor's entrance. Grassy parks act as perfect watchtowers for observing the endless motion of the sea, while pedestrians watch the harbor slip into darkness behind the golden glow of a setting sun.

The Pacific Coast Highway looked like this when the first upper bay bridge was completed in 1926.



PHOTO: BILL BLUMPOCK, NEWPORT BEACH, THE FIRST CENTURY