



LAGUNA BEACH: THE ART OF DIVERSITY

By Duncan Forgey

Originally named “Lagunas” by the Indians, for the two freshwater lagoons in the canyon, this narrow and steep strip of ocean front land has a history like no other. For some reason Laguna Beach was not included in Mexican land grants along with all the other lands from San Juan Capistrano to Yorba Linda. It remained government property and fell under homesteading law instead of private fee ownership. According to the Timber-Culture Acts of the 1870’s, under the “160 acres and mule” principal, land was granted to anyone who would plant 10 acres of trees over 10 years. Laguna’s early families did just that. After the 10 years, there were plenty of trees, but no new settlers. In 1876, William Brooks sold his 169 acres for \$50.00. Later, in 1919, Henry Rogers’ niece sold the land encompassing much of today’s business district for \$24,000.

Laguna Beach was too rocky and hilly for agriculture, farming or grazing. It was very pretty, but out of the way of the railroad and lacking a good harbor; therefore, it was of no real commercial value. It wasn’t until the 1920’s that the city’s roots really began to take shape. The seeds of today’s famous Pageant of the Masters dates back to 1921 when Isaac Frazee organized the first Indian Festival, starring the Native American singer Chief Yowlacae. In 1923, Wayne Moore started the Community Players, whose first play was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Also in the 1920’s, artists and writers established the famous “round table discussions” that attracted many of the creative minds of the early 20th century. The City of Laguna Beach, with a population of 1900, voted to incorporate in 1927.

The tradition of creativity continues today with an abundance of artists, writers, and actors selecting Laguna Beach as their hometown. Mack Sennett filmed here, as did many other major Hollywood productions such as *Captain Blood* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Bette Davis, Ozzie and Harriet Nelson, Rock Hudson, Lorne Greene, Victor Mature,

Mickey Rooney, Mary Pickford, and Rudolph Valentino are famous past residents of Laguna Beach. John Steinbeck wrote *Tortilla Flats* while living at 504 Park Avenue.

One cannot talk about Laguna Beach without mentioning its Greeter. Or, shall I say, Greeters. The first was Joe Lucas, whose long hair and beard were carbon copies of the second and more famous greeter’s, Eiler Larsen. Joe met and welcomed people arriving by stagecoach around the turn of the century.

Eiler Larsen arrived in Laguna in 1934 after a hike across the country. Attracted by Laguna’s artsy flavor, he stayed until his death. Several generations of Southern Californians remember his famous smile, his pointed wave and his “Hellooooo!” He was a bearer of warmth and good feeling in a town that symbolized just that.

The first subdivision in Laguna Beach was in 1887. Fifty-foot wide lots along the oceanfront from Laguna Avenue to Sleepy Hollow Lane sold for \$1 a front foot. By 1972 the price had risen to \$4,000 a front foot. Today, the same property has increased over ten fold.

Another unique aspect of Laguna is its varying styles of architecture. There may be a “Hansel and Gretel cottage” next to a charming beach house, next to a hard contemporary with angles and lines that spin off in all directions. Unlike in other communities, the homes in Laguna are vertical in orientation. Some canyon homes are surrounded by trees, giving them a pastoral feel. In contrast are the many “cliffhangers,” stuck along the hills like so many barnacles, with awesome views of the coast.

The people of Laguna have a reputation for fighting hard to keep their unique lifestyle. Intellectually, liberal ideals abound. The arts and the environment are foremost in the minds of locals. Stiff opposition is aroused quickly in battles like the current one raging over the Pageant of the Masters and its location and lease. The natives are not apathetic when it comes to local issues and development.

Laguna Beach is known as a picturesque beach town, an arts town and a town of alternative lifestyles. Whether you’re a business executive, an artist, a writer, a Woodstock holdover, or a professional, Laguna Beach will open its doors to you with a smile and a Larsen-style “Helloooo.” With its history of rum running, whaling, horse racing, Chinese coolie smuggling, and its mixture of Mormons, Native Americans, artists, actors, homosexuals, and hippies, you have the recipe for something out of the ordinary. Laguna Beach is visually spectacular and culturally rare. It is by no means ordinary.