



Neighborhoods

Lido Isle: Loose Cannons and European Culture



By Duncan Forgey

Halloween is a special night in many parts of the world, but no more unique than on Lido Isle in the 1960's. The early hours of the night belonged to the little children prancing from door to door dressed as Mighty Mouse, Boris or Natasha, or the more traditional ghouls and ballerinas. These small groups picked up candy bars, homemade donuts, and a virtual treasure chest of suckers and gum. The annual rumor was that one of the bayfront homes was giving out silver dollars. The next day, at school, this proved to be an exaggeration.

By nine o'clock, with the little brothers and sisters in bed and the parents at costume parties, the streets were taken over by groups of adolescents that ruled Lido Isle each year. It was the east-enders versus the west-enders, youthful "armies" dedicated to defending their turf and attacking the opposite end of the island. Local developer Gary Hamilton recalls that he ran with a younger group of kids that were intimidated by the older boys. Because of their ages, they were forced to hide in bushes and "lay in wait" for an opportunity.

It was strategy, stealth, courage, and mischief that combined to create the "Great Halloween Wars" of Lido Isle. The "soldiers," armed with water balloons, eggs and fast feet, tore about the island "nailing" each other. The battles went on late into the night and the toll was heavy. The firefights and ambushes left tired boys with ruined clothes, scraped knees and multiple bruises. The island was left with much debris, and rotten eggs littered the streets, stradas and alleyways.

Not exactly what Swiss architect Franz Herding had in mind in 1928, when he designed the current layout for Lido Isle. Lido Isle, "the smartest" new address in town, was named after an exquisite Italian resort on the Adriatic Sea.

An overly optimistic W.K. Parkinson, reportedly, paid \$45,000 for the island in 1923. The sand island was bought to house a base for

wharves and industrial installations, taking old Newport Harbor one step closer to a commercial harbor. This dream ended about the time of the Great Depression, when the island was sold to William C. Crittenden. He, in turn, subdivided the island with the help of \$1,222,861.95 in improvement monies from the state of California. These bond monies helped build streets and bury utility wires. As bonds against future lots sold, they were the early version of our current Mello-Roos assessments.

In Crittenden and Herding's vision, the island was to be a resort-quality development matching the best in Italy, Spain and France. The homes were Mediterranean style with red tile roofs; they were built around patios and "stradas," and orientated to the sun. The streets were named after some of the greatest resort cities of all time: Barcelona, a fourth-century port city and ancient capital of Catalonia; Genoa, a fifth-century Roman port and gateway to the Roman Western Empire and birthplace of Columbus; Nice, a beautiful city on the French Riviera and home to the rich and the royal of Europe; Ithaca, a Greek Island significant because Ulysses' wife Penelope waited there for him to return from the Trojan Wars. Of the 33 streets on Lido, all have historical or literary notoriety.

If one person's name can be associated with the overall success of Lido Isle it would have to be P.A. (Pappy) Palmer. He was the primary salesman of the 1940's and 1950's. He sat day after day selling lots on this sparsely occupied sandpit. In 1946, gross real estate sales hit an all-time high of \$790,340.

It was this period, after World War II, when the island was transformed into a vibrant community. Young professionals, mostly from Los Angeles and environs moved to the resort town of Newport Beach. Lido Isle was the benefactor of this movement. Loaded with children, Lido took on the family feeling that remains today. The Yacht Club, Tennis Club and social events became major factors in the lifestyle on the island.

Land value has gone from \$1,500 for a bayfront lot in 1931, to \$100,000 in the 1960s, to \$1,800,000 in 2000. Off-the-water lots have risen from \$795 in the 1930s, to \$45,000 in 1960's, to \$650,000 in 2000. Lido has a variety of locations and subtleties that affect pricing for the homes. Locals discuss noise, sun orientation, lot size, "street to street" versus "street to strada," and patio placement as economic factors in weighing prices.

Today Lido Isle is more refined and civilized than in those hardy days of block parties, Christmas tree forts, The Lido Round Up, sandlot football and the "Great Halloween Wars." But the memories remain.