

HISTORY OF CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS

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SILVER STRAND BEACH STATE PARK

State Park No. 66

by

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SILVER STRAND BEACH STATE PARK

The land locked harbor of San Diego extends southward sixteen miles separated from the ocean by the narrow sand spit, Silver Strand, which terminates in Coronado and North Island and connects them with the mainland. Beyond low-lying North Island rises Point Loma, a lofty promontory 400 feet above sea level which with North Island forms the entrance to San Diego Bay sometimes called the Silver Gate.

Famous as one of the choicest beaches of the California southland, the Coronado Silver Strand is a state park. It includes 215 acres and has a 3 mile ocean frontage. The strand lies directly opposite the city of San Diego. The quiet waters of the bay are on one side; and on the other is the rolling surf of the blue Pacific. From Coronado an excellent, straight highway follows along the clean white sands of the beach. Continuing over that road on the Strand, Mexico is only fifteen miles distant with much of the way in sight of San Diego bay and the ocean.

In The Golden Tapestry of California, Clark Sydney wrote:¹

1. S. Clark, Golden tapestry of California, 96-97.

It is easy, however, to turn the eye away from man's developments to that peerless strand leading straight as a die to Baja California, which is Mexico. The narrow strip of land which barely succeeds in making Coronado a peninsula instead of an island becomes in the early spring a riot of color from the billions of wild flowers. The road is a primrose path to Mexico.

Extending the entire length of the strand, the beach is smooth, hard and level, gradually sloping into the ocean. Its gleaming silver white sands have given the narrow ribbon of coastal beach the name Silver Strand.

The earliest discoveries and first settlement on the Pacific coast of California were made at San Diego bay often referred to as the place "where California began." Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo in command of two small Spanish sailing vessels discovered the port in 1542 and named it San Miguel.² He described it as a "land-locked and very good harbor."

The bay was not visited again until sixty years later by Sebastian Vizcaíno in 1602. Ignoring Cabrillo's discovery, Vizcaíno renamed the bay San Diego de Alcalá for the saint whose name day occurred on November 12, while the party was anchored in the bay. Vizcaíno remained at San Diego ten days to refit the ship, obtain wood and water and explore the vicinity. The bay and its surroundings impressed them very

2. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, I, 69-70.

favorably as the site for a Spanish settlement. Vizcaino also named Las Coronadas, the islands to the south of the bay and from which the city of Coronado derives its name. Numerous Indians whom they encountered were quite friendly and exchanged gifts with them.³

More than a century and a half elapsed before the Spaniards made any attempt to colonize Alta California. Then fear that England, Russia or some foreign power might encroach upon her territory caused Spain to take definite action. In 1769 an expedition by land and sea was dispatched from Mexico and made the first settlement in California at San Diego, at the place now known as Old Town.

Before the arrival of Cabrillo's sailing vessels the quiet waters of San Diego bay had known only the paddle of Indian canoes and rafts. Hill and beach trails were Indians ways long before Spaniards trod them. Numerous natives known as Coahuillas or Cahuillas, by the Spaniards called, Diegueños, inhabited the region. They lived in small rancherias or villages scattered about the mesas and canyons and along the bay shores. Almost a dozen villages were located on the Coronado peninsula, North Island and the Silver Strand. Arrows, pottery,

3. Bancroft, History of California, I, 97-99.

shells and many old relics may still be found on the site of old encampments.⁴

Of the Indians of the San Diego bay region when the Spanish colonists arrived in 1769, Alvena Suhl wrote:⁵

San Diego and Mission bays were centers about which a considerable number of Indians lived in pre-Spanish days. The shell mounds of North Island, Point Loma and the bay shores are evidence of long continued residence by Indians. Estimates of the number of Indians vary. Cronise says there were thousands living on the coastal plain when the Spanish arrived. Kroeber estimates that the Diegueño population may have been 3,000, not all of whom lived upon the immediate shores of the bay.

There were many villages scattered about both Mission and San Diego Bay....These villages as the Spaniards called them were in all probability merely small groups of dwellings. Portola speaks of two of them as having about fifty natives.

The Diegueños were not an agricultural people. Those about the bay subsisted on fish and mollusks, whereas for those further inland baked 'mescal', formed a staple. This was made from the flower shoots of the Agave. Coyotes, wild cats, and mice were by no means scorned as food. Acorns were dried and pounded, then washed to remove the bitterness, made into a gruel and baked. Berries and herbs supplemented this diet.

Their houses were merely rude shelters of brush covered with earth. Three posts were planted in a row and connected by a short ridge log against which poles were propped from the sides. A layer of brush kept the soil on top from sifting through....

4. A. M. Suhl, Historical geography of San Diego, 22.
5. Ibid., 21-25.

This was the first San Diego with many villages or rancherias dotted along the shores of the bays, its half naked Indians fishing upon the quiet waters or gathering acorns and seeds along the water courses or perhaps hunting for game in the chaparral. It was a dry, sunny land knowing neither hot summers nor cold winters and rain only during the few winter months. To the Indians it was probably an area of superior attraction at least they seem to have had no feeling of inferiority or passive nonresistance which we associate with the occupants of less fortunate areas.

Before the arrival of white men the Indians of the rancherias on the sunny bright sands of the Coronado peninsula spent their lives in that leisurely, tranquil atmosphere. Trails connected the villages on the strand with those on North Island and the mainland. In canoes and crude rafts made of logs tied together with tule they often ventured far from shore to fish. Along the beaches they gathered shell fish and mollusks and hunted seal and otter which swarmed in the bay waters. Whole villages often assembled for great feasts after a catch. From earliest times the Silver Strand has been a favorite recreational beach.

A mission and presidio were established by the Spanish Colonists on their arrival at San Diego in 1769. The natives of the region, hostile and suspicious, were slow to accept the religion of the Spanish priests. Lack of food made it impossible to feed the Indians and they remained at their villages more or less independent of its influence during the

first years of its existence.

In 1774, the mission was removed to a more favorable site six miles up Mission Valley and away from the undesirable influence of the presidio. In 1775 several hundred savages attacked and burned the mission and murdered one of the priests. Trouble with the natives continued until 1779, when they were pacified and an understanding between them and the missionaries was reached.⁶ From the mission the Indians learned many worthwhile and useful things which made their existence easier. The waters of the bay contained many seal and otter. More successful ways of catching them than the natives had known were devised by the priests and a profitable fur trade was built up.

Life at San Diego in these early days centered about the mission and presidio. When the soldiers from the presidio retired they settled outside the presidio walls and soon a small village grew up there known as Old Town. Some of the owners of the large ranchos also came there to live.

When the mission lands about San Diego were divided into large land grants during the Mexican period, cattle raising became the leading industry of the countryside and San

6. T. D. Murphy, On sunset highways, 110-111.

Diego the center for an enormous hide trade with Boston shipping interests. At La Playa across the bay from Silver Strand were located the hide houses where hides were cured and stored. Usually there were several vessels engaged in the traffic anchored in the bay.

San Diego was organized into a pueblo in 1834 and received a grant of eight square leagues of land.⁷ More or less removed from the rest of California, the town grew slowly during Spanish, Mexican and even well into the American period. Life was leisurely and pleasant. The social life centered about the homes of prominent old families, the Bandinis, Machados, Estudillas, Carrilos etc. There were many gay fiestas, fandangos, bull fights, barbecues and pleasure outings. The beaches of Point Loma and Silver Strand were frequently the scene of pleasure outings.

After the missions were secularized and the Spanish population gradually increased about San Diego Bay, the Indians abandoned their villages along the beaches and bay shores and moved elsewhere. Their numbers were diminished also by diseases and vices of the white man. After their disappearance the Coronado Peninsula with its Silver Strand and North Island was uninhabited until after 1846. It remained iso-

7. Suhl, Historical geography, 50.

lated and little used except for fishing, hunting and other pleasurable pursuits. It was long a haven for a variety of game - seal, otter, numerous birds and water fowl.

The Coronado Peninsula was originally a part of the pueblo lands of San Diego. In 1846, Pedro C. Carrillo petitioned for a grant of the peninsula. The petition was approved by the pueblo authorities who declared it to be open for entry. After the American occupation of California in 1847, however, in the readjustment of land claims, many who held title to land under Mexican grants lost them. Pedro Carrillo was denied his petition and the land was assigned to Bezar Simmons whose title was confirmed by the land commission in 1856.⁸

H. C. Hopkins wrote of the settlement:⁹

Again San Diego lost a valuable holding. The Supreme Court held, however, as late as 1888, that Coronado Peninsula was within the incorporate limit of the city of San Diego.

A resident of San Diego at the time of the American occupation, J. J. Warner estimated that at least thirty families or about 250 people lived within the town then.¹⁰ After 1846, although Yankee immigrants arrived in increasing numbers, San Diego long retained much of the atmosphere of the

8. H. C. Hopkins, History of San Diego, 240.

9. Ibid.

10. Suhl, Historical geography, 49.

old Mexican pueblo. Life was exceedingly quiet and growth slow.

About 1850 an attempt was made to settle New San Diego, the site of the present city. Several families built houses there. William Heath Davis erected a wharf in return for which he received a grant around it from the town. A government barracks was erected on Dead Man's Point. There was not sufficient business or population to warrant a shift to the new site at that time. Most of the people remained at Old Town and interest in it soon died down.

After the gold rush was on the wane, 49'ers broken in health came to Southern California to regain their strength and some of them settled at San Diego. The present city of San Diego had its real beginning in 1867 when the establishment of a railroad from the Mississippi Valley to the Pacific Coast was much talked of. San Diego was considered by many to be the probable Pacific terminus of the line. About the same time E. A. Horton, father of modern San Diego, visited the San Diego bay area. A foresighted and enterprising individual, he determined to purchase the pueblo lands along the East shores of the bay for a town site. In 1868 he had the land put up at auction and purchased some 900 acres at about 26 cents per acre. Father Horton advertised his project extensively and succeeded in bringing many newcomers to San Diego.

In the Historical geography of San Diego, Alvena Suhl wrote of the new development:¹¹

People came largely from San Francisco and Central California, where the gold rush had brought many people. A vigorous advertising campaign brought many of these to San Diego. Houses and stores rose rapidly and within two years a typical frontier town had appeared which far over-shadowed Old Town. All went well until 1873. The railroad failed to materialize. Little was left to support the town and much of the population disappeared. From 1873-1885 was very quiet. San Diego without a railroad developed slowly.

In 1885 San Diego was connected with the 35th parallel Atlantic and Pacific railroad by a branch from San Bernardino. The town began to receive large numbers of winter tourists. Many stayed to make San Diego their home. San Diego also began to receive many who were forced to seek a mild climate for health, and increasing numbers of old retired people.

The period from 1868 to 1888 in San Diego history is known as "the great boom." Via the new branch railway more tourists arrived daily. San Diego's climate and beautiful location were enthusiastically acclaimed by the new comers. It was during this boom period of the eighties that most of the present suburbs of San Diego including the Silver Strand were subdivided and settled. Until 1886 Coronado Peninsula was an unimproved, neglected strip of sandy beach used almost solely by hunters. The possibilities of the Strand

11. Suhl, Historical geography, 56-57.

were recognized first by two of San Diego's prominent citizens, Elisha S. Babcock and H. L. Storey. The two often hunted on the Strand, long a favorite haunt of sportsmen. It occurred to them that the Strand offered an ideal and unique setting for an exclusive beach resort hotel.¹²

In 1886 they formed a syndicate and purchased the entire peninsula comprising 4185 acres and including North Island. In 1887 they laid out the site of the town of Coronado, began the sale of lots and construction of the imposing Hotel del Coronado. The opening of the Strand was considered a stupendous and dubious enterprise by many people. The hotel was opened in February, 1888, and the new development succeeded beyond all expectations. The beautiful Coronado Silver Strand soon gained world wide fame and recognition as a beach resort. Unusual in beauty, setting and climate, its popularity has never waned.

A railroad which was built from San Diego proper along the east shores of the bay over the Strand connected the Coronado peninsula with the main land. A good water system and all of the modern improvements of the day were installed by the enterprising financiers of the Coronado project.

The great boom in San Diego lasted about two years

12. C. H. Heilbron, History of San Diego county, 320.

followed by a general collapse. The Coronado Peninsula venture also suffered somewhat. About that time John D. Spreckels secured an interest in it, and early in the 90's purchased the entire property including North Island and South Island, Hotel del Coronado and the Coronado railroad, from its original owners.¹³

The boom of 1868-1888 transformed San Diego from a dreamy, adobe Mexican town with a population of several hundred into a fast growing modern American city. The large cattle ranchos of the back country of an earlier day were subdivided into small holdings and cultivated as farms and orchards by ambitious Americans. With the development of its natural beauty and many resources San Diego went ahead slowly but steadily with no great change during the next quarter of a century. In 1915, valuable advertisement from the World's Fair of 1915 boosted the city considerably. The past twenty years has brought many new changes, modern improvements and increased population; California's first settlement today, is the fourth largest city in California.

From a popular resort of the gay nineties, Silver Strand Peninsula has become increasingly acclaimed as a recreational area. The city of Coronado also remains one of the

13. Heilbron, History of San Diego county, 320.

exclusive and popular residential suburbs of San Diego. The government purchased North Island in 1921 for aviation fields for the Army and Navy. San Diego Bay is the home port for the Navy's Pacific fleet. The military and naval activities of the government there have meant increased industry and activity for all of San Diego. The Coronado Silver Strand is an accessible and pleasant residence and recreational area for many of the naval and military people as well as wealthy and retired individuals, health seekers and tourists.

Southeast of Hotel del Coronado is the famous Tent City, a three mile beach strip, an ideal and reasonable resort, equipped with almost two thousand tents, houses, palm cottages and modern conveniences.

Besides the bay ferry, the Silver Strand is made accessible by a splendid highway which follows the shores of the bay from San Diego and continues the length of the narrow ribbon of the Strand to Coronado.

The Silver Strand State Beach Park is situated in the midst of this historic and lovely setting. In 1932 the state purchased 174 acres valued at \$100,000 from the J. D. A. B. Spreckels Investment Company for the purpose of a state park. Eight acres were also leased to the state by the U. S. War Department. In 1936, 33 additional acres were purchased from the War Department. Silver Strand State Park reserves

to nature lovers one of the choice beach areas of the world. Surf and bay bathing, swimming, fishing and other aquatic sports are among activities to be enjoyed there. Pleasant picnic areas and camping facilities add to the enjoyment of the place. On May, 22, 1938 the Silver Strand State Park was dedicated at Coronado with members of the State Park Commission officiating.

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SILVER STRAND BEACH STATE PARK

(Summary by Lois Ann Woodward)

Comprising 215 acres of excellent beach, Silver Strand State Park is located in San Diego County on the famous Coronado Silver Strand peninsula. The strand, directly opposite the city of San Diego, separates San Diego Bay from the ocean. At its northern terminus are Coronado City and beyond, North Island, almost severed from Coronado by Glorieta Bay.

From Coronado an excellent highway follows along the narrow sand spit of the Silver Strand with most of the way in view of the ocean on one side, the bay on the other. In springtime many colorful wild flowers carpet the driveway which fifteen miles southward crosses the Mexican border. The beach is smooth, hard and level, gradually sloping into the ocean. Its gleaming silver white sands have given the narrow ribbon of coastal beach the name Silver Strand.

San Diego Bay was discovered by Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo in 1542. It was not visited again until 1602 by Sebastian Vizcaino who named it for the Saint, San Diego de Alcalá. After these early explorations more than a century and a half elapsed before Spain colonized Alta California.

In 1769 the Portola expedition was dispatched from Mexico and established a mission and presidio on San Diego

Bay. Before the arrival of the Spaniards the San Diego Bay region was inhabited by numerous Indians by the Spaniards called Diegueños. Some of their villages were located on the Coronado Peninsula and about the bay shores. As the Spanish population settled in increasing numbers about San Diego Bay the natives moved elsewhere.

During Spanish and Mexican days the Silver Strand peninsula was seldom frequented after the Indians disappeared except for fishing and hunting. In 1846 Pedro C. Carrillo petitioned the pueblo of San Diego for a grant of the Coronado Peninsula including North and South Islands. The pueblo authorities declared the area open for entry. However, after the American occupation the United States Land Commission gave title to Bezar Simmons.

The peninsula remained isolated and used chiefly as a hunting ground until 1886 when Elisha S. Babcock and H. L. Storey purchased the entire peninsula including North Island and comprising 4,185 acres. They laid out the townsite of Coronado, began the sale of lots, and built the great Hotel del Coronado, which was opened in February 1888. The Silver Strand Peninsula gained world fame as a beach resort and residential suburb. In the nineties John D. Spreckels purchased the entire property including North and South Island and the hotel from its original owners. In 1921 the government purchased North Island for aviation fields

for the Army and Navy.

In 1932, the state purchased 174 acres valued at \$100,000 from the J. D. A. B. Spreckels Investment Company for the purpose of a state park. Eight acres were also leased to the state by the United States War Department. In 1936, 33 additional acres were purchased from the War Department. The Silver Strand State Park reserves to nature lovers one of the choice beach areas of the world. Surf and bay bathing, swimming, fishing and other aquatic sports, pleasant picnic grounds and camping facilities make it an enjoyable recreational center. The park was dedicated May 22, 1938.

SILVER STRAND BEACH STATE PARK

Summary by Lois Ann Woodward

Silver Strand State Park in San Diego County is located on the narrow sand spit of the beautiful Coronado peninsula separating San Diego bay from the ocean. Dedicated May 22, 1938, the park preserves 215 acres of famous beach for recreational purposes. It provides bay and surf bathing, hiking, picnic areas and camping facilities.