

Field Guide to Coronado History:

The Sandspit

By Bruce Linder



Coronado, North Island and the Sandspit about 1932.

The place is right in front of us but largely hidden from the eye. A major part of Coronado's past, this place is now largely locked behind fortified steel and no-nonsense uniformed guards.

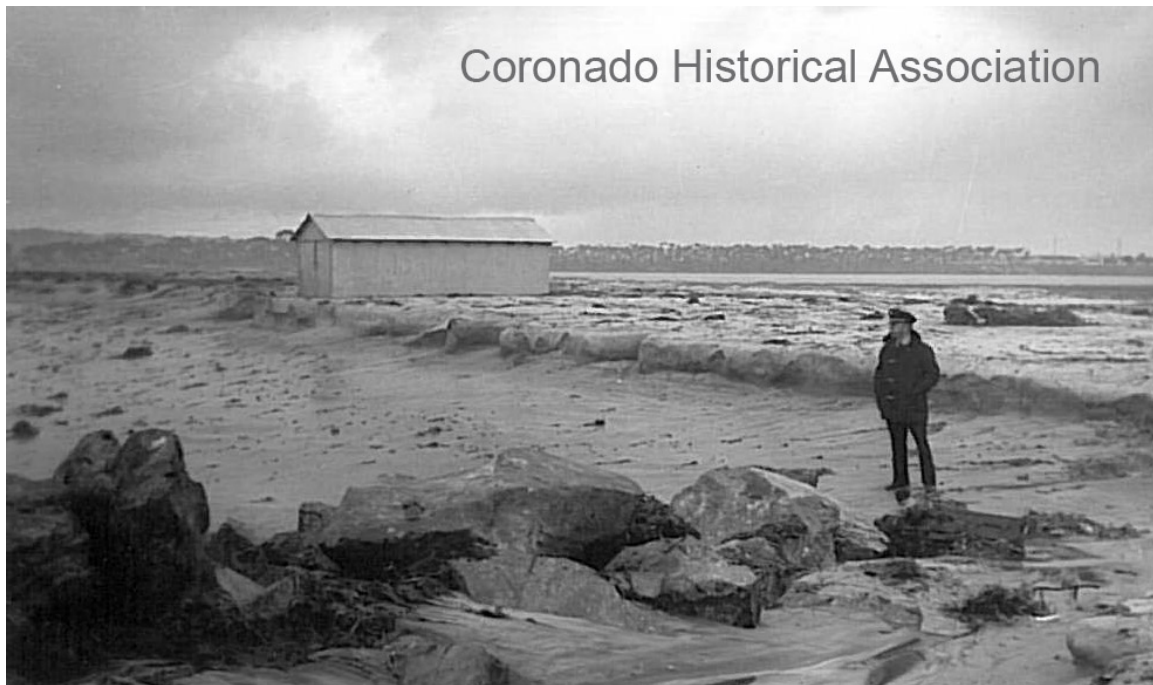
A legacy, a heritage, a place of youthful memories of long ago ... it's whimsical slang name was "The Sandspit," or sometimes, "The Wash."

Who remembers the Sandspit – or better still – who can accurately define its boundaries?

The Sandspit was the thread of beach along the ocean that formed a bridge of sorts between North Island and Coronado before Spanish Bight was filled during 1943-44. The Sandspit was naturally formed, a part of geologic history where opposing forces of river and ocean currents deposited sediment to form the dry land of Coronado, the sandy ocean edge of the city, and the Silver Strand.

All the earliest charts of San Diego Bay showed this unique construct: a bulbous North Island and Coronado sitting atop the exquisite curve of the Silver Strand while connected at their seashores by the Sandspit.

To protect itself against winter storms, Coronado installed a rock seawall in front of the Hotel del Coronado and along Ocean Boulevard beginning in the 1890s. The rock seawall ended where it does today near Ocean Boulevard and Ocean Drive. The streets dead-ended at that point in a dirt parking area for cars ... beyond lay the Sandspit.



Although also referred to in the 1920s and 30s as “North Beach,” the Sandspit lay further inland than North Beach does today, with a shoreline that bisected today’s Sunset Park. Its width was about a half city block between the ocean and the lapping waters of Spanish Bight. In length, the Sandspit extended westward from the end of the rock seawall to the threshold of the current Navy runway. Today’s 12th fairway of the Navy’s Sea-n-Air Golf Course is a fair approximation of the Sandspit’s run.

This “North Beach” was a Coronado favorite in the 1920s and 30s for dinner parties, outings, and beach suppers, all regularly covered in newspaper social pages. Less well covered by the Coronado Journal was the Sandspit’s notoriety for bonfires, grunion hunts, nighttime rendezvous, and surreptitious drinking (even during Prohibition)

This North Beach was a consistent feature of Island life generating many charming stories. “Lost” notices for missing rings, gentleman’s gold watches, spectacles, and jewelry peppered local newspapers stirring an aura of buried treasure. On September 23, 1931 came a Lost Announcement offering a reward for an unrecovered Pekinese dog, mislaid somewhere in the shifting sands of North Beach.

During the summer of 1927 the Board of Trustees (City Council) met to vote on a repeal of a troublesome city ordinance that prohibited the wearing of swimsuits on city streets ... really! During the proceedings it was breathlessly announced that small children had actually been observed at the Sandspit “without anything on.” The City Marshall quickly dispatched a deputy to North Beach “to maintain supervision.”

The Sandspit always had a fearful reputation for rip currents with reports over the years of, perhaps, ten drownings.

A. H. Greene, a popular Professor of Music at Coronado High, with a penchant for morning swimming before the start of classes, drowned in North Beach surf in 1930. The incident raised a cry for improved city services. A lifeguard (the first for North Beach), lifeguard tower, and public pay phone quickly followed.

Fencing and security between Coronado and the airfield was always more of a notion than a reality. North Beach was a bit of a wilderness with only one dilapidated (and generally unmanned) guard shack. Most Coronadans intuitively realized that it must be against some kind of law to trespass but no infrastructure existed to prevent strolling down the beach and patrols by authorities were rare. So, it was big news to everyone, even in the confusion of sudden war, when the Navy announced plans for an all-night beach watch in 1941 to guard against potential enemy landings.

In short, before 1941 there was a “civilized” beach in Coronado – centered on Tent City, the Del, and Central Beach. Then there was the Sandspit.

North Beach radiated a relaxing, unpopulated, adventuresome spirit. It was perfect for residents and locals, less so for visitors. The Sandspit was an iconic part of Coronado’s geography and helped define the “beach place” in which we live today.



Ocean Boulevard during a weekend about 1934. Note the end of Ocean Blvd and the dirt parking area with the Sandspit beyond.

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