

Mission Cliff Gardens

From 1898 to 1942 Mission Cliff Gardens, under the ownership of the San Diego Electric Railway Company, occupied the cliffs overlooking beautiful Mission Valley.

The garden was first opened as a small recreation park (called the Bluffs) under the management of the San Diego Cable Railway Company. The park was used as an end-of-the-line attraction for cable car patrons. The Bluffs changed management twice before J.D. Spreckels, owner of San Diego Electric Railway Company, had it developed to its greatest extent.

As one of San Diego's first park and recreation areas it was frequented by thousands of San Diegans. The popularity and fame of the park spread throughout the country as it developed into one of the most beautiful botanical gardens in the nation.

In 1889, in the midst of a depression, a cable car system was initiated in San Diego. Beginning at L Street, the line ran out to the Bluffs, at the end of present-day Park Boulevard. At the Bluffs, a five-acre recreation park was being developed by the San Diego Cable Railway Company.¹ The park was being built as an attraction to promote travel on the cable car line.

Later in 1890 a large pavilion was built on the park grounds. Terraced paths were embedded along the Bluffs, and general improvements began.

But the depression was taking its toll, and in 1892 the San Diego Cable Railway Company went bankrupt. About this time the Spreckels brothers, of sugar fame and wealth, were investing in San Diego interests. They began to purchase the streetcar and local steam horse lines and soon acquired all but the cable car system. The San Diego Electric Railway Company was incorporated by the Spreckels to operate their amassed lines.

It wasn't until 1896 that anything was done with the old cable car system. It was then that the Citizens' Traction Company was formed. They converted the cable to overhead trolley and assumed the cable car route.

The Bluffs again flourished under the Citizens' Traction Company. The renovated grounds, now called Mission Cliff Park, drew patrons once more for public transport. The park soon became a favorite recreation center. By providing entertainment the Traction Company sought to appeal to both young and old. For the children a "whirligig" or merry-go-round was installed. Violet Beck recalled her childhood memories of this attraction in a letter to the *San Diego Union*.

To the east, an old man ran a merry-go-round where the riders grabbed for rings fed from a pole. Whoever got the gold-colored one could have a free ride instead of paying five cents.

I liked to turn the crank on the music box, not only to earn a ride, but because the music sounded so pretty as it rolled over the lawn and trees and spilled down the brush-covered hills.²

When the Traction Company obtained special entertainment, such as a grand balloon ascension, they used extensive advertisement to attract the public. Traveling acting shows put on shows at the pavilion. Dances were held there, too. It was for adults that the Traction Company sought a liquor license for a saloon in the park. A license was finally approved for a cafe or restaurant, but not without much dissent.³

The Citizens' Traction Company was in deep financial trouble by 1897. In February 1898, the road was sold to the San Diego Electric Railway Company (J.D. Spreckels). Along with the road, Mr. Spreckels procured the twenty-acre park and pavilion.

J.D. Spreckels saw potential for Mission Cliff Park although it consisted only of seven palm trees and a large pavilion. But Mr. Spreckels did not want to re-open Mission Cliffs as an entertainment park. He favored development of a quiet, beautiful spot where San Diegans could enjoy a Sunday afternoon picnic or other calm diversion.⁴ To fulfill this purpose, in 1902 Spreckels hired a Scottish gardener, John Davidson, to take care of the

few trees and flowers which were in the park at the time. As a result of the new emphasis put on gardening, the name was changed to Mission Cliff Gardens. The Gardens were open free to the public to draw passengers for the streetcar line.

In 1904 Davidson was asked to take charge as director of development, head gardener, and caretaker. From that time improvements increased rapidly. Davidson was never idle. He laid plans for development of the gardens and carried many of them out himself. Nor did he let the workers under him relax. Trees were planted, paths embedded and stonework done. A stone wall surrounding the gardens was built chiefly by Davidson and his workers.⁵

Under Superintendent Davidson, the once nearly barren park blossomed into a beautiful botanical garden. It was not long before the emergence of annual flower shows drew tourists from all over the state. Since flowers grow year-round in balmy San Diego, someone commented that Mission Cliff Gardens held a flower show every day of the year.⁶

Mission Cliff Gardens was an appropriate name for the park. The grounds were situated on steep cliffs overlooking Mission Valley. A delight for visitors to the gardens was the view from the cliffs which included a breath-taking panoramic scene from the mountains to the sea. On a very clear day to the far north, "the snow-clad summits of the Sierra Madre, San Bernardino and San Jacinto ranges"⁷ could be seen. Stretched out directly below the cliffs lay Mission Valley and to the west was the boundless Pacific Ocean. View pergolas or shelters were constructed at the most advantageous viewpoints in the gardens. It was to these look-out spots that San Diegans flocked when floods hit the valley. From the pergolas the flood waters could be observed raging toward the ocean. Often the water flowed from bank to bank in the valley.

Elizabeth Phelps, John Davidson's daughter, recalled at least three times when her father had to haul people up the cliffs out of the water to safety.⁸

Sunday picnics at Mission Cliffs became a great favorite with hundreds of San Diegans. Soon annual gatherings and picnics held by clubs and societies were instituted at the gardens. The pavilion, the main building in the park, was also put to use by clubs and societies. Inside the pavilion was a large hall where dances and entertainment could be held. At one end of the hall, for a time, there was a refreshment stand operated by Mrs. Davidson.

At the other end of the pavilion was the Davidson living quarters. The living room, dining room, and kitchen were downstairs. Their fireplace was an interesting conversation piece. It was a three-way fireplace opening onto the pavilion hall and also the kitchen and dining room in the family's quarters. Upstairs were the bedrooms. One room in particular which the Davidson's grandchildren loved was occupied by their bachelor uncle. It had a captain's walk and cupola, and the children would run up there to play whenever he was not looking.⁹

In front of the pavilion was a lovely lily pond complete with gold fish, frogs and more than twenty varieties of pond lilies. A young boy attending the Raja Yoga School on Point Loma visited the gardens and became enthralled with the lily pond.

...most beautiful was the big lily pond, with lilacs of all colors from light blue to soft heliotrope violet. The lotus plants were magnificent, with leaves about twice as big as a dinner plate.¹⁰

As the gardens expanded, innovations were made. A walk-in bird aviary was built in 1912, and bird-watching became popular at Mission Cliffs. The cage was seventy feet high, thirty feet wide, and had a ten-foot passageway through the center, arranged so that birds could fly overhead from one side to the other. At that time between two hundred and three hundred birds were housed there. Mr. Gillette, famous for his razor business, liked the garden and felt that the birds were well cared for there, so he donated many rare birds to the aviary. By 1915, the Aviary contained one of the largest and most

varied collections of birds in the country. In the summer of 1906, the San Diego Railway Company bought two black-tailed deer. This acquisition was the beginning of a deer paddock.

A miniature Japanese garden became the favorite of many visitors. It was commissioned by San Diego Electric Railway Company and designed by the proprietor of the Japanese tea garden at Coronado. The miniature garden displayed all the "features of a picturesque Japanese landscape."¹¹ Pygmy trees with gnarled and twisted trunks dotted the small hillsides. Arching bridges, quaint dwellings, and a tiny wisteria-covered pergola delighted the visitors. No expense was spared in creating the miniature garden. All of the materials used in making the garden—the trees, vines, buildings and even most of the rock was imported from Japan.¹² An arbor was constructed on the north side of the Japanese garden. Near the center of the structure was planted a specimen of the favorite Japanese vine, *Wisteria multijuga*.

This wisteria plant had a colorful background. It crossed the Pacific three times before it finally remained at Mission Cliff. The 170-year-old plant was imported from Japan for installation at the gardens. When it arrived in San Francisco the plant inspector would not let it pass because of a pest infection. It was sent back to Japan and replanted. The next year, sprayed and debugged, it again traveled the Pacific Ocean. This time it was received and planted at Mission Cliff Gardens, there to remain.¹³

Not to be forgotten by those who visited Mission Cliff was the Ostrich Farm. The ostriches were raised for their feathers. It was fashionable then for ladies' hats to have an ostrich plume. Actually, outside interests operated the Bentley Ostrich Farm which was located adjacent to Mission Cliff Gardens. Everyone enjoyed the ostriches, especially the children. Occasionally visitors might see trainers riding on ostriches' backs or harvesting their plumes. One man recalled watching the harvest as a boy.

"First they would place a plain willier sock over the ostrich's head. This blinded him and kept him quiet while they pulled out his tail feathers."¹⁴

Some children became acquainted with the ostriches in a different manner.

Several times I climbed along the uneven path on the cliff side of the high wooden fence and peeped through a dollar-sized knothole. Each time I encountered a big, rolling eye on the other side. Evidently the ostriches like to gaze at the outside world.¹⁵

Other children were not content to just watch.

"I remember giving one of the birds an orange to eat. He gulped it whole and you could see the shape of the orange as it slowly sank down his neck."¹⁶

By 1914, Mission Cliff Gardens had grown from twenty acres to thirty-eight acres and had improved as it grew. But in 1914 something was on the horizon which would affect the progress of the gardens; Balboa Park was being developed for the Panama-California Exposition. Balboa Park tended to draw the crowd away from Mission Cliff Gardens. In 1915 the Spreckels brothers donated a beautiful outdoor organ pavilion to the people of San Diego for the Exposition. Originally the organ had been ordered for Mission Cliff Gardens. One of the canyons there would have been a perfect amphitheater. But for whatever reason, when the organ was ready it was sent instead to Balboa Park! After the initial excitement over Balboa Park, Mission Cliff Gardens was once again on the itinerary of tourists. Mission Cliffs was not forgotten because of the tremendous coverage afforded it by the *San Diego Union*. This was often not because of the gardens' own merits, but because Mr. Spreckels owned the Union.

Mission Cliffs continued to retain its beauty due to the hard work and dedication of John Davidson, but, the advent of the automobile caused fewer and fewer people to ride the streetcars. Now that people could travel more easily to far-away places, business slowed considerably at the gardens.

The San Diego Electric Railway Company was losing money. So, for the first time, admission was charged. People stayed away in masses and went to Balboa Park instead. Finally, in 1929, even before the famous crash, the gardens closed.

The Davidsons stayed on after the gardens closed, no doubt hoping it would soon re-open. Mr. Davidson, who loved the gardens so much and knew every flower by name, kept right on working. In 1935 at the age of eighty he died of a heart attack while working in the garden.

After Mission Cliff Gardens closed to the public in 1929, about the only people to use it were members of the "Pioneers Club." The Pioneers Club was a group of elderly men who had met every day for years at the gardens to play dominoes. They did not let anything as minor as a locked gate keep them out after the gardens closed.¹⁸

Late in 1933 the San Diego Electric Railway Company announced that they had found a lessee for the gardens. A permit was requested from the city planning commission to re-open Mission Cliff Gardens as a high-class dining and recreation center. The council approved the request and San Diegans anxiously awaited the re-opening.

The *Union* received a letter from a San Diego resident expressing what the writer felt were the sentiments of the community. Editor *Union*: It is very gratifying and delightful news to find that at last the beautiful piece of property which San Diego residents were once so proud of as a scenic asset of the city is about to be available to us and visitors alike once more

Best wishes for success of those who have the idea and ability to make this haven of rest and recreation popular. The thanks and appreciation of all San Diegans and visitors are assured.¹⁹

But the hoped for opening never materialized. Ten years after the closure of the gardens the question of what would become of it was still relevant.

Nobody knows what the future of San Diego's "ghost park" may be. One theory is that someday someone might modernize the decaying pavilion (there's an auditorium and dance hall out there) and make an amusement center out of it. Or even build a drive-in theater.

Meanwhile it lies more or less forgotten often puzzling tourists who wonder what it is. From time to time crews are sent in to clean it up a bit. You might say the park has been put "in storage."²⁰

After J.D. Spreckels died, Spreckels interests began disposing of their holdings in San Diego. Finally, in 1942 Mission Cliff Gardens was sub-divided and put up for sale as residential lots. Undoubtedly many people were saddened by the news of the sale. Jean Phelps Russell, granddaughter of John Davidson recalled how disappointed her whole family was to see Mission Cliff Gardens sub-divided. She said she has not and will not ever drive by what used to be the gardens.

...our whole family feels that way. Maybe it's silly but it's so much a part of us we just can't let go.²¹

Today on the site of the former botanical gardens, houses and apartments are situated. Few physical remains of Mission Cliff Gardens are evident. Some trees remain, the cement lily pond is now covered with dirt and shrubs, and the stone wall built by John Davidson still stands. Yet for those fortunate San Diegans and visitors who loved Mission Cliff Gardens, there are still the memories.

NOTES

1. Richard F. Pourade, *The Glory Years*, The History of San Diego Series, vol. 4 (San Diego, Ca.: Union-Tribune Publishing Company, 1964), p. 218.
2. "Cliff Capers Filled Many Halcyon Days," *San Diego Union*, 3 September 1957.
3. "Mission Cliff Park Retail Liquor License Granted by The City Council." *San Diego Union*, June 8, 1897.

4. "Inside Mission Cliff Gardens," *San Diego (Calif.) Hillcrest-North Park Smart Shopper*, August 20, 1970.
5. Elizabeth Phelps, daughter of John Davidson, interview held at her home by Edgar F. Hastings, interview file Serra Museum in Presidio Park, San Diego, 9 April 1959.
6. "10,000 Chrysanthemum Blooms at Mission Cliff Gardens," *San Diego Union*, October 19, 1913.
7. "Mission Cliff Gardens Popular View Spot," *San Diego Union*, January 10, 1915.
8. Elizabeth Phelps, interview, 9 April 1959.
9. Jean Phelps Russell, granddaughter of John Davidson, interview held at 485 E. St., Chula Vista, Ca., 7 November 1974.
10. Staffen Kronberg, "Life at the Raja Yoga School from a Growing Boy's Point of View," collection of translated excerpts from his letters home, manuscript located at the San Diego History Center Library and Manuscripts Collection.
11. "Miniature of Old Japan Annexed at Cliff Gardens," *San Diego Union*, 18 May 1913.
12. Ibid.
13. "Ghost Park," *San Diego Sun*, 4 January 1939.
14. *Hillcrest-North Park Smart Shopper*, 20 August 1970.
15. *San Diego Union*, 3 September 1957.
16. *Hillcrest-North Park Smart Shopper*, August 20, 1970. 17. *San Diego Sun*, 4 January 1939.
18. "Records Never Bother This Exclusive 'Pioneers' Club;' Members Meet at Mission Cliff Gardens For Dominoes," *San Diego Union*, March 8, 1938.
19. *San Diego Union*, 14 September 1933.
20. *San Diego Sun*, 4 January 1939.
21. Jean Phelps Russell, interview, November 7, 1974.

Beverly Potter, a native of Seattle, Washington, has lived in San Diego for almost nine years. She is a graduate of Point Loma College with a major in History and English. While attending college she served as photographer for the student newspaper. The article presented here was an award-winning paper at the 1976 San Diego History Center Institute of History.