

SAN DIEGO HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

AND

BALBOA PARK

San Diego's High School District has occupied Balboa Park longer than any other public institution. This occupation has been of great benefit to the School District and to the students it serves, but of lesser benefit to Balboa Park and to the public for whom the park provides rest and recreation.

On January 19, 1873, six years after Alonzo Horton had purchased 960 acres of what is now downtown San Diego for \$265.00, the San Diego Union advocated putting a public school on a hill at a southeast edge of City Park (today Balboa Park).<sup>1</sup> On April 13, 1874, Horton deeded the proposed school site to the city.<sup>2</sup> This deed had no meaning for Horton did not own the land and the trustees of the Town of San Diego had already set it aside, May 25, 1868, as part of a 1,400 acre park.

In March 1881, Joseph Russ of Humboldt County, owner of a lumber yard in San Diego, offered to donate lumber for a school.<sup>3</sup> The School Board, April 15, 1881, called for an election to pay for a school building.<sup>4</sup> San Diego voters, May 14, 1881, approved, 163 to 40, bonds for \$12,000 to cover costs of construction and furnishings.<sup>5</sup> The City eventually paid \$18,428.73 for the building, exclusive of the donated lumber.<sup>6</sup>

The School Board, June 14, 1881, selected a 560 by 660-ft. tract of City Park, near 13th and A Streets.<sup>7</sup> This 8.48 acre portion grew to today's approximately 23.5 acres with a neighboring stadium occupying an additional 10.5.<sup>8</sup>

On August 8, 1881, the San Diego Board of Trustees agreed to “set apart” land in City Park for a school, however, they never issued a formal resolution of the grant, nor did they seek State of California validation.<sup>9</sup>

The Stewart Brothers designed a two-story, eight-room, Italian-villa style Russ School.<sup>10</sup> Perched on a hill in City Park, the building’s low-hip roof, ironwork parapet, open-bell tower, rusticated boarding, and yellow paint made it an impressive landmark on the skyline of pioneer San Diego.

Russ School opened August 14, 1882 with 276 elementary students.<sup>11</sup> J. A. Rice, the first principal, turned away 32 students because there were not enough seats.

Kate Sessions, San Diego’s esteemed horticulturist, was principal from January to March 1884, and assistant principal from April 1884 to June 1885. She taught algebra and geometry in the eighth grade. Kate resigned because of low pay (\$80.00 a month), dissension among teachers, and difficulty maintaining discipline.<sup>12</sup>

In November 1887, the School Board gave Principal J. K. Davis authority to organize a twelfth grade.<sup>13</sup> In January 1888, the Board hired three high school teachers to teach Latin and high school subjects.<sup>14</sup> High school students took over the upper floor, while primary and grammar students occupied the lower.<sup>15</sup>

In 1889, workers put up a \$4,000 gymnasium building, designed by Comstock and Trotsche, to the west of the school.<sup>16</sup> By a vote of 202 to 11, voters, October 24, 1887, approved an \$80,000 bond issue to build the gymnasium.<sup>17</sup> In 1893, contractor Keyes moved the gymnasium to University Heights and turned it into a grammar school.<sup>18</sup>

On June 20, 1889, Russ School held its first commencement at the Presbyterian Church, with four students graduating.<sup>19</sup>

In September 1893, the high school took over the entire building. Primary and grammar schools moved to the B-Street School.<sup>20</sup> The building then became “Russ High School.” Two hundred and forty-five students attended in 1893, of whom 36 were in the normal course and 35 in the commercial course.<sup>21</sup>

In January 1895, 30 students petitioned the Board of Education for a meeting to determine whether a portion of Russ School buildings and grounds should be sold to the State for a normal school.<sup>22</sup> Nothing came of this. In 1899, the State built a normal school at what is now Park Boulevard and El Cajon Avenue.

On January 11, 1898, voters turned down, 841 to 816, a proposal to form a new high school district.<sup>23</sup> They feared the Board of Education and the San Diego City Council, rather than the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, would be able to levy direct taxes, thus getting around submitting school building bonds for voter approval.<sup>24</sup>

Voters approved building an annex to Russ School, 590 to 496, on July 6, 1899 at a cost of \$2,000.<sup>25</sup> The annex contained an assembly room and a room for the commercial department.<sup>26</sup> Carpenters divided the old assembly room in the main building into two classrooms.

In 1902, the Board of Public Works planted trees on the hitherto bare grounds of the campus.<sup>27</sup>

By a vote of 256 to 61, voters, on July 20, 1903, approved establishing a high school district.<sup>28</sup> The School Board needed their approval to obtain State school funds.<sup>29</sup>

Minutes of a School Board Meeting, August 3, 1903, read: “As the law requires a location for the High School, Mr. O’Farrell moved that it be located in the incorporated City of San Diego. Carried.”<sup>30</sup>

For at least one year following the July 30, 1903 election, the school was either Russ School or San Diego High School as county funds were budgeted to Russ School and State funds were given only to high schools.<sup>31</sup> School annuals and city directories continued to list the school as Russ until 1909.<sup>32</sup>

In 1906, workers moved the old school several hundred feet east of its original location and put stilts underneath for support.<sup>33</sup> They removed the slender tower and iron work on the roof. The once grand building looked desolate. It was used for dressing rooms, storage, and a cafeteria.

With \$133,000 from bonds approved by the voters, 1,030 to 391, on July 27, 1905, the Board of Education commissioned a new building on the hill.<sup>34</sup> When dedicated, April 30, 1908, the price had climbed to \$225,000, the increase being due to the rise in labor and materials caused by the April 18, 1906 San Francisco earthquake.<sup>35</sup>

F. S. Allen of Pasadena prepared plans for a 65-room school building.<sup>36</sup> Called the “Gray Castle” by students and designated Building 100 by the Board of Education, its style was Gothic-Revival. Round towers flanked a west entrance, with one tower to the east of the entrance on the south and with merlons on the roof. As architect Allen put use before appearance, the building was not symmetrical.<sup>37</sup> A four-inch veneer of granite from the Stimson and Pirnie quarries at Santee covered brick walls. Yellow

trumpet vines and Boston ivy, planted by Kate Sessions, soon hid everything except the windows and did more to hold up the building than the granite veneer.<sup>38</sup>

The building accommodated almost 1,000 students. For fire protection, all partitions were of brick or steel.<sup>39</sup> A 50 by 60 ft. court stood between the walls. Besides 22 classrooms, the building contained lecture rooms, assembly halls, science rooms, art rooms, study rooms, a gymnasium, and faculty offices.<sup>40</sup> The San Diego Union proclaimed the high school “easily one of the most thoroughly equipped and best arranged high school buildings in the United States.”<sup>41</sup>

The School Board planned to tear down a temporary building near the high school used as a polytechnic school and to fit up the old Russ Building for this purpose.<sup>42</sup> When, on July 13, 1911, the Russ burned down its reuse became impossible.<sup>43</sup>

To meet the need for a polytechnic school, voters, December 10, 1910, approved, 1,394 to 301, a \$200,000 bonds issue to finance construction.<sup>44</sup> Quayle Brothers and Cressey, in 1911, designed three Gothic-Revival style buildings (numbers 200, 300 and 400) with 42 rooms for manual arts, fine arts, and domestic arts.<sup>45</sup>

George J. Magly, chairman of the building committee of the Board of Education, laid the cornerstone for the Manual Arts building, to the north of the “Gray Castle,” on December 19, 1912.<sup>46</sup> John Campbell, general contractor, completed the three buildings in the fall of 1913.<sup>47</sup>

In 1913, fifty-five teachers taught 1,518 students. A freshman junior college class, added in September 1914, was followed by a sophomore class in June 1916. In 1921, the junior college moved to the State Normal School.

Voters, July 1, 1913, by a vote of 9,843 to 613,<sup>48</sup> approved an \$850,000 park improvement bond, from which \$135,000 was used to defray cost of a stadium.<sup>49</sup> Quayle Brothers and Cressey designed the stadium and F. O. Engstrum Co. built it in 1914-15 to the east of the high school. Workers poured concrete for 23,500 seats on earthfill and on the graded slopes of a canyon. The San Diego Union described the stadium as “the largest in America.”<sup>50</sup> Twenty thousand people attended the May 31, 1915 dedication.<sup>51</sup>

As most of the outdoor activity for the 1915-16 Panama-California Exposition took place in the Plaza de Panama and the Plaza de los Estados, in front of the John D. Spreckels Organ Pavilion, the stadium did not play a major role at the San Diego Exposition.

President Woodrow Wilson visited the stadium, September 19, 1919, while attempting to win citizen support for the League of Nations. He spoke to more than 50,000 people.<sup>52</sup> On September 21, 1927, more than 60,000 welcomed Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh home at the stadium after his May 20-21 trans-Atlantic flight.<sup>53</sup> Other attendance records were set October 2, 1935, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke to 50,000 people,<sup>54</sup> July 20, 1958, when 29,000 heard evangelist Billy Graham,<sup>55</sup> July 5, 1965 when 25,000 Jehovah Witnesses attended a convention,<sup>56</sup> and on Thanksgiving Day 1964, when 34,865 saw the San Diego Chargers play the Buffalo Bills.<sup>57</sup>

San Diego High School was the only high school in the City until 1922 when La Jolla Junior-Senior High School was built.

By a vote of 6,309 to 5,308, voters, December 7, 1920, approved giving the School District 17.42 acres of Balboa Park near Upas Street and Park Boulevard for a junior high school. The 17.42 acres included 6.25 acres previously approved by Park Commissioners, but not by the voters. The State validated school use of the land in April 1921.<sup>58</sup>

The Common Council conveyed the 17.42 acres and another 9.99 acres west of San Diego High School to the School District, June 6, 1921. The park would reacquire the land if the School District should stop using it. If the 9.99 acres were included in the December 7, 1920 ballot proposition, voters were not aware of it and the San Diego Union wrote nothing to enlighten them.

Frank P. Allen, Jr., Director of Works for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition, expressed his objections to the School District's proposal as follows:

The granting of this part of the park to the school board will absolutely block for all time the development along the north side in the park from Cabrillo canyon to Park Boulevard. It is hoped that sometime in the future there will be a broad boulevard similar to Park Avenue (Sixth Street) from Date to Upas, across the whole north end of the park, which will connect with another boulevard along the east side of the park. Then with the further development of the road section in the southern part of the park, we will have a magnificent boulevard six miles long around Balboa Park.

The grant which is proposed for the school runs clear to the extreme north boundary of the park and blocks these boulevards absolutely. In fact, it so

effectively shuts off the northern part of the park that it will never be possible to connect the northern part of Cabrillo canyon to the main park, and anyone driving through it will be obliged to go outside the park and then reenter. This grant will cut off access across from the mesa of two beautiful canyons in the northern end of the park, and will cut off access to the mesa points between them except by climbing up from Cabrillo canyon.<sup>59</sup>

The north boulevard Allen hoped for was never built. Mesa points and canyons, now occupied by Boy and Girl Scouts, are as inaccessible as ever. Automobiles and pedestrians entering the park from the west must converge on Cabrillo Bridge.

The Board of Education appointed Theodore C. Kistner, architect for the projected junior high school, June 10, 1921.<sup>60</sup> Cost of building, amounting to \$300,000, came from a \$730,000 bond approved by the voters, 4,281 to 1,386, on March 2, 1920.<sup>61</sup> Grand Master David Reese of the Grand Lodge of Masons of California laid the cornerstone, April 22, 1922.<sup>62</sup> The school, named after former President Theodore Roosevelt, who had died in 1919, opened in September. A count of students, October 13, showed an attendance of 1,275.<sup>63</sup>

Kistner designed a functional, two-story building with a tile roof, classic pediment over the center entrance, and blind arches enclosing first and second-story windows. Unlike the Churrigueresque fireworks in the central portion of Balboa Park, the style was bland, lowcost California Spanish.

Voters, March 20, 1923, approved 10,012 to 3,713, giving a strip of land 60-ft, wide along the south line of the park to the City to form Russ Street.<sup>64</sup>



On a motion of former Russ student Claude Woolman, the Board of Education, October 5, 1925, adopted the name “Russ High” in place of “San Diego High.”<sup>65</sup> Students and alumni raised such a hullabaloo, the Board of Education, October 19, 1925, restored the quasi-official 1903 designation.<sup>66</sup>

Nino Marcelli conducted the high school orchestra in a concert, May 13, 1926, at the opening of Russ Auditorium, to the south of the “Gray Castle.”<sup>67</sup> Designed by Lincoln Rogers and partner Stevenson to match the Gothic-Revival style school buildings and made of granite-faced, reinforced concrete, the auditorium has 2,500 seats and cost \$300,000.<sup>68</sup> It assumed many of the civic functions of the auditorium in the Southern-California Counties Building, put up for the 1915 Exposition in Balboa Park, that had burned down in 1925. Financing came from a \$850,000 bond issue approved by voters, 4,718 to 1,432, on January 22, 1924.<sup>69</sup>

San Diego High School reached a peak of 3,327 students in 1928. Since then the diversification of high school facilities throughout the city, the progress of the freeways, and the growth of suburbs has caused a decrease in enrollment, 3,300 in 1941, 1,990 in 1954, and 1,779 in 1973.<sup>70</sup>

Snyder Continuation School, a special school for students who could not attend full time, opened across Park Boulevard from the high school in September 1930 on the 9.99 acres the City Council gave to the School District in 1920.<sup>71</sup> The school was named for Edwin R. Snyder, California Commissioner of Education (1914-32) and the author of the Snyder Vocational Act.<sup>72</sup>

On April 18, 1961, voters approved, 60,018 to 24, 448, transferring 8.5 acres of Balboa Park to the west of Park Boulevard and north of Snyder School to the School District for high school and community college recreational use.<sup>73</sup> The land, cut off from the park by the crosstown freeway, would revert to the City should the School District ever decide it did not need it. Following the formation of a separate San Diego Community College District, December 23, 1973, San Diego Community College acquired control of the 8.5 acres.

In 1975, the School District sold approximately five acres of land occupied by Snyder School and the remaining buildings to San Diego Community College for \$350,000. The District's Land and Facilities Department considered only 2.2 acres of this land to be usable. To take the place of the obsolete Snyder School, the School District, December 8, 1977, dedicated Garfield Independent Learning Center on Oregon Street, to the north and outside Balboa Park.<sup>74</sup>

As the San Diego School District has no legal claim to the approximately 23.5 acres occupied by San Diego High School, this school is a squatter in Balboa Park.<sup>75</sup> Attempting to secure its right to the land, the Board of Education, in January 1935, asked the City Council to seek voter approval of a transfer of ownership of the site of San Diego High School, stadium, and adjacent athletic fields.<sup>76</sup> The Council failed to act on the request.

Prodded by the San Fernando earthquake of February 9, 1971, the State of California Architectural Commission advised that Roosevelt Junior High School and San Diego High School buildings would have to come down by June 30, 1975 as they did not

conform to the April 1933 Field Act establishing earthquake school building standards.<sup>77</sup> State legislators had enacted this act in response to a March 1933 earthquake in which many school buildings had been destroyed, but had delayed enforcing it until the 1971 disasters alerted them to the grave consequences of procrastination.

On October 20, 1976, the School District rededicated Roosevelt Junior High School on 16.33 usable acres. Harold W. Culver, director of the School District's Land and Facilities Planning Department, noted the school occupied 18 acres less than the State's recommended standard.<sup>78</sup>

Construction costs came to \$2,572,989 with \$1,142,149 coming from local tax levies and \$1,430,839 as a State loan to be repaid out of local taxes.<sup>79</sup>

Crews tore down the pre-Field Act buildings, but left an Art-Science building and a Physical Education building put up in 1958.<sup>80</sup> Project architects Lykos and Goldhamer designed an innocuous, practical, almost-windowless building, containing vague references to detailing on Spanish and Moorish buildings. A semicircular auditorium and a rectangular classroom building are the only buildings visible from Park Boulevard. The entrance is through cyclone fencing facing Upas Street on the north. Brown-on-tan floral motifs, appearing in panels around doors and as a frieze on the upper portion of the auditorium, contrast with light-tan stucco walls.

As of September 17, 1976, one thousand and thirty-nine students were enrolled,<sup>81</sup> 236 students less than the enrollment in 1922.

Opponents of rebuilding San Diego High School in Balboa Park, including the Academic Senate of adjoining City College surfaced in 1973.<sup>82</sup>

They argued the school was too far away from a large residential population, the park and Naval Hospital to the north and business, industrial and college developments to the south kept it isolated, and 18.7 acres was too small for an expected enrollment of 2,000.<sup>83</sup> Thomas T. Williamson, one of the architects for the replacement school, admitted the State recommended a 53-acre site for a student body of 2,000.<sup>84</sup>

Once more students and alumni proclaimed their love for San Diego High School and cited its idea ethnic balance (39 percent white, 38 percent Mexican-American, 20 percent black, and 3 percent Oriental).<sup>85</sup> (In 1978 the white enrollment in the rebuilt San Diego High School had slipped to 17.5 percent.) George Smith, member of the Board of Education, who earlier had advocated using 53 acres of Balboa Park's Morley Field for the high school,<sup>86</sup> warned the alternative to building on the site would be busing black, brown and white students all over the city.<sup>87</sup> Dr. Douglas McElfresh, chairman of the 1957 Balboa Park Citizens Study Committee, said the school did not detract from Balboa Park as it was cut off from the rest of the park by freeways.<sup>88</sup>

School attorney Tom Shannon thought the State policy of requiring school districts to own property before they could put up schools was not applicable to Balboa Park since the district would be rebuilding on land continuously occupied since August 1882, and not rebuilding on a new site.<sup>89</sup> Airplanes overhead and airport within close proximity were overlooked, though presumably overheard.

In August 1973, the Board of Education rejected a move to put the issue of giving the San Diego School District clear title on the November ballot.<sup>90</sup>

On May 8, 1973, Assemblyman Peter Chacon submitted a bill to the State legislature making it possible for the State to give school districts funds for replacing schools subject to earthquake damage, whether the school districts or the cities held title.<sup>91</sup> In September 1973, Governor Ronald Reagan signed the enabling legislation.<sup>92</sup>

Superior Court Judge James Focht, May 23, 1974, signed an order approving a 50-year lease for the land for \$10,000, worked out by the Board of Education and the City Council.<sup>93</sup> The School District would take over operation of the stadium during the lease.

On November 6, 1976, the School District rededicated San Diego High School.<sup>94</sup> Built in 1975 at an estimated cost of \$7.5 million,<sup>95</sup> the new school, designed by Delbert Cole, an associate of Richard George Wheeler,<sup>96</sup> consisted of four structures made of textured-gray concrete blocks, with blue trim on doors, windows and metal fixtures.<sup>97</sup> Construction costs came to \$6,343,113, with \$2,654,592 coming from local tax levies and \$3,688,520 as a State of California loan.<sup>98</sup>

Designed without windows as these were thought to distract students from their lessons, the new buildings rest on the south on earthfill pads faced with sloping concrete blocks. Supposedly, these rampart-like pads would keep students in and intruders out. The only direct access to the campus is through the administration building fronting Park Boulevard.

Workers from the Paul Roel Construction Co. incorporated gargoyles from the facade of the Russ Auditorium (demolished in 1973 by William E Spicer<sup>99</sup>) into a fountain at the entrance to the new school. They also placed heavy carved doors from the

“Gray Castle” on the portal of the administration building. Building’s numbers 500 and 600, built in 1940 and 1950 were retained. New buildings include a 300-seat auditorium, fine arts facilities, a media center, a 1,200 seat gymnasium, and administrative and student services offices. The new structures form a rough circle around an interior courtyard with promenades and bridges circling and linking the buildings. The low-slung, slope-panel massing, and fluted concrete facing are modern in appearance while, at the same time, they harken back to Aztec and Toltec temples from Tenochitlan and Tula. The entire plant uses approximately five acres for buildings, six acres for parking, and nine acres for athletic fields.<sup>100</sup>

The Board of Education, the Park Board and the City have fought each other for control of the stadium over the years.<sup>101</sup> The Board of Education wanted the stadium for school recreational use, the Park Board for public use, and the City for its lucrative rental revenues.<sup>102</sup>

Nearby residents, the high school, junior college, and Naval Hospital protested the midget and hotrod auto races held in the stadium from 1948 to 1960.<sup>103</sup> The races stopped in 1961 when the City invited the Los Angeles Chargers football team to relocate in San Diego and offered the stadium rent-free for one year.<sup>104</sup> To accommodate the Chargers, Lee J. Morgan Construction Co. of National City, assisted by architect Stanley French of Boyle Engineering Co.,<sup>105</sup> built a second deck. The stadium gained 11,000 seats, or a grand total of 34,500.<sup>106</sup> The Chargers used the stadium until December 1966, then shifted to the Mission Valley San Diego Stadium.<sup>107</sup>

Even though the City, May 23, 1974, transferred control of the stadium to the School District, as part of its 50-year lease, this proved, from the School District's point of view, to be a costly mistake. Parts of the upper deck, rest room facilities, and locker rooms did not conform to Field Act guidelines.<sup>108</sup> Ironically, the stadium still met city, county and state earthquake requirements for non-school use.

The William J. Kerchnavy Construction Co. Demolished the classic peristyle at the south end of the stadium and the locker room behind it, July 1975, as a first step in bringing the stadium into compliance with the Field Act.<sup>109</sup>

In January 1977, Mike Connolly, acting public facilities' supervisor for the City, announced he would no longer rent the stadium for rock concerts.<sup>110</sup> Violence, noise and traffic and parking problems caused by concerts, sometimes attended by as many as 35,000 people, had made this move necessary.<sup>111</sup>

Over the objections of five members of the San Diego City Council, who wanted the stadium modified to 19,000 seats with the upper deck removed, the Cleveland Wrecking Co. Of Los Angeles demolished the stadium in 1979 for \$468,430. Dissenting Council members vowed never to approve a replacement stadium.<sup>112</sup> Notwithstanding this threat, on October 28, 1980, the Council, by a vote of five to four, allowed construction of a 3,500 seat stadium for school use at a cost of about \$900,000.<sup>113</sup>

The approximately 10.5 acres occupied by the high school stadium, the approximately 23.5 acres used by San Diego High School, the approximately 17.5 acres held by Roosevelt Junior High School, and the approximately 17.6 acres taken by San Diego Community College were once part of Balboa Park.<sup>114</sup> These institutions are where they are because the San Diego School District, San Diego City Council, and San

Diego voters considered parkland to be free, 1,400-acre Balboa Park to be too large, and the need for schools at the time to be more important than the unforeseeable park and recreation needs of the City's future.

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37. San Diego Union, August 22, 1906, II, 1.
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