

## BALBOA PARK: WHOSE PARK IS IT ANYWAY?

by Richard W. Amero

The word "people" has a high level of generalization. As such it is synonymous with human being. It means everybody who has or had the characteristics of a human being. This excursion into abstractions may be of assistance to those who refer to Balboa Park as a "people's park" or "a park for the people"

There were no parks in the United States before the middle of the nineteenth century. There were cemeteries, commons and squares or plazas which were owned by private individuals, institutions and municipalities or other government agencies. Government ownership implied that these areas were owned by those who formed parts of the governments; that is, citizens. If one was not a citizen—a slave or a foreigner—one did not own public places and could be excluded from them. In 1868, a handful of trustees of the town of San Diego decided to make a portion of land which the city owned a "park." The exact wording was that the land was to "be for a park." Later in 1870-71, after some San Diegans tried to steal the land, the California State Legislature ratified the trustee's action, adding the words "a free and public park."

It is the last phrase that is cited by those who say Balboa Park is "a park for the people," that is a park that is free and public. Most people would claim to know what the words "free" and "public" mean, though "free" may be defined as without cost, obligation and constraint and "public" may be used to denote people who have money, who can vote, and who are of a certain race, religion, age or sex.

In practice, the protectors of Balboa Park in the nineteenth century—that was not its name at the time —were an elite who were not overly concerned about the meaning of the word "public." They wanted to keep the land off the market so the value of their own holdings would not be diluted. Later as their lands were developed, they realized the presence of the park increased the value of their lands. But this was not all, cultured members of the elite considered the park as their own pleasure ground. Whatever amenities they put into the park were for their pleasure or edification... . golf courses, carriage drives, bowling greens, gardens, schools for their children, and, on a bluff overlooking San Diego Bay, buildings and grounds for indigent orphans, unwed mothers and widows

Unlike New York, Chicago and Philadelphia, there was little talk about parks improving the morals of the poor, curbing delinquency, or reducing alcoholism. Other than the charity institutions, which were landscaped and left open, little was done to make the park serviceable for employed and unemployed laboring classes. Upper income people, who considered park land next to their backyards as part of their backyards, took satisfaction in promoting the concept of a "City Beautiful." (This in a city whose business section was mercantile, congested, ugly and unsanitary!) These were the refined people --mostly women —who paid nursery woman Kate Sessions to decorate their property with plants. The elite still exist in the form of benefactors and foundations eager to dictate park policy, to keep out the homeless, Mexicans and the poor, and to endow the park with monuments to themselves or their families, statues in honor of San Diego

pioneers who with the passing of time have achieved mythological status, and privately-owned and operated facilities.

Shortly before ambitious bankers and business men decided to use the park as a place to stage the 1915-16 Panama-California (International) Exposition, the playground movement got started in the Golden Hill section of Balboa Park. Playgrounds and their attached field houses, were not elitist because anybody who lived near them could use their facilities. But their main users were children of the lower classes. Middle class children did not visit them. While the people who had managed the bankrupt homes for orphans, unwed mothers and widows in Balboa Park endorsed the playgrounds, elected officials controlled them. They tried to choose people to manage them under the "spoils" system. Their attempts to replace Park Superintendents John Morley and William Allen Perry and Playground Superintendents Tam Deering and W. A. Kearns with henchmen failed because the incumbents had proven their worth to a majority of the citizens of the city.

The development of cultural institutions and institutions of a quasi-commercial and quasi-civic character on the flat central mesa in Balboa Park overlapped the playground movement. This was the period of the expositions of 1915-16 and 1935-36 and—except for the interruptions of two world wars—it set the tone of Balboa Park. Of course, the park consisted of a western strip of acacias, eucalyptus, palms and Eastern-style lawns, which was popular with the poor for picnics, for sailors, for lovers, for thieves and vandals. The eastern side continued to be used as an active recreational park; though it confined the poor to the outer edges of Golden Hill Park and Morley Field. Other usable areas became the preserve of people with money to spend on golf, tennis, archery, Frisbee tennis, professional bicycle racing and membership in art, camera and travel clubs.

The Zoo got into the park by the accident of acquiring ownership of mangy and diseased animals in cages left over from the 1915-16 exposition that nobody else wanted.. Because it had dedicated leaders and patrons, it soon became known all over the United States. While it is possible to look at the zoo's early days and wonder how it could have been so backward; it was, from its beginnings, a mixture of good and bad features... tiny constricted cages and bare cement moats. Leaders strove to make the San Diego Zoo the most humane they could, limited by their understanding and lack of money. Dr. Harry Wegforth and his successor, Belle Benchley, kept the Zoo free to children. The practice was abolished under Dr. Charles Schroeder. Now children, like their parents—or maybe just their parents—pay for their admission.

Businessmen eager to make money advocated the growth of tourism, agriculture and commerce in San Diego City and County. To these people, the 1915-16 exposition was a means to achieve these ends. U.S. Navy officials, who manned the installations, which came to San Diego as a result of the 1915-16 exposition and of World War I, helped businessmen and politicians plan a city which wavered between the extremes of a "City Beautiful" of geraniums and a "City Practical" of smokestacks, with working people in favor the latter. The concurrent arrival of the airplane industry and the Depression in the 1930s tipped the scales in favor of the "City Practical." As a consequence, palaces and gardens left in Balboa Park after the first exposition were neglected. By converting the decrepit palaces to military uses during World Wars I and II and by paying for their reconstruction afterwards, the U.S. Navy carried the patched-up buildings

over for use during the 1935-36 exposition, at which time new buildings were added to the park and the cycle of repair and rot began again. The Zoo remained open during World War II to boost the morale of service people and of civilians. Staff were told to kill animals should they escape from their pens during air raids.

San Diego is left today with the question is Balboa Park "a park for the people?" To put the question in another form . . . Are there limits to the institutions, events and functions that can be placed in the park without damaging the landscape and depleting the park as a free public recreational resource? There are some areas in the park that everybody can visit without paying to do so; however, even in these areas, payment is extracted from residents in property taxes. Funds for park upkeep and building repairs come from the General Fund, the Transient Occupancy Tax, state and federal governments, and from private donors... the last with proprietary strings attached. The Park Department can rent or grant vast sections of the park to private groups for special occasions, such as the area surrounding Marston Point, the area abutting the sanitary landfill, the Organ Pavilion, and the Plaza de Panama. However temporary these rents or grants may be, when they are in force the areas are closed off to casual strollers. Not all "free" areas are accessible, either because of steep grades or impenetrable planting; however, views of them from a distance give pleasure, such as parts of Florida, Switzer and Cabrillo Canyons.

Groups of various kinds occupy areas in the park. Some of these group activities are open to the public, others to members. Some require fees, others occasionally allow free admission. In any case, exclusive groups are not part of a people's park because their use is specialized rather than generalized. Like sects and institutions in society, groups in Balboa Park determine membership by interests, income, political persuasion, religious beliefs and sexual orientation. They divide people and prevent inter-communication and inter-action. Archers, girl scouts, boy scouts, bridge players, mountain bicyclists, veterans' organizations, a U.S. naval hospital, city administrative departments, city equipment and maintenance yards, a city plant nursery, and public high schools in the park shortchange the democratic character of a public park and subtract from free portions for everyone to enjoy. In San Francisco specialized groups are allowed to camp out in Golden Gate Park for short periods of time but none of them are allowed to stay permanently.

Unlike indoor institutions in Balboa Park—which could be anywhere—the San Diego Zoo is in an anomalous position because its attractions are outdoors. They afford pedestrians a wholesome activity and lasting entertainment. Pages can be written explaining why animals fascinate people. To maintain its accreditation with the National Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums, the zoo must keep its standards of animal care at a high level; therefore, it is in no danger of degenerating to the level of a Disneyland or a Sea World. The Zoo excludes people for non-payment of fees and for vandalism. Until San Diego, like the St. Louis Zoo or the National Zoo in Washington, DC, decides to finance its zoo, there is no alternative to this situation, except the hope that the zoo will keep its admission fees low, which, compared to Disneyland and Sea World, so far it has done.

In the present technological era, people use automobiles as extensions of their feet. These automobiles require roads over which to travel and places to park when they are not in motion. Such requirements impose impacts on cities in general and parks in particular. Since the

relationship between people and their modes of transport are indissoluble, automobiles can be regarded as distinguishing parts of the people equation, along with clothes, food and other necessities. By deciding which uses of Balboa Park should be prioritized and which removed, automobile and parking problems can be assuaged. Eventually, a shortage of fuel is going to change the nature of civilization; but this is not likely to occur within the next half century. Traffic and congestion problems have already been solved in the master plan of Balboa Park adopted in 1989, but, as the solutions, are not satisfactory to everybody and as the money available kept getting diverted, nothing has been done to implement them. By placing the welfare of Balboa Park and its most attended institutions and activities first, solutions are transparently clear, no matter how much institutions and activities that are threatened may attempt to becloud the issue. A reading of this paper should indicate those facilities and functions which the writer would prefer not to see in Balboa Park.

So the next time, someone says they support "a people's park" or "a park for everyone," it would be well to question what they mean and whom they represent. Maybe everyone represents somebody or something, no matter how much they pretend otherwise. But every time an individual puts the interest of their group ahead of others, he or she is refusing to acknowledge his or her common share in the democratic inheritance of "we," the American people.

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