



Pacific Ocean Park

The
Rise and Fall
of Los Angeles'
Space-Age
Nautical
Pleasure Pier

**Christopher Merritt
and Domenic Priore**

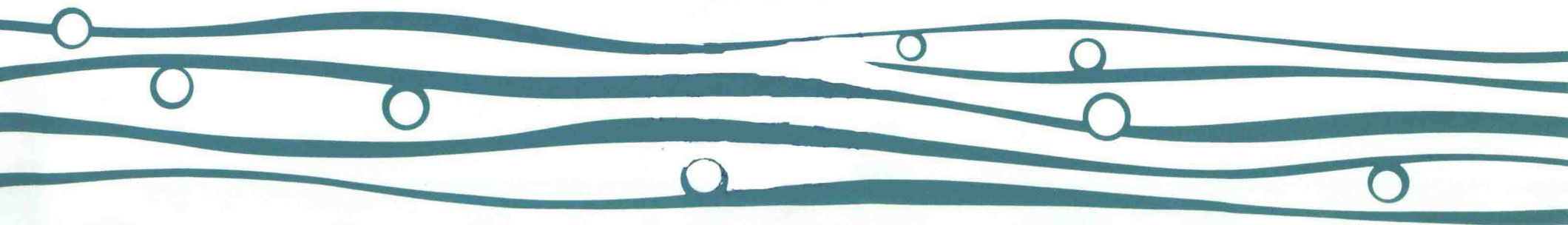
Foreword by Brian Wilson

Pacific Ocean Park

**The Rise and Fall of Los Angeles'
Space-Age Nautical Pleasure Pier**

by **Christopher Merritt**
and **Domenic Priore**

Foreword by Brian Wilson



Pacific Ocean Park: The Rise and Fall of Los Angeles' Space-Age Nautical Pleasure Pier
©2014 by Christopher Merritt

©to all excerpts within retained by original authors and photographers
except for material that has since passed into public domain

All rights reserved.

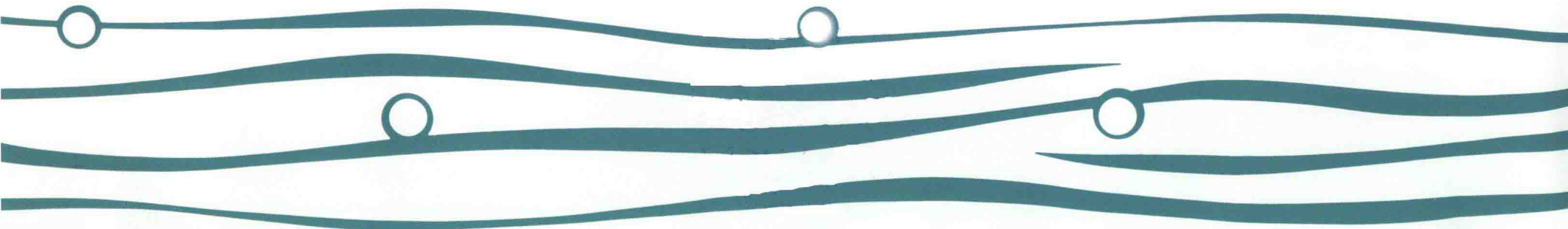
Printed in Korea

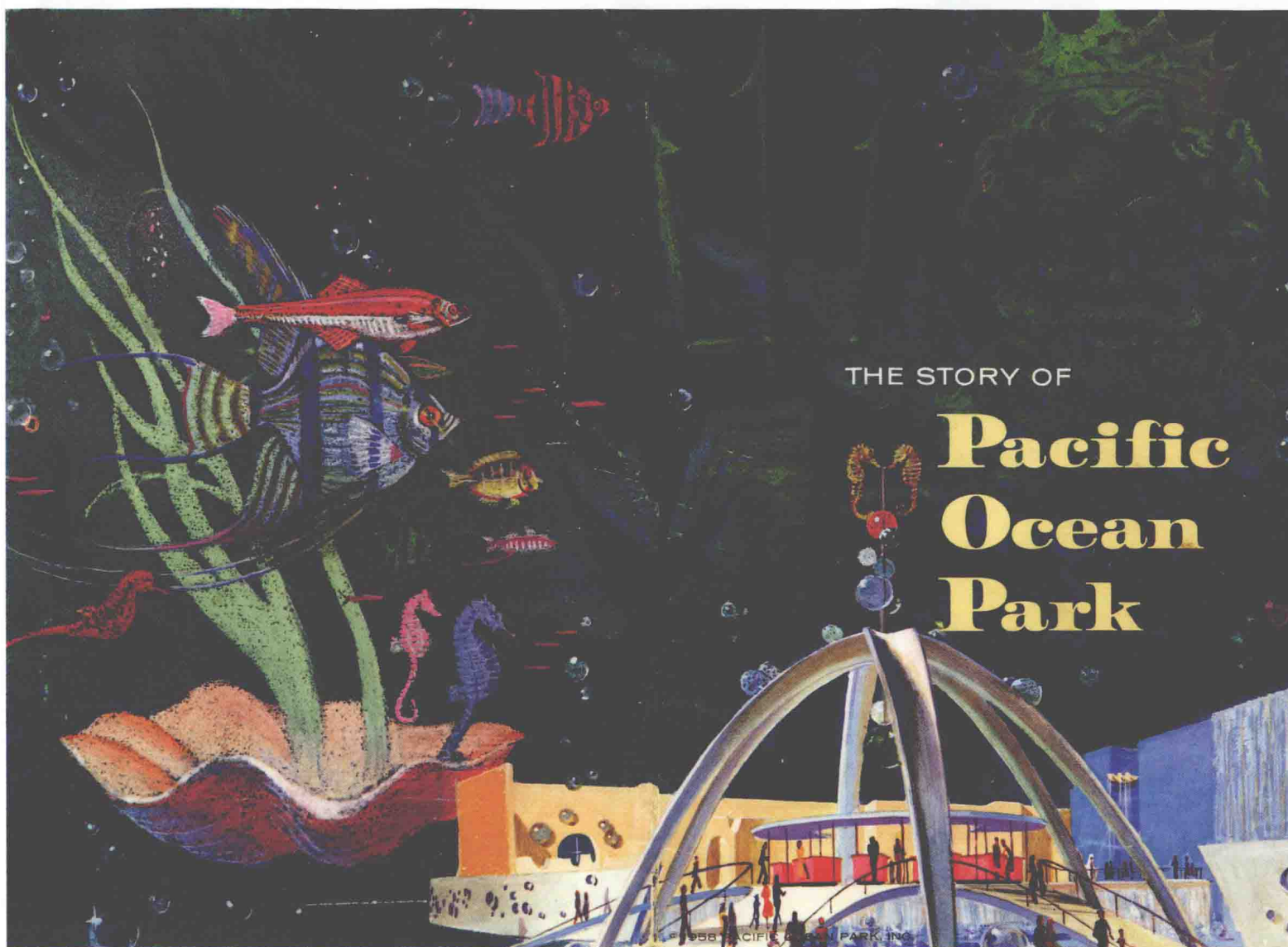
Design by Sean Tejaratchi

Process Media
1240 W. Sims Way Suite 124
Port Townsend WA 98368

processmediainc.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

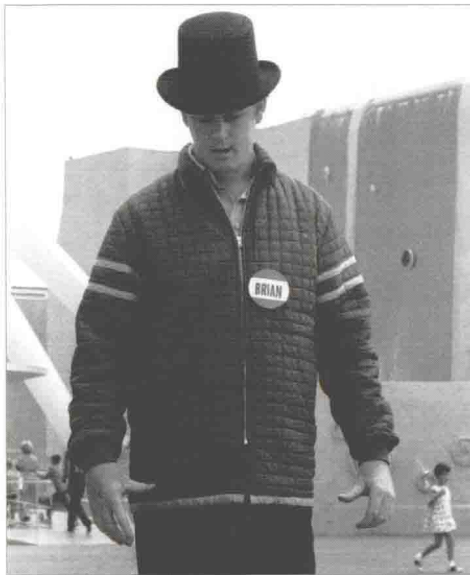




*For my mother, Carolyn Merritt:
Thanks for saving that guidebook, Mom.*

Foreword

by Brian Wilson

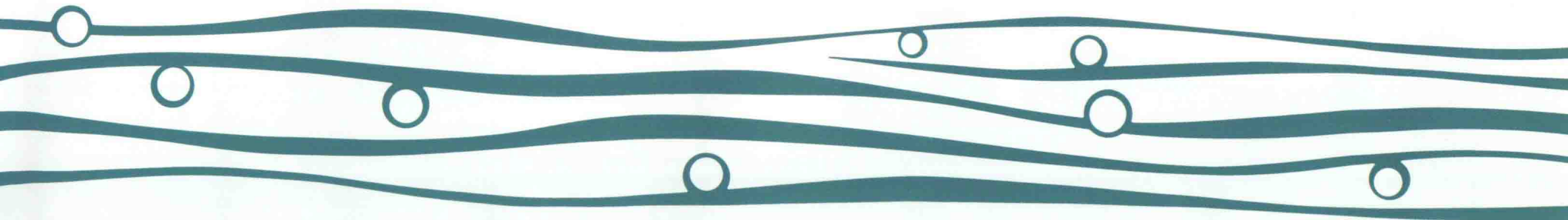


As a kid, our dad used to bring my brothers and me to The Pike in Long Beach a lot, but Pacific Ocean Park is special to me for other reasons.

The first time the Beach Boys played on TV was for *Wink Martindale's P.O.P. Dance Party*.

When it came time to promote our new *All Summer Long* album, Dennis, Carl, Mike, Al and I all went down to the entrance to shoot some photos for *Teen Set* magazine. Later, when *Pet Sounds* was released, we came back out to the end of the pier for another promo shoot... Bruce was with us by that time.

Looking through this book, I dug seeing some of our early, local rock 'n' roll heroes: Sam Cooke, Ritchie Valens, plus some of our friends from the Beach Party movies, too. From what I can remember, the place had a really cool vibe... very Modern, and we were going for a Modern sound. P.O.P. was a good match for the spirit of the Beach Boys—a real sun & fun experience that won't be soon forgotten.



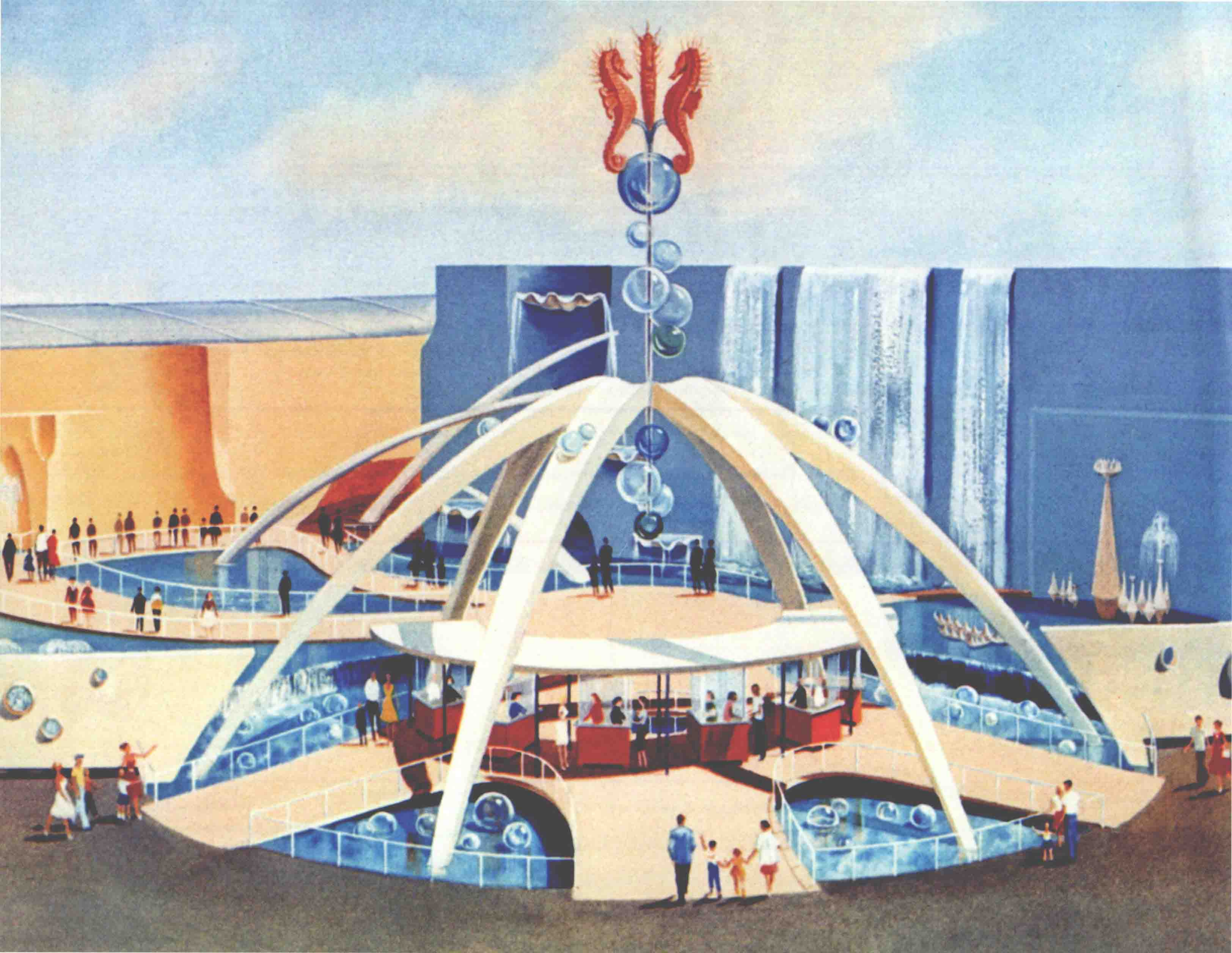


Table of Contents

vii **Foreword** by Brian Wilson

1 **Turf Club & Television**

The Creation and Design of Pacific Ocean Park

77 **Suspension of Disbelief**

The Attractions of Pacific Ocean Park

143 **Teenage Wasteland**

The Death of Pacific Ocean Park

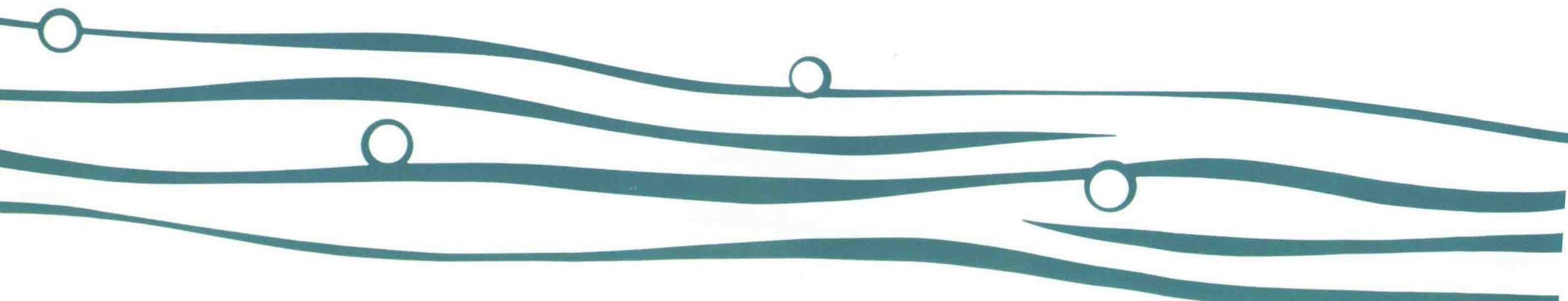
256-257 **Photographic Fun Map**

258 **Acknowledgements**

261 **Image Credits**

263 **About the Authors**





1

Turf Club and Television

The **Creation and Design** of
Pacific Ocean Park



*Ocean Park, before it was improved out of existence, once had
to perfection all the things I most desire... It's gone now,
its shops plowed under and concreted over...*

—Ray Bradbury

*This was the greatest pleasure pier in the world! I have picture
postcards to prove it. And it wasn't derelict; it was deliberately
bankrupted to make a real estate bonanza...* —Reyner Banham

It was 1956, and Charles “Doc” Strub had decided to take the last big gamble of his life. As a lifelong poker enthusiast and entrepreneur, he was used to taking sizable risks. On February 20, his company, the Los Angeles Turf Club (also known as Santa Anita Park—the first racetrack built in California) signed a one-year option to purchase the old Ocean Park Pier in Santa Monica for \$3,000,000. His plan? To build an amusement park that rivaled Disneyland. He called it Pacific Ocean Park.

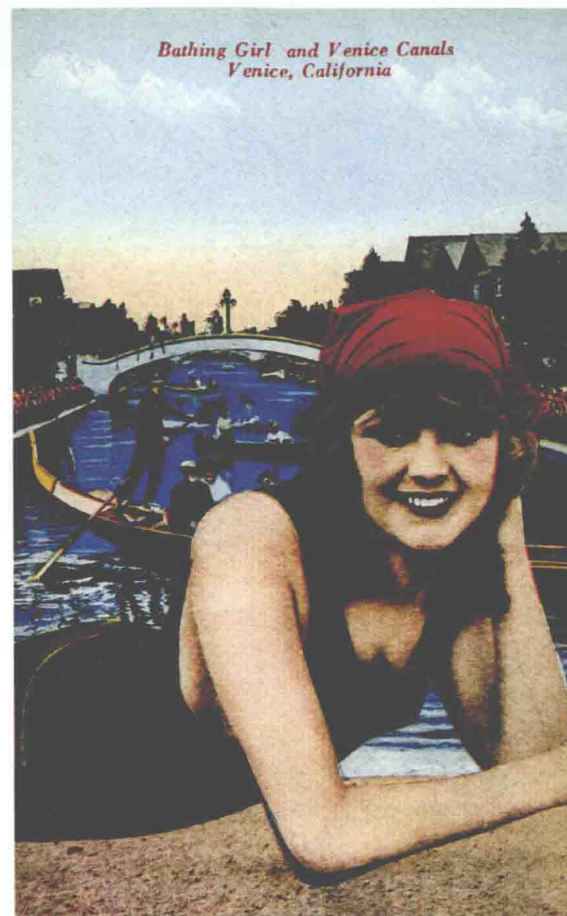
Also known as “The Dentist with the Golden Drill,” Strub had a long history of finding opportunities where seemingly none existed. Beleaguered as a child by the semi-barbaric practices of dentists in the late 1800s, he became one himself, and worked hard to develop modern techniques to relieve the pain of pulling abscessed teeth. In early April of 1906, he had just finished work on his new



office when the massive San Francisco earthquake hit. Strub had invested heavily in state-of-the-art equipment, and the destruction forced him to start over.

Over the next year, he would divide his time between rebuilding his dentistry practice, speculating in real estate and playing baseball with the Sacramento Cordovas. By 1918, he had built up a practice of six “painless extraction” dentist offices. When investors looking to purchase the San Francisco Seals of the Pacific Coast League came knocking, he was able to acquire 1/3 of the club. Over the years, “Doc” Strub drove the prices of “purchasing” star athletes in the PCL sky-high. Among other innovations, he was behind the shockingly high asking price of \$100,000 for outfielder Jimmy O’Connell in 1922.

Again, in 1929, he lost everything. Strub was sitting in his “lucky” barber chair, in the midst of a shave, when he took a phone call from the president of Bank of America—he was one million dollars in debt, due to the crash of the stock market. He seemingly took it in stride, working over the next five years to pay everything back. By 1939, he was ready to invest again. Seeing a lack of thoroughbred horse racing in California, he partnered with filmmaker Hal Roach and others to purchase



Previous left: Concept art for the grand entrance to Pacific Ocean Park, Neptune’s Courtyard by Fred Harpman in mid-1957. He generated the painting over one weekend, convincing the members of the L.A. Turf Association to make him supervising art director on the project.

Opposite: Abbot Kinney, creator of the Ocean Park and Venice of America amusement areas, c. 1890s.

Far left: Seedling: Ocean Park Pier as it appeared in 1900.

Left: Venice postcard, c. 1910s. Kinney’s Canals and Venice of America debuted in 1905.



Above: "Doc" Strub's Santa Anita Racetrack opened in 1934.

Right: Entrepreneur and former dentist, Charles "Doc" Strub, c. 1920.



'Lucky' Baldwin's Rancho Santa Anita in Arcadia with the express desire to fund and build a world-famous racetrack. The 401 acres of land cost them \$2,900,000. Always the innovator, Strub spearheaded many new concepts in racing—including a \$1 admission charge, \$100,000 purse races, electrical timing of races and the ubiquitous "photo finish." During race time, Strub maintained a cubbyhole high above the track where telephones connected him with all areas of Santa Anita. His involvement during the racing season was so total that he would go into seclusion for a month afterwards to recuperate.

Santa Anita wasn't "Doc" Strub's only success. In May of 1939, the financially failing Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco ousted Harris Connick as managing director. Connick had opened the Fair with \$4,000,000 more debt than anticipated, and the entire exhibition was headed for receivership. Management replaced him with Strub, who insisted on promoting more ballyhoo and bigger attractions. With schemes like substituting classical concerts with swing bands, he was able to turn the World's Fair around within the year.

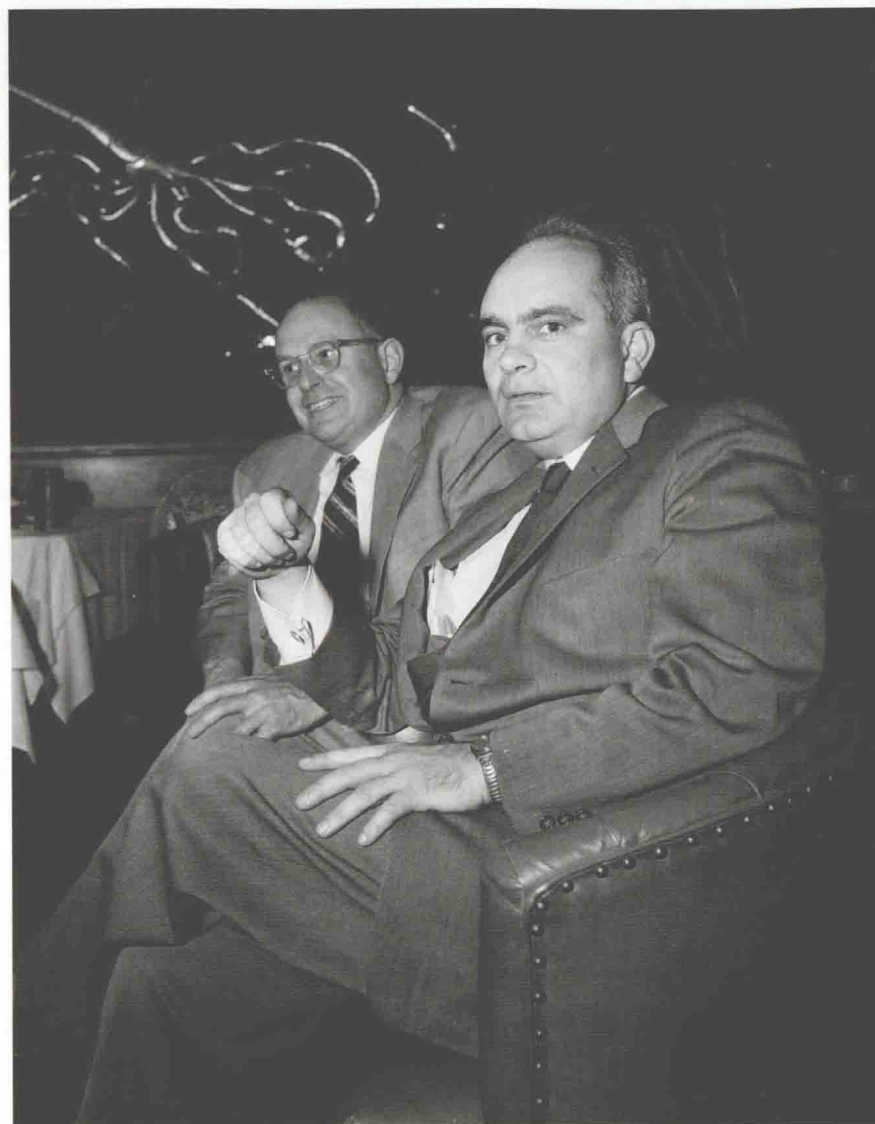
During World War II, the U.S. Army took over the Santa Anita racetrack, in order to use it as an ordnance training center. Two young officers—William H. Jaynes and Ben A. O'Dorisio—were transferred there during this time. Jaynes and O'Dorisio worked well together, a fact not unnoticed by Strub. "Jaynes was, I believe, my dad's commanding officer and he was very impressed with my dad's business acumen, and his organization," recalled Ben's son, Dennis O'Dorisio. After the war, Strub didn't forget the two, and in 1946, he contacted Jaynes with a proposition. Lake Arrowhead Village, a charming collection of hotels, pavilions,

restaurants and homes—all built in a Norman style—was in financial trouble. The appealing resort, located in the San Bernardino Forest, had been a popular tourist destination for servicemen during the war years. “Doc” Strub was interested in another gamble—purchasing the lake, “village” and adjacent Arrowhead Woods.

Since the war, tourism had declined greatly—and the overhead was high. He needed a new management team to go in and make it profitable. Jaynes, recalling how impressed he was with O’Dorisio, immediately brought him on board. “They had all these employees on payroll up at Lake Arrowhead, and the first thing that my dad and Bill did was to get rid of the corporate type of management of the Lake,” remembered Dennis. “This included the Village and restaurants, as well as other interests. What they did is they proceeded to lease these various entities out, and then give the headache of managing these entities to others who were obviously going to be more motivated because they had sunk their own money in, to obtain these leases. It worked out very well.”

Jaynes and O’Dorisio seemed to click as a team. They began to make decisions and take appointments jointly. When in conversation with a potential lessee or employee, they would be so in sync that they would finish each other’s sentences. A phone call to the duo would be simultaneously answered by both of them. In a 1958 interview, they observed that they rarely argued. “We never have any trouble,” Jaynes said. “We’re partners in bridge, too,” O’Dorisio added. People began to refer to them collectively as “Bill & Ben.”

Over the next several years, “Doc” Strub’s Turf Club sunk millions into improving the property, as well as donating land to many charitable organizations.



Above: L to R: William Jaynes and Ben O’Dorisio (a.k.a. “Bill and Ben”) take questions from the press at the revamped “Jack’s At The Beach” restaurant on the Ocean Park Pier.



Above: Strings of lights illuminate the night on Woodward Avenue in Venice, 1925.

Almost overnight, it became a tourist Mecca—while movie actors, producers and directors began to use it as a convenient location for filmmaking (including the Marx Brothers classic film *A Day At The Races*). The investment paid off, and Strub did so well that he was able to purchase a sizable parcel on the north shore of Lake Arrowhead, including a large home and a steamboat with its own private dock. Many would consider this achievement the pinnacle of a successful career. Strub, however, wasn't done dreaming just yet.

By 1953, it was becoming known that creative genius Walt Disney had a big project on the horizon—an amusement park that would redefine the standard currently offered to the public. Gone would be the WWII-era carnivalesque rides found in most parks of the time. Instead he would offer a richly themed and detailed fantasy

world, enjoyable by the whole family, with thrilling attractions all based around the famed Disney characters. The initial concept revolved around a “Mickey Mouse Park”—located adjacent to Griffith Park, and within walking distance of the Walt Disney Studios in Burbank. Quickly, Disney's dreams for the project outgrew the small plot of land he had initially intended. By the late summer of '53, he had agents gathering data on various cities, searching for the future home of his “theme park.”

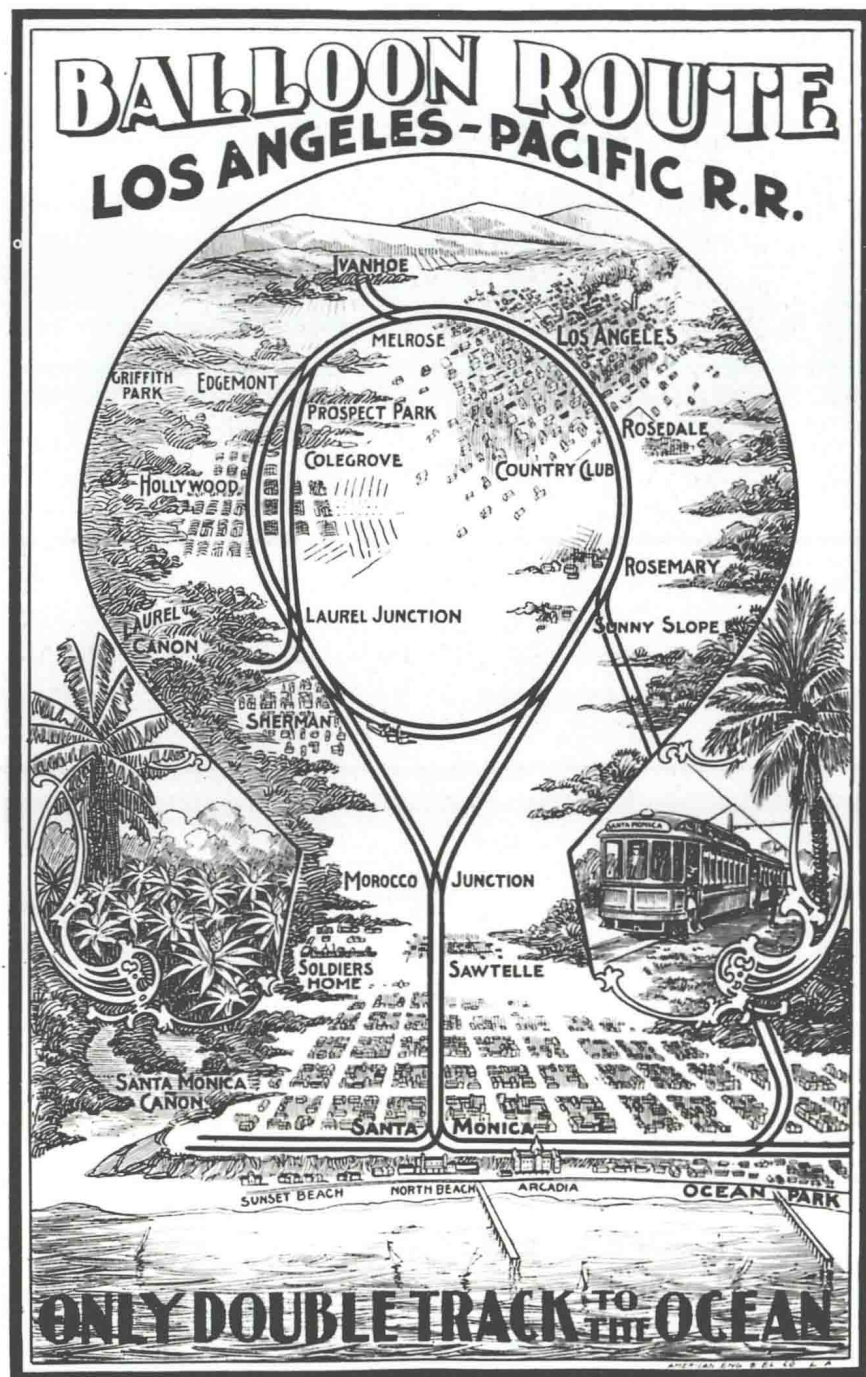
During this time, Disney was actively seeking funding for the project, and the L.A. Turf Club had shown interest. Because of their experience in developing the Lake Arrowhead property, “Bill & Ben” were loaned to Disney by “Doc” Strub's Turf Club company for about three months, in order to assist with early planning.

At this time, Strub verbally committed to putting up half the money for financing Disneyland, and he set up a business meeting with Bill Jaynes, Ben O'Dorisio, Walt Disney and Roy Disney at the Huntington Hotel in Pasadena. The discussion did not go well. Disney had agreed to put up \$10 million, and the Turf Club had concluded they could match that amount. Strub, however, began the meeting with some demands. In a 1965 interview, Walt Disney recalled, "He said my park would have to be built along the ocean. I told him that was the one place where I would not build it."

Dennis O'Dorisio relates the rest of the story. "Strub made a comment that Santa Anita would operate. Disney took exception to that and said that nobody was going to tell Walt Disney how to operate. Strub looked at him and said, 'Well, then I guess we don't have a deal.' And Roy Disney concurred. As the meeting was breaking up, Walt Disney made an inquiry as to the disposition of 'Bill & Ben.' He said something to the effect of 'Well, what about the boys?' And before O'Dorisio or Jaynes could say anything, Strub said, 'They're staying with me.'" Throughout 1954 and 1955, "Doc" Strub would continue to develop his plan, to create an all-new amusement park on a pier. But the concept of "high theme" and a more family-friendly environment being espoused by Walt Disney had not been lost on him.



Above: The Grand Lagoon and Midway Plaisance, Venice of America—1906. Gondoliers drifted alongside unique attractions such as the 'Temple of Mirth' and 'The Chicken Farm' on Kinney's Midway.



A Concept With Deep Roots

In fact, a grandiose, phantasmagoric and imaginative amusement park by the ocean had already existed in L.A., a true “Coney Island of the Pacific” known as Venice of America, built by Sweet Caporal cigarette manufacturer turned real estate developer Abbot Kinney. Based on the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair on the shoreline at Lake Michigan, and opened on July 4, 1905, Kinney’s dream was to bring a cultural center to Los Angeles, something that could inspire nothing less than an American Renaissance that would begin on the shores of the Pacific. It would be coupled with fun zones, a pleasure pier, Scenic Railways, bands playing at the Venice Lagoon, ballroom dancing at several venues and new beachside homes. Kinney’s concept was so complete that the aesthetic design of the neighborhood (some of which still exists) featured columnated Venetian architecture, with canals adjacent to the new attractions, Grand Lagoon and living areas. Amusements were spread over a vast area, and the Pacific Electric Railroad’s public transportation system was extended to Venice of America and its neighboring Ocean Park pier from downtown L.A. by two different routes. Over 20 gondoliers directly from Venice, Italy were hired to complete this fantasy by the sea.

One of the very first Hollywood movie star hangouts was a 182-foot-long replica of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo’s Spanish galleon called The Ship Café (referencing the discovery of the Coronado Islands and Santa Catalina Island in 1542). This was built adjacent to the Abbot Kinney Pier to accommodate 500 guests. Movie stars featured in shoots in and around the Venice and Ocean Park piers over time included Charlie Chaplin (*Kid’s Auto Races*, *The Circus*), Mary Pickford