

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



by Hynda Rudd,
City Archivist (Retired),
and Club Member



'Venice of America' – A Cultural Theme Park



Venice in 1905.



The Ship Café.

Venice, California's historic entrance into California geography dates back to the La Ballona Rancho period of the 1870s. Property along the seaside of the Pacific Ocean had been considered of primary interest to all who had the good fortune to acquire the land.

The story begins with Abbot Kinney. He was an easterner born in 1850, who had been a world traveler working in a family owned tobacco business in New York City. On one of his travels he sailed to Hawaii, where he stayed for a few months before traveling back home. By the time he reached San Francisco in 1880, a heavy blizzard in the Sierra Mountains blocked the trains from heading east.

While Kinney waited for the railroad tracks to clear, he heard of a health resort in Sierra Madre. Kinney suffered from asthma and insomnia. After spending some time at the resort, he realized that this was where he wanted to live. He purchased 550 acres in the foothills, built a mansion and planted 6,000 citrus trees and 20,000 seedless grape vines.

In time he realized he wanted a cooler summer home for his family near the Pacific Ocean. In 1886, to escape the heat of Los Angeles, he built a home in Santa Monica.

Kinney was a wise businessman and became interested in land development along the coast. His first endeavor in nearby Pacific Palisades failed because of an 1888 real estate market crash.

In 1891, Kinney and a business partner, Francis Ryan, bought a controlling interest in Ocean Park Casino, which was really a restaurant and tennis club. The same year they purchased a one-and-a-half mile long tract that was 1000 feet deep facing the Pacific Ocean south of Santa Monica. They

paid \$175,000 for the property. There they built a beach resort called Ocean Park. In time with new partners added to the scheme of things, Kinney chose the marshy, undeveloped southern half of the tract to build his "Venice of America." The county territory consisted of sand dunes and wetlands. In time and great effort, Abbot Kinney would have his dream come true to build a recreational area reminiscent of Venice, Italy, on the shores of the Pacific.

These future partners realized that making this resort park a success would mean transporting people from the cities of Los Angeles and Santa Monica by means of a railroad system that would be a direct line and inexpensive. Santa Monica businessmen were concerned that Kinney's dream would prove a competition to their North Beach resort and convinced Colis Huntington of the Southern Pacific Railroad to be uncooperative. With that understanding, Kinney contacted the rival Santa Fe Railroad to extend their Inglewood line to his resort. In turn, he donated 12 acres for the railroad right of way. The first train began its operation on June 12, 1892.

Within the next year, Kinney and his partner advertised 25-by-100-foot lots featuring piped water for \$100. To entice buyers to purchase lots, three small four-room cottages were built and given away through a lottery. The lots sold well, even though these were difficult financial times. Tents were then erected on unsold lots and made available to campers for summer rentals.

In May 1895, the community was named Ocean Park, California. The community was slow in growth, but by the spring of 1898, there were approximately 150 lots sold. Also, that year the area had a business boom that provided Kinney the incentive to build a

racetrack and golf course not far from his Ocean Park Country Club.

In 1898, the City of Santa Monica gave Kinney and his partner permission to build a 1250-foot-long pier at Pier Avenue. The pier would sit on pilings already used to carry Santa Monica's 200-foot-long outfall sewer. Kinney's pier provided two goals: one, to have a pleasure place for fisherman and tourists; and two, to protect and lengthen the sewage pipes seaward as to not pollute their property to the south. Incredibly, the project was finished within six weeks.

Tragedy occurred before the completion of the grand plan. Francis Ryan, Kinney's partner, died of a sudden heart attack. His wife soon remarried. Thomas Dudley became a new partner for Abbot Kinney. He was a Santa Monica businessman and politician. By 1902, Dudley sold his partnership for \$400,000 to three new partners mentioned above. Even with the recent alliance, there was continued fear that Kinney's resort would take business away from the local North Beach resort. Unfortunately, Kinney did not get along with the three partners.

The new partners refused to support any of his projects. First, they were not interested in making enemies of the local constituents in Santa Monica over a newly considered Abbot Kinney trolley company. Second, the partners were more concerned about losing money in the Casino restaurant and vaudeville theater. Finally, they did not approve of Kinney's ideas on how to develop the southern wetlands. But Kinney's dream would nevertheless come true.

After Kinney ended his partnership in the Ocean Park Improvement Company, he took title to the underdeveloped marshy southern property in Winter 1904. This is when he made definite plans for his "Venice of America" beach resort. At that time there was a nationwide plan referred to as the City Beautiful Movement, which incorporated planned communities with spacious public areas. He also realized that most of the best seaside resorts were back east, and necessary to investigate. Eventually, he hired an apprentice from the Fredrick Law Olmstead Jr. firm. Olmstead was highly regarded as one of the most famous landscape architects in the country. He was founder and first president

of the American Society of Landscape Architects. He was also the initiator of the City Beautiful Movement, with its inception in the eastern United States.

The "Venice of America" plan also followed the same model found at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, although much smaller. The Chicago extravaganza was also built on marshy land on the shore of Lake Michigan. The Venice plan included a planned community that separated the business and commercial areas from residential living. In Summer 1904, Abbot Kinney began contracting for excavation of canals and building a pier, designing and building of a Ship Hotel and other principal buildings.

"Venice of America" was an instant success. It opened on the Fourth of July, 1905. Visitors were entranced by his intricate canals. The electric trolley would bring throngs of people from Santa Monica and downtown Los Angeles. The architecture had an ornate Venetian Renaissance design. There was an active business district with a huge auditorium and a Ship Café. Guests were given tours of the resort by a miniature steam railroad or by gondolas. Swimming was available in the ocean or at Kinney's salt water plunge lagoon, where the guests could listen to band concerts.

Eventually, the resort was expanded by enlarging the amusement pier. Abbot Kinney also became very influential in local politics when, in May 1911, he was able to have the name changed from Ocean Park to Venice, its own city. But in November 1925, Los Angeles annexed Venice to become a community within the City.

Over the years, the amusement park, vis-à-vis Venice, went through a number of changes. In 1911, one of Abbot Kinney's former partners built a "Million Dollar" amusement park. In 1920, Abbot Kinney passed away; his amusement pier burned. In 1924, the Ocean Park pier complex burned. In 1930, oil was discovered in Venice. In 1946, the Venice amusement Pier closed. In 1964, Los Angeles demolished 550 buildings in historic Venice. In 1967, Pacific Ocean Park went bankrupt after being rebuilt. And, in 1977, Venice regained its popularity as the "Roller Skating Capital of the World."

Photos (except that of Abbot Kinney) are from the Security Pacific Collection, Los Angeles Public Library Photo Archive, courtesy Carolyn Cole, Director.



The Venice Auditorium.



Abbot Kinney.