

The Pacific Beach Club

In the 1920s, only white people were allowed on most Southern California beaches. But in December 1924, Hal R. Clark, a white attorney from Los Angeles, purchased seven-and-a-half acres of beachfront, about a mile below the Huntington Beach Pier, to develop a beach club for blacks.

Clark was an opportunistic wheeler-dealer. He was later found guilty of selling oil-drilling permits for land he didn't own, and was suspended by the State Bar for accepting cases from ambulance chasers.

Clark worked with leaders of Los Angeles' black community to plan and promote the Club. The Club's original Board of Directors included numerous prominent Southern California black men, including President E. Burton Ceruti (a founding member of the NAACP's Los Angeles Chapter and the attorney for the Colored People's Protective League), Vice President Dr. James T. Smith (a pharmacist), Secretary William R. Carter, Treasurer Dr. R. S. Whittaker, and Dr. V. "Batie" Robinson. Later additions to the Board included Frederick Madison Roberts, California's first black assemblyman; Dr. Albert Baumann, druggist and future president of the L. A. Urban League; Dr. W. C. Gordon; Dr. R. C. Orffut; and Joseph Blackburn Bass, editor of the *California Eagle*.

The Pacific Beach Club was designed like a citadel, with the ocean on one side and a large white stucco wall around the rest. The buildings were designed in an "Egyptian" style, also in white stucco. Both the parking area and the children's playground would be enclosed and attended.

The first phase of construction included a clubhouse, bathhouse, and a dance hall, scheduled for completion by May 1925. The bathhouse and clubhouse were each 100 feet square. The dance hall could hold 3,000 people, and featured a balcony for entertainers. The Club's plans also called for a large roof garden and a 450-seat auditorium with a stage. The second phase would add 200 beach cottages. The final phase, including a restaurant, drug store, grocery store, and other concessions, was to open by Summer 1926. All facilities, shops and concessions were to be staffed and maintained by blacks.



The Pacific Beach Club. Adapted from promotional art in *The California Eagle*, March 20, 1925. (O.C. Archives)

The Pacific Electric refused to provide a railroad crossing to allow access to the Club's property. But on March 22, 1925, a pile driver was skidded under a railroad bridge, a raft of pilings was floated up onto the beach, and a groundbreaking ceremony was held. Rev. J. D. Gordon of the Tabernacle Baptist Church of Los Angeles and other black civic leaders spoke, the first pile was driven, and people waded out to enjoy the surf. The crowd was so large that local authorities had to request help from the sheriff's office to manage the highway traffic.

From the start, the Pacific Beach Club faced opposition from some local residents. Chambers of commerce passed resolutions against the Club and lobbied the County Board of Supervisors to condemn the land. In Huntington Beach, a committee of community leaders was appointed to handle all publicity, propaganda and fundraising needed to fight the Club. A local Edison Co. manager suggested enlisting the support of "fraternal organizations" who "might be interested in the question" of the Pacific Beach Club. The Club's lawyers had to go to court just to get water service and a railroad crossing for the club.

On Labor Day 1925, black families again gathered at the site of the Pacific Beach Club for what its sponsors called the first "negro bathing beauty parade" in the country. About 2,000 prospective members attended. Reporters and film crews covered the event. Sales pitches for life memberships were followed by musical performances and the bathing beauty parade itself.

By mid-September, after several false starts, work on the dance hall and clubhouse was underway. Few contractors were willing to work on the Club, and at least one abandoned the project. Carpenters overheard bystanders suggest "what a fine fire the buildings would make." Contractor Charles E. Rowe of Long Beach – who also held a mortgage on the property – rushed the work because of earlier delays.

But in early December – with the dance hall and bathhouse nearly complete – financial difficulties again halted construction. Then, the State Corporation Commissioner ruled that the Club could not issue bonds to raise more funds. Rowe gave up the contract. Only 200 Club memberships had been sold.

A new builder was hired, but soon tried to back out. Work was halted again when the engineer in charge of the pile driver dropped dead on the job. Other investors were eyeing the property. Originally scheduled to open on Lincoln's Birthday, Feb. 12, 1926, the Pacific Beach Club's future was in doubt, and construction was already half a year behind schedule.

On January 21, 1926, just before 6:00 a.m., a fire began at the northwest corner of the clubhouse. When first discovered, the fire was still small, but no water was available to extinguish it. The fire grew rapidly and destroyed the entire complex, except for one small tool shed. The fire also spread to the Pacific Electric bridge on the east end of the complex, but it sustained minimal damage.

The watchman, a black man named A. H. Sneed who lived with his wife in an apartment in the bathhouse, had just gone off duty and was heading to bed when he heard a noise outside. He said he saw two men running away from the fire toward two cars parked east of the Club. One car drove toward Newport Beach, the other toward Huntington Beach.

Clark said the arsonists would be arrested within 24 hours, and that Sneed could identify one of the criminals. However, no one was ever charged with the crime. He also said threats had been made against the Club, and that he had expected an arson attempt for some time. However, he said, the Club would be rebuilt, grander than before, in no more than three months. After an investigation by insurance company detectives, all but \$20,000 of the \$150,000 loss was covered.

The club member met and made plans to rebuild with fireproof brick and concrete. But before further construction began, a tall stucco wall was to be built around the property, all the way to the high tide line. The wall was to be topped with bright lights, and several watchmen would be put on continuous duty.

But the new contractor failed to resume construction, and by November 1926, Clark was forced to mortgage the property. He convinced the Club to launch a nationwide membership campaign to raise \$25,000 to pay off the mortgage and taxes. Black newspapers throughout the nation covered the story of the Pacific Beach Club. However, the campaign failed to make much progress. Foreclosure proceedings began, and most of the Club's members asked for their money back.

By early, December, citing "broken morale, financial difficulties, and the promise of endless litigation," the Board accepted an offer by Clark to return all members' investment, plus 10 percent interest. Clark then released the Club from its agreement to rent the property from him.

In January 1927, the mortgage company foreclosed on the property. Today, the story of Pacific Beach Club is all but forgotten.