

1935 California Pacific International Exposition

Excerpts from *San Diego's Balboa Park* by David Marshall, AIA
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■ Summary

Still feeling the effects from the Great Depression in 1933, San Diego's civic boosters believed that another exposition in Balboa Park would help the economy and promote the city as a business and tourist destination. The 1935 California Pacific International Exposition, also known as America's Exposition, was born. The new buildings were paid for in part by the first WPA funds allocated to an American city.

Balboa Park was re-configured by San Diego architect Richard S. Requa who also oversaw the design and construction of many new buildings. The second exposition left behind a legacy of colorful stories with its odd and controversial exhibits and sideshow entertainment. America's Exposition also provided visitors with early glimpses of a walking silver robot and a strange electrical device known as a "television."

Only two years after it was first conceived, the 1935 California Pacific International Exposition opened on May 29, 1935. Like the first exposition, the 1935 fair was so successful it was extended for a second year. Opening ceremonies for the second season began when President Franklin D. Roosevelt pressed a gold telegraph key in the White House to turn on the exposition's lights. When the final numbers were tallied, the 1935-1936 event counted 6.7 million visitors – almost double the total of the 1915-1916 exposition.

■ Buildings Constructed for the 1935 Exposition

House of Hospitality Courtyard. For this popular patio, architect Richard Requa literally carved out the center of the hangar-like 1915 Foreign Arts Building and opened it to the sky. Remnants of the original heavy-timber trusses that once spanned over the patio can still be seen above the second floor arcades. The design of the patio was inspired by the patio of the Convent of Guadalajara in Mexico. The central tile fountain is topped by a limestone figure known as the "Woman of Tehuantepec," carved by renowned sculptor Donal Hord. Requa also added the second floor, along with elaborate interior finishes and decorations. Exposition art director Juan Larrinaga, a Hollywood studio designer, played a key role in the design of stencils and light fixtures throughout the fair grounds.

The House of Hospitality provided offices for San Diego Mayor Percy Benbough, exposition president Frank G. Belcher, staff, and several fraternal organizations. A first aid station was located where the visitors center is now housed. The second floor Loggia was where First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was the guest of honor at a lunch on October 2, 1935. President Franklin D. Roosevelt dined one floor below in the Sala de Oro, now a restaurant bar.

Casa del Rey Moro Gardens. In 1915, the Foreign Arts Building (House of Hospitality) originally had a large wing on the south side, but it was removed prior to the 1935 exposition.

In its place, architect Richard Requa designed the Casa del Rey Moro Gardens, a faithful reproduction of an 18th century garden with the same name in Ronda, Spain. The “House of the Moorish King” gardens had brick-paved terraces containing three distinct water features, wrought-iron rails, redwood pergolas, rose gardens, a well, and carefully manicured trees and shrubs. The Casa del Rey Moro Restaurant became known as the *Cafe* del Rey Moro after the exposition ended. The popular Mexican restaurant continued serving food until 1994. In 2007, the Prado Restaurant serves meals and provides catering for the many weddings and events held in this picturesque garden.

Arco del Porvenir. This 50-foot tall arched tower was named Arco del Porvenir, which translates into Arch of the Future. It was constructed for the 1935 exposition to house public address speakers and spotlights that projected colored light.

Spanish Village. The village included winding streets with restaurants, the Laguna Shop of Color featuring hand-made pottery, and shops with jewelry, flowers, wine, and art. The whitewashed, red tile roofed buildings were meticulously detailed and landscaped to create the illusion of old Spain, down to posters for fictitious bullfights.

Ford Building. Modeled after the Ford Motor Company’s building at the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress Exposition, designed by architect Albert Kahn, this structure is one of the rare “modern” buildings erected in the park. The Streamline Moderne design of the Ford Building recalls a stack of automobile gears. The vertical ribs were dramatically backlit with blue neon and the name FORD appeared in red neon on all four sides of the main rotunda. According to Requa’s account in his 1937 book, the “seemingly impossible” task of trying to complete the Ford Building on time created in him “an overwhelming desire to wander off into a peaceful glade in the Park, fall asleep and forget it all.” Exhibits inside included a mock assembly line, examples of Ford cars since 1896, and the mighty V-8 engine. On the walls inside the building were 12 colored dioramas which gave a picture story of the production of various materials used in the manufacture of Ford cars. A large, open-air courtyard in the center of the building contained the latest Ford models around a large fountain shaped like the V-8 logo. The Ford Building has housed the San Diego Air and Space Museum (formerly Aerospace Museum) since 1980. The gardens and fountain in front of the building were replaced by a parking lot after the exposition.

Ford Bowl. In addition to the Ford Building, the Ford Motor Company sponsored a 3,000-seat open-air amphitheatre next door. The Ford Bowl (now the **Starlight Bowl**) was the venue for a wide variety of musical performances during the exposition, including choirs and symphonies.

House of Pacific Relations / International Houses. Despite the name, there was not just one House of Pacific Relations – there were more than a dozen Spanish-style cottages representing 21 nations. As described in the 1935 *Official Guide*, “Floral patios, winding walks, rock gardens and pools make it one of the most attractive sites in America’s Exposition grounds.” Participating countries included the British Empire, China, Italy, Denmark, Cuba, Norway (top), Chile, Yugoslavia, Panama, and Argentina among others. In 2007, 31 nations

open their doors to the public every Sunday afternoon, continuing Balboa Park's tradition of multicultural goodwill and understanding.

Christian Science Monitor Building. This modest structure was built near the House of Pacific Relations and is now the **United Nations Building**.

Plaza de America. The plaza in front of the building, contained the Firestone Singing Colored Fountains. The 20-foot wide by 120-foot long pool contained jets of water colored with light that would rise and fall to music.

Palace of Electricity and Varied Industries. The most talked about aspect of this building was the "House of Magic," a display of electricity marvels sponsored by General Electric. The Palace of Electricity is now the **Municipal Gymnasium**.

Standard Oil Building. This building, featuring the 108-foot high "Tower of the Sun," was located at the north end of the Plaza de America. The elaborate ornamentation used designs inspired by prehistoric palaces in Mexico and the Yucatan.

Palace of Travel, Transportation, and Water. This building was located between the Organ Pavilion and the Federal Building. One of the exhibits was a miniature working model of the Santa Fe Railroad between San Diego and Chicago. This exhibit was a precursor to the current San Diego Model Railroad Museum in the Casa de Balboa. The Water Palace had a separate entrance facing the rear of the Organ Pavilion, complete with three huge spouts that poured water around the entrance. The Palace of Travel, Transportation, and Water was demolished after the exposition to make room for a parking lot.

Federal Building. Built to house exhibits of the United States government, the Federal Building was decorated in a Mayan motif. The triangular-shaped entrance was modeled after the doorway to the Governor's Palace in Uxmal, Yucatan. The large entrance window was painted with a mural of a standing Maya priest and a crouching Indian. In 2000, the building was restored and became the home of the **Hall of Champions** sports museum. Unfortunately, the colorful window mural was not recreated.

California State Building. This simple structure was built adjacent to the Ford Building. There were originally four large murals on the curved wall above the main entrance. Inside the building, according to the *Official Guide*, 100-foot long murals depicted "the lore of the golden state since the days of the padres and old missions." In 1988, the **San Diego Automotive Museum** opened in the building.

Hollywood Motion Picture Hall of Fame. In 1935 this new pueblo-style building had exhibits demonstrating "how modern talking motion pictures are made..." Visitors could peer into a sound stage where "a lively scene is rehearsed, lighted, directed and shot..." There was also a children's show featuring puppets. Now called the **Palisades Building**, the structure houses a 300-seat recital hall, offices, and the Marie Hitchcock Puppet Theater.

Palm Canyon Bridge. A ravine south of the House of Charm (Indian Arts Building) was named Arroyo de Las Palmas, or Palm Canyon in 1915. In 1936, a visitor from London enthused, "I believe that the view of Palm Canyon under the glow of the many colored lights is one of the most beautiful in the world." The rustic log bridge was lit from above by bell-shaped lanterns perforated with colored glass beads.

Old Globe Theatre. The Old Globe Theatre was constructed in 1935 to present 45-minute versions of Shakespeare's plays. The theater seated 350 persons on wooden benches for 25 cents apiece. The building was modeled after Shakespeare's Elizabethan-style London theater, built in 1599. The Old Globe complex included an Old Curiosity Shop where one could purchase English pottery, silver, and imported curios and Falstaff's Tavern, described as "the only authentic English Tavern on the Coast." Like the buildings of the 1915 exposition, the Old Globe was intended to be a temporary structure. In 1936, the theater was sold to wreckers for \$400, but a citizen's committee was organized and raised funds to save the building.

The Old Globe originally had no roof over its center, to replicate the original in London. But the top was covered with canvas after only a few weeks. On March 8, 1978 an arson fire destroyed the Old Globe Theatre. In order to provide a temporary venue for the summer season, a 615-seat outdoor Festival Stage was constructed in just 100 days. The new Old Globe Theatre was dedicated in 1982 and bore only a passing resemblance to what was built in 1935.

■ Special Exhibits and Rides

Commemorative Stamps

Special government three cent stamps were issued with the imprint of the California Building.

Commemorative Half-Dollar

The federal government issued a special fifty cent piece in commemoration of the exposition. One side of the coin depicts the California Building. 250,000 coins were minted in Philadelphia and sold -- for fifty cents each -- in Balboa Park.

Lighting Effects. According to the *Official Guide*, "At night [the plaza] becomes a rainbow of mirrored lights." A great deal of attention was devoted to the exterior lighting for the California Pacific International Exposition. Lighting expert H. O. Davis supervised the innovative lighting design. Davis drew inspiration from popular artist Maxfield Parrish, whose fantasy paintings often depicted deep blue twilight scenes streaked with amber light. Davis had a design epiphany when he saw one of Parrish's paintings -- not in a museum -- but in a General Electric calendar hanging in his office.

The designers wanted to create layered and silhouetted effects with the exterior lighting. Instead of simply pointing lights at the building facades, colored lights were directed at the landscaping in front of the buildings. Violet, blue, red and green lights were used to "paint" palms, bougainvillea, and other landscape features. Soft ambers were used to wash the building facades while blue and red floodlights internally lit the open-air towers. The *Official*

Guide stated, “The lighting experts of America’s Exposition have created the world’s greatest nocturnal spectacle in illumination. Even the stars shine more brightly for the rivalry.” “Aurora borealis” rotating light beams on top of the Organ Pavilion provided a dramatic light show that could be seen for miles.

The Midway. Some of the 1935 exhibits included Crime Never Pays which displayed bank-robber John Dillinger’s bullet-proof limousine, complete with machine gun portholes. According to the *Official Guide*, the Monsters Alive attraction displayed “reptiles of various descriptions from all parts of the world, including giant pythons... and venomous cobras...”

Parachute Drop. Today we have bungee jumping, but in 1935 Balboa Park had this ride called Bailout. Riders would freefall from a 155-foot steel tower attached to a parachute and steel cable. The Russian military had been using similar towers to train paratroopers since the 1920s. The text on the sign read, “First time presented in America. Get the thrill of a lifetime!”

Gold Gulch. This 21-acre mining town was located in the canyon behind the Palace of Better Housing (Casa de Balboa). The *Official Guide* referred to Gold Gulch as “a faithful ‘movified’ version of the pioneering period...” Also faithful to the old west was stripper “Gold Gulch Gertie,” who was arrested for riding naked through Gold Gulch on a burro. Gertie was eventually acquitted and rode again -- with police supervision. The **Japanese Friendship Garden** now occupies this site.

Ripley’s Believe It or Not. Fresh from the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress Exposition, Ripley’s Believe It or Not built an Odditorium on the Midway in Balboa Park. Robert Ripley began as a cartoonist and writer and his newspaper cartoons displayed all things strange, exotic, and unbelievable. In 1936, the Strange as it May Seem theater replaced Ripley’s sometimes gruesome Odditorium with what an exposition press release described as a “more glamorous spectacle.”

Midget Village. The 1935 exposition included many unique attractions, some more exploitative than others. The Midget Village and Midget Farm, “built on doll-house scale,” were billed as “the world’s greatest aggregation of little people” and displayed “more than one hundred Lilliputians [at] work and play.” In this image, 19-year old Trinidad Rodriguez poses with Nate Eagle, the sideshow promoter who, with partner Stanley R. Graham, created Midget Village and its predecessor at Chicago’s 1933 fair. Many of the little people from the 1935 California Pacific International Exposition went on to greater fame in the classic 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* portraying Munchkins and winged monkeys. During Children’s Day at the exposition, Jack Dempsey, former world’s heavyweight boxing champion, refereed a bout between two midget boxers. For the second year of the exposition Midget Village was replaced by the Mickey Mouse Circus, where midgets sang and performed with full-size elephants.

Four Cornerstones Fountain. Sculptor Frederick W. Schweigardt created the fountain called “The Four Cornerstones of American Democracy” inside the **Balboa Park Club**, originally

the New Mexico Building and later the Palace of Education in 1935. Female figures represent home, church, school, and community.

Roads of the Pacific. Hidden behind the Ford Building were the “Roads of the Pacific,” where fairgoers could ride in new Ford V-8 cars over a winding route along the Cabrillo Canyon. The course was modeled after fourteen famously rough roads, including the Oregon Trail, China’s Summer Palace Road, Peru’s Inca Highway, and El Camino Real, to demonstrate the new Fords’ smooth ride over bad terrain.

Modeltown. The newly created Federal Housing Administration (FHA) sponsored an exhibit behind the Palace of Better Housing (Casa de Balboa) which consisted of a town filled with “tiny structures, standing less than 3 feet high, [each] designed by an outstanding Southern California architect.” The *Official Guide* explains that “clever mechanical devices” transform “a tiny dilapidated village” into “a smart modernized group of homes before your eyes.”

Beer Garden. At the north end of the Midway was the Bavarian Beer Garden. Employees of the establishment wore authentic Bavarian costumes.

Alcazar Gardens. The Alcazar Gardens and fountains, adjacent to the House of Charm, were designed and built for the 1935-1936 California Pacific International Exposition. The original 1915 garden was called Los Jardines de Montezuma.

Zoro Gardens, 1935. In addition to Midget Village, Graham and Eagle created the scandalous Zoro Gardens nudist colony. Located in a sunken garden east of the Palace of Better Housing (Casa de Balboa), Zoro Gardens was, according to the *Zoro Gardens* program, “designed to explain to the general public the ideals and advantages of natural outdoor life.” Topless women and bearded men in loincloths read books, sunbathed, and acted in pseudo-religious rituals to the Sun God. According to the program, “Healthy young men and women, indulging in the freedom of outdoor living in which they so devoutly believe, have opened their colony to the friendly, curious gaze of the public.” The public’s curious gaze quickly turned Zoro Gardens into the exposition’s most lucrative outdoor attraction. Despite protests, Zoro Gardens lasted for the entire run of the exposition. The area is now the Zoro Butterfly Garden.