

Once Upon a Time in North Park

J. M. Highett and the Balboa Square Subdivision

By Donald Covington

The smallest real estate tract to be divided and developed in North Park was an abandoned and nearly forgotten citrus ranch on the East Side. As early as the 1880's, it seemed likely to many business leaders that the city was on the threshold of great expansion. To land investment brokers and developers this smelled like money.

The entire north side of City Park (Balboa) was divided into streets and blocks for potential development of suburban communities. When the boom became bust in the late 1880's, those paper streets and residential blocks were forgotten and the land was sold off for small farms and ranches. In the early 1890's, twenty acres of that land was purchased by J. M. Highett, a recent immigrant from Australia. Mr. Highett immediately set about planting lemon and orange trees in the hopes of producing a lucrative business in citrus fruits.

Water was always a limited commodity even though the city brought a supply down from the mountains in wooden flumes for the many farms and ranches on the periphery of the urban area. Whenever water was directed this way, Mr. Highett tried storing the excess in improvised tanks for use in those times when it flowed less freely or not at all. Those times came more and more often in the drought years of the late 1890's. By 1900, it had become necessary for water to be purchased in town and brought up the narrow and steep road (later Pershing Drive) by wagon to Highett's ranch.

Finally, Highett gave up the life of a dry-land rancher and moved to England. Twenty years passed and in 1922 he returned to San Diego to find that his abandoned 20 acre ranch was surrounded by urban development. North Park, as the area had become, was the fastest growing suburban community in San Diego.

A well-known Los Angeles real estate development firm, Welsh & Campbell, were aggressively moving into San Diego at the time and persuaded Highett to sell them the ranch for a residential subdivision. The twenty acres became four blocks divided into lots of 50' X 125'. Selling price of the lots was \$450 with 10% in cash. The four blocks of the tract were bordered by 32nd and 33rd Streets on the West and East; and Landis and Myrtle Streets on the North and South.

In the first week of January, 1923, the tract was opened to the public as *Balboa Square*, one of the last remaining residential developments in North Park. Mr. Welsh, the Los Angeles developer, reported to the San Diego Union that the city was "on the eve of great expansion." This time the prediction proved to be true.