

Once Upon A Time in North Park
Planting of Palms Is Urged on Home Owners

by Karon Covington

This headline appeared over an article by reporter Edward T. Austin in the *San Diego Union* on November 22, 1936. Someone asked me several years ago if I knew why there were so many of these trees around North Park. All I knew at the time was that a native San Diegan had told me that other trees tend to blow down in storms, causing property damage, and the city had forced people to take out most of the ornamental trees after a storm in the 1930s which blew down quite a few. That was close, but there was more to it than that.

When we bought our home on a corner in North Park, the park strips on the side street housed five old blackwood acacia trees, although there were old palm trees lining the street we lived on. Someone suggested that we cut down the acacia trees, but our trees were 55 years old and had not blown down. However, twenty years later we did have the old trees removed because their roots had so badly buckled the sidewalk that it was a hazard, particularly to older people.

Years later I found the article by Austin in the *San Diego Union* (dated nearly illegibly by hand 11/22/36) which read: "If the Acacia or pepper trees in the parking space in front of your home are breaking the sidewalk, or if you just don't want them there, you can have them painlessly removed by the city's tree-planting crew. It will be painless because it won't cost you anything nor will there be any expense of having them replaced by palms-provided you buy the palms. In an effort to remove all unsightly trees from the streets and eliminate danger to pedestrians from broken sidewalks, the park department has obtained a WPA fund which is providing work for about 25 men. Under the supervision of William T. Bishop, this crew has in the last six weeks removed 101 trees, dug 228 holes, hauled away 134 loads of dirt, planted 96 palms and trimmed 1165 trees. All this work has been done in the parking strips between street and sidewalks in various sections of the city. Work now is concentrated on Date Street between the waterfront and Balboa Park."

Edward T. Austin, the reporter, went on to write that the acacia tree had come into bad repute in the last few years in San Diego due to 1) untidiness caused by the year-round molting and dropping excessive dry brittle leaves, 2) the roots fan out just under the surface of the earth and break up sidewalks, 3) the fanned out roots fail to hold the tree upright in a wind-falling trees were an increasing problem. Automobiles and homes had suffered damage from them. The city had come up with uniform street planting plan, using palms as decorative foliage all over the city, which the chamber of Commerce had urged for some time. The *cocos plumosa* variety of palm won the day for the perfect choice to plant all over San Diego.

“A uniform street planting plan, using palms as decorative foliage all over the city, long has been urged by the Chamber of Commerce. Palms are hardy, cause less rubbish from falling leaves and none at all from broken sidewalks. Besides, they give the streets a decidedly tropical appearance which never fails to make an impression upon visitors from colder areas. Their shade is negligible but who wants shade all over town when what we are trying to sell tourists is sunshine in large rectangular quantities? So from every standpoint, the palm-cocos plumosa-wins. And you can have them planted for nothing. If your soil is adobe and if you’ve never tried to dig into it, that’s something.”