

ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTH PARK

UNIVERSITY AVENUE BECOMES A “GREAT WHITE WAY”

BY VINCENT RIVERA

In 1926, the sidewalks and streets of University Avenue were busy with activity both day and night. North Park was booming: street cars brought people from all over San Diego to North Park, automobiles were becoming more and more common, and you could play a game of pool at the local billiard hall, dine at various restaurants or see a picture show at the Ramona Theater. But while many of the residential neighborhoods already had street lights along their sidewalks, the busy commercial corridor of University Avenue was left in the dark due to its lack of street lighting.

There was a definite need and demand for street lighting along University Avenue for both safety and convenience. The North Park Business Club, which was involved in numerous neighborhood activities, sought to improve the community of North Park and began a campaign in April 1926 for street lights along University Avenue. The estimated cost of between \$30,000 and \$35,000 was funded for the most part by local merchants. By the end of May, the electrical conduits were being laid down on University Avenue between 28th and 31st streets. North Park would soon have a “Great White Way,” which was a common name during the early 20th century for a street that was lit. This term was derived from New York City’s Theater district being referred to as the “Great White Way” because of the large amount of lights used to light the theaters’ marquees along the streets.

By early August, North Park was ready to celebrate the lighting of University Avenue with a carnival and dance centered at University Avenue and Kansas Street for everyone in San Diego to attend. The celebration was to be the final event in the annual San Diego Week celebration. On the day of August 7th, 18 decorated floats paraded through Downtown promoting the carnival to happen later that night. Flowers, ribbons and specially designed signs for every business in North Park gave the streets of North Park a truly festive spirit.

Judge Lacy D. Jennings began the ceremony by saying, “Let there be light, and there was light.” The lights were turned on, people cheered, and fireworks announced the beginning of the celebration. An estimated 10,000 people joined in the festivities. There was something for the young and old. Thirty-five thousand pieces of candy were handed out to children and 3,000 noisemakers were given out. Dancing, musical talents, comical features and other amusements filled the night with excitement. The musical lineup was impressive and included the Scotch Maids and Normal Raleigh playing the bagpipe, Mrs. Ida Stever on the piano, Ruth Buzzell gracing the crowds with her coronet, and Mrs. Constance Reeves on the violin obligato. A temporary bandstand was set up at Kansas Street and University Avenue and provided music for street dancing.

Festivities could now carry on into the night under the glow of the “Great White Way.” Such a grand festival held for the residents of North Park and visitors from other parts of San Diego showed that North Park was one of the fastest growing communities at the time.