

“A Race ‘Riot’ in Beach Town”

One night a cross was burned in the wash at the head of Del Monte Street, and this may have been connected with the talk about keeping the Negroes out. We'd heard a rumor that one was going to move in, but that "we" would never stand for it.

--Ruth Varney Held, *Beach Town*

By the early 1920s the neighborhood of Ocean Beach had become a prosperous, growing suburb on the outskirts of the City of San Diego. Only 40 minutes by streetcar from downtown, the community of about five thousand people featured a thriving business district on Newport Avenue, and ambitions for becoming a major beach resort.

Like most of San Diego, Ocean Beach was ethnically homogeneous with a white population of over 97%. While fewer than 1000 blacks lived in all of San Diego, only five were known to live in Ocean Beach. Racial uniformity seemed to be a matter of community pride.

For some residents, the community's racial "purity" seemed threatened in the spring of 1923. Racial differences "have been rumbling for weeks in Ocean Beach," the *San Diego Union* noted. Resident Ruth Varney, 16-years old at the time, recalled a "flurry of Ku Klux Klan activity" in her 1975 memoir *Beach Town*. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that "recently the local Chamber of Commerce was asked to pass a resolution making it the sense of the community that Ocean Beach welcomed only residents of the Caucasian race."

The first victim of the growing prejudice was an elderly black woman who began building a house on a lot she had owned for several years. A delegation of Ocean Beach residents called on the woman in April and demanded that she sell the property. She refused. A few nights later, the partially constructed dwelling mysteriously burned to the ground.

The racial troubles escalated on the evening of May 8. Two black men—King Clemens and William Knighten—were having dinner in Clemens' rented Ocean Beach house, when they noticed two white men watching the home closely from across the street. After eating, Clemens and Knighten walked to a pool hall on Bacon Street. Late in the evening the two separated—Knighten returning to the house while Clemens went to the rear door of a local restaurant for a cup of coffee.

As Knighten neared Clemens' house at 1917 Bacon Street, the two white men reappeared. One of them leveled a shotgun at Knighten's head and demanded, "Where's that whiskey you've got?"

"Ain't got any," Knighten replied, as he walked away from the men. When they ordered him to stop Knighten took off running.

Clemens was drinking coffee in the restaurant when he saw his friend run by, closely pursued by the two strangers. When he went outside, one of the men yelled "Come here, boy!" Clemens ran and eventually caught up with Knighten. The two darted into a vacant house on the outskirts of town and hid on the floor. They heard gunshots in the distance, followed several minutes later by the bell of a fire truck. They set off on the road to San Diego to find help.

The two white men, later identified as Robert Walsh and Daniel O’Connell, assumed that Clemens and Knighten had returned to the house on Bacon Street. Walsh fired several shots into the home and then set the building on fire. The men ran from the scene when the first fire truck appeared.

Neighbors who gathered around the burning home shouted to the firemen that there were men inside. The firemen entered the burning interior but found no one home. As the small house fell to embers, Battalion Chief Charles Wood investigated the scene and decided the fire had been deliberately set.

Walsh and O’Connell were arrested early the next morning on charges of assault with deadly weapons. Clemens and Knighten identified the pair. Both suspects appeared quite drunk, and Walsh was abusive to the arresting officer, calling Police Sergeant George Churchman a “nigger-loving son-of-a bitch.”

In September, the men were tried in Superior Court on charges of second-degree arson. The case against 62-year-old Daniel O’Connell was soon dropped. Attention was focused instead on 44-year-old Robert J. Walsh, a longtime real estate salesman in Ocean Beach. Prosecutors hinted that Walsh had often agitated against blacks in the community and had led the arson attack on the elderly black woman in April.

In court Walsh offered little justification for his actions. He claimed no memory of the attack on May 8, explaining he had been drunk. The judge asked the defendant how he obtained the liquor, since Prohibition was the law of the land. The whiskey was bought with a doctor’s prescription, he explained.

Walsh was convicted on October 2 and sentenced to seven years in the State Prison at San Quentin (he would be released on parole, two years later). The next month, King Clemens sued for damages. But the court rejected his suit without comment. Mrs. Martha Plummer, the owner of the burned house at 1917 Bacon Street, had better luck with the justice system, winning \$1,200 in damages.

The citizens of Ocean Beach appeared defensive about the whole affair, claiming in newspaper accounts that “no organized movement against the colored residents was ever contemplated by any civic body.” “Almost unanimous” in repudiating the acts of Walsh and O’Connell, the residents called it “strictly a personal matter” between the two whites and two black men.



Robert Walsh at San Quentin *State Archives*

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