

## “Albert G. Spalding and San Diego”

*A. G. Spalding, the well known athletic goods man, has decided to make San Diego his home, as is evidenced by the arrival of a carload of elegant furniture and a double-seated locomobile for him. Last year Mr. Spalding married a lady at the Point Loma Homestead. —San Diego Union, February 23, 1901.*

“Spalding” is perhaps the world’s most recognized name in sporting goods. Less well-known is the man who founded the famous company: Albert Goodwill Spalding, a member of the baseball Hall of Fame, business magnate, and prominent San Diegan.

Growing up in Rockford, Illinois, A. G. Spalding began playing the new sport of baseball as a teenager in the 1860s—learning the game, it is alleged, from a Civil War soldier. As a pitcher for the Boston Red Stockings in the formative years of major league baseball, Spalding became a national sports hero. He was the first pitcher to win 200 games and led his Boston team to four consecutive pennants. Spalding retired in 1876 at age 27, concerned--as he later told his son Keith--that advancing age was slowing his reflexes.

Spalding’s second career began when he borrowed \$800 from his mother and opened a sporting goods store with his younger brother in Chicago. Selling baseballs was a hit for the A. G. Spalding and Brothers Company. The retired sports hero paid the National League to use his baseballs, which he advertised as the “official ball” of the national pastime. Prosperity soon followed as the company manufactured and sold bats and gloves, tennis rackets, basketballs, golf clubs—anything related to sport, including a lucrative annual called *Spalding’s Official Baseball Guide*.



A. G. Spalding

Spalding would be closely associated with baseball the rest of his life. From 1882-91, he owned the Chicago White Stockings (today’s Cubs) and won five pennants. Despite his experience as a ballplayer, Spalding the owner fought early player efforts to unionize and strongly supported the “reserve clause” which bound players to one team.

One of Spalding’s most interesting legacies was a history commission he sponsored that researched the origins of baseball. Despite obvious links to the British games of rounders and cricket, Spalding’s commission promoted the myth that baseball was invented by an American, Abner Doubleday, who it was said, created the game at Cooperstown, New York in 1839.

Spalding would spend the last chapter of his life in San Diego. In July 1899, his wife Josie died. Within a year he married Elizabeth Mayer Churchill, a childhood friend from Illinois and his mistress of several years. Elizabeth was a disciple of Katherine Tingley who ran the Point Loma community of the Theosophical Society, an institution that promoted the study of religious philosophy along with a regimen of self-improvement that included the performing arts.

Elizabeth became the musical director for “Lomaland” and a member of Madame Tingley’s inner circle.

While Spalding did not share his wife’s enthusiasm for theosophy, San Diego did offer new business challenges and opportunities for civic involvement. The couple built a grand Victorian house on the grounds of the Theosophical Society (which still stands today on the campus of Point Loma Nazarene University) and Spalding turned his attention to San Diego.

In 1907, Spalding joined other San Diego business elites—newspaper publishers John D. Spreckels and E. W. Scripps, and department store owner George W. Marston—to protect the site of Presidio Hill above Old Town where Father Junípero Serra had founded San Diego in 1769. The men purchased the spot, where Marston would later build the Serra Museum and establish the San Diego Historical Society.

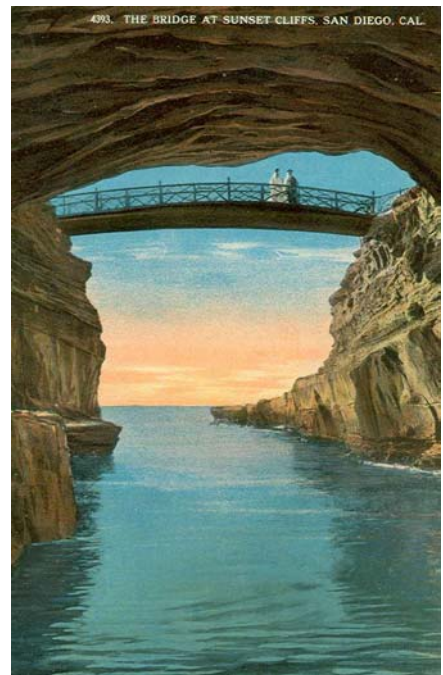
Spalding was also interested in “good roads.” When San Diegans approved a bond issue in 1907 to improve local roads, Spalding was appointed to a County Highway Commission along with Spreckels and Scripps. Unfortunately, “the three millionaires” bickered among each other and Spalding resigned.

Road development in Spalding’s own neighborhood went better. He was instrumental in building roads connecting Point Loma with Ocean Beach, Roseville, and San Diego, and he convinced the federal government to extend Catalina Drive (major portions of which Spalding owned) to the tip of Point Loma, now the site of Cabrillo National Monument.

One of Spalding last acts was the creation of “Spalding Park” on beachfront property he owned. Hiring workmen under the direction of a Japanese landscape architect, he spent \$2 million on the area he would name Sunset Cliffs. Local historian Ruth Varney wrote in her book *Beach Town*:

*Decorative palm-thatched roofs sheltered benches where the view was spectacular. Japanese style arched-rustic bridges spanned narrow, deep clefts where the waves surged in and out endlessly. . . . At the foot of Adair Street a path led down to two sets of cobblestone steps ending on a flat projection of rock where “Spalding’s Pool” was carved into sandstone. It was about 15 by 50 feet, three feet deep at the near end, sloping to six feet where the waves at high tide broke over it and washed it clean.*

Spalding even added a dressing room at the top of the cliff for users of the “pool.” In later years, ocean tides would erode and eventually reclaim all of Spalding Park.



In August 1915, the 65-year-old Spalding suffered a minor stroke. He appeared to be recovering but on September 9, he died suddenly. An elaborate funeral service was held two days later at his home before cremation at Greenwood Cemetery.

Spalding's estate, valued at \$1.2 million was left almost entirely to his wife, Elizabeth. His son Keith, from his marriage to Josie, challenged the will, arguing that "for several years before his death his father was not in his right mind." No less interested was Madame Tingley who had always expected to be well treated in the will. After two years of litigation, an out of court settlement awarded \$500,000 to Keith and \$700,000 to Mrs. Spalding. Tingley and the Theosophical Society received nothing, not even after the death of Elizabeth Spalding in 1926.

---

Originally published as "Sporting goods tycoon left mark on city," by Richard Crawford, in the San Diego *Union-Tribune*, April 5, 2008, p. CZ.3