

The San Diego Baths

Salvation for the great unwashed is now offered in the waters of the Tropical Natatorium at the foot of D Street. This institution is thrown open to the public today. No pains have been spared for the comfort of the people.

---San Diego Union, Nov. 27, 1886.

There was a time in America when the standard for personal cleanliness was a weekly bath. The “great unwashed” often found that Saturday night soak in commercial bathhouses, such as the esteemed Tropical Natatorium, where bathers could indulge in warm, saltwater dips along the seashore. During San Diego’s population “boom of the eighties,” nearly a dozen bathhouses dotted the city’s waterfront.

San Diego’s first recorded bathhouse, Cotterel & White, opened in 1869 near Horton’s Wharf at the foot of Fifth Street. The first facility was simple affair: a wire netting suspended alongside a barge formed a “swimming bath,” 12 feet by 30 feet. The barge provided dressing rooms and rental bathing suits.

Later bathhouses were fashioned from corrals of wooden stakes, pounded into the mud of the bay. The corrals sheltered the bathers from vagaries of the surf; they also offered protection against the notorious sting rays of San Diego bay. The baths were open seasonally, usually from May until October.

Captain John Heerandner’s “Caroline Bath House” at the foot of 6th Street was a popular success in the early 1880s. Heerandner drew evening crowds for his moonlight concerts featuring the San Diego Brass Band. The concerts were free. Bathers paid the usual 15 cents. Heerandner also boasted of a swimming coach from Sidney, Australia, who gave “instructions and exhibitions of his skill to all who so desire.”

Heerandner’s chief competitor was W. W. Collier, operating from the steamship wharf at the foot of Fifth Street. Collier claimed that his “accommodations for lady bathers [were] especially good,” and featured large, floating tanks. The mornings were reserved for the women, as the *Union* announced: “Mrs. Collier gives her personal attention to lady bathers, and those who wish to learn to swim will have an excellent opportunity these warm sunny forenoons.”

Mrs. Collier’s lady bathers had a scare one day when their floating tanks nearly met disaster. “The cable at the steamship wharf bathhouse broke yesterday,” announced the *Union*. “The great tubs were about to go to sea while several ladies were indulging in the invigorating exercise of a swim. The cable was soon repaired, however, and the danger averted.”

The “Tropical Natatorium” would easily eclipse the seasonal bathing corrals and floating tubs of Heerandner and Collier when it opened in November 1886 at the foot of D Street (today’s Broadway). Ground-breaking, for San Diego, was the 200 by 100 foot lined, swimming bath, open to the bay. Seawater flowed through gates, which opened and closed automatically with the tide. The facility boasted of electric lighting, steam-heated tub baths, Turkish steam rooms, and an amphitheater. The giant pool featured “swings, slides, spring-boards and other things dear to the heart of the amateur athlete.”

In August 1897, the ultimate San Diego bath experience opened one block away from the Tropical Natatorium across the street from the Santa Fe depot. “Los Banos” was an architectural showcase. Built by Graham E. Babcock, the son of Coronado developer Elisha S. Babcock, the bathhouse was a red-tiled, neo-Moorish-style structure designed by the architects William S. Hebbard and Irving J. Gill.

Admission to Los Banos cost 25 cents, which gave the bather a swimsuit, towel, and key to the locker room. The indoor, concrete “plunge tank” was 50 by 100 feet. “Pure seawater” filled the tank, heated by steam from the streetcar power plant on E Street, just behind Los Banos. “All the luxuries that a bather could desire, in the way of Turkish baths, plunges, showers, and slides” were provided, reported the *Union*.

Los Banos would last for many years. But within that time, indoor plumbing was fast making inroads to American homes. Public bathhouses became passé. In 1928, the San Diego Gas and Electric Company tore down Los Banos and expanded the Station B power plant, which survives today at West Broadway and Kettner Blvd.



“Los Banos” at Broadway and Kettner Blvd.

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