

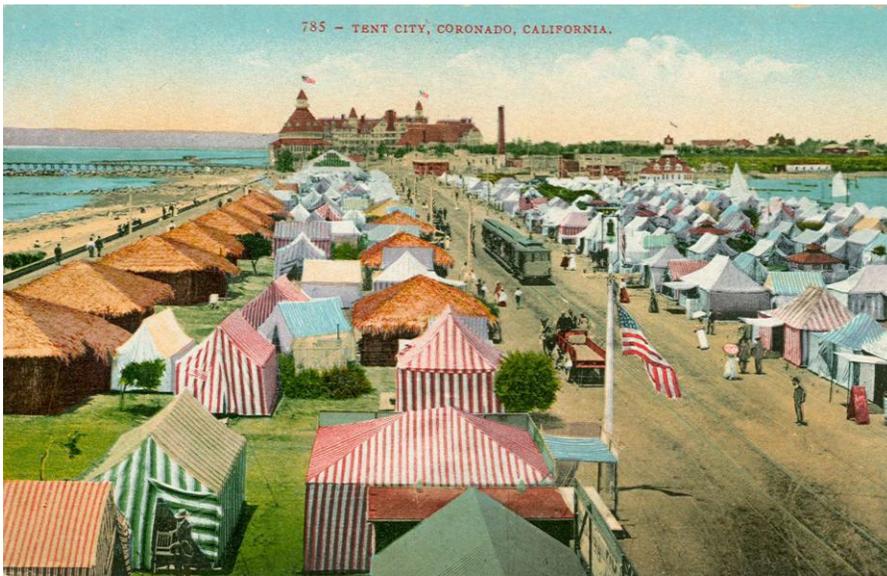
The Fourth of July, 1910

Yesterday Tent City had a big crowd as the forerunner of the record breaker which is expected today. Every tent was crowded to capacity and day visitors packed the boats on every trip across the bay.

--San Diego Union, July 4, 1910

A century ago, Coronado would be the epicenter of San Diego County's Fourth of July celebrations. "Tent City," the annual summer resort on the strand below the Hotel del Coronado, hosted the action that day when the small town of less than 1,500 residents would jump to an estimated 20,000--about half the population of the City of San Diego.

Sprawling Tent City, which began in 1900 as "Camp Coronado," appealed to middle-class vacationers who found the Hotel del Coronado too expensive. The village of canvas tents and thatched bungalows (rented by the week for \$2.75 to \$6, depending on the furnishings) featured a bath house, an indoor swimming plunge, restaurants, stores, an amusement park (called the "Joy Ward") a theater, bandstand, and dance pavilion.



Tent City organizers in July 1910 promised a "3-Ring" celebration of sports, music, and fireworks. There would be yacht and power boat racing on the bay, four band concerts from Henry Ohlmeyer's orchestra, and a fireworks show at Glorietta Bay.

The public was also assured that Tent City would be the ideal place

to hear news bulletins from the keenly anticipated "Battle of the Century" between boxing heavyweights James Jeffries and Jack Johnson, scheduled to be fought that afternoon in Reno, Nevada. The undefeated Jeffries, who retired and relinquished his title in 1905, was heavily favored to defeat Jack Johnson, the current champion.

Independence Day would be a Monday but holiday tourists began pouring into the region before the weekend. A special \$3 round trip fare between San Diego and Los Angeles brought thousands. Santa Fe officials would declare the July 4, 1910 weekend the busiest day in the history of the San Diego run, with 3,633 weekend visitors counted on the packed trains from Los Angeles.

Accommodations in Coronado became scarce and then non-existent. When all the tents were rented, organizers set out cots in the theater building. Many people spent Sunday night sleeping on the beach.

Conditions were no better in San Diego. "Several persons finally gave up in despair and walked the streets or caught a few minutes' sleep on street benches," the *Union* reported. "A few of the initiated went to the Santa Fe depot and spent a restless night on hard benches."

On the morning of July 4th the rush to Coronado began early. Hundreds came by car, driving up the strand from Imperial Beach in time for breakfast. Most took crowded streetcars in San Diego to the ferry landing at the foot of Atlantic Street (Pacific Highway) and then boarded the steam-powered, paddle wheel ferries—*Ramona* or the *Coronado*--to cross the bay. On the island side the visitors took a steam train or electric cars from the foot of Orange Avenue to Tent City, "where all of the concessions were in full blast."

The crowd by mid-day was estimated at over fifteen thousand people with more arriving with each ferry boat. "There would not have been room for all the people if so many had not obligingly taken to the bay surf," noted one observer. Tent City's unofficial mayor, E. H. Clough, bluntly said, "Tent City was no place for a fat man on Independence Day, and it's just as well that President Taft couldn't celebrate with us."

Concerts from the band pavilion began at 11:00 a.m. Ohlmeyer's orchestra played three concerts of patriotic "Sousa-like" music in the afternoon, followed by an evening devoted to American composers. Dancing in a new "casino" building began at 10:30 a.m. and continued until midnight.

For the afternoon regatta, the boardwalk facing Glorietta Bay was crowded four to five people deep. Sailing yachts began racing at 1:05, featuring the thrilling victory of *Butcher Boy* over *Restless*. Power boats followed on the six-mile course. The regatta finished with a barge race between the crews of the Navy torpedo boats *Rowan* and *Goldsborough*. The *Rowan* crew won by several lengths after the *Goldsborough* stroke oarsman "crabbed" his oar.

While thousands of spectators watched races on the bay, a large crowd of boxing fans fought for admittance to the Pavilion theater to hear news bulletins from the Jeffries-Johnson fight. The fight had taken on particular significance as a "color line" battle between Jeffries—"the white hope"—and Johnson, a black man.

The fight coverage was preceded by "moving pictures" of the 1908 lightweight title fight between boxers Joe Gans and Oscar "Battling" Nelson. Excited by the newsreels, "the fans' "rousing cheer shook the roof of the building" when the first bulletin from Reno was read. Outside the theater, a pushing crowd struggled to get inside but had to be content with listening to fans who shouted the progress of the fight from the theater windows.

Inside the theater the betting "was freely made and considerable money changed hands." Jeffries was the gambler's favorite with odds of 10 to 4 but the bettors were surprised when Johnson wore down the former champion and won easily in fifteen rounds. (The outcome would provoke rioting and a several deaths in cities across the country.)

In the evening a massive fireworks display was launched from the middle of Glorietta Bay. The music and dancing continued until midnight. The next day, all of San Diego would congratulate itself on “safe and sane and patriotic” holiday.



A Fourth of July crowd at the Tent City bandstand in 1906. *Courtesy the Hotel del Coronado*

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