

# Pacific City, a resort with promise, flashed in the pan

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**H**istory tells us that Huntington Beach had its beginnings in a grand scheme to create the flashy resort town of Pacific City, a tourist attraction that was to rival Atlantic City.

In truth, the ambitious venture was finished shortly after it started, and it is possible that the promoters never really expected it to get off the ground.

That is the gut feeling of Barbara Milkovich, a historian who has been digging into Huntington Beach's past for several years.

A syndicate led by developers Philip A. Stanton, John N. Anderson and S.H. Finley started the venture in mid-1901. The group bought 1,500 acres of land for \$100,000 and organized the West Coast Land and Water Co.

Streets and lots were laid out on a 40-acre tract on ground above what then was called Shell Beach, a five-mile stretch that includes today's downtown Huntington Beach. The beach had been named for the numerous bean clams that dotted the sand.

Starting March 12, 1902, the company began running daily advertisements in the Santa Ana Daily Blade, proclaiming, "Pacific City is the most beautifully located seaside town in Southern California."

Lots were going for \$150 to \$300, according to the ad, and a Los Angeles wharf-builder had been contracted to build a "substantial and modern pleasure wharf." The ad cautioned, "Lots selling fast."

But later that year, a new firm

called the Huntington Beach Co. expressed interest in the land. By mid-1903, the land had new owners and a new name — Huntington Beach.

"I doubt that they got past a half-dozen houses and a boardwalk," Milkovich said of Pacific City. What caused Pacific City's rapid demise?

"It could have been any number of reasons," Milkovich said. "Transportation wasn't adequate, and all the excitement was at Long Beach then. It just wasn't timed right.

"But there's also the possibility that Pacific City wasn't intended to succeed. Stanton was a real-estate speculator anyway, so maybe he just sold out and left. He may not have had adequate financing and he may not

have tried very hard to make it work."

Stanton might have been leveraging his money for his next venture. In 1903, he and I.A. Lothian bought 200 acres north of Huntington Beach for a resort to be called Bay City. It later was renamed Seal Beach. "We know he didn't go broke over Pacific City," Milkovich said.

Henry E. Huntington, the nephew of Southern Pacific mogul Colis Huntington and the founder of the Pacific Electric Railway, was the man who would make the former Pacific City boom. But he wasn't on the Huntington Beach Co. board of directors until 1904 or 1905, well after the company purchased Pacific City.

"There's an enigma there. I

have a suspicion the Huntington Beach Co. was fronting for him at first," Milkovich said. "He had a problem: The minute he had a finger in a pie, the price would go up. That why he apparently did it behind the scenes."

Huntington instantly solved the area's access problem by extending Pacific Electric rails from Long Beach in 1904. He also started an extensive advertising campaign that helped spur a brief real-estate boom in the area. Lots that had cost \$200 suddenly were going for \$43,000.

The boom was short-lived, but the community was well-launched. Huntington Beach incorporated in 1909, becoming Orange County's sixth city.

— John Westcott/The Register

