

Field Guide to Coronado History:

Coronado's Link to Scripps Oceanography

By Bruce Linder



The world-famous Scripps Institute of Oceanography in La Jolla had its start in 1903 but, surprisingly, not in La Jolla but in Coronado. Only the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts has a longer history in American ocean sciences

Starting around 1902 the head of the University of California's Department of Zoology, Dr. William E. Ritter began looking for a site for the university's marine studies. While looking in Monterey, San Pedro and at Roseville on San Diego Bay, he became associated with Dr. Fred Baker a physician, amateur naturalist, and civic leader in San Diego.

Sensing a plum, the San Diego Chamber of Commerce caught wind of Ritter and Baker's discussions and convinced Elisah Babcock (himself a member of the Chamber) to offer the Boathouse of the Hotel del Coronado to the university as a marine laboratory. Students and faculty arrived in the summer of 1903 for the lab's first session.

The work at the Boathouse involved underwater surveys of San Diego Bay, plankton research, and studies of native marine animals along the coast. The lab used boats donated by local sailors and stories surfaced of “unusual” sea critters discovered at what was then referred to as Glorietta Bight.

The summer session convinced Ritter that “San Diego is unquestionably the best place on earth for such an institution,” and the Chamber networked publisher Edward W. Scripps and his sister Ellen Browning Scripps into the project hoping for their support as patrons. That winter, the Scripps, Baker and other leading citizens of San Diego organized the Marine Biological Association of San Diego with the aim to formally establish a permanent laboratory site.

A second summer session began in Glorietta Bight in 1904, keeping Coronado and San Diego on the oceanographic map. The Coronado Beach Company agreed to improvements at the Boathouse including the addition of an extra room and the strengthening of pilings. Edward W. Scripps offered the use of his yacht *Loma* for at-sea surveys.

When it became evident, though, in mid-1904 that the Boathouse could never hold the expanding laboratory (including plans for an aquarium), the Association decided on a new permanent building site on La Jolla Cove.

What would be known as the “Little Green Laboratory” assumed the Boathouse’s operations in 1905 and, five short years later, the first permanent building of the current Scripps Institute of Oceanography was completed along La Jolla’s shore. Yet ... Coronado stands as the site of the second oceanographic laboratory established in the United States.

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