

ALIGHT, DRINK AND BE HAPPY



We track down the history of
the Carlsbad train depot.

Written By Wendy Hinman



Some of Carlsbad's earliest dignitaries posed on the platform at Frazier's Station (from left): John Frazier and his wife, Bertha Schutte, Gerhard Schutte, Samuel Church Smith and D.D. Wadsworth (photo courtesy of San Diego History Center).

a) This is a view of the depot from the east, possibly from the Twin Inns. b) A plaque commemorating the depot's historic significance was unveiled during a 1987 ceremony (photos courtesy of Carlsbad History Room).



The way to spot Carlsbad natives is to wait for a train. Watch their faces. If they get a slight, wistful grin when the whistle blows, they grew up here. If they look annoyed, they're from somewhere else. Trains run right through our town and their clatter has punctuated the rhythm of our days. The old Carlsbad depot is in the heart of the Village and we grew out from that center.

The fingers of the rail lines hold the history of the American West in its grasp. The railroad barons boosted them as symbols of growth, progress and opportunity. Trains started arriving in Carlsbad in 1881. They came to Frazier's Station, so named because it was near where—seeing



opportunity—John A. Frazier dug down for a well and built up a tower. The artisan spring he tapped into became a destination for train travelers.

At the time, Frazier's Station was a platform with an open shed on it. The Victorian-style building that we now call the depot was constructed in 1887 by Arizona Eastern Railway. It was designed by Victorian (and Gothic) carpenter Fred R. Perris. It is one of only three depots built before 1900 that are still standing. (The others are in Encinitas and Escondido.)

Seeing the possibility in water, The Carlsbad Land and Water Company (est. 1886) built the Carlsbad Hotel in 1887 and changed the name from Frazier's Station to Carlsbad. The new name was inspired by Europe's famous spa town, Karlsbad, Bohemia (now Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic), where Well Number Nine had water with the same mineral content that was found here. Trains from San Diego, Los Angeles and beyond brought guests hoping to soak in the best qualities of our mineral water—and people hoping to invest in land. A sign near the station read: "Alight, drink and be happy!"

The well and the hotel made the depot the hub of Carlsbad. It was the first commercial building in town. Besides train business, the 24.3-foot by 63.1-foot building housed the post office, general store, Wells Fargo and tele-



c) The depot stood ready to greet visitors in 1930. d) The first day of Streamliner service in 1938 brought the latest in high-speed technology to Carlsbad (photos courtesy of Carlsbad History Room).



graph office. Its original address was just Elm and State (First Street). Roy Chase was one of the first station and postmasters. The depot brought in the news of the world and launched Carlsbad's comings and goings.

In 1907, the station was refurbished and renamed by the Santa Fe Railroad as just "Carl," in an effort to end the confusion that still exists between Carlsbad, CA and Carlsbad, NM. (Ever been asked where the caverns are?) Pressure from the citizenry brought the full name of "Carlsbad" back by the 1920s.

Like all of California history, changes turn on too much water or too little. Drought in the late 1800s slowed land speculation to a trickle. As the boom died down, so did the number of passengers. The Carlsbad Hotel burned down in 1896. The Southern California line ran not only north-south in 1882 but also ran northeast to the Temecula Valley and Colton beyond. These tracks were damaged by several floods and finally washed out in the El Niño floods of 1916.

Even with passenger decline, the depot remained the nucleus of the Village into the 1940s for shipping crops and transporting troops for two world wars. Beans, peas, corn and, of course, bulbs and cut flowers kept the freight trains' arrivals and departures at a steady rate. After World War II and the building of Interstate 5, passengers took the last train to Carlsbad in 1957. The depot closed for rail business in 1960.

B.M. "Chris" Christiansen was keen to get Frazier's well and the depot designated as historic landmarks. To remind Carlsbadians of its historic importance,



a) In 1910, the station had been rechristened "Carl" to avoid confusion with Carlsbad, NM. b) The depot, boasting a fresh coat of paint, belonged to the city in 1969 (photos courtesy of Carlsbad History Room).

the depot became the venue for several art contests and symposiums. There was a slight tug-of-war over the building in the early '60s before Santa Fe deeded the depot to the city in 1966.

By then, the depot needed renovations to become the office of the Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce as, once again, Carlsbad land specu-



c) The depot building was the home of the Carlsbad Visitor Center by the 1990s (photo courtesy of Carlsbad History Room). d) Today, the depot continues to welcome Carlsbad visitors to explore a bit of history (photo by Ann Patterson).

lation boomed. Carlsbad had doubled in population from the early '50s to the '60s. Former Carlsbad Councilman Claude "Red" Helton led this charge.

Before Gofundme was a thing, Carlsbad had a tremendous tradition of coming together and pooling resources to promote both historic preservation and good community growth. The depot's restoration was funded locally and with state grants. A festive dedication celebration was held on December 10, 1982, and presided over by the late Mayor Claude "Bud" Lewis. The late '80s saw the Chamber of Commerce outgrow the depot.

It's now the site of the Carlsbad Visitor Center, with a new address at 400 Carlsbad Village Drive. With walk-in traffic, the depot is still the welcome spot for guests and the terminus for new Carlsbadians.

When you hear the whistle blow, smile, then wander into the depot and breathe in the history. Let that whistle remind us how this little building conducted Carlsbad into all the directions it has grown into: a major tourist attraction, a storied surf town, a golf trifecta, a foodie destination, a business hub and a great place to live.

As always, a special thanks to the Carlsbad Historical Society, the Carlsbad History Room at the Georgina Cole Library and Carlsbad historian par excellence Susan Gutierrez.