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History of Manhattan Beach

The city that is now known for chic restaurants and sophisticated nightlife was a cattle ranch dotted with beanfields in 1888. In that year the Santa Fe railroad laid the first tracks to the port of Redondo Beach, which had a lively fishing and tourist trade at that time. The railroad spurred development in the entire area, and developers rushed to build beach cottages and tent camps for vacationers. For over a decade the area then known only as the northern part of Rancho Sausal Redondo was lively in summer, but almost deserted in winter. Sometime around 1902 the name of the area was changed to Manhattan, after two developers with different ideas flipped a coin to decide who would get the privilege. Confusion with other cities by the same name caused the name to be altered to Manhattan Beach by the time the city was incorporated in 1912. At that date there were 600 full time residents, with at least three times that number visiting in the summer.

By 1920 Manhattan Beach had a small but vibrant downtown and a 928-foot cement pier which still stands today. That pier quickly became a mecca for fishermen thanks to record catches of sea bass weighing over five hundred pounds. Though the size of the fish has declined over the years the pier is still popular with fishermen and strollers, and the small aquarium at the end attracts adults and children alike. The Manhattan Beach pier with its octagonal roundhouse is the oldest of its type still standing on the West Coast, and has been declared a state historic landmark.

Like most coastal cities in California, Manhattan Beach experienced a boom after the Second World War, and the year-round population grew steadily. The area did not become a mass-market tourist destination; beach cottages were still the preferred lodging for visitors, and a hotel was never built downtown. After the demise of the Red Car light rail line in 1954, day trippers from downtown LA preferred closer beaches in Santa Monica and Venice. Manhattan Beach remained a quiet community until the late 1960's, when a new generation discovered the virtues of the area and came to stay. Fine restaurants and chic shops sprang up to cater to their tastes, celebrities moved in, and suddenly downtown Manhattan Beach was famous.

Though the city has always been primarily a resort and residential community, it did have one industrial enterprise in the form of the Metlox Pottery factory, which opened in 1927 at the corner of Manhattan Beach Boulevard and Morningside Drive. This factory produced one-of-a-kind pieces like the ceramic sign for the Pantages Theater in Hollywood as well as colorful dinnerware and ceramic art pieces. In the 1950's the factory produced a famous line of Disney figurines, and at one time over 500 people were employed there. The factory closed in 1989, but the site remained vacant for years due to an ownership dispute and concerns about environmental damage from the factory. In the late 1990's a plan was put forward to redevelop the area, and in 2004 ground was broken for the Metlox Plaza, an area of fine restaurants and upscale shopping. Adjacent to that plaza is downtown Manhattan Beach's first hotel, Shade, which began welcomed its first guests in summer of 2005. The management and staff at Shade are proud of our community and its history, and we look forward to welcoming you to experience the past, present, and future of Manhattan Beach.