



University Heights Historical Society

JOHN DAVIDSON: MISSION CLIFF GARDENS PARK SUPERINTENDENT

John Davidson moved to Southern California with his wife, Martha Ann Davidson and their four children, in 1891. He chose to leave his home and promising gardening job in Edinburgh, Scotland, because of the harsh winds.

He eventually started an orchard in Chula Vista, and, with his past experience and the California climate, he was very successful. People came from all around to see his orchard, which caught the eye of many, including Mr. Babcock who owned a large portion of San Diego at the time. He interviewed John and offered him a job to help design and be the superintendent of the gardens at the Hotel Del Coronado.

Mr. Babcock eventually sold out to Mr. John Spreckels who owned the streetcars in San Diego. Mr. Spreckels wanted to transform the existing park from an amusement park, "The Bluffs," into a botanical garden at the end of the street car run and named his proposal "Mission Cliff Gardens." John was chosen to design, build and maintain a forty-acre parcel of undeveloped land on the cliffs overlooking Mission Valley, on Park Boulevard, between North and Adams Avenue. John and his family moved into one end of the existing pavilion on the property in 1904. The pavilion built in 1890 by the San Diego Cable Railway, was designed by noted architect William S. Hebbard in the shape of a Japanese house at the edge of the cliff, with a sloping roof and a veranda running completely around it. Inside was a large room for dancing and other social functions, and an elegant soda fountain.

Davidson found that the soil beneath the park left much to be desired; it consisted of hard adobe clay and scores of cobblestones. He proceeded to incorporate the cobblestones into the park's landscape. This can be demonstrated in Davidson's first project, which was to supervise the construction of a cobblestone wall to surround the Gardens. Then he crisscrossed the grounds with trails and pathways. Finally he began to plant and care for a wide variety of foliage. He planted hundreds of new trees – palms, several varieties of pines, eucalyptus, pepper, cedar, cypress, acacia and hibiscus. Over the arbors and pergolas, he planted bougainvillea, grapevines and climbing roses. Each season, he devoted a large area to a single variety of lower. He became famous for his displays of Easter lilies, which brought hundreds of San Diegans as well as tourists and horticulturists from other parts of the country to the park. From the main gate, strollers could walk along a path lined with Canary Island date palms and beds of beautiful blooms.

With the arrival of the automobile, giving people freedom to roam, few headed to the gardens. Mission Cliff Gardens closed down in early 1929. Gardener Davidson and his family remained there and he continued to maintain the Gardens entirely on his own until his death in 1935, while tending the Gardens at the age of 80. A few years later, Mr. Spreckels died and his heirs were not interested in maintaining the Gardens. In 1942 the land was subdivided and put up for sale as residential lots. The property is now occupied by houses and apartment buildings.

The wall, palms, fountain and gates are City Historic Landmarks designated on 8/27/1997.