

# State Street Was Our First Street

TAKE A NOSTALGIC WALK DOWN  
CARLSBAD'S HIGH STREET.

WRITTEN BY WENDY HINMAN



A mid-century look down State Street south from Grand Avenue (photo courtesy of Carlsbad City Library Carlsbad History Collection).





State Street is Carlsbad's high street. When Carlsbad was still a small town in the 1950s-'70s, Elm Avenue (now Carlsbad Village Drive) seemed like the Main Street of our little Mayberry. Mainly because whether by car, bike or skateboard, if you were headed east-west it was Elm. Elm was the Carlsbad business exit off the 5. But if you were headed to town for a haircut or plumbing parts, State Street has always been the high street.

The late Delene Stromberg described the Carlsbad of her youth just after the turn of the 20th century as "scattered farms and houses, very few businesses. If you went 'to town' you went to Oceanside." The few businesses were on the west side of State Street along the railroad tracks. But by the 1920s, Carlsbad was developing into its own little Village and State Street was the main business artery.

"The 101 was the main highway south," the late Robert Baird said of Carlsbad in the 1920s. "It came across the slough [Buena Vista Lagoon, from Oceanside] and came right up State Street to the corner of Elm and turned straight right and went clear to the ocean and turned south. All the businesses were right on what is now State Street."

He said, "What is now" because back then it was called First Street. And in 1927, there was a reconfiguration of Lincoln Street and the 101. The smoother, gentler curve of the 101/Carlsbad Boulevard caused a minor separation of more touristy business—like the old Twin Inns and the Royal Palms—along Carlsbad Boulevard, with the locals running their errands

on State. As late as 1935, the only paved streets in Carlsbad were State and Carlsbad Boulevard, according to Baird.

The theater also came in 1927 and cramped center field of what had been the town's baseball field, more of a sandlot. But there were vacant lots next to the theater and that was the hub of Avocado Days, an annual festival to celebrate what was then one of Carlsbad's main crops.

After WWII, the businesses in the Village were not just supporting a small agricultural town. Carlsbad went through one of its growth spurts and surrounding the downtown area were less farms and more suburbs. Still, even in the '40s, the late Roy Pace said, "The business community consisted entirely of State Street."

State is still our high street; Carlsbad Village Drive is for driving, State is for strolling. The ghosts of our small businesses past—Stillman's, Stringer's, Sonneman's—can still be felt as we walk down State and feel the spirit of enterprise in our new local favorites. Let's walk south to north.

Where Docent is now on State, the late Joyce Smith (who was born on State) remembered those cottages housing wives and families during WWII. They had come to be near their men on Camp Pendleton. The popular brewery honors the old cottages architecturally. And neighbors love that Docent showcases the long-growing wisteria that has been an announcement of spring for years.

The Killian Building takes up most of State on the west side between Carlsbad Village Drive and Grand

a) One of a clutch of Tudor-style cottages on State, where Docent Brewing is now. b) Built in 1927, the theater on State has been an anchor of the community. c) Bauer Lumber was the DIYers go-to on State. Now it's our own New Village Arts theater and cultural gathering place. d-f) The Killian Building businesses changed across the decades. g) Carlsbad's high street in the early 1900s. (photos courtesy of Carlsbad City Library Carlsbad History Collection).





The Los Diego Hotel at State and Grand (photo courtesy of Carlsbad City Library Carlsbad History Collection).

Avenue. It was a wooden structure built in the '20s by Oscar and Mattie Killian. It burned down in 1927 and was rebuilt in the brick-and-mortar style we know today. It originally had a market, one of Carlsbad's first doctor offices and one of the town's first newspapers. And like a lot of things in Carlsbad, locals still call it by its old name no matter how many others have owned it.

Next to the Killian, the Los Diego Hotel combined the "Los" of Los Angeles and the "Diego" of San Diego, trying to communicate it was halfway between the two. After the 101 realignment, the hotel became an office building on the upper floors. The lower floor is currently home to Via Vai Cucina Italiana.

On the east side of the same block, there has been Stringer's paint and pet supply, Nick's Shoe Repair and the South Coast Land Company, to name just a few. South Coast was the second developer, after the Carlsbad Land and Water Company of the late 1880s, to see the potential in Carlsbad. Its old office is next to Abel Garcia's Barber Shop and near Garcia's Mexican food and a few doors down from The Village Pub with its train beer. These businesses have anchored the street's east side for decades.

We all just call it the State Street Theater no matter who owns it or what they call it. Ginny Unanue remembers in her childhood in the '50s, "on Saturday afternoons, you could get in for a quarter. Popcorn cost a dime. It was a double-feature, plus a cartoon. And if you didn't have a double-feature, you felt really cheated."

The Bauer Lumber building sat vacant for a few years. It was the go-to place along the tracks for contractors and DIYers to get the goods. We wrung our hands for a while over what would become of this prime location. We couldn't have been more pleased when New Village Arts (NVA) arrived in 2006. Since then, NVA has become the cultural anchor of State Street. With award-winning drama, comedy, music, education and spoken word poetry, NVA has given State new, vibrant colors.

The northern part of State was where we went to deal with our cars, and there are still a few mechanics and a carwash there. But with NVA's influence, north State is slowly growing with art galleries and becoming a foodie purlieu, as they would say at the Michelin-star French restaurant Jeune et Jolie. We so enjoy when a new place honors the past. Campfire did just that when it moved into the old Drag Master shop. Drag Master was the world-renowned builder of dragsters founded by locals Jim and Tom Nelson and Dode Martin in the '60s. It is legendary to gearheads everywhere. Campfire kept the quonset hut of the old shop and repurposed the wood steeped in story.

*Stromberg and Smith quotes from original Carlsbad Magazine interviews. Baird, Pace and Unanue quotes are from oral histories held at the Carlsbad Cole Library History Room.*