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A Sailing Start to the Park's Centennial



By George Mullen & Ester Araujo García de Paredes

Most San Diegans see Balboa Park's coming centennial as either the anniversary of the park's building or the anniversary of the exposition. Few recognize that it marks something far larger and more profound, and with a global impact beyond compare. The centennial marks the 1915 completion of the Panama Canal – an extraordinary accomplishment for both the United States and Panama. The canal brought forth life in innumerable ways with a new unhindered movement of people, food stuffs, raw material, manufactured goods and even the U.S. Navy in times of war. The canal brought to reality a 400-year-old fantasy of finding or building an Atlantic to Pacific water passageway. The Panama Canal's creation forever changed the world.

The canal's impact upon Panama has been immense, but we also note the profound effects it has had on the development of San Diego. The connection began with the Panama-California

Exposition of 1915 that celebrated the first ship to pass through the canal and reach an American port, that being San Diego. This celebration prompted the large-scale building of Balboa Park (named for Spanish explorer Vasco Núñez de Balboa, the first European to cross the Isthmus of Panama in 1513 and see the Pacific Ocean) with the central plaza fittingly named Plaza de Panama.

The exposition brought worldwide attention to tiny San Diego (population 39,500) and put it on track to become the beautiful metropolis it is today. You could say the Panama Canal brought great life to Panama, but you also could say it did the same for San Diego. The connection between San Diego and Panama is fascinating – as if the canal opened a “River of Life” between the two.

The flow of life resonates large in Panama as highlighted by the new Frank Gehry museum at the tip of the causeway on the Pacific entrance to the canal – named the Bridge of Life Museum. The bright parrot-colored museum depicts Panama as the great thoroughfare of natural life between North and South America and is scheduled for completion in 2012. Architecturally, the museum will be on par with Spain’s Bilbao Guggenheim, also designed by Gehry.

Meantime, a number of San Diegans have been seeking a new identifier for San Diego along the same theme – the City of Life. There are many reasons why this label is a perfect fit, particularly when you consider the incredible natural biodiversity of the San Diego region. Though different in the content of their biodiversity, both Panama and San Diego are rich in life indeed.

The concept of life with respect to Panama, the canal, the Bridge of Life Museum and San Diego, is thought-provoking and poetic. With this in mind, we have something unique to propose, something focused directly on the real meaning of the centennial, and something with the ability to garner worldwide attention. We propose:

- San Diego and Panama City, the capital of Panama, form a sister city partnership focused on celebrating the life the canal brought to Panama, San Diego and the entire world.
- An international flotilla of ships (Ships of Life) sail the same route in 2015 as the first 1915 voyage – passing through Panama via the canal, by Panama’s new museum (Bridge of Life), and ultimately reaching San Diego (City of Life) as the first American port of call. This voyage has the potential to be a major media/Internet event as the world tracks the progress of the Ships of Life flotilla from launch until docking in San Diego Harbor.

Should San Diego’s civic and sailing leaders choose to participate or captain sailing vessels within the flotilla, San Diego’s well-deserved reputation as a world-class sailing destination will radiate.

Once the flotilla enters San Diego’s harbor, the Balboa Park Centennial Celebration would begin – deservedly connecting the celebration itself to the waterways that originated it. Such a flotilla would bring worldwide attention to both Panama and San Diego, and be a boon to our respective tourism industries.

Most centennial celebrations are but a circus of pomp and circumstance with little long-term benefit to a community. It does not have to be this way with our centennial. We can have a

celebration with real meaning, and one with the potential of a lasting impact on San Diego comparable only to the original 1915 exposition itself.

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