



OLD-TIMER—Local meteorologist J. Sherman Denny, shown here with some of the tools of his trade, is one of Huntington Beach old-timers who tell it the way it was in interviews, collected in a new book, "Huntington Beach: An Oral History." Staff photo

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Ol' Huntington remembered

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HUNTINGTON BEACH — Huntington Beach today is a sprawling municipality, stretching from the Santa Ana river to Seal Beach, from the Pacific Ocean inland to the San Diego Freeway, with a population that makes it the eleventh largest city in the state.

For the vast majority of its residents, the Huntington Beach of housing tracts, shopping centers and an overcrowded beach is the only Huntington Beach they are familiar with.

However, a small number of the city's citizens, their ranks thinning more each year, remember quite a different Huntington Beach. They remember a city with an oil derrick skyline, rows of cardboard shanties, celery and bean fields and unpaved roads.

For the city has a rich and interesting history — founded as a would-be West Coast resort, turned into a boomtown with the discovery of oil and then completely reshaped by the Southern California housing boom of the 50s and 60s.

A part of this history is now brought to light, told by some of the people who lived through it, in a book compiled by the history department of California State University at Fullerton. The book is "Huntington Beach: An Oral History," and is 180 pages of photographs and transcribed interviews with 50- to 70-year residents of the city, including J. Sherman Denny, the *Independent* weather statistician.

Names that now are only remembered as streets and avenues — Talbert, Newland, Gisler, Huntington and Bushard — are once again, briefly, flesh and bone, walking the dusty streets of a pre-World War II oil town.

Other names, famous ones, are seen in cameo appearances — P. T. Barnum, Duke Kahanamoku, Prince (now Emperor) Hirohito — stopping off in the town on their many and varied world travels.

Also, several minor historical firsts are associated with Huntington Beach. For instance, Bud Higgins, one of the city's first lifeguards in the 20s and the city fire chief from 1950 to the mid-60s, relates that the Huntington Beach oil field was the first one ever to be drilled as a result of geologic study.

"No study was given to geology or petroleum geology previous to the time (of the first Huntington Beach well)," Higgins relates. "Standard Oil Company had hired a young engineer about two years before this well was drilled. He had done

some studying of areas in Southern California. Through his geology studies, he came to the conclusion that the area near Reservoir Hill (between what is now Goldenwest Street and Beach Boulevard) was a petroleum-bearing area.

"So, he kept after the people who were operating Standard Oil Company, the officers, and tried to talk them into drilling a well there. They kept putting him off and putting him off and finally one of them wrote a letter to an official and in the letter said that in order to get this young geologist off their back, go ahead and drill a well down here and satisfy him.

"They drilled a well and it came in...Within a matter of six months, there were probably 800 drilling rigs operating here."

Other innovations of some historical note were the first trailer campground in the nation, located by the beach south of the pier; the first telephone system used in lifeguarding to keep each station in touch with the headquarters on the pier; and the first use of the "whipstock," which allowed drilling for oil at angles other than straight down and led immediately to onshore wells tapping offshore oil zones.

In addition, Higgins claims to have been one of the first surfers in California, having met Duke Kahanamoku and learning the Hawaiian art from him. Higgins' first board, which he made himself, was made of redwood and weighed 135 pounds.

Some other features of early Huntington Beach that have receded into dim memory and are brought back by this volume include the annual "occupation" of the town by a group known as "The Grand Army of the Republic;" the yearly two-week gospel meetings near what is now Beach Boulevard and Atlanta Avenue and gave that area the name "Gospel Swamp;" and the annual Twins Convention, which, in its last incarnation in about 1932, attracted between 400 and 500 pairs of twins to our fair city. The Twins Convention was discontinued because the city council was no longer willing to foot the \$300 bill for the affair.

Also included in the fascinating book are rare photographs of the city's early days, including one of the official town seal — not the documentary kind, the mammalian kind — a little flapper named Old Ben who was housed in a pen adjacent to the old municipal "Plunge," or saltwater pool, on the boardwalk near the pier.

"Huntington Beach: An Oral History" is available in a limited number from the Huntington Beach Historical Society for \$15.00.

