

An Illustrated History of Muscle Beach

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Venice, California

By 1930, Santa Monica already had a considerable reputation as a resort community. Its temperate climate, beautiful beaches, and crystal clear waters seemed to be the very embodiment of the California dream. With the advent of the great Depression, Santa Monica, like other communities, turned to the Works Progress Administration for civic building projects. During the late 1930s the WPA erected a number of structures on Santa Monica's beaches, one of which was a low, open-air platform/stage. Nearby, the WPA also erected gymnastic bars, rings and other types of playground equipment. Soon gymnasts, hand balancers, adagio dancers, bodybuilders, and competitive weightlifters began gathering on the weekends to work out together. What started as workouts for several members of the UCLA gymnastics team soon grew into extravagant productions that attracted thousands of spectators. Men, women, and even children participated, and Santa Monica Beach found itself with a new nickname -- "Muscle Beach."

The halcyon days of Muscle Beach did not last, however. Following charges of sexual assault by several weightlifters, the city ordered the exhibitions to stop and demolished the platform in the late 1950s. However, nearly a decade later, the city of Venice, California, built a small, open weightlifting pit on Venice Beach, and the second era of Muscle Beach began. Unlike the first era, however, the main participants at Venice Beach were not gymnasts but male bodybuilders.

Using slides from Glenn Sundby's Muscle Beach Alumni Newsletter, this paper traces the evolution of "Muscle Beach" from its early days as a simple, seaside resort to its prominence in the mid-1950s as the Mecca for bodybuilders and handbalancers. Using first person interviews as well as newspaper reports, the paper pays particular attention to the men and women who played leading roles at Muscle Beach following World War II and into the mid-1950s.