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The Fall of the Original Muscle Beach

Beginning in the late 1930s, a group of young acrobats and weight trainers began to come to the beach at Santa Monica just south of the pier to practice their stunts and lift the weights they brought in their cars. Soon, the first few physical culturists

attracted others and the weekends on the beach popular with athletes and spectators alike. The Second World War saw these carefree days give way to training for battle, but once the war ended in 1945, "Muscle Beach" reached and then surpassed its pre-war popularity. The crowds sometimes reached 10,000 as people came to watch the often-spectacular feats of tumbling and acrobatic and gaze at the then-rare physiques of the weight-trained men and women.

By the late 1950s these huge crowds had become a problem for the city of Santa Monica, especially in the area of parking. Some Muscle Beach regulars believed that the city wanted to use some of the beach space for additional parking. Other supporters of the activities on the beach thought that some of the business owners in the area didn't like to compete with the free shows given by the athletes who came to share the sun and fun to be had on the platforms and gymnastic apparatuses. Still others blamed the owners of the largest hotel in the area for being opposed to the large and boisterous crowds who flocked to the beach.

Finally, in December of 1958, five weightlifters that lived in a boardwalk apartment were arrested on charges of "morals offenses" involving two underage girls, and the city of Santa Monica had the pretext to move against Muscle Beach. The case was widely reported by the local papers but although charges against the five lifters were later dropped, in the interim, Santa Monica arranged to have the recreation department remove the tumbling platforms and bulldoze the workout areas. This was done at night with no warning and the next day dirt was hauled to the site to create new parking.

In March of 1959 the city council reopened the beach, but disallowed the use of the term, "Muscle Beach" and refused to permit all weightlifting activities and elaborate acrobatic shows of the sort that made the place famous. The council justified this by claiming that the beach had become an attraction for "perverts" and "narcissistic parasites" and thus an embarrassment for "decent people." The circumstances surrounding these events will be examined in detail through the use of police reports, newspaper and magazine accounts, letters from the period and personal interviews. Others blamed the owners of the largest hotel in the area for being opposed to the large and boisterous crowds who flocked to the beach.



Nancy Struna makes her point



Sue Smith & Steve Gietschier