SEA ISLE CITY HISTORY

THE SEA ISLE BOARDWALK – 1921 STYLE

It's gone now. Swept away by hurricanes, nor'easters, and progress. But a century ago, Sea Isle boasted a boardwalk every bit as vibrant as today's Promenade.

Then, as now, the action was centered around Ocean Avenue (today's JFK Boulevard) with attractions not so different from those of today. Then, as now, there were souvenir and candy shops, retail stores, food stands, ice cream parlors, amusements, and concert venues – all the amenities that make for a festive time at the shore. Then, as now, everybody had fun.

But there were differences, too. Instead of condominiums, the early boardwalk featured full service hotels with bars and dining rooms. Public bath houses, some with salt water baths, seemed especially popular. There were bowling alleys, fishing piers, movie theaters, and more – all within a five block stretch between about 39th and 44th Streets.

What follows represents a hundred-year-old glimpse into those five central blocks from early survey maps, reminiscences, and photographs found in the Sea Isle City Historical Museum.

North of Ocean Avenue



This panoramic view, taken from the Ocean Pier at 42nd Street, shows the two most prominent buildings just north of Ocean Avenue – Excursion House on the left at the corner of the avenue, and the Surf House hotel a block farther along in the center of the photo. To the north of Surf House, the landscape comprised mostly private homes or smaller hotels such as the Albion, Sea Breeze, Gladstone, and Sea View – all clustered around 36th and 37th Streets.

And then there was the Continental…

For some reason, the grandiose Continental Hotel was built a good 15 blocks north of the center of town. It covered two acres and filled the entire space between 24th and 25th Streets. It never made a profit, and was finally torn down in the early 1920s after several years of inoccupancy. Location, location, location.



Shown above is a perspective looking north along the boardwalk from just south of Ocean Avenue. The first building on the left above is the Women's Civic Club, followed by Excursion House, with Surf House in the distance. The benches in front of the Civic Club are at the terminus of Ocean Avenue and face a bandstand on the ocean side. Band concerts in those days seemed to draw a bit of a crowd, shown below:



The Surf House (shown below) first opened as the Hotel Lilly in 1882 and was one of the premier establishments of its time, with a private bath house, an elegant restaurant, location at the beach, and proximity to the railroad station.



It was later purchased by Dr. Frank Dealy who intended to transform it into the Surf Hospital. Unfortunately, the hurricane of 1944 interfered, and the building was demolished.

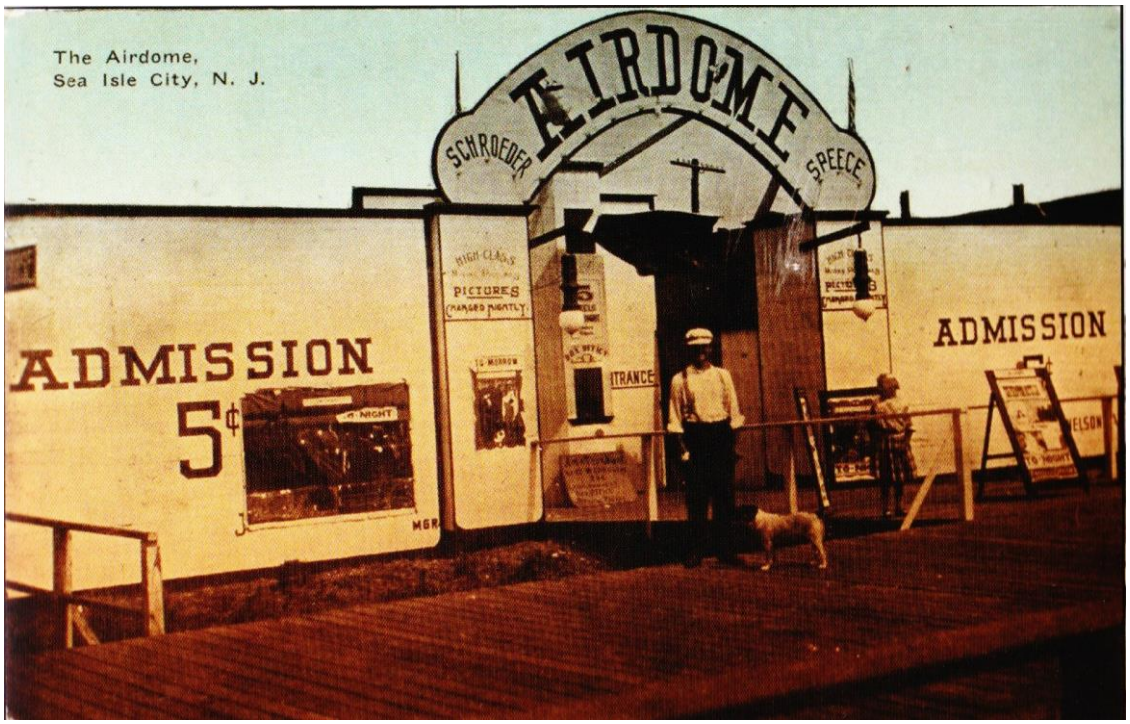


Excursion House (shown above), reconstructed from the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, was the entertainment hub of early Sea Isle. It provided a place to rest, enjoy the view, and nibble on a shoobie lunch. For the adventurous, it offered dancing, skating, boxing matches, basketball games, and games of chance. There was the Stevens Theatre, a hot dog stand, a drugstore, and souvenir shops. Next door was a bath house with hot and cold sea water. Why go anywhere else? (Excursion House was totally demolished in the great nor'easter of March, 1962.)



The Women's Civic Club, the oldest community organization in Sea Isle, was granted a charter in 1910 and continues to this day as both a social and a service club run entirely by women. No men were allowed inside its building except during certain days. The building survived for a half-century until the 1962 nor'easter did it in.

Tucked in among the larger buildings north of Ocean Avenue were many smaller venues. For example, a circus-size carousel which had stood next to Excursion House in the 1890s had been supplanted by five stores and a shooting gallery. There was once even an "Airdome" – a fancy name for an outdoor movie house in the 1920s (shown below).



And south of the Avenue the scene was just as lively...

South of Ocean Avenue

That first block south of Ocean Avenue was probably the busiest on the boardwalk. One could find restaurants, ice cream and soda shops, hot dog stands, souvenir shops, an amusement parlor, bowling alleys, a photo studio, salt water baths, and apartments for rent. According to the caption, this early (undated) picture below shows Pantella's Greek Restaurant, Amberg's photo shop, Mickey Marr's This & That Shop, Fehrle's bowling alley, and a snack shop. (Albert Amberg was responsible for most of the photos shown here)





Fehrle's Candy Kitchen and Bowling Alley

This photo below (c1920) shows the same block a decade or so later. The Amberg building has sprouted another level, the Women's Civic Club now partially shadows Excursion House in the distance, but the overall tenor of the boardwalk remained unchanged.



Moving just a bit south, shown below on the left is the corner of the first block, with the front of the Ocean Pier making an appearance at the end of 42nd Street. (The photo is dated c1913.)

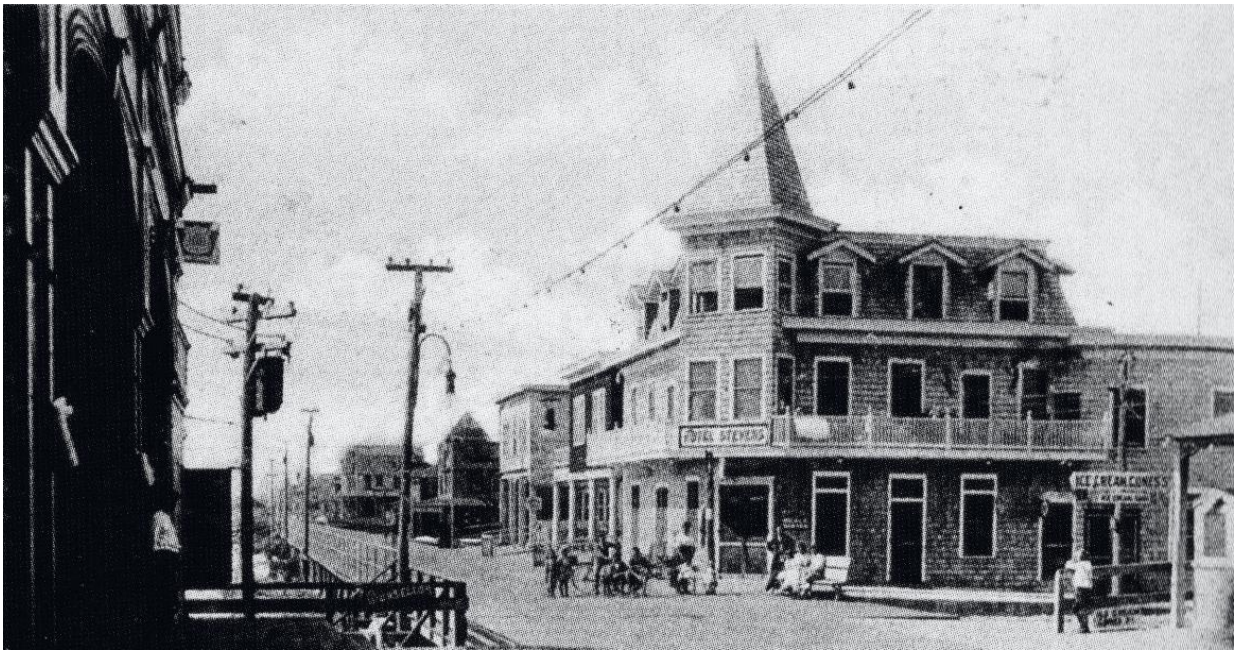


The Ocean Pier was yet another center of activity on the early boardwalk. The Philadelphia Inquirer called it “one of the longest and finest fishing piers in the State.” But it wasn’t just for fishing. It provided the venue for all sorts of entertainment, ranging from early vaudeville shows to the more modern Madeline Theatre. The pier survived several ownerships, names, and hurricanes, until it too was washed away in the ‘62 storm – including the Madelaine which was reportedly seen floating, largely intact, out to sea.





Crossing 42nd Street, the imposing building on the south corner is the Hotel Stevens as shown in the c1915 photo below. The Stevens charged three dollars a day, which must have been a bargain even back then. In time, the Stevens became the Windsor Hotel with its restaurant and coffee shop – which later became the iconic Kozy Korner Coffee Shoppe. (Back in the 19th century, it had been the site of the Star of the Sea Hotel and Bath House.)



The Hotel Stevens with the Ocean Pier at the left

By around 1925, the block between 42nd and 43rd Streets looked like this:



At one time on the south side of the Hotel Stevens there was a candy shop, the Colonial Hotel and Restaurant, Sammy Pullstrings game of chance (where, for a dime, one pulled a string attached to a wall of prizes to win the connected prize), an imported linens store, plus other shops to fill up the block.

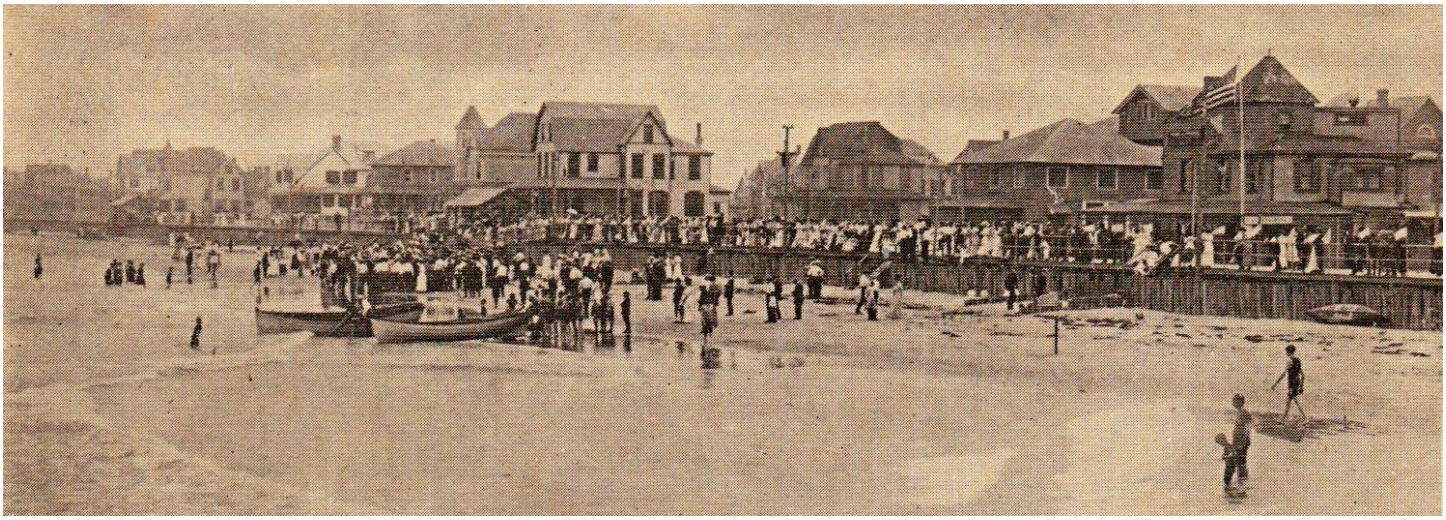
The flat-top building in the center of the photo was the Spray Hotel and Cafe, which has an interesting lineage. It apparently started life as a convent with 22 rooms, was purchased by Charlie Hahn for his restaurant, became the Spray, and, after the 1944 hurricane, was bought by Alvin and Catherine Fean and turned into Fean's Hotel, destined to be lost in the 1962 nor'easter.

Beyond the Spray, it seems that the small cluster at the end of the block was an ice cream parlor and a hot dog stand. And at the far left in the photo, on the other side of 43rd Street, is the building which housed the famous merry-go-round, ill-fated to be demolished by the same nor'easter.

This earlier photo of the next block (below) has a feature that seems to epitomize over-the-top advertising. That sign on the building across 43rd Street, instead of the usual "Bath House," reads "Bathing Home." It must have been very classy. Note the small beach pavilion at the left. Back then, these shelters were placed every few blocks along the walk.



From 43rd Street south, the landscape began to be mostly dominated by private dwellings. The second building from the right (below) with the pyramid hip roof was Mayor Richard Atwater's summer "Cottage by the Sea."



Postcard dated 1921

When the cottage became too limited to handle his crowds of visitors, Atwater built what he called "The Barracks" next to it on the corner of 45th Street. This photo below shows both the Barracks and the Cottage, with Hahn's, the Hotel Stevens, and the Ocean Pier in the background.



View looking north from 45th Street (c1915)

Summing up

Looking back a century, it's evident that the Sea Isle boardwalk provided plenty of venues for the visitor to relax and be entertained. Excursion House, the Ocean Pier and the bandstand were major attractions. Surf House and the Hotel Stevens were right in the center of things. Mix in all the rest and

you had a perfect complement to the main attraction – which has always been the beach and the ocean. It's no wonder that thousands of visitors made the sometimes arduous trek by train and by car to enjoy Sea Isle City.

To enjoy our collection of photos, literature, and artifacts, please visit the Sea Isle City Historical

Museum at 48th Street and Central Avenue. Access our website at www.seaislemuseum.com. Call 609-263-2992. Our current hours are 10:00am to 3:00pm on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, and 1:00pm to 3:00pm on Friday. Admission is free.

This "Spotlight on History" was written by Sea Isle City Historical Society Volunteer Bob Thibault

Photos were provided courtesy of the Sea Isle City Historical Museum

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