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San Diego **CityBeat**

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Neighborhood Watch: Old Town

Our monthly feature featuring new stuff, fun facts and the OG locals of San Diego's best burgs

by Torrey Bailey



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All photos by Torrey Bailey unless otherwise noted

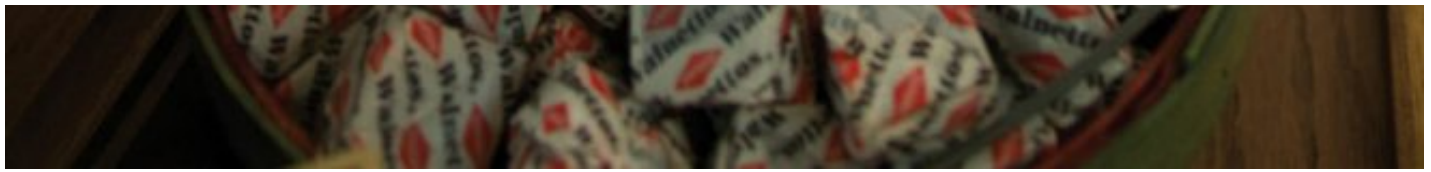
When Father Junipero Serra established California's first Spanish mission, Mission San Diego de Alcalá, in 1769 on Presidio Hill, he couldn't have foreseen the tourist-friendly neighborhood that would unfold below. Surrounded by Interstates 8, 5 and Mission Hills, Old Town grew organically at the hill's base and preceded downtown as San Diego's epicenter until Alonzo Horton entered the scene in the late 19th century. In 1968, the state created Old Town State

Historic Park which opened the floodgates for field trips to fawn over period-accurate sites. Staples of the era are found among Victorian-style homes, Mexican restaurants selling fresh tortillas and gift shops filled with gemstones and pottery. While tour groups parade past the park's kiosks, museums and the birthplace of the *San Diego Union* newspaper, they also cross paths with, supposedly, the most haunted house in America and a hidden pentagram. A cemetery honoring some of the area's earliest settlers also wiggles its way in between the copper shops and soap stores. Considering all the sombrero wearing and margarita drinking that takes place in Old Town, it might be the closest thing to a year-round, American-style Cinco de Mayo celebration.

THE CORNER

San Diego Avenue's collision with Twigg Street marks the entryway of the state historic park. Westward, there is no vehicular entry and employees of wellness stores and leather shops are outfitted for the bygone era. Facing East, Hungry's Kitchen & Tap stands out among a line of Mexican food establishments that better reflect the present.





I WANT (OLD PEOPLE) CANDY

If we really want to get a sense of just how bad our grandparents and great-grandparents had it, just head to **Cousin's Candy Shop** (2711 San Diego Ave.) inside Heritage Park where I tried some vintage candies that are, somehow, still made. Don't get me wrong, some are pretty good and the store does sell some yummy homemade items, but most of the vintage candy for sale is, well, just see below.

Cigarette candy: Really?! This still exists? These have been around since the early 20th century. They were marketed to kids who wanted to look cool like mommy and daddy. They're made of a hardened corn syrup fashioned to look like a smoke. I haven't eaten one in years. They still taste like disgustingly sweet chalk.



Zagnut: Not sure I've ever had one of these before. They're made up of crunchy "peanut butter" (not actually one of the ingredients) and toasted coconut, and while they're pretty yummy, they have the look of a granola bar that's been in a Cold War fallout shelter for 70 years.



Kits: Individually wrapped flavored taffy candy that's texturally somewhere in between a Now and Later and a Hi-Chew. It's when you eat one that you realize that artificial flavoring technology has come a long way. I had strawberry. Tasted more like a dingleberry.



Fudge: Who even eats fudge anymore? That's like something you get from your old-ass aunt in a decorative Christmas tin, and it just sits around all year until someone finally decides to return it to its rightful home (i.e. the garbage). That being said, Cousin's housemade fudge, while a little on the soft side, tastes like that river of chocolate in Willy Wonka. Pretty damn good.

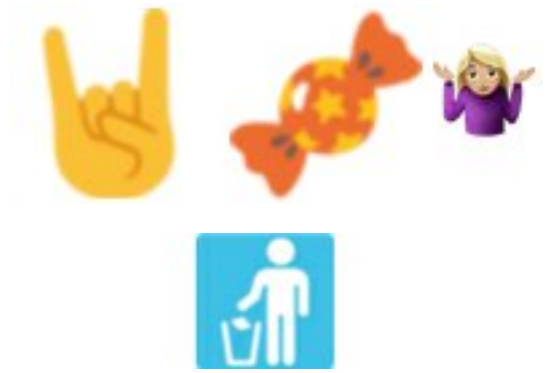


Rock Candy: Not the crystal-shaped lollipop, but rather, the jellybeans that look like actual rocks. They taste like jellybeans so why can't they just look like jellybeans? Why do they have

to look like rocks? Was there a huge contingent of young children who wanted to eat rocks back in the '50s? Greatest generation, my ass.

Walnettos: A caramel and walnut soft-chew candy. According to Wikipedia, “one of America’s most popular candies in the 1920s and 1930s.” Why? Who? Generational proof that our candy palates have evolved, because, ew, walnuts? They don’t even put those in trail mix anymore, cause walnuts taste like dirt poop.

—Seth Combs



WHALEY OF A TALE

Entering Old Town’s Whaley House, I think of the boastful claim (according to touristy souvenirs) that this is “the most haunted house in America.”

How do you even qualify that? I think. Can one place be more haunted than another? Do the amount of ghosts earn that distinction, or is it the severity/frequency of ghostly encounters?

Then, while I'm standing in the entrance and ruminating on semantics, the wind blows a framed photo against my shoulder, and I almost jump out of my fucking skin.

And that's the power of the Whaley House—even the most skeptical can fall under its spell. The history of Thomas Whaley and his troubled family life (including the suicide of his daughter Violet) is juicy enough to fill a modern day reality show, but throw in Whaley's association with local law enforcement and their penchant for hanging criminals on his property, and it's easy to see how the house can beguile non-believers.

Besides the dreadful wind incident, I don't see any ghosts. But then again, it's 10 a.m.—not really the ghosting hour. I talk to one of the volunteers, who says she's often had to lock the house up after everyone has gone home.

"I've often felt someone right next to me," she says.

I may not believe in ghosts, but after hearing that, it's a safe bet that I won't be volunteering to work at the Whaley House anytime soon.

— *Ryan Bradford*



Photo by Candice Eley

TOWER OF TERROR

Old Town is about as tourist- and family-friendly as San Diego gets, with old-timey buildings, souvenir photos, candy shops, foot-long margaritas and, of course, Rockin' Baja Lobster. And yet, most San Diegans probably aren't aware of the sinister landmark lurking just up the road. At the adjacent Presidio Park, there's a fairly unassuming one-story tower with a rooftop overlook, known as the Pattie Memorial, named for Sylvester Pattie who was a War of 1812 veteran and the first soldier to die on San Diego soil. But those in the underground have a much more ominous name for it: Witches Tower. There's a good reason for that. The roof of the tower is covered with a giant pentagram. Nobody really knows who put it there, or what the significance is, but as is often the case, the imagined reason is probably more interesting than the truth. Personally, I believe it's there for me to summon the power of the dark lord, as I did one warm Sunday afternoon. Just below there was a guy practicing some jazz and funk drums while I channeled the spirits; not the dark ambient or black metal soundtrack I'd hoped for, but it's fine. If Satan needs to groove, then it will have been a suitable offering.

—Jeff Terich

COLORFUL CHARACTERS

Christina Blessing - Owner of Lost Cities Beads

Christina Blessing is a rolling stone. From moving cross-country during her childhood to traveling the world for old beads, most of her life has been spent on the road. Eighteen years ago, she decided to settle in Old Town where she opened Lost Cities Beads (2802 Juan St.), a jewelry-making supply shop. Her interest in stones began while living near a river in Illinois where she often found arrowheads made of chert (a silica-based opaque rock)

after it rained. Moving west, she opened various stores and held bead collection shows across the Southwest before finally coming to San Diego in the '90s. Since then, Lost Cities brings in both new customers and devoted regulars into the shop. "I have people from all over the country that'll come here once or twice a year because they're in town and they know I'm here," says Blessing. She has even started a now longstanding tradition of baking six-dozen cookies every week, providing something sweet for the families of customers who are brought along to outings to the store. "Kids and husbands are often times a little happier if they've got something in their mouth, and it [makes it] hard to complain."



—Sofia Mejias-Pascoe

Pat Downing - *Blacksmith at Blackhawk Livery Stable*

At the 1850s-style Blackhawk Livery Stable (4002 Wallace St.), Pat Downing only uses the basics—hammers and fire—to create candelabras, gun barrels and other items for the Historic Park. He’s dressed in period-correct attire, including a pink-hued shirt, dyed with the extract of cochineal bugs plucked from surrounding cacti. For visitors, the blacksmith shop is educational. “You talk to a kid, and you tell him that the sword we have in Old Town took about 62 hours [to make],” Downing says. “And they say, ‘Well I saw it done on YouTube in 13 minutes.’” But, Downing says the kids’ attitudes change when he lifts a 150-pound anvil with a metal rod, then heats up the same rod and bends it using one finger. “At that point the kids quit talking and pay attention,” says Downing. When he’s not in Old Town, Downing specializes in modern techniques such as foldforming, often referred to as the origami of metal work. His pieces can be seen throughout San Diego, including a wave-inspired sculpture and a birdbath at Westfield University Town Center. “I love the modern techniques of power tools. But without the knowledge that I’ve gained over the years from traditional blacksmithing like we do in Old Town, I couldn’t do what I do.”



—Victoria Davis

Elida Guadarrama - *Tortilla maker at Cafe Coyote*

Elida Guadarrama came to San Diego in 1984 with plans to stay only a year. She’s still here after 33 years and 26 of those years have been spent making tortillas at Cafe Coyote (2461 San Diego Ave.). But when Guadarrama moved here, she had never made flour tortillas, much less knew that they existed. “Where I come from [Guererro], Mexico, we only had corn,” she says. “The flour was for bread and for other food items, so coming here was very different.” She apprenticed under another woman at Cafe Coyote, learning visually. “I caught on real quick that I eventually beat her doing the tortillas.” Tourists and locals can watch and order to-go tortillas from her at the griddle that faces the street, where she makes classic flour tortillas, as well as strawberry, chocolate, cilantro, cinnamon and other flavors depending on the ingredients available. Guadarrama guesses she has made more than 6 million tortillas by now and she was recently featured in a BuzzFeed video showing her in action. “Because of this job, I’m able to give my children what they want. That makes me really grateful and very honored to be here for everyone to see what I do.”



—Torrey Bailey

OLD TOWN TOURISTS



The Group Photographer



The Margaritavillers



Fourth grade field tripper



The Churro-less Child

JUNE 7, 2017 ISSUE NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

by Torrey Bailey
June 7, 2017 12:30 PM

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