

COLONEL D. C. COLLIER: AN INSPIRATION

TO THE CITIZENS OF TODAY



One of the ironies of history is the manner in which the achievements of people who were famous in their lifetimes are soon forgotten. In the span of 59 years, Colonel David Charles Collier, who was an important mover and shaker in San Diego City and County in the early decades of the 20th century, has become unknown. Communities which had honored him are now removing his name from parks and schools in order to commemorate people who in another 59 years will be as uncelebrated as Collier is today.

Colonel Collier was a lawyer, real-estate developer, public servant, amateur archeologist, dabbler in minerals, and consultant in the holding of expositions.

He was born in Central City, Colorado, August 14, 1871, the son of David Charles Collier and Martha Maria (Johnson) Collier. His father was a lawyer, a judge and the manager of the *Central City Register*.¹ Along with his father, mother, brother Frank and sister Mabel, 12-year old "Charlie" arrived in San Diego on the steamer *Orizaba* in 1884.² Collier, Sr. built a house at 6th Street, between Cypress and Cedar,³ and became a law partner of Alfred Haines in 1889.⁴

"Charlie" completed his education at Russ High School. During intermissions he went down Waterworks Canyon (today Cabrillo Canyon) in the City Park. Here he ate lunch under a pepper tree. The only trees in the park surrounded the waterworks. Chaparral and cactus grew on hardpan in the rest of the park.⁵

At age 14, "Charlie" became a janitor, then a bookkeeper at the First National Bank.⁶ While filling a tank with gas from a jet for H. D. Priens, a druggist at 4th and E Streets, he lit a match. The explosion blew out a window and nearly cost him his life.⁷

At 16, "Charlie" built a shack at the corner of Pacific Avenue (today Coronado Avenue) and Bacon Street in Ocean Beach. He called the shack the "Alligator Rock Lodge."⁸

In 1891, at age 20, Collier, Jr. became a lawyer in his father's office.⁹ *The San Diego Union*, August 21, 1895, mentioned that he got in a fist fight with J. P. Hirschler in the latter's bookstore.¹⁰

Following his father's death in 1899,¹¹ Collier became a law partner of Judge W. P. Andrews.¹² In 1900 he entered a new partnership with Sam F. Smith.¹³ As many of his clients were unable to pay him in cash, they gave him real estate they considered worthless.¹⁴ He subdivided this land, put in utilities, planted trees, and sold it through the Ralston Realty Co., organized in 1904.¹⁵ In 1905 he organized the Easton-Collier Co.,¹⁶ in 1908 the Western Investment Co.,¹⁷ and in 1909 D. C. Collier and Co.¹⁸ Through these companies, he sold lots in Ocean Beach, Point Loma, Pacific Beach, University Heights, Normal Heights, North Park, East San Diego, Encanto, La Mesa, and Ramona.

A marriage to Ella May Copley in San Diego, January 1, 1896,¹⁹ ended in divorce, November 11, 1914.²⁰ His wife was the sister of Congressman Ira C. Copley of Illinois, who would later become the owner of the *San Diego Union* and *Evening Tribune*. Collier, his wife, and two sons, David Copley and Ira Clifton, lived at Alligator Rock Lodge. The lodge had become a large house with a bathing pool and a Japanese garden.²¹

Ruth E. Everson became his second wife, November 14, 1915. Following her death, August 28, 1916,²² he married Clytie B. Lyon, December 13, 1919.²³

His son David became a military aviator who was killed in a crash during World War I. Ira, from whom he was estranged, became a newspaperman in New York City.²⁴ Collier had a stepdaughter, Clytie, by his third wife.

As his business prospered, Collier took a leading role in the community as a financier, politician and citizen. He won a case against the County Auditor in January 1900 when Judge Torrance ruled interests and penalties cannot be charged on costs of property being sold to redeem taxes.²⁵

Collier owned the first phonograph, a Berliner Gramophone,²⁶ and the first automobile in San Diego,²⁷ an Oldsmobile he purchased in 1900. It made 25 miles per hour and could cover 50 miles on three quarts of gasoline.

In 1905 Collier persuaded the City Council to override the veto of Mayor John L. Sehon and to purchase water from the J. D. Spreckels' Southern California Mountain Water Company.²⁸

Seeking new fields, he bought five mines in the Julian-Banner district in 1900 and the Santa Maria Land and Water Co. in Ramona in 1905.²⁹ After that he built a home on stilts near Hatfield Creek on the road to Ballena.

Like other men Collier sought the goodwill of his fellow citizens, but, more than any other factor, he was propelled into a whirlwind of activities by the irrepressible force of his exuberant energies.

From 1907 to 1911 he served on the staff of California Governor J. N. Gillette, who gave him the title of "Colonel."³⁰ In 1907 he built a home and poultry farm in La Mesa Springs.³¹ In 1908-09 he built a railroad line from San Diego to Ocean Beach.³² In 1908 he was president of the San Diego Chamber of Commerce,³³ and organized San Diego's reception for the U.S. Navy's Great White Fleet.³⁴ In 1909 he built the Ocean Beach School, planted trees and put a road through Collier Park in Point Loma,³⁵ and donated decomposed granite to surface the driveways and sidewalks of El Cajon Avenue.³⁶ In 1910 he organized the Aero Club of San Diego.³⁷ In 1911 he persuaded Glenn H. Curtiss to bring his aviation company to North Island,³⁸ and helped secure passage of legislation from the State of California giving San Diego title to its tidelands from National City to Point Loma.³⁹ In 1912 he organized the Order of Panama.⁴⁰ In 1913 he thought up the idea of using tiles from the ruins of the Spanish Presidio to make the cross in Presidio Park.⁴¹

A meeting of the Chamber of Commerce, July 27, 1908, to investigate charges that the law firm of Crane and Andrews had tarnished the reputation of San Diego businesses by declaring that 17 of them were on the verge of bankruptcy erupted into a fight between Collier and Andrews. Taking Collier's side, the Chamber ruled that Crane and Andrews had been "disloyal to the people of San Diego."⁴²

Collier was not so successful, August 3, 1908, when at a political meeting in the Garrick Theater, he rose from the audience to protest an unscheduled speech by Captain John L. Sehon. The audience yelled "Sit down!" and "Go back to the woods!" Collier's quick-tempered response did not win him friends:

"Yell, yell! Yell, I want you dogs to yell every time I snap my fingers. Yell and bark. Every time I snap my fingers, I want you dogs to bark."⁴³

After taking his first flight in a Curtiss biplane flown by Charles Hamilton, Collier told a reporter:

"When I die, I hope they'll have biplanes for the funeral, for I know I'll come back to life for a second time then and be able to wave goodbye to the bunch just before the clods begin to fall."⁴⁴

The most important civic posts Collier held in San Diego were those of Director-General of the Panama-California Exposition from 1909 to 1912, and President of the Exposition from 1912 to 1914.⁴⁵ He gave \$500,000 of his own money to the Exposition, served without pay, and paid his own travel expenses on promotional trips to Washington, D.C., South America and Europe.⁴⁶ Consequently, his real estate business foundered, he was burdened by debts, and he was compelled to resign the presidency, March 5, 1914.⁴⁷

Collier chose the central mesa of Balboa Park as the site for the Exposition,⁴⁸ selected California Mission as the architectural style,⁴⁹ approved hiring Bertram Goodhue as consulting architect,⁵⁰ and decided on the Indian background of the Southwest as the Exposition's main cultural theme.⁵¹ He was a founder of the San Diego Museum (today Museum of Man), a manager of the American School of Social Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and a friend of Dr. Edgar L. Hewett, director of the School of American Archaeology and first director of the San Diego Museum.⁵²

Collier's role in enlisting U.S. Congressional support of the San Diego Exposition did much to advertise San Diego, but he failed to get government recognition because of opposition from San Francisco, which was organizing an exposition of its own. San Franciscans had acquired the support of conservatives in the Republican party.⁵³ When the conservatives succeeded in defeating the San Diego Exposition's bid for recognition, their triumph caused Collier to join the Progressive wing of the party.⁵⁴

William Kettner, a San Diego Democrat, who was elected to Congress in November 1912, managed in his mild, un-Collier-like way, to secure the recognition Collier had sought. Since President Woodrow Wilson and Kettner belonged to the same party, the recognition went through speedily, without the intrigues that had beset Collier.⁵⁵

To show they approved of Collier's efforts for the Exposition, hundreds of San Diegans attended a reception in his honor, held at the Spreckels Theater, April 22, 1914. As Judge Ernest Riall presented him with a loving cup, his admirers shouted "What's the matter with Collier?", followed by the response, "He's all right!"⁵⁶

Collier told his enthusiastic audience that he had accepted the presidency of the Pacific Southwest Railway. The railway would bring iron ore and coal from Colorado to San Diego, from which place ships would carry it around the world. He concluded:

I feel I am again spending my energy for that town whose virtue, when it is once in a man's blood, makes of him a San Diegan in this life and in the life to come.⁵⁷

Finding the Pacific Southwest Railway to be more talk than substance, Collier bought back ownership of D. C. Collier and Co. in May 1914.⁵⁸ Still struggling with financial problems, he resumed his law practice in March 1915.⁵⁹ Panama-California

International Exposition directors appointed him a public relations commissioner in February 1916.⁶⁰

As a trustee of the defunct Wonderland Park in Ocean Beach, Collier, in April 1917, approved the transfer of ownership of animals in cages at the northeast perimeter of the Exposition to the newly-formed San Diego Zoo. The Zoo paid \$500 for the animals and the trustees waived a \$2,000 balance.⁶¹

Also in April, Collier ran for City Council, but, owing to his championship of George W. Marston for mayor against popular Louis J. Wilde, he was rejected in the April 3 election.⁶² By claiming Wilde would refuse to serve, if he—Collier—were elected, he made himself look ridiculous.⁶³

After the United States entered World War I, Collier and Kettner offered Exposition buildings, land at Linda Vista, the site of Wonderland Park, and Collier Park to the U.S. Army⁶⁴ and then to the U.S. Navy⁶⁵ for the duration of the war. The Navy accepted the Exposition buildings as a training center. After sparring between Los Angeles and San Diego, in which Collier did not figure, the U.S. Army chose Linda Vista Mesa, consisting of 12,720 acres, as the site for Camp Kearny.⁶⁶

Taking advantage of contacts he had made while promoting the Pacific Southwest Railway, Collier left San Diego in 1918 to seek employment in Chicago. San Diego newspapers did not report the nature of his Chicago activities. His reputation as an Exposition promoter and Republican being known in Washington, D.C., President Warren G. Harding appointed Collier as a representative to the 1922 Brazilian Centennial Exposition in Rio de Janeiro. At the end of the Fair, the Brazilian government declared Collier and his wife guests of the nation and arranged for them to tour the principal states of the country.⁶⁷

Collier returned to San Diego in 1924 and resumed selling real estate in a "drive-in" office at 1050 Ninth Street. His friends greeted him with a banquet at the San Diego Hotel. When his turn to speak came, Collier praised the cooperation that had made the Panama-California Exposition possible.⁶⁸

Collier sold properties at Loma Portal, Wonderland Beach, Point Loma Heights, and Sunshine Gardens.⁶⁹ His firm was responsible for the demolition of Wonderland Casino⁷⁰ and the construction of beach houses, cottages, and apartment houses from Voltaire Street to Point Loma Avenue.⁷¹

Accepting the Director-Generalship of the United States Sesquicentennial to be held at Philadelphia in 1926 at a salary of \$25,000 a year, Collier left San Diego in February 1925.⁷² He resigned, October 29, 1925, after Philadelphia Mayor Kendrick cut the number of exhibit buildings from seven to two and an auditorium.⁷³ The Republic of Panama employed Collier as an exposition consultant in 1925-26.⁷⁴ Nothing concrete resulted from this enterprise.

Information is not available regarding Collier's activities during the next six years. He visited or lived at times in Philadelphia, Chicago and New York City. In 1929 he was admitted to the Illinois bar.⁷⁵ He may have acted as an intermediary in the sale of goods from Brazil. In 1930 he contributed toward developing the theme of the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago.⁷⁶

In the fall of 1930, Collier returned to San Diego and resumed the practice of law.⁷⁷ He lived on Park Boulevard, but visited a retreat near Ramona, possibly his former home at Ballena, whenever he could. Carl Heilbron, his former partner, owned the retreat. Much of Collier's practice came from clients in the Ramona area.⁷⁸

In June 1932, Collier came in fifth in an election for the Board of Supervisors. As a person who had spent most of his life selling real estate, he, not surprisingly, favored lowering property taxes.⁷⁹

Resilient by nature, a defeat could not keep Collier down for long. In 1931 he declared that San Diego could make its waterfront as attractive as Balboa Park, if it held a Centennial Exposition there.⁸⁰ Most people in San Diego ignored the suggestion.

After Frank Drugan secured promises of federal and industrial support and of exhibits from Chicago's Century of Progress Exposition, power brokers in San Diego endorsed Drugan's plan. They chose Balboa Park as the site for the California Pacific International Exposition, to be held in 1935-36. No one thought to ask Collier for his opinions.⁸¹

On November 13, 1934, Collier died of a heart attack at Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla.⁸² He was 63 years old. Funeral services were held November 15, at the Bradley-Woolman funeral parlor, under the auspices of the San Diego Lodge No. 35, of the Order of Masons. He was buried in the Masonic plot at Mount Hope cemetery in San Diego.⁸³

In 1936 Mrs. Collier moved back East to live with her daughter. After she died, April 28, 1968, her body was taken to San Diego for interment alongside her husband's at Mount Hope Cemetery.⁸⁴

Collier's death prevented him from getting permission of the U.S. Congress to pursue a suit to win title from the U.S. Government for land at Fort Rosecrans. He claimed the government did not have clear title. If his suit had been successful, Collier would have received 75 percent of the profits from the sale of 85 estates. Judge George Thompson, in the Superior Court, July 27, 1937, canceled Collier's filing fee and discharged him as administrator of the estates as he was no longer living.⁸⁵ The suit was another of Collier's bold schemes. If he had won, he would again have become rich. As it turned out, he was close to bankruptcy when he died. His widow was left with \$2,000 in uncollected fees for legal services and a debt of over \$42,000 in claims against her husband's estate.⁸⁶

On October 11, 1936, in the second year of the California-Pacific International Exposition, a plaque designed by San Diego sculptor Frederick W. Schweigardt, honoring Collier, was erected on the west wall of the California Quadrangle in Balboa Park.⁸⁷ It shows Collier in profile signing his name, the same image used in innumerable real estate ads. Beneath the salutation, "Yours for California," and Collier's signature are the words:

COLONEL DAVID CHARLES COLLIER

A man of vision - a dynamic leader - a developer and builder

A great and lovable character

The creative genius of the Panama-California Exposition of 1915

An inspiration to the citizens of today.⁸⁸

Archaeologist and director of the San Diego Museum from 1916 to 1929, Dr. Edgar L. Hewett paid tribute to Collier in a 1935 issue of *El Palacio*. His words are quoted because they convey a view of Collier as an exponent of "rugged individualism," with all the ruthlessness the name implies:

One can only think of Colonel Collier as tremendously alive. He was the most dynamic personality I have ever known; a product of human evolution well described by the term "rugged individualism." Every believer in humanity must hope and pray that the type may survive and increase.⁸⁹

Collier had many friends and enemies in San Diego. He was a blustery, extroverted person with an ebullient manner that recalled Theodore Roosevelt's overflowing personality. Recognizing in him a kindred spirit, Roosevelt offered Collier the post of colonel in a regiment he was trying to form for duty during World War I.⁹⁰

Collier's bustling mannerisms, his strapping figure, his leonine mane of hair, and the flamboyant clothes he wore were on a colossal scale. After returning from a visit to Brazil in 1912, he appeared at public meetings booted and spurred, with a striped poncho made of alpaca hair, a wide belt with knife attached, and an enormous sombrero on his head.⁹¹ Small wonder that a New York reporter asked, "Is he real or is this just theatrical makeup for a Westerner?"⁹²

When asked why for 40 years he had worn a five-gallon Stetson hat, a No. 18 turndown collar, and a Windsor tie, he replied:

"Oh, I just like the combination. It makes me easy to find in a crowd. Few other men would wear such a getup."⁹³

A product of the crass, commercial times Sinclair Lewis satirized in *Babbitt*, Collier was always ready with a glad-hand and a cheerful slogan. Even maverick editor of the *San Diego Herald*, Abraham Sauer, fell temporarily under Collier's spell, June 22, 1911, when he asked:

"If it takes a steamer fifteen minutes to get up steam, how long will it take Collier? The answer is one second exactly, for that is what Colonel Collier did upon arrival. He exuded steam, injected it into the backbones of the dallying, shilly-shallying, doubting Thomases until, despite themselves and their knockings, backslidings and evasions, they cheered his words to the echo."⁹⁴

Collier's popularity among members of Congress from both parties and among businessmen from South America was stupendous. All these up-and-coming people recognized that he was one of them . . . a gregarious, confident man with schemes for making money and advancing society that dazzled the mind. Yet the hype was done with humor, with a pat on the back, and a wink of the eye.

Collier was vulnerable as a politician. San Diegans saw the no-holds barred, brass-knuckle side of his character in his feuds with mayors John L. Sehon,⁹⁵ Grant Conard,⁹⁶ and Louis J. Wilde.⁹⁷ After his disillusionment with the Republican Old Guard in 1912, he aligned himself with George W. Marston, G. Aubrey Davidson, Joseph W. Sefton, Jr., and Carl Heilbron.⁹⁸ A front man for Marston in the 1917 mayoral election, he tried to bring Marston's aloof character within touch of the masses. He failed, not only because his attacks on his opponents were outlandish, but also because, in dirt-slinging warfare, his opponents (men like Sehon and Wilde) were as opportunistic and bombastic as he.

There was personal side to Collier that was deeper and quieter than his boisterous public mask. We can speculate why Collier deferred to men whom he considered superior. Did he, like Babbitt, know there was more to life than camaraderie and boastful promises? Did he feel that by contact with polished and professional people, like George W. Marston and Dr. Edgar L. Hewett, he could somehow smooth out his own crudities and imperfections? We will never know.

Perhaps the numerous organizations Collier belonged to can give us an indication of his expansive, forward-looking character. These were the Masons, Shriners, Elks, Archaeological Institute of America, National Geographic Society, California Historical Society, Sons of Colorado Pioneers, San Diego Chamber of Commerce, Ramona Chamber of Commerce, Order of the Liberty Bell, Chicago Athletic Club, San Diego Yacht Club, San Diego Rowing Club, Sojourners of Pen and Pencil, Philadelphia Boosters' Club, Brazilera de Imprensa, and Instituto Geographical e historico de Bahia, Brazil.⁹⁹

Colonel David Charles Collier: an inspiration to the citizens of today.

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