

## **Bruce's Beach Text for Interpretive Panel**

### **Mrs. Willa Bruce – An Entrepreneur Pursuing the California Dream in Manhattan Beach**

Mrs. Willa Ann Bruce (b. 1862, Missouri), and her husband, Charles Aaron Bruce (b. 1860, District of Columbia) were American pioneers. In February 1912, Mrs. Bruce purchased waterfront property in the barely developed and unincorporated town of Manhattan Beach. A visionary entrepreneur, Willa pursued her California dream of opening a resort where racially diverse Americans could enjoy the ocean. During the Jim Crow era of racial segregation, this dream was pitted against the barrier of exclusionary real estate practices. Mrs. Bruce proclaimed to the *Los Angeles Times* in 1912: "Whenever we have tried to buy land for a beach resort we have been refused. But I own this land and I'm going to keep it."

### **The Bruce's Beach 'Grand Affair'**

When the resort opened in the summer of 1912, it was one of the few places where Black beachgoers could access a bath house and other amenities. By the early 1920s, thousands of Black families visited, and the Bruce family had constructed a new frame building that included lodging, a dance hall, and a restaurant. They also expanded their property ownership by purchasing an adjacent lot. Other Black families were inspired to invest and develop property near Bruce's resort, creating a diverse summer community. However, Bruce's Beach was destined to represent more than a seaside escape for visitors to swim, relax, and socialize.

### **Racist Harassment at Bruce's Beach**

Harassment from some white neighbors began immediately after the resort opened. "No Trespassing" signs were posted on a strip of beach directly in front of the Bruces' resort owned by Manhattan Beach subdivider George Peck. This forced guests to walk a half mile to reach the water. As the popularity of the resort soared, harassment of residents and guests intensified. A mattress was set aflame on the Bruce's property. Air was let out of tires of visitor's cars parked in vicinity of the resort.

### **The Condemnation**

Influenced by vocal white resident concern of an African American "invasion", city officials deployed tactics to control beachfront access and economic development. In 1924, the Manhattan Beach Board of Trustees passed a series of ordinances aimed to thwart the Bruces' business. As the Bruce's and their guests remained undeterred, city officials voted in favor of eminent domain to condemn the Bruce's property to build a park. This action would compel the Bruce's to give up their property. On July 4, 1924, the *California Eagle* reported: "It seems that the Ku Klux Klan is operating unrestrictedly along the waterfront [in the South Bay]". The article noted that Klan pamphlets were distributed to Black fishermen in Redondo. The *Eagle* article also asserted "it is understood that some Ku Klux who recently moved in the vicinity object to the presence of Colored folk...influenced the servants of the people (who reside over the city council) and ...condemned Bruce Beach."

### **The True Motive of Eminent Domain**

In a letter to the *Manhattan Beach News* published February 4, 1927, the Bruce family wrote: "...the attempt to make a park out of these two blocks was a direct slap at us because we were not born white people." In 1943, Frank Daugherty, one of the original Manhattan Beach subdividers and a member of the City's Board of Trustees during this time, admitted as much in a personal essay for the *Manhattan Beach News*. In his statement, he proclaimed: "We had to acquire these two blocks to solve the problem [of Black people purchasing property here]. We voted to condemn these two blocks and make a city park there. Our attorneys advised the members of the council never to admit the real purpose in establishing the park."

### **The Legacy of Bruce's Beach**

The Bruce family surrendered their land on May 16, 1927, receiving a fraction of what they requested for their property and thriving business. Racist actions and a growing Ku Klux Klan presence were evident in Manhattan Beach following the family's departure. The exclusionary practices that persisted along the Manhattan Beach shoreline sparked peaceful protests supported by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP). Although the Bruce family abandoned their California dream in Manhattan Beach, memories of the diverse leisure community endure, inspiring a legacy of social justice.