

Parade History

1907 Tournament of Lights

2014 Newport Beach Christmas Boat Parade

The Newport Beach Christmas Boat Parade began at the turn of the century. John Scarpa, an obscure Italian gondolier, and Joseph Beek, developer of Beacon Bay, the Balboa Ferry Line and the principal force in the early development of Balboa Island, arrived in the Newport Harbor area. These two men established what was then called the Tournament of Lights, an event that would continue for the next ten decades.

In 1907, Scarpa began the tradition of lighting boats by taking visitors from Pasadena across the bay in a gondola decorated with Japanese lanterns. A year later, on July 4, 1908, the first lighted boat parade took place. Scarpa, along with his fellow small boat operators, created a loosely organized affair consisting of nine vessels. The parade, illuminated by Japanese lanterns, was led by Scarpa's gondola followed by eight canoes. Thus, Scarpa is credited with creating the first lighted boat parade.

In 1913 the parade, then called the Illuminated Water Parade, was held again. The boats were judged and prizes for the best decorated and best lighted vessels were given. Another larger parade followed in 1914 and for the Fourth of July, 1915, an even larger turnout was experienced. Historians say as many as 40 launches, canoes and rowboats participated. The spectacular event featured a derelict boat hull set afire, followed by a dramatic "rescue" of passengers, a "Battle of Fireworks" between two launches and the explosion of two underwater mines. The relatively dangerous celebration was witnessed by thousands of visitors.

Unfortunately this was to be the last parade for the next five years. World War I erupted and a severe depression hit Newport Harbor. It was not until 1919 that Beek, who at the time was operating ferryboats like the Fat Ferry, came to rescue the lighted boat parade. Most of the early participants were children who decorated floats that were towed around the harbor. The floats were constructed in Beek's garage and many were patterned after those seen in the Pasadena Tournament of Roses Parade. With the exception of several years during World War II, the Tournament of Lights was held every summer from 1919 through 1949. However, in 1949 the city fathers believed the parade was drawing too many visitors to the harbor and creating heavy crowding and traffic congestion. The Tournament of Lights fell out of favor.

Fortunately, back in 1946, Newport Beach City employees had outfitted a barge during the holiday season and installed a lighted Christmas tree. The barge was towed around the harbor while its passengers sang Christmas carols to residents on shore.

In later years, the Beek family came to the front again, providing one of their ferry boats for the floating Christmas tree celebration. Gradually, each year, other lighted boats fell in line behind the city employees' floating tree. Soon the Tournament of Lights came back as a Christmas celebration.

Today the Tournament of Lights, now called the Newport Beach Christmas Boat Parade, features as many as 100 boats. The parade is proudly presented by Simple Green, the City of Newport Beach, Meguiar's and Visit Newport Beach, Inc. The event is hosted by the Commodores Club of the Newport Beach Chamber of Commerce and has been hailed as "one of the top ten holiday happenings in the nation" by the New York Times and was recently designated as "The #2 Location in the Country for Holiday Lights" by Yahoo Travel.

With 2014's theme of "Deck the Hulls with Bows of Jolly," the parade was the premier event of the holiday season in Southern California. 2014 marked the 106th year of the parade. We hope you enjoyed the parade and Ring of Lights, and remind you to plan on joining us once again in December, 2015 to enjoy the splendor!