

Unearthing history at a Santa Monica Beach

Volunteers picking up debris in Santa Monica will get a chance to learn about the Inkwell, a beach where African Americans gathered for decades in the Jim Crow era.

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By Martha Groves

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For much of the early to mid-20th century, a stretch of Santa Monica sand was the preferred hangout for African American beachgoers who didn't feel welcomed on other beaches. Some called it the Inkwell.

Aside from a discreet plaque that has marked the site since 2008, little physical evidence remains to remind residents and visitors of local African Americans' connection to the sea during a racially fraught period in the nation's history.

On Saturday, environmentalists, historians and black surfers, swimmers and divers hope to raise collective awareness by combining a coastal cleanup with education about the role of African Americans in Santa Monica's history.

Members of the Los Angeles Black Underwater Explorers plan a dive under the Santa Monica Pier to look for debris. Santa Monica Conservancy docents will tell volunteers about Nick Gabaldon, a Santa Monica High School student who in 1940 taught himself how to surf at the Inkwell and became the first documented surfer of African American and Latino descent. Rick Blocker, 58, a retired school-teacher who learned to surf in Malibu nearly half a century ago, plans to be on hand to pick up plastic bottles and cigarette butts.

A member of the Black Surfing Assn., Blocker has spent years seeking to disabuse others of stereotypes



Photo Credit: Irfan Khan, Los Angeles Times

Alison Rose Jefferson has studied Inkwell beach and will participate in a panel discussion Sunday in Santa Monica.

about African Americans and water sports.

"For most of my life, people of all ethnicities told me that blacks don't surf," Blocker said. "As I continued to surf and get better, I still ran into that.... They were telling me either that what I had been doing all these years wasn't surfing or that I wasn't black."

The broad expanse of sparkling sand between Bay and Bicknell streets, just south of the Casa del Mar luxury hotel, bears no resemblance to the wilder coast with rocks and dunes that existed in the 1920s through the 1950s. There

African American couples could canoodle in peace.

"It was self-segregated," said Alison Rose Jefferson, a historian who has studied the leisure activities of African Americans. "This is where people felt safe, where they wouldn't be harassed and could meet other African Americans to enjoy the beach."

By the early 20th century, African American families, many seeking to escape the worst of Jim Crow segregation in the South, had settled in Santa Monica. One magnet was Phillips Chapel, a Christian Methodist Episcopal Church established in 1908 at

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4th and Bay streets in the city's Ocean Park neighborhood.

The church and the "sepia community" that grew around it, Jefferson said, helped draw African Americans, who traveled by Red Car and automobile to sunbathe and picnic. African Americans lived among Chinese, Japanese, old Californios and new Mexican immigrants, Eastern European Jews and whites.

Discrimination remained a huge hurdle. Segregation prevailed at many hotels, restaurants, theaters and beaches. In 1922, homeowners formed the Santa Monica Bay Protective League to drive blacks out. "Settlement of Negroes Is Opposed," read a headline in the Los Angeles Times.

Black investors tried unsuccessfully to buy a site near the Inkwells to start a beach club. Later, the property was sold to white developers and became the location of Club Casa del Mar, now the hotel. (Thanks to the hotel's floodlights, Inkwells patrons could play volleyball after dark and take late-night dips in the surf.)

In 2008, Santa Monica installed a plaque on Ocean Front Walk describing the Inkwells as "a place of celebration and pain."

Meredith McCarthy, Heal the Bay's programs director, said she quickly embraced the idea of adding a historic component to the nonprofit organization's 23rd annual cleanup after learning about the Inkwells from Jefferson. They enlisted the National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People and African American churches. Hundreds of people volunteered in advance to clean the former Inkwells site, one of 60 in the region that will be tidied up as part of the coastal cleanup.

On Sunday, the Santa Monica Public Library will screen "White Wash," a 2011 documentary that explores the complexity of race in America through the history of African Americans and water culture. A panel discussion will follow, with Jefferson, a UC Santa Barbara doctoral student; Blocker, founder of BlackSurfing.com and Ted Woods, the documentary director.

For information about the coastal cleanup, visit Heal the Bay's website, healththebay.org. For details about the documentary screening, see the library website, smpl.org.



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Photo Credit: L.A. Public Library

Taking in the sun in 1934 at Santa Monica's Inkwells beach are Arthur Lewis and Verna Williams. The beach has been called a place of celebration and pain.