

Los Angeles Times

CIRCULATION:
1,021,121 DAILY 1,391,076 SUNDAY

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 22, 1997
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South Bay

Manhattan Beach Uses Park Benches to Showcase Public Art Project

The **Manhattan Beach** Cultural Arts Program has installed a temporary public art piece in Parque Culiacan that incorporates six benches that have each been decorated with photo montages and text from author Alan Lightman's book "Einstein's Dreams."

The "Invisible Clock," designed by Carolyn Speranza, examines in image and text the nature of passing time. Lightman's 1993 book describes time and timing being altered and the theme of his book is weaved through the three pairs of benches along with text from the book.

One pair of benches incorporates pictures of the beach, the sea, sunbathers from the '20s and '50s and fishing circa 1918. Manhattan Beach native Helen Sinsabaugh is depicted in two pictures of yesterday; in one, he is wading in the water with her friends and in the other she is holding a fish.

Another pair explores what



LORI SHEPLER / Los Angeles Times

One of the six benches decorated with photo montages and text.

would happen if people had to live their lives in one day. The benches depict baby hands and aging hands to show a timeline along with the axis of the earth as it spins.

The third pair of benches looks

at time becoming more constricted and organized with layers of photographic images. Grass and flowers form the backdrop for this piece of artwork while an Egyptian shadow board and digital clock

float in the foreground.

Speranza, a Pittsburgh-based artist, said she applied to Manhattan Beach for public artworks grant and decided on the bench project because she was enamored by the park, which overlooks the Pacific Ocean at the top of a hill.

"Benches are about time," said Speranza, who has created many public artworks and has held several art shows around the nation. "People sit, wait, meditate, read a book . . . in a nutshell, they pass time."

Manhattan Beach Cultural Arts manager Howard Spector said that the benches that make up the "Invisible Clock" exhibit replaced six dilapidated benches and will be on display through June. He said the artwork, which is one of 22 temporary exhibits that have been created in the city since 1989, may become permanent because it also serves a practical function.

THE BEACH REPORTER

The Community Newspaper of Manhattan Beach, Hermosa Beach and Redondo Beach

APRIL 24, 1997

374-4040

VOLUME 21 NUMBER 11



Manhattan Beach native depicted on park bench

Manhattan Beach native Helen Sinsabaugh, who celebrated her 89th birthday last week, is depicted in two pictures on a park bench in Culiacan Park. In one of the pictures, Sinsabaugh is wading in the water with her friends and in the other, she is holding a fish. The park bench — one of six that have been installed by the Cultural Arts Program — is currently serving as a temporary public art piece in the park.

(photo by Chris Miller)

HELEN SINSABAUGH

You would have a hard time finding someone who got to Manhattan Beach before Helen Sinsabaugh. You know somebody who came in the 1920s, do you? Big deal. Helen came from her home state of Illinois in 1912 when she was four years old.

Next time you are down by Parque Culiacan, sit for a while on one of the benches just west of Highland Avenue. Be sure to study the montages that artist Carolyn Speranza created for them in 1996. Helen appears prominently in two. In one you will find her at age 13 with four friends. They are demurely lifting the hem of their skirts in a vain effort to keep them dry as the waves pound toward the shore. In the other she is a 10-year old, holding a fish fresh-caught from the ocean, an ocean from which Helen has seldom strayed during her 89 years.

A product of local schools, she can remember trying to enroll in the first grade before Manhattan even had a school building. "They met in the old Congregational Church on 9th and Highland," she recalls. Helen was not permitted to attend because she was too young. Now it is the Manhattan Beach Community Church and is located on Peck Avenue. Helen and her family joined the church when they first came to town, and she remains a member today. Her 84-year affiliation is unmatched in the history of the congregation, and she has held the title of deconess emeritus since 1937.

When Center Street School was built in 1913, her sisters, Emily and Marion, were among its first students. Where was Center Street School? you ask. Where was Center Street? Like churches, school and street names can change. What was once Center Street is now Manhattan Beach Blvd., and the K-8 school that was the town's first has been replaced by the K-6 Pacific School. When it was time for Helen and the group she started with in the first grade to go to high school they had to go all the way to Redondo Union, for there was no Mira Costa in those days. She was an honor graduate in 1926 and went on to become one of the first students at the then new Westwood campus of UCLA.

Upon graduation she sought employment as a teacher. Due to the depression that followed the 1929 stock market crash teaching jobs along with all others were difficult to come by. But in 1932 she returned to Center Street School - - - as a teacher. Five years later she was offered a job by Eileen Hammond, the principal of RUHS, Mrs. Hammond had been vice principal and dean of girls during Helen's high school years. As a journalism teacher she achieved national acclaim as she built the school's student paper, the High Tide, into one of America's finest.

Her career was interrupted by a three-year hitch in the Navy during WW II, where she rose from the enlisted ranks to that of full lieutenant. She returned to RUHS in 1946, where she again guided the fortunes of the High Tide until her retirement in 1968.

Ironically, this honored Manhattan pioneer has made her home in Hermosa Beach since 1953. Ironic in one sense, but not really inappropriate, for she is a true daughter of the South Bay. Many of her peers are no longer living, but she is still rich in friends. Former students numbering in the several hundreds keep in touch with their teacher, who is also their friend. In this dual role she is as quick to correct a grammatical or spelling error today as she was when they sat in her classroom.

Speranza, the artist, speaks of time and its unique function in the human mind. She quotes from Alan Lightman's 1993 novel, *Einstein's Dreams*, "In this world time is like a flow of water."

That metaphor works for Helen Sinsabaugh. She has seen much of time's stream flow past her gaze, and those of us who have been borne on that stream can feel privileged.