



# THE COMMITTEE OF ONE HUNDRED

Working to preserve Balboa Park's historic architecture, gardens and public spaces since 1967.

Spring 2013 Newsletter

## The "Electriquette" is Back!

One of the true highlights of San Diego's 1915-1916 Panama-California Exposition was the "Electriquette," a motorized wicker cart available for rent to Exposition visitors. Previous world's fairs had rented push-chairs to elderly and disabled visitors so that they could cover the vast expanses to see more exhibits. Wicker wheelchairs for two were available at the larger 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. At the San Diego fair the Electriquette would become a memorable attraction in itself, combining entertainment, personal transportation, and a focal point for thousands of photographs.

Officials hoped to create San Diego's version of Piazza San Marco (St. Mark's Square) in Venice or London's



Mike Kelly with grandchildren Charlotte and James DiMase and pigeons in the prototype for the new Electriquette on display at the San Diego History Center. *Photo by Jennifer DiMase*

Trafalgar Square, importing pigeons to attract tourists, who often called them "doves of peace." Exposition visitors could purchase food for the pigeons from vendors in the Plaza de Panama and then pose for a professional photographer while seated in an Electriquette, with pigeons eating from their hands and even perched on their heads (most adults and many of the children wore hats). The professional photographs were then printed as postcards to be mailed to friends and relatives or saved in scrapbooks. They also provided an unintended but outstanding record of the visitors and the attire of the day.



The Panama-California Exposition Digital Archive is collecting images of fairgoers, scrapbooks, and souvenirs to document the human experience of the Exposition. The public is invited to submit photos and scrapbooks from the 1915-1916 San Diego Exposition to be scanned or copied for inclusion in the Digital Archive. These will be made available to the public on our website for the 2015 Centennial of the Exposition and will be preserved in perpetuity. With the owners' permission we will include the names of individuals, dates, and known other details.

Many thanks to Sandy Shapery for resurrecting the Electriquette. His prototype is on display in the lobby of the San Diego History Center. Grab a hat, hold cute little stuffed pigeons, and have someone take your photo "with the pigeons" as photographers did on the Plaza de Panama in 1915.

Michael Kelly  
president@c100.org



## The Balboa Park “Electriquette” Return of a San Diego Legend

By David Marshall, AIA



Exposition visitors parade in Electriquettes across Cabrillo Bridge. David Marshall Collection

Most San Diegans have seen those wicker chairs on wheels in photographs from old Balboa Park — even if they never knew what they were called. “Oh yeah,” they exclaim, “Those look like fun.” And they’d be right, at least according to a 1915 ad for the Electriquette, “A child can drive it. It’s great fun.”

So where did these little electric-powered cars come from? As San Diegans prepared for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition a retired attorney named Clyde H. Osborn, who owned a local Fritchie electric car dealership, had the idea of motorizing traditional wicker push chairs for use at the Expo. The Electriquette Manufacturing Company was soon established in Los Angeles and 100-200 individually numbered cars were custom built and ready for Exposition visitors in 1915. A newspaper article referred to the cars as “Electric Chairs,” but thankfully that nickname never stuck.

The Electriquettes operated at a top speed of 3½ miles per hour, or walking speed, so as not to interfere with the many pedestrians on the Expo grounds. They were “the only passenger conveyance permitted” at the Exposition. Even though the \$1 per hour rental fee was high for the time, the Electriquettes proved to be very popular. Tens of thousands of people from around the world came to the Expo and rode around in one

of Osborn's Electriquettes. Many visitors paid to simply pose in a parked Electriquette “with the pigeons” in the Plaza de Panama.

So what happened to all of those quaint little cars? No one can say for certain, but some stories have them being trucked up to Santa Monica or other West Coast seaside destinations. None are known to have survived.

In 2011, nearly 100 years after they were first unveiled, attorney and entrepreneur Sandor Shapery was persuaded by Committee of One Hundred stalwarts Michael Kelly and Welton Jones to resurrect the Electriquettes in time for the 2015 centennial celebration in Balboa Park. Being a history buff and car enthusiast, Sandy leapt into the fray to make this dream a reality — probably not realizing the many challenges that lay ahead.

Once the author learned of Sandy’s ambitious plan I offered the discounted services of my architectural firm, Heritage Architecture & Planning, to create accurate scale drawings of the Electriquette. I figured that if someone was going to go to all the trouble of bringing back the Electriquette it should at least be historically accurate.

Nothing remained of the cars except descriptions and old photos. After a careful analysis of historic images Heritage Architecture was able to create accurate plans of the little cars. At 3½ feet wide and 5½ feet long the Electriquettes were larger than a motorized scooter, but smaller than a golf cart. They could seat two adults and one child. Steering was accomplished with an L-shaped wand on the driver’s side. After taking the design as far as we could Sandy forwarded the plans to various manufacturers to create a working prototype.

He needed expertise in low-tech rattan weaving as well as high-tech motors and controls.

A company in China fabricated the wicker body and proposed to build a complete prototype with a steel frame and a rather crude drive system. It was clear to Sandy that the motors and controls were too complex for the Chinese company, so he contacted his friend Brad Hunter, president of Active Precision. Brad holds an advanced degree in Electronics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and was a collaborator on Sandy’s other passion, a low-cost breakthrough maglev train system.

Brad, who also discounted his fee, took a crack at engineering the guts and brains of the Electriquette. He built a more sophisticated version, but without access to the Chinese made wicker body. Once the Chinese prototype arrived from China it was shipped to Cambridge, Mass., where the two prototypes were combined into one superior vehicle and then shipped back to San Diego. Sandy then became the first San Diegan to drive an Electriquette since 1916.

To everyone’s relief, the four-wheeled car looked great and the unique steering wand was a breeze to use. The first fully functioning Electriquette prototype cost over \$20,000 to create and was unveiled this past November at the San Diego History Center where it remains on display.

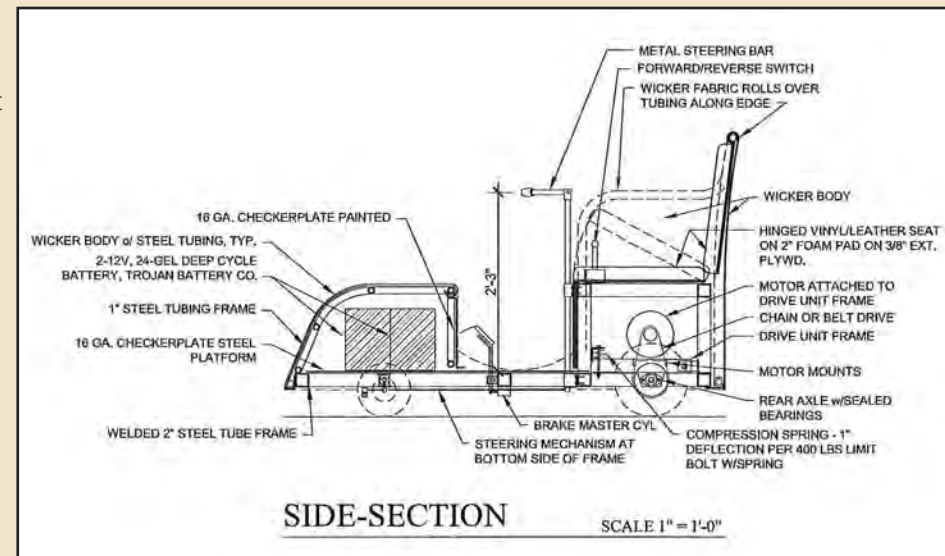
As the first prototype body was made in China without the benefit of onsite super-

vision, not every detail is historically correct, but it’s a close approximation of the final product. Those small design details will be corrected in the final version.

The current task at hand is to obtain approvals from the 2015 Centennial Committee as well as acquire a concession lease from the city to rent up to 100 Electriquettes for 2015 and beyond. Details, such as rentals fees and nighttime storage, have yet to be fully resolved, but nearly everyone who has heard of this plan wants it to happen. Plus they can’t wait to

tool around Balboa Park in an Electriquette. This long-gone San Diego legend is poised for a comeback.

For further information, contact Sandor Shapery: [info@shaperyenterprises.com](mailto:info@shaperyenterprises.com)



Design for prototype of the new Electriquette. David Marshall.



The real, easy, classy, comfortable, luxurious way to see and thoroughly enjoy the Exposition is in an Osborn Electriquette, which supplants the antiquated push-chair and jinrikisha. The only passenger conveyance permitted on the grounds.

The simplicity of operation renders experience unnecessary. A child can drive it. It’s great fun.

Stations at each entrance gate, all prominent points, and “Neptune’s Wonderland” on the “Isthmus.”

EXPOSITION MOTOR CHAIR COMPANY,  
San Diego Exposition

Ad for Osborn Electriquette. David Marshall Collection





H.L. Benbough, his wife Verna, son H.L., Jr., and daughter Pat pose with pigeons in Electricquette at the Panama-California Exposition. Benbough was proprietor of Benbough Furniture. *Submitted to the Panama-California Exposition Digital Archive by Pat Benbough Small.*

## Save the Date

Annual Luncheon Meeting

11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.

Friday, May 31, 2013

**Guest Speaker:** Jean Stern, Executive Director,

The Irvine Museum

**Topic:** "Robert Henri and the 1915 San Diego Exposition"

**Bertram Goodhue Award:** San Diego Chamber of Commerce

**Gertrude Gilbert Award:** Ranger Kim Duclo

Further details and reservation form:

[www.C100.org](http://www.C100.org)

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