

# In Search of the Vintage Tiles of Catalina Island:

## An Easter Egg Hunt in a Sea of Easter Eggs

By R. D. Smith

The weather on the Pacific this afternoon is crisp but sunny. I can see Catalina Island in the distance. As the saltwater mist from the bow of the boat hits my face, I scan the waters for the elusive creatures which are the symbol of Catalina: flying fish. What astonishment I felt the first time I watched the ocean waters boil before a school of silvery fish leaped into the air spreading their long pectoral fins as they glided over the swells and foam of the open sea.

I return to the “Commodore’s Lounge” on the [Catalina Express](#). I had



Catalina Casino

purchased a ticket for the lounge because I am very particular where I sit on boats and planes. With that ticket you board first—I know what steers feel like loaded onto a cattle boat—and you get a drink

and snacks for the crossing. I order their signature Bloody Mary with spicy pickled green beans.

Now I sit back and relax for the rest of my twenty-two mile boat ride. “What?” You say. “I thought it was ‘*26 Miles Across the Sea*’ just like the song says.” Catalina Island is actually twenty-two miles from “overtown,” the name Islanders call the mainland. The Islanders exclaim that Bruce Belland, of *The Four Preps*, wrote “twenty-six” because he thought it sounded better. Well...he was only fifteen when he wrote it.

For decades, as passengers disembark onto the island they are greeted by a manifold array of colorful tiles decorating the storefronts, walkways, planters, rooftops, and fountains. Inspired by the “Span-

ish Revival” movement, the island’s public spaces have been decorated with these works of art since the late 1920’s.

While over the years there have been many contemporary tiles and reproductions of the vintage tiles produced and installed, it is the vintage tiles that I have made it my quest to locate amongst all the tiles on the island. These vintage tiles were manufactured on the island using the clay quarried from the deposits found on the island.

In 1919, William Wrigley Jr. purchased the island. Wrigley made it his life’s ambition to create a romantic “refuge...for the rich and the poor” on Catalina Island, and transform Avalon into “...a monument to the early beginnings of California.” To accomplish this endeavor, Wrigley brought over his “expert” contractor D. M. Renton who was given that mission.

The persistent story in island folklore is that one day Wrigley and Renton got their vehicle stuck in some mud. This fortuitous discovery of clay, the malady of their traveling mishap, was a boon for the island’s much needed construction material. Starting in 1927, bricks, roof tiles, and patio tiles were produced at the factory built on Pebbly Beach, just east of Lover’s Cove. Today, with the factory long gone, colorful shards can still be found if one scours the shore.

The factory soon evolved into producing decorative tiles and pottery, which were produced until 1937 when the trademark of the Catalina Clay Products Company was sold to the Gladding, McBean & Co.—none of the island’s tile designs were produce after that.

Johnny Sampson, the Chief Curator at the [Catalina Museum for Art & History](#), has put me in touch with Sandra Putnam. She was born and raised on the island and has amassed a wealth of knowledge about the Catalina tiles and pottery since she fell

in love with them as a young child. She has graciously volunteered to take me on an excursion of the island to locate the vintage tiles I am seeking to find.

Sandy waits for me on the dock with her golf cart—golf carts are to Avalon as Vespas are to Rome, and feel just as perilous with all of the first-time tourist drivers. She has offered me lodgings at

one of her rentals, which was built and owned by Tom Mix, the first cowboy of the big screen. It is a cozy place and has a great view of the bay. Her residence across the street is home to a large collection of

vintage Catalina pottery, and her luscious garden is extensively built with vintage bricks and tiles.

I awake the next morning and wander through the peaceful streets of Avalon seeking an eatery open for breakfast. I stumble onto a plaza, just a few blocks inland from the bay, where I get hit with the smells of sizzling pork products and coffee—I have arrived. At [Pete's Plaza Cafe](#) I order my sausage and egg sandwich and walk over to a beautiful fountain of vintage tiles. This fountain was once located at the bird park and moved here to the plaza.

I meet Sandy, my camera gear in tow, and she drives us to our first stop. The [Catalina Casino](#) was built at Sugarloaf Point, now named Casino Point, and opened on Memorial Day, 1929. It is a stunning structure of Moorish architecture, and a magnificent exhibit of art deco murals and interior design. As the largest circular ballroom in the world, it was host to numerous headliners during the big band era.

Many have been incorrectly led to believe by the name that there was gambling at this location. There was not; casino comes from the Italian word which means

a building for social gatherings. We are here to see the numerous patio pavers and paver inserts at the entrance of the Casino.

The majority of the motifs incorporated in the pavers, and the later decorative tiles, were influenced by the Celtic, Spanish, and Moorish designs of antiquity. The large terracotta pavers are interspersed with decorative pavers and inserts created with the Depressed-Glazed method.

I learn firsthand how these tiles are made by making them with Robin Cassidy, ceramicist and founder of [Silver Canyon Pottery](#). Robin makes replica tiles, which are used in the restoration of structures on the island, from molds of the vintage tiles. Clay is pressed into a mold which leaves the design as a recessed cavity where glazes are applied with a syringe, leaving the background of the design unglazed. This allows for a slip-resistant surface and protects the glaze from excessive wear.

We now take a long winding drive through the hillside neighborhoods to view the many homes which use decorative tiles. In addition to the Depressed-Glazed tiles, there are two other types of decorative tiles used: Relief singled glazed tiles, and Cuerda Seca tiles, meaning “dry cords” in Spanish, developed in Islamic Spain around the tenth century. The Cuerda Seca method separates the applied glazes from



Plaza fountain



Chimes Tower

blending together during the final firing. This is achieved by first outlining the design with resist lines made of mineral oxides and oil or wax.

We finish our hillside tour with a stop at the Chimes Tower. Its roof is made

of solid color tiles, which were replaced with replicas some time back, and the fun vintage “Backgammon” tiles, which were also used to make tables.

Sandy and I take a respite from our golf cart expedition to have lunch.



We decide on [\*The Lobster Trap\*](#), which Sandy tells me is a frequent destination for the Islanders. It is a casual setting created from nautical wood and decor with numerous large trophy fish decorating

the walls. There is an elevated dining area which is built from the stern of a fishing boat where we take our seats.

Even though she is a regular at this eatery, she is surprised that I order something not on the menu, which she didn't even know existed. It's a secret creation they will serve you if asked: lobster mac 'n' cheese.

When the huge bowl of my gooey meal is placed in front of me, I am flabbergasted at the size they told me was a “child's portion.” There is enough of this



Crescent Avenue Storfront

comfort food to feed three people. It must have a full cup and a half of lobster heaped on top the pasta with freshly grilled crostini to assist with the shoveling. I ask our waitress Mara how large the

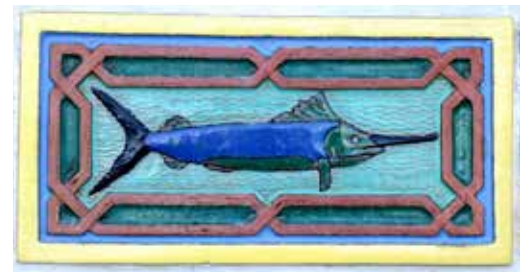
indigenous children are on Catalina. It's delicious.

After lunch, as I explore the oceanfront promenade of Avalon for the jewels of my quest, I am confronted with a cacophony of college students fresh off a cruise ship. Unlike myself, their spring break adventure goal is to bathe their liv-

ers with the ambrosia of youth; the names of their libations do not matter as long as they are strong, and Dionysus keeps them flowing.

With my gray hair, casual islander attire, and the clumsy but confident way I hold my camera, I must appear to be the logical person to stop and ask about the island and its points of interest. I become their island cicerone as I narrate the story of the Catalina tiles. We stand at a storefront on Crescent Avenue fully adorned with vintage tiles. The coeds are astounded that they were just walking by all of this fascinating history. The rare “Marlin” tile is an exciting find.

The Marlin tile uses a unique combination of Relief, Cuerda Seca, and Cuenca methods. Developed around the late sixteenth century in Seville, Spain,



the Cuenca method is a molding technique which creates ridges of clay for the outline of the design with hollows to separate the applied glazes; cuenca means “basin” in Spanish. I tell them how Renton used the decorative tiles as part of the architectural design. He had a successful vision to create a colorful experience.

The affair with color that one experiences on the island not only stimulates the eyes, but can inspire the soul. Catalina's tranquil natural environment, and its reminiscent European-harbor town style, has provided a setting for reinvigorating many artists and writers. At a loggerhead with Paramount Studios, Robert Towne sought refuge on Catalina Island to make his story of *China Town* come to life on the page.

Using mineral oxides from the island, the first glaze colors combined the natural environment of the island and the

influence of the Spanish Revival movement. Glazed tiles were produced in the factory for the first time in September, 1928. Renton brought Mr. Birchfield and Harold Johnson from the Pacific Clay Products Company; both known as “glaze men.” It is believed they created these first distinct glaze colors of Catalina pottery.

Earlier, Sandy had searched her collection and laid out twelve shards of the original Catalina Pottery colors. The first six colors used by the Pebbly Beach factory were: Catalina Blue, Descanso Green, Toyon Red, Mandarin Yellow, Pearly White, and Obsidian Black.



Scarlet Macaw mural

Toyon Red receives its name from the Toyon plant on the island, which produces bright red berries. The indigenous Tongva people, who once inhabited the island, called the plant “ashwet.” They used the leaves for tea and partook of the berries fresh, roasted,

or made into cider. The name is a Spanish alteration of the indigenous Ohlone people’s word “totcon.” The Ohlone inhabited the mainland during that period.

Sandy and I once again enter the cockpit of her golf cart to finish our intrepid journey; she the pilot and I her copilot...sans controls. I have come to realize that Sandy has developed a fearless proclivity to play “chicken” with any Humvee that may cross her path.

We continue at a blistering nine miles per hour uphill on Avalon Canyon Road with our final destination to be the Wrigley Memorial. Our first stop is the old Bird Park, which is now a school. William Wrigley Jr. and his wife Ada were avid bird lovers. The park was a sanctuary to nearly 8,000 birds, which comprised hundreds of species, rare and exotic, and was free to the public. We are here for the most coveted tiles of collectors and tile hunters: the bird murals.

These bird murals, using the Cuerda Seca method, were made up of six tiles installed together to create one

illustration. Roger “Bud” Upton was a local artist well known for his paintings and ceramic designs. It is said that he was responsible for designing the bird murals. The murals include a Green Macaw, two yellow Parakeets, Crested Crane, two Scarlet Macaws, and a “Fantasy Bird,” which depicts a generic crane in an Oriental floral motif. The most famous piece is a pair of Toucans, which became the symbol for the bird park.

No tour of the island’s tiles is complete without a stop at the country club and a visit to the men’s bathroom—not just because of a long day’s tour, but to also view the vintage tiled sink. Sandy did not enter that domain with me since she had already seen the men’s bathroom, being that her family members were once the plumbing contractors on the island. We also viewed the exquisite drinking fountain. Sandy told me how her very athletic grandmother Lou would play golf with the famous golfer Bobby Jones when he came to the island.

We then pass by the botanical gardens, which is a valuable walk along meandering paths surrounded by landscaped indigenous vegetation. We finally arrive at the William Wrigley Jr. Memorial. This magnificent structure was built using mostly material quarried on the island. Its position on the hill gives one a splendid view of Avalon Bay. This is the fitting end to our tile excursion since the memorial



Snake Head—Crescent Avenue

has the most extensive use of Catalina tile on the island.

I rise the next day and stroll down Crescent Avenue one last time to photograph the “Serpent Wall.” Otis Shepard

was the designer of the Serpent Wall, and also designed Crescent Avenue using Catalina tile seconds to decorate the sea wall and planters. It is made from vintage bricks for its teeth, and tiles are inserted as scales along this serpentine wall, and goes on for blocks ending with a spiraled tail. I also get a few more shots of the tile decorated planters and the “Sombrero” fountain before grabbing a cappuccino and a macaroon dipped in dark chocolate.

Though I am a connoisseur of dark chocolate, it should be a felony to put it on one of life’s perfectly moist and luscious epicurean delights—oh to be king. After grumbling to myself about my defiled macaroon, I look up and see the tile mural of a swordfish jumping out of the water. These four tiles were installed on the second story of the old steamer pier.

Sandy and I are meeting Chuck Liddell for lunch at *El Galleon*, a restau-

rant which overlooks the bay and has been serving its island fare for over fifty-five years. El Galleon is a relaxed place to eat but you would feel comfortable if you wanted to dress a bit dapper. It has an obvious nautical theme with the obligatory large trophy fish mounted on the walls. Truly a seafood aficionado, I am pleased by the simple gastronomic plate placed before me: fresh local swordfish blackened and cooked perfectly, not too dry, and some broccoli and fried garlic-mashed potatoes.

Chuck is the island’s historian and a wealth of information of everything Catalina. Like Sandy, Chuck was born on the island and in his mid-seventies. Both of their grandfathers, plumbing and building contractors, arrived on the island in 1919 with Wrigley Jr. to build the destination of Wrigley’s imagination. Sandy and Chuck are affectionately called the Catalina Britannica and the Google of Catalina.

Chuck gave tours of the island tiles and the Casino a few years past. He was the impetus for convincing John Gabriel Beckman, Hollywood art director and muralist for the Grauman’s Chinese Theater and the Catalina Island Casino, to convert his Mermaid mural into tiles, which was painted at the entrance of the Casino in 1929; it was always Wrigley’s original plan. The connection with famous visitors and their knowledge of the evolution of the island deserves more than a mere lunch meeting.

I watch several pods of dolphins racing in the wake of our boat on my return to Long Beach. I am already contemplating my next journey to the island, and several other books and articles to write, which are the mental genesis of this memorable trip. I hope the coin I tossed into the Sombrero Fountain has the similar effect of throwing a coin into Rome’s Trevi Fountain.



Relief



Cuerda Seca



Depressed-Glazed



Cuerda Seca four tile Swordfish mural



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# Catalina Island Clay Pottery Colors



Catalina Blue



Descanso Green



Toyon Red



Mandarin Yellow



Monterey Brown



Seafoam



Turquoise



Pearly White



Powder Blue



Colonial Yellow



Teal



Coral Island