

HISTORICAL HAIGHT THEN AND NOW

by Jay Bail

"I loved the neighborhood," he says, throwing his arms out. Why? I ask. What was there in the twenties and thirties...? He laughs, shrugs. "I don't know. It must've suited my personality..."

Cy Downie moved to the Haight almost 55 years ago. First it was to Pierce, then Divisadero, Stanyan and finally now Grove Street. He's 75 years old, moves quickly, and has a better memory than his interviewer.

Before World War II, in those quiet, settled days of family neighborhoods, there were four five-and-dime stores on Haight Street ("Woolworth's, Sprouse-Reitz (that's R-e-i-t-z), Ben Franklin, and..."—he pauses, disturbed that after three decades he cannot remember the fourth), four hardware stores, plenty of pharmacies, two bakeries, and one creamery ("Marjory's, right where Roberts Hardware is now"). Where Superba Market is, there was a theatre—"look up over the entrance and you'll see the two carved faces of comedy and tragedy"). At Haight and Stanyan there were two hotels, a stable for horses, a trolley barn, a saloon ("the owner played varsity football for St. Mary's in Oakland," he smiles). Yes, of course he remembers when the stable burned down. "Forty or fifty horses must've been killed. It was terrible."

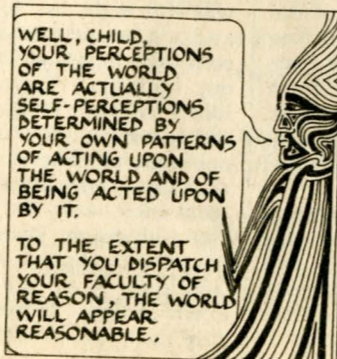
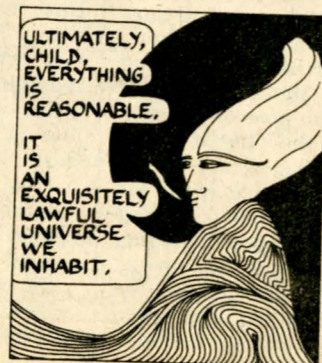
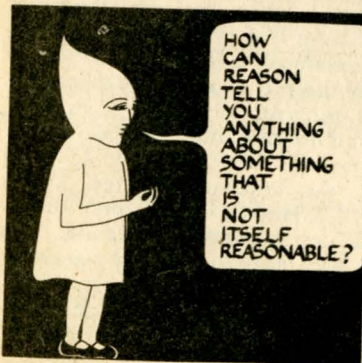
He points up to the top of the hill where USF is, and says that years ago that was all the huge Masonic cemetery—"St. Ignatius was there then—it was put up right after the fire"). And he talks humorously about a friend who declared his Pall Mall bartender as a dependent.



Cy worked on streetcars, steam railroads, went into the retail business, and sold jewelry on Haight Street right after the First World War. He carried mail for almost twenty years here, from the old post office at Haight and Masonic. In those conscientious years, he delivered mail three times a day. He has a supple memory for businesses and addresses, knows the names of shops and people, and delights in the old Haight.

Shops opened at eight sharp in the morning then. They were willing to do more for you—either hunt out small items or order what was not in stock. Now, he says, you stand around and no one helps—(he excepts Mendel, Kent Story and Bob Smith). In those years, it was a lot quieter—no

MOMENTS



By FINN

1300 HAIGHT



1364 HAIGHT ST.
SAN FRANCISCO
552-2862



automobiles; only streetcars. Christmas saw decorations and lights up and down Haight Street, and there was a genuine pleasure in festivities. "As a matter of fact, what they had was plenty of parades. Any damned old excuse they could use was good enough for a parade. There was even a festival celebrating Portola, whatever the hell he was supposed to do." Not much was happening in Golden Gate Park. "Things move in cycles, you see. Up to the First World War, the park was very fashionable. Then it sort of slowed down, and now plenty is happening in it again."

The reason he liked the Haight? "Because it was so quiet. And because you could buy absolutely anything. You had extensive shopping then that you don't have today. There was one five year period when I don't think I went downtown once. And people let you alone here. They minded their own business."

"What they had was plenty of parades. Any damned old excuse they could use was good enough for a parade. There was even a festival..."

Indeed, the tempo was slower, and the people a good deal more formal. It was the thirties, a time of Depression and manners, hope and hard working propriety. "Nowadays, you might be walking down a street and an absolute stranger says hello and you say hello and you'll probably never see him again. But it wasn't done in those days. I lived on Stanyan Street over ten years, and I knew only two people—one because my kid played with his, and the other because I worked with him in the post office. People didn't make pals of everybody like they do today."

That gets us into the difference between the two eras. Cy is a wide-eyed, curious man with rows and rows of books on delightfully musty-smelling shelves. "More power to the kids," he says happily of the people he sees in the Haight today. And he launches out into an intense concern for ecology and redevelopment. "A lot of stuff around here—things I love—wouldn't be here if those kids hadn't hollered." People in high places today don't know the difference between liberty and license, he says. "But everything operates according to the laws of nature. They talk about being free as a bird. But a bird isn't free. It obeys laws of nature and balance." And Cy speaks about ecological balance, with crisp examples and a vital appreciation of the part the young people have played in getting this message heard. "Those kids are just great who fought off those bastards," he continues, pointing out a young man who

continued next page

California Surplus no. 2

meeting the community needs
1393 HAIGHT STREET

861-0404

Open: Sun. 11 a.m.- 5 p.m.
Mon-Sat. 9:30 a.m.- 6 p.m.



**FAMILY AFFAIR
Hair Styling Shop**
1369 Haight near Masonic
861-9688 for appointment

Geometric & Precision Hair Design



continued from previous page

battled a medical hospital's expansion plans right up to the Supreme Court—and won. There is admiration in Cy's bright, fierce eyes for the angry young, and sarcastic comments for those who, as he says, line their pockets. "They're predicting another earthquake. But what do we need with another one? We've got redevelopment."

He is angry in a friendly way, and vibrantly independent in his political views. "I'm a Catholic, but I didn't think the Last Supper was Alioto and the Board of Supervisors. . . I'll tell you what it takes to be a Supervisor. You have to learn to hide behind a corkscrew without your head showing."

One can picture Cy Downie in the 20's and 30's; independent, sharp, laughing a great deal and very friendly. He would be accepted instantly in the Haight. It was a mixed section then, as now, with people of every nationality and religion. "Just ordinary working stiffs here," he says, referring to unpretentiousness. It was a family neighborhood, peaceful and safe. If you were a child you went down to the candy store and bought a penny licorice stick. You knew people and felt comfortable running through the streets. If you were a young man you lived in a reasonably priced house and raised a family. It was, as Cy says, "what you would call a conservative neighborhood." But it was also alive, and had a character all its own, and people shared values and portions of kindness.

What would you tell young people today about the old Haight? How was it different? I ask.

But it is not all that simple. Cy has lived in Sacramento for the last three years and swears, "Country living isn't what

it's cracked up to be. All you can do is sit and look out the window." Now he is moving, once again, back to the Haight. He loves it, he says. The old and the new. It was different then, he laughs. But it's different now.

"I just liked it," he says wonderingly. "And I still do." □

AFFORDABLE ART GALLERY
 1790 Haight St.
 10:30-6 Mon-Sat
 Toni Davis
 387-2435

DALJEET'S

Fine Boutique and Imported Gift Items

hours 11-6

1744 HAIGHT STREET
 SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94117

752-5610