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Neighborhoods: The Sunset

by
Pauline Scholten

The San Francisco Fog Tomatoes aren't ripe yet, so Dave Fish makes his dinner salad out of fresh picked 47th Avenue zucchini, onions, peas and red leaf lettuce.

"We can have a meal out of our backyard every night for months," boasts Dave, a muscular 32-year-old carpenter who has lived in the Sunset-Parkside District since age one.

To Dave, his thriving garden one block from Ocean Beach is not only a source of pride and fresh vegetables, but an example of the good life available in a district that some San Franciscans have poked fun of for more than 100 years.

Before the turn of the century, when the area consisted of rolling sand dunes, they labeled it The Fog Belt and The Great Sand Waste. Following its development as a residential neighborhood in the 1920s and '30s, the City's wits said its rows of stuccoed homes looked like they were all cut out with the same cookie cutter. Today's critics find its solidly middle class atmosphere as grey as the fog that persistently hangs over the area.

But for Dave and most of the more than 100,000 people who live in the Sunset-Parkside, its quiet, well-ordered streets represent a haven from inner-city hassles, a place they can come home to where they can safely raise their kids.

"It's the last bastion of real San Franciscans, people who were born here or who moved here more than 10 years ago," says Supervisor Quentin Kopp, who represents the southern half of the area.

Bastion or not, the district in recent years has been faced with a number of urban problems that some residents feel are changing the character of their neighborhoods. The Sunset-Parkside is losing its family-oriented atmosphere, they charge; it is becoming more impersonal, and in some areas it is starting to look shabby.

"These real estate guys come by all the time and knock on my door," says Dave. "They want to tear the house down and build a flat."

But Dave has no plans to sell. He likes his tiny, three-room, 1906 cottage, and he likes his life in the Sunset. He runs everyday in nearby Golden Gate Park, he surfs at Ocean Beach, and he putters in his garden.

"Sometimes it's like a piece of heaven," says Dave.

Early San Franciscans had another name for the area: The Outlands. Until the late 1800s, this western portion of the City consisted of sand dunes, rolling in unbroken waves from the beach to Twin Peaks. The wide open spaces attracted a few hardy squatters, some dairy farmers and two gunpowder factories.

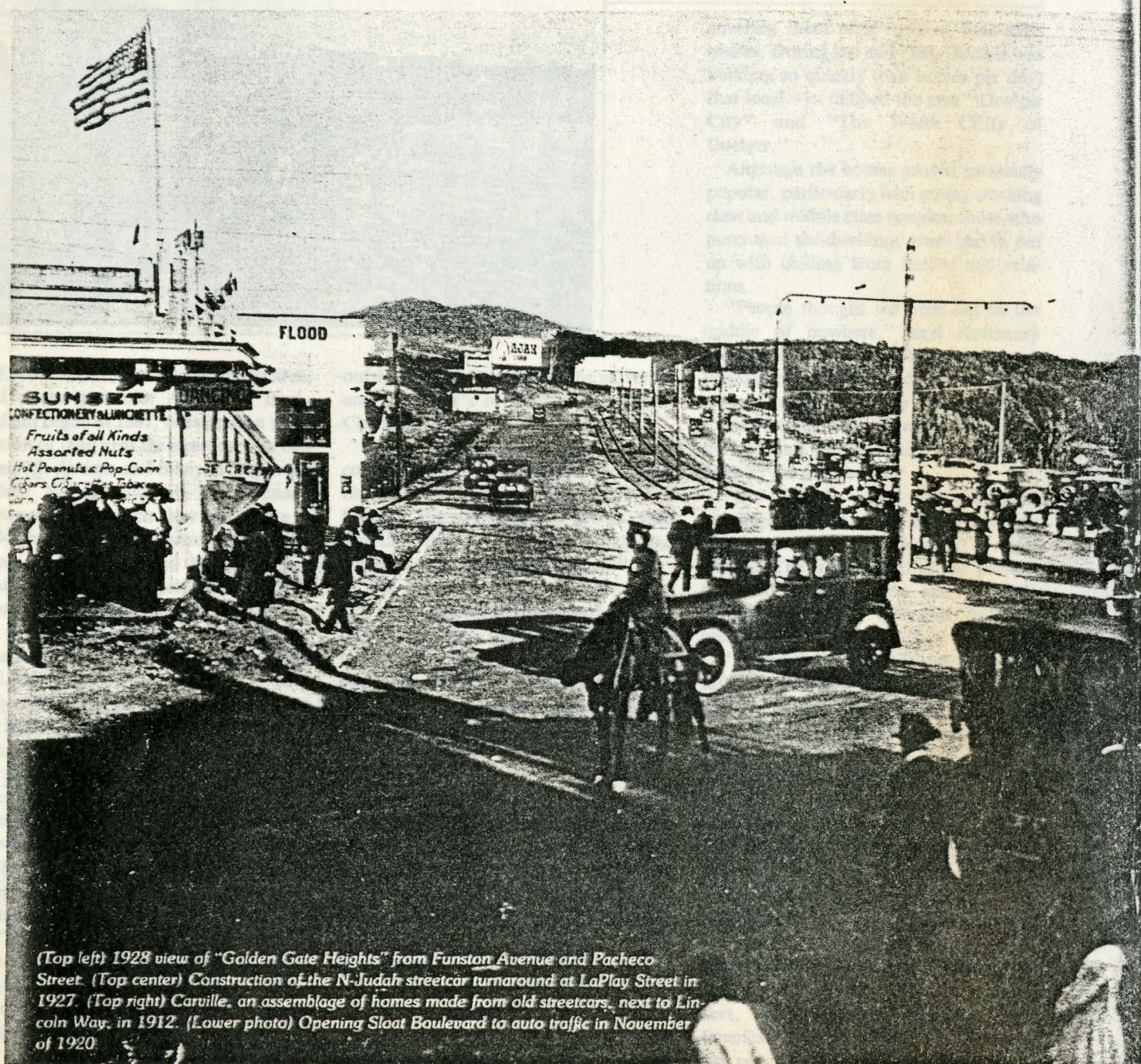
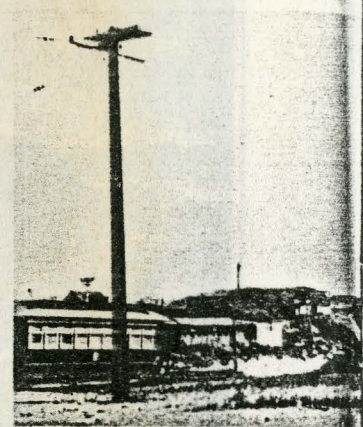
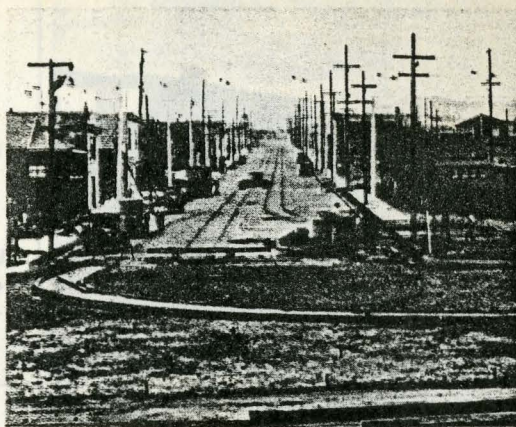
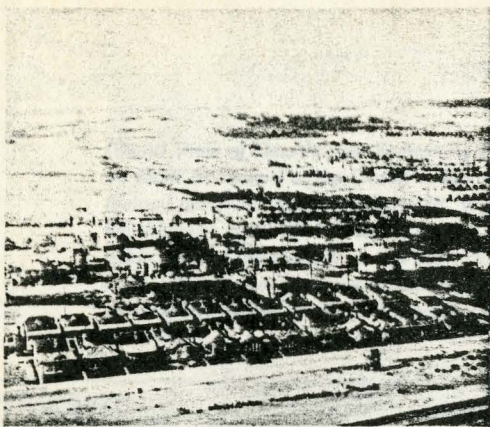
Although they didn't want to live in The Great Sand Waste, many of the City's residents used it for recreational purposes. "Race tracks and roadhouses built near the beach or Lake Merced were the major attractions in the district before the turn of the century," says Tom Harrison, a Lowell High School civics teacher.

"You can still see some of the buildings that were hot spots," he says. For example, there's the Trocadero Inn, an early-day gambling casino that today is better known as Stern Grove's recreation hall. Another remnant of the area's past sporting life is the oval-shaped Urbano Drive, which follows the course of one of the area's old race tracks.

Harrison became an unofficial historian of the Sunset-Parkside in 1970, when students in his community civics course decided to research the area around their school as a term project. Their efforts resulted in a 90-minute multimedia slide show called Sand Lot City, which Harrison has shown two or three times a year since then, usually to audiences in the Sunset.

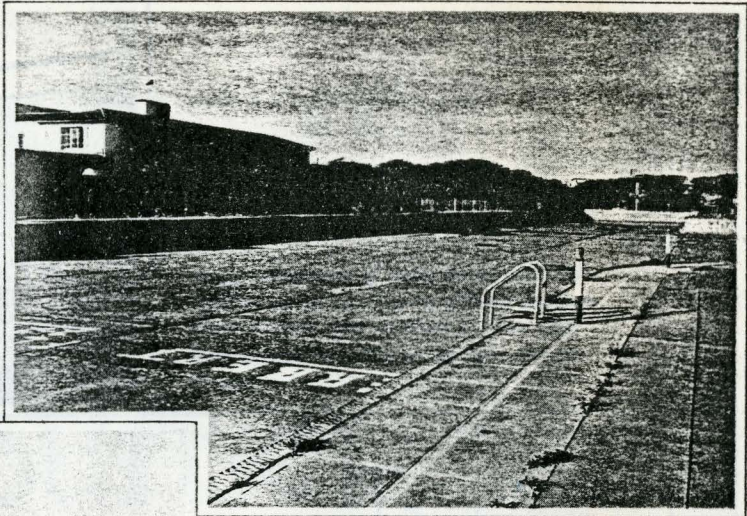
"People seem more interested in the area's history these days," he says. "I think they're trying to find their identity in an urban setting."

One of the show's segments discusses the development of Golden Gate Park, which first began in 1870. The popularity of the growing park, as well as Ocean Beach, prompted construction in 1879 of the area's first street car line, which ran from Haight Street along what is today known as Lincoln Way.



(Top left) 1928 view of "Golden Gate Heights" from Funston Avenue and Pacheco Street. (Top center) Construction of the N-Judah streetcar turnaround at LaPlay Street in 1927. (Top right) Carville, an assemblage of homes made from old streetcars, next to Lincoln Way, in 1912. (Lower photo) Opening Sloat Boulevard to auto traffic in November of 1920.

(Right) View of Fleishhacker Swimming Pool on Sloat Boulevard at the Ocean today and (below) filled with swimmers in 1928. When Fleishhacker was built, it was the largest public pool in the country. It has been closed since 1971 and will be paved over this fall to make room for the Southwest Sewage Treatment Plant.



Encouraged by the interest in the area, real estate speculator Arelius E. Buckingham began in 1887, developing a small section of land near the street car line between 5th Avenue and Stanyan Street. He called his subdivision The Sunset. However, growth was slow and as late as 1894 there were only twenty houses between Stanyan Street and the beach. Four years later, business picked up slightly when the University of California Medical School moved from its downtown location to a new site at Parnassus and 2nd Avenue.

In 1905, William Crocker opened the Parkside Realty Company and developed home sites just west of 21st Avenue and Taraval Street. The subdivision caught on after the 1906 fire and earthquake, when homeless San Franciscans suddenly found Crocker's Parkside dwellings attractive.

Despite the real estate activity on its fringes, however, the district's heart remained untouched.

"There was nothing there but sand dunes," recalls Mary Rice, a wiry 87-year-old who lived at 4th and Parnassus in 1914. She describes the neighborhood she lived in as "not very big, just a few houses and stores." Its two

outstanding structures were the university and St. Anne's of the Sunset Catholic Church.

Out by the beach there was a cluster of cottages, and "some people had taken old streetcars and turned them into homes," she remembered. "It was called Carville. But between the beach and where I lived, there wasn't much."

This began to change in 1917, when real estate speculators pressured the City into constructing the Twin Peaks streetcar tunnel. The transportation link between the downtown area and the Parkside triggered a sand dunes land rush that was further encouraged by the construction of the Judah streetcar tunnel eight years later.

It was during the '20s and '30s that the residential Sunset-Parkside emerged from the sand. Small construction companies filled the area between 7th Avenue and Sunset Boulevard with stuccoed single-family homes, priced at an affordable \$5,000 to \$6,000, some complete with furnishings.

Henry Doelger, Ray Galli and the Gellert Brothers became the top names in the Sunset building boom, buying up entire blocks of undeveloped property and

covering them with rows of look-alike homes. During the mid-'30s, Doelger was building so quickly (two homes per day) that local wits dubbed the area "Doelger City" and "The White Cliffs of Doelger."

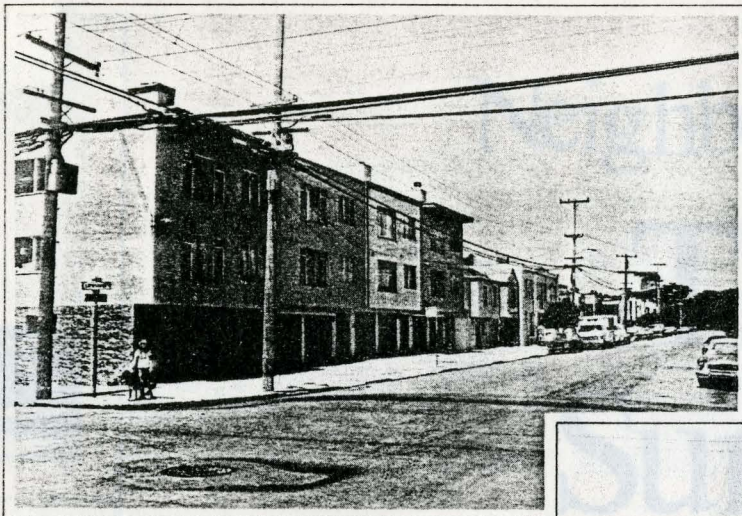
Although the homes proved extremely popular, particularly with young working class and middle class couples, those who purchased the dwellings often had to put up with chiding from friends and relations.

"People thought we were out in the middle of nowhere," says Rosemary Morris, Rice's niece, who moved as a youngster to Vicente and 16th when her parents bought a home there in 1933. "They told us that we were moving into the fog and that it would take half an hour to get downtown."

"But life in the Sunset wasn't as dismal as predicted," she says. "Since everybody was new on the block, it was easy to make friends. The women had bridge parties, the men played poker, and the kids played together in the sand, building castles and digging caves."

"I liked the fact that it was clean and safe," says Mary Rice, who moved in with her niece's family in 1941. "People stood in their driveways and chatted. It was very friendly."

Although the Sunset-Parkside is surrounded by superb outdoor recreational areas such as Golden Gate Park, Ocean Beach and Stern Grove, nighttime or indoor recreation facilities are minimal. Culturally, the area's outstanding contributions are the city's only ice skating rink and Polly Ann's, a Noriega Street ice cream parlor that boasts 277 outrageous flavors. (The ice cream selection includes Beet, Sweet Corn, Vegetable and American Beauty, which is made with rose petals.)



(Left) Intersection of Irving Street and 48th Avenue today and (below) without development in 1912. The southern Golden Gate Park windmill is visible in the right on both photos.



Most of the neighborhood night spots provide strictly booze, no entertainment or atmosphere. A handful of these drinking establishments, such as Finian's Rainbow, The Sea Gull and the Golden Grommet, have bands on Friday and Saturday, but only The Lost Weekend on Taraval provides week-round entertainment. The bar, decorated in a 1920s art deco style, is presided over by Rodney, a jovial organist who plays endless requests for old standards, show tunes, and Frank Sinatra songs.

One entertainment feature the district does provide in surprising abundance is restaurants. Located mostly in the small shopping areas along Judah, Irving, Noriega and Taraval Streets, the dining spots run an ethnic gamut that includes French, Mexican, Vietnamese, Russian, Middle Eastern, Chinese, Thai and Italian. The restaurants tend to be small, reasonably priced, and, like the district, family oriented.

However, some residents are worried that this "family" atmosphere is gradually disappearing.

"The Sunset seems more isolated now," says Carol Braun, a 19-year-old college student who grew up in the district. "A lot of people have moved out. People aren't as close neighbors as they used to be." She also feels that parts of the district, particularly below Sunset Boulevard, are starting to deteriorate: "The houses aren't being kept up; the front lawns aren't being tended."

In recent years the area has faced a number of urban challenges:

- Soaring real estate costs have driven the price of homes out of the range of some family buyers and into the hands of speculators. A number of these single-family homes have become rental properties while others have been torn down and

replaced by small, boxlike apartment houses and condominiums, bringing a more rapidly-changing population into the area.

- Discouraged by the quality of the city's public schools, 50 per cent of the district's parents now send their children to private schools, a trend which has resulted in the closure of six of the area's public schools in the last seven years.

The total effect of these changes and others has been to make some of the area's "low-density, family oriented neighborhoods into impersonal, transient, high density areas," according to a study conducted in the mid-70s by the Sunset-Parkside Education and Action Committee (SPEAK).

"We are definitely concerned," says Evelyn Wilson, a SPEAK member who has lived in the district for over 50 years. The group, along with other local organizations such as the Inner Sunset Action Committee and the District Eleven Neighborhood Association, has resisted what it considers to be over-development of the area, and is fighting to preserve "the family concept of the neighborhood."

"I think we have a real reason to be concerned," says Supervisor John Bar-

dis, who represents the northern half of the Sunset-Parkside. "Housing is the biggest crisis in the City right now."

He feels that the area represents "a tremendous resource: 35,000 family homes. We should give it special protection and make sure that zoning is enforced." To those who doubt whether the repetitious little stuccoed dwellings are worth preserving, Bardis responds: "They can look down their noses at it, but what are we building today that is better? Crackerbox apartment houses?"

Supervisor Kopp is also quick to defend his district's homes. "The contractors who built those houses were performing a public service," he says. "The homes were put up inexpensively, and people could afford them. We can't say that about what's being built today."

He's optimistic about the district's future, calling the Sunset "the most stable area in the City."

Stable or changing, the district will always have at least one defender.

"People tell me that it's foggy all the time or that there's nothing going on here, but I like it," says Dave Fish, chomping into a home grown carrot. "I think maybe it's inbred in me." ●