

Real Estate EXPRESS Neighborhood FOCUS The Sunset District

"The Sunset" is San Francisco's large part of the Outer Sunset, from Sloat westernmost neighborhood. It's bounded Boulevard on the south roughly to Quintara, by 7th Avenue on the east, by Sloat on the north. It began around 1905, when Boulevard on the South, by Lincoln Way William Crocker established Parkside and Golden Gate Park on the north, and by Realty and opened tracts for home building the immense expanse of the Pacific Ocean around Stern grove, making Parkside the on the west — the biggest front yard on earth. oldest large subdivision in the City. **Pine Lake Park** is a small subdivision of the Parkside district bounded by Sloat Boulevard, Vicente Street, and 24th and 37th Avenues. It was developed by the Parkside Realty Company in 1927. **Forest Hill** is on the east side of the Inner Sunset; between Laguna Honda and Dewey Boulevards on the east and by 16th Avenue on the west. The Forest Hill subdivision began in 1912 under the promotion of Newell & Murdock. **Golden Gate Heights** is a choice neighborhood of 115 acres on the northwest corner of Forest Hill; it's bounded by Kirkham and Quintara Streets and 10th to 17th Avenues and has magnificent views of the Ocean and Golden Gate.

The Outer Sunset is the part of San Francisco "where fog and water meet." On summer mornings, fog rolls in here earlier than anywhere else in the City — and retreats last in the evening.

The splendid boulevard alongside the ocean's beach is known as "the Great Highway." Originally built in 1927-1929, it underwent a lengthy reconstruction during the late 1980s. The two-mile stretch on the west side of the Sunset District, between Golden Gate Park and the Zoo, has a new \$12-million sea wall and promenade. Thirteen acres of the oceanfront have been planted with native grasses and wildflowers to keep the sand dunes in place and prevent them from drifting over the highway and closing it to traffic, as has happened numerous times in the past. Trails and pleasant paths are in place for bikers, joggers and horseback riders — or for those walkers just out for a simple stroll and a smell of sea air.

A community known as Carville enjoyed a short existence around the turn of the century. It came to life in the graveyard of worn-out streetcars and cable cars that had been abandoned along 47th and 48th Avenues from Lincoln to Noriega. Homeless squatters remodeled the cars into family residences.

The main north-south thoroughfares through the Sunset are 7th Avenue (and its extensions as Laguna Honda, Dewey and Clarendon Streets) on the east, Sunset Boulevard on the west, and Nineteenth Avenue in the approximate center. Nineteenth Avenue is the heavily traveled link between the coastal highway and the 280 freeway to the south and the Golden Gate Bridge and Marin to the north. Irving, Judah and Taraval are the main commercial cross streets through the district.

To residents of the Sunset, the most satisfying thing about Nineteenth Avenue is that it's NOT a freeway. That it's not a freeway is the result of a "Freeway Revolt" in the late 1950s. Led by local residents, the revolt challenged the City's plan for handling the large postwar increase in traffic. Those whose homes would have been demolished were the first to oppose the freeway. Others took a good look at concrete freeways elsewhere and decided they preferred traffic problems to freeway trouble. Their objections forced the Board of Supervisors to withdraw its agreement to the freeway route planned by the state's highway department. Many residents throughout the Bay area changed their thinking about the term "quality of life." In the general upheaval that followed, demands were also made to tear down the section of freeway in front of the historic Ferry Building at the foot of Market Street. That proposal was placed before the voters years later and rejected as too costly. Mother Nature, however, cast a deciding vote in the earthquake of 1989. That earthquake damaged the freeway in front of the Ferry Building so badly that it was finally torn down — a fitting finale to the Freeway Revolt that began decades earlier on the other side of town.

Meanwhile, San Franciscans had begun agitating for a large public park. In 1870, a five-man commission was established to oversee the creation of Golden Gate Park. The opening of the park, in turn, created a need for public transportation — the forerunner to real estate development in new areas. To meet this need, the Market Street Cable Railway, which operated a spur line along Haight Street, was extended to a station at Stanyan Street, at the southeast corner of the park. Here passengers transferred from the cable line to the Park & Ocean Line Steam Railway, which carried them west along the south side of Golden Gate Park and then north to a stop near the Cliff House.

Aurelius E. Buckingham, a clerk in the city assessor's office, correctly sensed the possibilities for the area's future growth. In 1886 he left his City Hall job to become a real estate developer — the first of many. It was Buckingham who labeled the area "The Sunset District" in 1887.

The area received more attention with the Mid-Winter Fair of 1894, held that year in Golden Gate Park. Patrons who rode the Park & Ocean Line Steam Railway to the Fair were treated to their first sight of an area that few had ever seen before. At this time, many smaller neighborhoods, each with its own special character. **Parkside** occupies a

The Sunset, continued on page 13

The Sunset, continued from page 10

only twenty homes were said to stand between Stanyan Street and the beach.

Response by the developers was immediate. Plans for the Sunset's first subdivision were drawn up. It was to stretch westerly from Fifth Avenue and Lincoln Way for three blocks south of the railway line.

Homeowners, however, were not as quick to respond. The problem was sand — stretches of sand dunes that extended for miles. So extensive were the dunes that the western side of San Francisco had been identified on early maps as "The Great Sand Bank."

The wasteland of sand dunes was cut off from the settled part of San Francisco by the City's highest peaks. Reading from north to south, these include Buena Vista Heights (569 feet), Mount Sutro (918 feet), Twin Peaks (910.5 and 903.8 feet), and Mount Davidson (at 938 feet, the City's highest). The Sunset's expansion as a residential area did not begin until the mountain barriers to downtown San Francisco were penetrated. This feat was accomplished by the completion of two tunnels in the early 1900s — the Twin Peaks Tunnel (1917) and the Duboce or Sunset Tunnel (1928).

The contract for construction was awarded to R. C. Stornie on November 2, 1914 (the year the U.S. entered World War I). The contractor was allowed exactly 1000 days to complete the project. Work began without delay, and the tunnel was dedicated by Mayor "Sunny Jim" Rolph in a ceremony at the main station on Saturday, July 14, 1917 — just a few days less than the thousand allotted. A newspaper reported: "The Mayor was rewarded with a kiss by his better half and the crowd dispersed. But not before he had made some predictions with regard to the future of his beloved San Francisco: 'With the coming of the rails and the operation of streetcars through the Twin Peaks Tunnel, it will no longer be necessary to move down the peninsula or across the Bay to Marin or Alameda Counties to find suitable home sites. Enough will be provided west of Twin Peaks.'"

Mayor Rolph then moved to the east station, where he drove the first spike for the streetcar system through the tunnel. This was completed within the next seven months. On the afternoon of Saturday, February 4, 1918, Mayor Rolph and members of the Board of Supervisors, joined by their wives and families, left City Hall in the first Municipal Railroad streetcar to traverse the tunnel. The Mayor acted as motorman, and Timothy Reardon, president of the Board of Public Works, served as conductor. The crowded streetcars were met at the western station by the Twin Peaks Property Owners Association, which took advantage of the situation to conduct prospective buyers on tours of the emerging residential districts of St. Francis Wood, Forest Hill, Parkside, Ingleside, and Westwood Park.

The new streetcar system reduced the travel time to downtown San Francisco from an hour to only 25 minutes. With fast transportation to the area now available, property values zoomed. Ninety-two acres that had been assessed at \$164,000 before the tunnel were reassessed at \$340,000 in 1921, three years after streetcar service began.

In 1928, ten years after streetcar service

had begun through the Twin Peaks Tunnel, the Duboce or Sunset Tunnel was opened. The tunnel was named for Colonel Victor D. Duboce, who led the First California Regiment into action in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War of 1898. Duboce Avenue and Duboce Park are also named for the Colonel. Most residents today know the tunnel only as the Sunset Tunnel and have forgotten the man and his deeds in whose name the tunnel, avenue and park were dedicated.

The Duboce or Sunset Tunnel bores under Buena Vista Park and emerges on the west at Sunset Tunnel Park, bounded by Cole, Carl, Clayton, Cole and Frederick Streets. With a length of 4,232 feet, it's somewhat shorter than the Twin Peaks Tunnel, though its height and width of 25 feet are the same. Financing was again by the creation of special assessment districts.

Construction began in 1926, and the tunnel was officially opened on Sunday, October 21, 1928 with ceremonies at Duboce Park, the east portal. Mayor Rolph, wearing a new motorman's cap, was again at the controls of the first streetcar. He remarked in his dedicatory speech: "This is another of those important improvements which benefit the entire city. A new home district is created. It attracts to San Francisco more residents and builders. More people mean more prosperity for the business man. Prosperity for the business man means more employment, a greater and happier prosperity for all."

The Big Boom in residential development in the Inner Sunset took place during the Great Depression of the 1930s. With labor cheap, home construction boomed in many cities across the nation. San Francisco was no exception. Contractors like Henry Doelger, Ray Galli, and Carl and Fred Gellert moved into the Sunset. By 1939 the "tract kings" had covered half the Sunset with single-family homes that were cosmetic clones of each other.

Henry Doelger became known as "the man who built the Sunset." The son of immigrant parents, Doelger was a high-school dropout. His business career began by selling hot dogs from a stand in the City. A shrewd businessman, Doelger invested \$1,100 in a lot at 14th Avenue and Irving Street in 1922 — and two months later sold it for \$25,000!

Doelger's first group of houses in the Sunset was built in 1928 along both sides of 39th Avenue from Judah to Kirkham Streets. They're examples of a style that did not change fundamentally in the next thirty years — a balloon frame box with a stucco front that's cut up inside into smaller boxes, with two bedrooms and a living room with a bay window over the garage. (A picture window replaced the bay window in later versions.) Also around 1928, Doelger built the stores on the south side of Judah between 39th and 40th Avenues and a house for himself at the northwest corner of 38th and Kirkham.

By 1940, Doelger was the largest home builder in America, having constructed and sold more than 2,800 homes in the Sunset and on Golden Gate Heights. His top-of-the-line models then sold for \$5,450 and are today worth at least \$300,000. At the peak of construction, Doelger's crews averaged two completed houses a day, and the entire Sunset District was known briefly as "Doelger City." (Another name attributed by some to the Sunset is "The White Cliffs

The Sunset, continued on page 14

The Sunset, continued from page 13

of Doelger," although this was more likely applied to Doelger's Westlake development in the northwest part of Daly City, where he moved his operations after World War II. Doelger died in 1978 while touring Italy.)

Construction intensified in the Sunset after World War II with the building of homes for returning GIs.

One of the most popular spots in the Sunset is the Sigmund Stern Recreation Grove, located on the north side of Sloat Boulevard and stretching west from 19th Avenue. "Stern Grove," to use the shortened form of this area's official name, is a wooded glen hidden a hundred feet below street level. Each Sunday in summer it's visited by crowds upwards of 20,000 who come here to enjoy free performances of music, dance and drama.

Stern Grove was once part of a 160-acre farm and grazing land that belonged to Alfred Greene and his family — pioneers who came from Maine in 1847. Here, on the banks of *Laguna Puerca*, they built the first home west of Twin Peaks — a prefabricated home whose parts had been shipped around the Horn from New England. By 1849, Alfred and his recently arrived brothers had increased their holdings to 600 acres and were growing barley and potatoes. Holland grass and eucalyptus trees helped anchor the sand dunes against the ocean winds.

A legal battle ensued when David Mahoney, who had secured a grant of land to the south, the *Rancho Laguna de la Merced*, tried to extend his holdings to include the Greene's ranch. The California courts held for Greene, but the Supreme Court in Washington ruled for Mahoney. The Greenes' refused to move. To defend their land, they built a fort, lined it with metal, planted dynamite around the boundary of the land, and vowed "We weren't getting off! No, not until they carried us off in morgue wagons." (*San Francisco Chronicle*, June 5, 1932.) The Greenes' stood their ground, and in 1887 Congress restored their title.

The 63 acres that comprise today's park were bequeathed to the City in 1931 by Rosalie Meyer Stern with two stipulations — that the city name the grove after her late husband, and that the grove's 12-acre wooded dell, which forms a natural amphitheater, be used for "music, dramatics, and pageantry." When the inaugural concert was performed there on June 19, 1932, during the Great Depression, sponsors levied a 25¢ service charge, with the take going to unemployed musicians. That was the last time there was a charge for performances at Stern Grove. Today, free concerts are held on Sunday afternoons throughout the summer, with the San Francisco Symphony, Merola Opera Program, San Francisco Ballet, and companies of Shakespearean actors taking turns with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band and an impressive array of internationally renowned pianists, violinists, vocalists, dance companies, rock bands and other musical groups. "Sunday at the Grove" is a summertime ritual with many regulars who go there — many with packed picnics and blankets to spread on the lawn — to enjoy the performances and fresh air, and to socialize with old and new found friends.

Stern Grove has also had its day of sadness. Gaetano Merola, founder of today's San Francisco Opera Company, died here on August 30, 1953. Merola had conducted the first performance of the San Francisco Opera Company in 1923, and for the next thirty years was both conductor and impres-

sario for the company. He had been a frequent guest on the podium at Stern Grove before what was to be his last public appearance. While directing the orchestral accompaniment as Soprano Brunetta Mazzolini sang an aria, Merola suffered a massive heart attack onstage and died before the astonished audience. The aria was "*Un bel di*" ("One fine day") from *Madama Butterfly*, Puccini's opera that Merola loved so much because it reminded him of his birthplace in Italy and the melodies of his youth.

The Trocadero Clubhouse in Stern Grove was built in 1892 by George M. Greene, son the pioneer who had settled here in 1847. Greene wanted to develop the grove as a family resort. With financial help from sugar magnate Adolph Spreckels, he developed what was named the Trocadero Inn and Resort. It included a hotel built just to the west of where the Greenes' fort had stood during the land battle. There were also cabins, a restaurant, dancing pavilion, beer garden, lily ponds, a rowing lake, a deer park, and "the finest trout farm in California."

The Trocadero flourished into the early 1900s, when it degenerated into a disreputable hangout for a hard-drinking crowd. It was here on March 8, 1907 that political boss Abe Ruef was nabbed hiding out from the law, trying to avoid trial for his leading role in City Hall graft and corruption trials. Ruef and Ex-Mayor Eugene E. Schmitz were part of the group that included 18 supervisors and 10 labor leaders who were brought before the Grand Jury on March 18th. Ruef was convicted and sentenced to 14 years in San Quentin; he was released in 1912.

All that remains today of Greene's resort is the inn, now known as the Trocadero Clubhouse — an example of Stick-Eastlake architecture which the Recreation and Park Department had restored to its Victorian elegance in 1987. The restoration, however, left intact interesting evidence of the inn's colorful past — several bullet holes in the front door.

Although the park at the west end of Stern Grove is named Pine Lake Park, the small lake here appears on City maps as Laguna Puerca. Puerca is Spanish for a sow or for something dirty, but in no case does it mean pine. Perhaps the name on today's maps is meant to honor Farmer Greene's long-ago porkers. Or maybe it remembers the mothers of many children who played here and called it "Mud Lake."

Another pioneer in the Sunset District was Carl G. Larsen, a Dane who came to San Francisco in 1869. He was the owner of the Tivoli Cafe on Eddy Street near the old Tivoli Opera House in downtown San Francisco. In those days, operas and operettas were performed 365 days a year at the Tivoli Opera House, and Larsen had many customers. He made enough money catering to the opera crowd to purchase large chunks of land in the Sunset, starting in 1888. Friend thought him a bit mad to buy what they saw only as "that great stretch of shifting sands and sagebrush south of the park."

Larsen's vision, however, was a ranch — a huge chicken ranch in what eventually became the community of Golden Gate Heights. His breakfast menu at the Tivoli Cafe soon featured "Fresh Eggs from Tivoli Ranch Every Day," and every Easter Sun-

The Sunset, continued next page

The Sunset, continued from previous page

day he threw a huge party at his ranch.

Larsen never married. He was, however, a favorite uncle of his brother's children and he left much of his land for children to enjoy. In 1926 he bequeathed to the City 6 acres of his ranch, between 12th and 14th Avenues and Quintara and Pacheco, which became **Golden Gate Heights Park** (on Funston Avenue, between Pacheco and Quintara Streets; this has also been known as Larsen's Peak and Sunset Heights Park.). It's 725 feet above sea level. Larsen left another two city blocks nearby for a park and children's playground, which became **Grand View Park** (Moraga Street between 14th and 15th Avenues). These nearby parks are the only two in the district with views of both the Sunset neighborhoods and the ocean.

Besides offering outstanding scenic vistas, Golden Gate Heights Park is also the best place to trace the City's history back to the Pleistocene epoch — 140 million years ago — when California was at the bottom of the ocean. During this period, gravel and mud washed down from the Sierra Nevada mountains and were consolidated into bedrock. Volcanic action thrust the bedrock up through the sea to form the San Francisco peninsula. Geologists have named the rock "Franciscan radiolarian chert." It contains the deposition of innumerable one-celled marine organisms called "diatoms." If you look carefully at some of the rocks here, you can see their remains. You can also find among the park's plant life two endangered species, the dune tansy and San Francisco wallflower. The best time to visit here is in the spring, when wildflowers are in bloom.

Larsen also left land in the area along 19th Avenue where the **Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children** is located. Nearby **Larsen Park**, which occupies two blocks bounded by 19th and 20th Avenues and Ulloa and Wawona Streets, is named in Carl Larsen's honor.

When Larsen died in 1928 at age 84, his body lay in state in the rotunda of City Hall, and hundreds of mourners, including many children, attended his funeral.

Although women were a minority in Gold Rush San Francisco, their contributions to the City's development exceeded their numbers. They were among the leaders in providing education and meeting early needs for social services. One of the many humanitarian institutions they founded is the **Edgewood Children's Center** (1801 Vicente, between 28th and 30th Avenues). Originally called the San Francisco Protestant Orphanage, it has been in San Francisco since 1851. Sylvia Rubin, in a newspaper article in 1986, credits its founding to "tee-totaling pioneer women who believed idleness led to sin. Children were taught discipline and obedience; it was the only way to counteract the evil ways of the Gold Rush era, where suicides were common, disease rampant and the insane asylums crowded."

The first home for the orphanage was built in 1855. Described as "an enormous medieval-style stone mansion" in the Haight district, its construction was the major cost of the orphanage's budget of \$12,000 that year. By 1881, the Haight mansion housed more than 200 children. The earthquake of 1906 damaged the home beyond repair and the orphanage underwent several relocations. In 1924 it moved to its present 6-1/2 acre campus in a wooded section of the Sunset.

"By 1944, the name was changed to the Edgewood Children's Center, and the agency was treating fewer orphans and more children with disciplinary and emotional problems. Children now are referred by the courts, schools, parents, psychiatric hospitals or social service agencies.

"Today, the majority of the 100 children who either live on campus or come in for day treatment are the product of broken or abusive homes. Children used to stay at the center until they were 18; today they remain only until they are 12." (*San Francisco Chronicle*, January 24, 1986).

McCoppin Square (two blocks bounded by Santiago and Taraval Streets and 22nd and 24 Avenues) is a tree-studded slope named for Frank McCoppin, an immigrant born in Longford, Ireland in 1834. McCoppin arrived in San Francisco in 1858 at the age of 24 and became a superintendent of construction for the Market Street City Railroad. (The roadbed along Market Street between Third Street and California was below grade, and the water that collected here during the rainy season became known as "McCoppin's Canal." According to some reports, many people narrowly escaped drowning in the canal during the rainy season.) He was elected to the Board of Supervisors in 1860, and served four terms before being elected mayor in 1867. In 1875 he was elected State Senator from the 13th Senatorial District. McCoppin died in San Francisco in 1897. On the south side of McCoppin Square, along Taraval, is the **Parkside Branch Library**.

The Sunset is one of the city's well-established neighborhoods, with much the same ethnic make-up as throughout the rest of the City. Political refugees — the earliest from Eastern Europe and the most recent from Southeast Asia — contribute to its multi-ethnic character.

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San Francisco has had many historians whose works have been consulted by the writer in preparing this article. Readers wishing more details can find them in the following: *San Francisco: The Story of a City* (Presidio Press, 1978) by the late John B. McGloin, S.J., who taught history for many years at the University of San Francisco, and *Nature's Music Box: Fifty Seasons of the Stern Grove Midsummer Music Festival, 1938-1987* (Quarterly Journal of the Archives for the Performing Arts, San Francisco, Spring 1987). An important and dependable source of facts and statistics is *San Francisco Almanac* (Presidio Press) by Gladys Hansen. San Francisco's City Archivist who operated the history room in the main library for many years before retiring recently.

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