

IN THE NEIGHBORHOODS

A GUIDE TO THE JOYS AND DISCOVERIES
OF SAN FRANCISCO'S NEIGHBORHOODS

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11

THE BAYSHORE

PORTOLA • EXCELSIOR • VISITACION VALLEY
CROCKER-AMAZON • BAYVIEW-HUNTERS POINT

MENTION PORTOLA, EXCELSIOR, Visitation Valley, Crocker-Amazon, or Bayview to some San Franciscans and all you'll get is a blank stare and maybe, "Oh, that's somewhere near Daly City, isn't it?" They might have heard of Hunters Point, identifying it with either the shipyards of World War II or the riots of the 1960s, but they almost certainly won't know the term "Bayshore," which the City Planning Department uses to refer collectively to most of these neighborhoods.

The Bayshore is one of those areas that a lot of people go through but not to. Two major freeways, 280 and 101, carry motorists through the Bayshore south to the airport, the Cow Palace exhibition hall, or a Giants game at Candlestick Park. I still remember my first visit to San Francisco when I was twelve years old. As we were riding past Candlestick Park on our way north from the airport, our host informed us that this area didn't "really" count as San Francisco. I

wonder where he thought the thousands of residents here "really" did count?

Actually the Bayshore is a far more stable San Francisco district than some older neighborhoods, such as Haight-Ashbury or Nob Hill, with their transient populations. Single-family homes with neat lawns dominate, about half of them owned by the tenants. But despite a similarity in both appearance and history among the neighborhoods of the Bayshore, the freeway functions almost as a color bar to divide the area into black and white sectors.

Bayview-Hunters Point, to the east of 101, is 66 percent black, which represents the greatest concentration of blacks in the city. Portola, Excelsior, Visitation Valley, and Crocker-Amazon make up what I call the McLaren Park area. This sector is about 5 percent black, 60 percent white, and 13-29 percent Latino (Visitation Valley is the exception, with 29 percent of the neighborhood black).

The McLaren Park area surrounds the city's second largest park (after Golden Gate Park), while an abandoned (since 1974) shipyard and a baseball stadium dominate Bayview-Hunters Point. McLaren Park residents have a little more money and a lot less crime than those in Bayview-Hunters Point, but residents of both sides of the freeway are mostly skilled laborers who are struggling with high unemployment.

Like most of San Francisco, the Bayshore was once part of a Spanish land grant. Bayview-Hunters Point, under the name Rancho Rincon de las Salinas y Potrero Viejo (near the salt flats and old pasture), belonged to Jose Bernal in 1834. La Punta de Conca (Seashell Point) became known as Hunters Point after the Hunter Brothers bought the land to develop a town at the time of the Gold Rush.

During the 1860s, William Ralston, director of the California Steam Navigation Company, spent more than \$1 million to build a granite drydock at the point that was used until 1916. While oxen hauled stone from Sacramento for the pier, George Hearst attempted to turn the land he owned at Candlestick Point into a fancy residential area, the new Rincon Hill.

But nothing seemed to take hold on the point besides shipping and cattle slaughtering, despite the brief success of a theater, the Bayview Opera House, and the Bayview Racetrack. People never really moved to the area until World War II made Hunters Point the biggest shipyard on the West Coast. The 18,500 employees, many of them black southerners, moved into temporary housing on Hunters Point Ridge. By the time the freeway appeared in 1952, Hunters Point was a black neighborhood composed

of rickety temporary houses. The Redevelopment Agency has spent about thirty years replacing the World War II buildings with public housing, a process that's still going on.

Bayview-Hunters Point looks like a place that hit bottom and is slowly starting a change for the better. Beyond the auto wreckers of the old Butchertown, the bulldozers on Hunters Point Ridge, and the barren streets of Bayview are attractive, landscaped housing complexes and Youngblood Coleman Playground, opened in 1979.

The old Victorian Bayview Opera House (47045 Third Street) has been renovated and is run by the Neighborhood Arts Program. Theater productions, classes in dance, photography, and yoga, and a seniors' choir are offered free of charge. Many residents actively participate in the Bayview-Hunters Point Coordinating Council, or Joint Housing Committee. They're working to cut down on the area's biggest problems—crime and unemployment.

Some blacks have moved out of the neighborhood and across the freeway to Portola or Visitacion Valley, especially to the public housing there. Geneva Towers was one of the first integrated projects in the city, although nearby Sunnydale had restrictions against blacks. Lawsuits later struck down the racist requirement, and now Sunnydale is almost all black. Sunnydale is a depressing area of burned-out dwellings, armored stores, and motel-like apartments.

Portola is a much livelier neighborhood, with a busy commercial center along San Bruno Avenue. The old Avenue Theater (2650 San Bruno) shows silent films every Friday to a rather aged crowd. The audience arrives early to sing old songs accompanied

THE BAYSHORE/81

by the Wurlitzer organ. There are more beautiful examples of art deco palaces in San Francisco, but none with a more genuine Twenties feel.

Street names around the Portola Recreation Center recall the plan to site City College here years ago. Oxford, Cambridge, Yale, Harvard, and Mt. Holyoke Streets seem out of place in an area where half the residents have less than a high school education.

Portola and Visitacion Valley, like Crocker-Amazon and Excelsior, once had sizable Italian populations. After the earthquake, many Italians and Irish moved out to the rural city around McLaren Park. The park served as a tent city in 1906. Italian delis and restaurants abound here. Caffè Le Botte (1166 Geneva) is a particularly good, informal

ristorante in Crocker-Amazon. The latest ethnic group to arrive in Excelsior and Crocker-Amazon are Latinos, moving south from the Mission.

Everybody shops on Excelsior Avenue and Mission Street, the major commercial streets. Although Mission, the older street, displays a few Victorians, both boulevards are overly wide, bare of trees, and singularly ugly, as are many of their side streets.

Right now the Bayshore's major asset, McLaren Park, is under-used and full of arsonists. It certainly is not a draw for outsiders. But would residents want it to be? While there's nothing spectacular about the Bayshore and indeed a lot that's downright ugly, it is a stable area where families can own their own homes. They certainly count as San Franciscans.