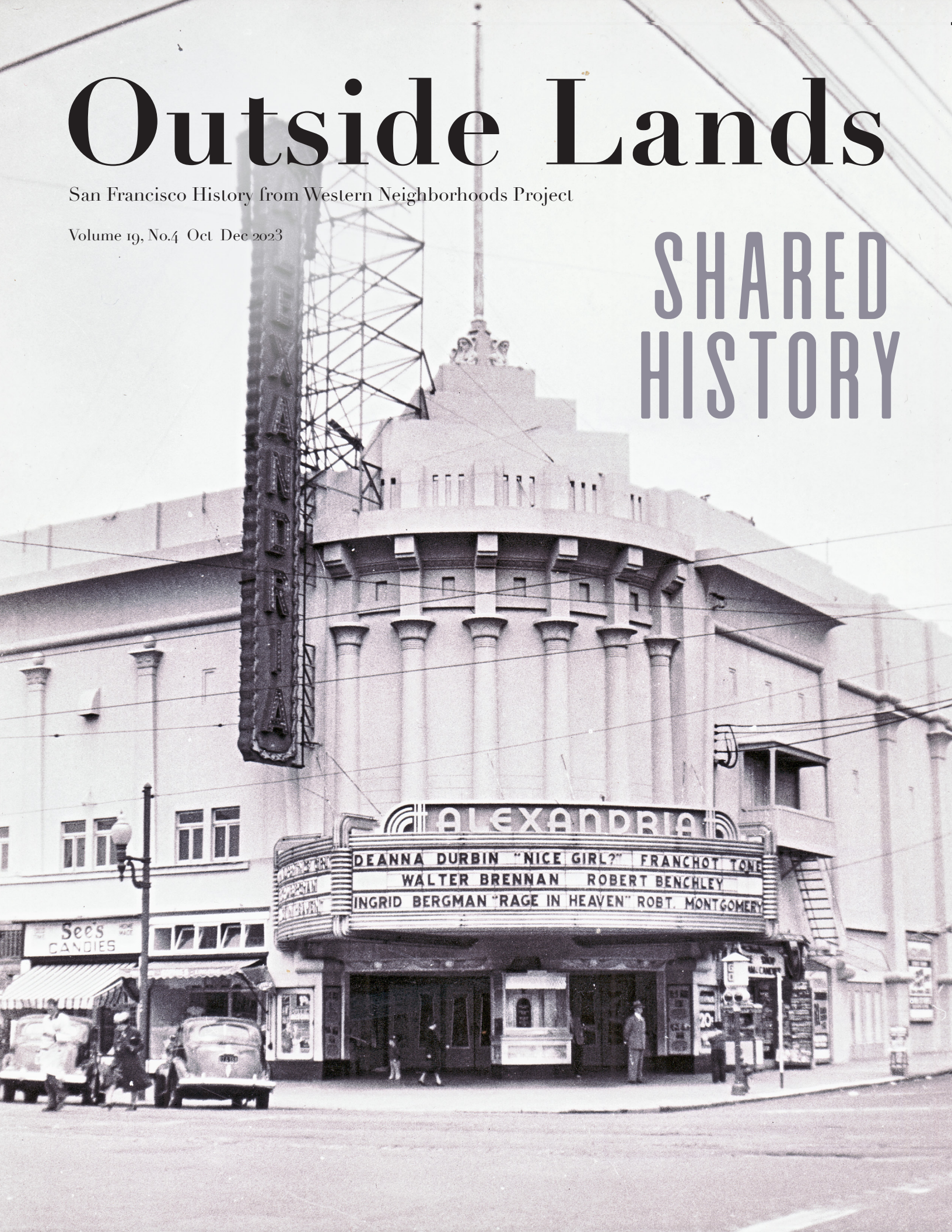
Outside Lands

San Francisco History from Western Neighborhoods Project

Volume 19, No.4 Oct Dec 2023

SHARED HISTORY



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Outside Lands

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EDITOR: Chelsea Sellin

GRAPHIC DESIGNER: Laura Macias

CONTRIBUTORS: Nicole Hallenbeck, Paul Judge, Woody LaBounty, David Lam, John Martini, Nicole Meldahl, Margaret Ostermann

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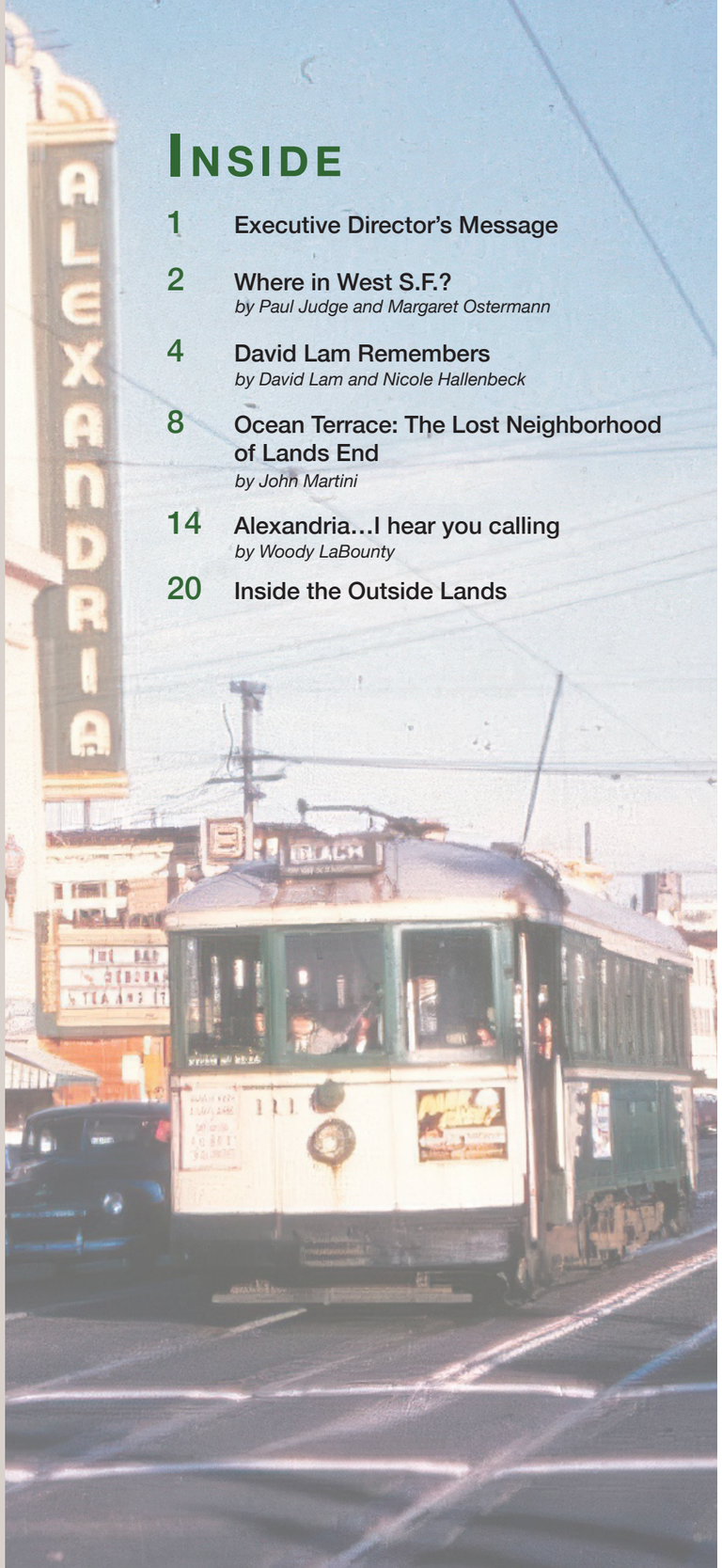
Richard Brandi, Christine Huhn, Woody LaBounty, Michael Lange, John Lindsey, Alexandra Mitchell, Jamie O'Keefe, and Lorri Ungaretti

Western Neighborhoods Project
1617 Balboa Street
San Francisco, CA 94121
Tel: 415/661-1000
Email: chelsea@outsidelands.org
Website: www.outsidelands.org
facebook.com/outsidelands
twitter.com/outsidelandz
instagram.com/outsidelandz

Cover: Alexandria Theatre, on corner of 18th Avenue and Geary Boulevard, 1941. (Courtesy of Jack Tillmany)

Right: View east on Geary Boulevard at 19th Avenue, 1956. (Courtesy of Jack Tillmany)

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Nicole Meldahl



I begin this message staggered by the loss of a dear friend and critical member of the Western Neighborhoods Project family. Our own Arnold Woods passed away unexpectedly just as we were about to send this issue to print. I often called him the First Gentleman of WNP, which always made him laugh. The joke landed because it was true: there is no way I could have managed this nonprofit since 2020 without him. There is so much more to say but, for now, we'll simply mourn. As I navigate this grief, I find myself finding purpose in the reason we all came together: History.

In September, Chelsea and I were fortunate to see cultural historian Abby Smith Rumsey speak at the Internet Archive; she discussed her newest book with Rick Prelinger of the Prelinger Archives and Library. *Memory, Edited: Taking Liberties with History* ties together so many things I've thought about in my search to better understand how we remember the past, how it impacts our present, and how it frames our future. Rumsey intertwines so many threads – pulling from political philosophy, the arts, cognitive science, and more – to explain how history has been used to create a polarized present. Critically, she asks: do we need a shared past to have a shared future?

Her answer has redirected how I think about the communal aspects of placemaking that are essential to the history work we do here at WNP. According to Rumsey, what we need more than a shared past is a shared sense of reality. I couldn't agree more. Essential to a stable perception of reality is the accessibility of earnest, honest history; not necessarily history we share in common but history made recognizable and relevant to as many people as possible. Sharing a constellation of individual lived experiences gives facts human form and makes the past more tangible, makes reality more real.

We need to understand the things around us to understand who we are, and in this respect, historians are in a unique position to help shape how people perceive their world. In this issue, you'll find an article on the endangered Alexandria Theatre written by **Woody LaBounty**. As always, he combines scholarly research with recollections from his time growing up in the neighborhood. This is history at its best: fact-based information bound together by memories. Each perspective in this magazine is unique but relatable in the presence of objectively verifiable touchstones, like the Breon Gate at 19th Avenue and Lincoln Way, which **Paul Judge** and **Margaret Ostermann** take a pass at in ***Where in West S.F.?***

For those who also spent their childhood in the western neighborhoods, **David Lam**'s memories of visiting landmarks like the Steinhart Aquarium, Conservatory of Flowers, and Playland-at-the-Beach with his family will feel very familiar. The universal framework of these places connects us all. Plus the photographs that accompany ***David Lam Remembers***, written by **Nicole Hallenback**, are particularly adorable. But, history should also dig deeper, below the sediment of our collective memory, to help us see the things made invisible by the past. In that spirit, **John Martini** takes a closer look at an area near Sutro Heights no longer remembered as Ocean Terrace. There's so much history to uncover here that this is the first of a two-part story.

That's the thing about the history that defines our reality: it's open-ended, iterative, and should be revealed with great care. Especially in this era of escalating tensions where facts are fickle, I see it as our job at WNP to lay a foundation based on evidence and experience on which we can all find firm footing and common ground. And, with this work, I sincerely hope we're helping people feel interconnected through a shared sense of place.





Looking south from the Breon Gate and Lincoln Way, down 19th Avenue, circa 1935. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp14.0813)

WHERE IN WEST S.F.?

By Paul Judge and Margaret Ostermann

How many of us, wishing we earned a nickel each time, have passed through the gateway to Golden Gate Park depicted in our mystery photo? Whether you fueled the family auto at one of the two gas stations on its southern corners; made your way to classes at Jefferson Elementary School, the Conservatory of Music, SF State or City College; or perhaps took a trip to window shop at Stonestown; this portal was a regular landmark along one's route.

We're looking south through the Breon Gate to 19th Avenue and Lincoln Way. It is the mid-Depression years, circa 1935, and big changes are in store for this corridor. The widening of 19th Avenue (and later creation of Crossover Drive through the park) began in 1934 in preparation for the influx of traffic due to the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937.

Today, over 60,000 vehicles travel this important north-south artery each day. It certainly feels so at peak times, slowly rolling between red light stops. The routine passage through this intersection made our mystery photo no mystery for **Julie Alden, Fred Baumer, Mike Dadaos, Tim Dineen, Krista Farey, Gino Fortunato**, **Judy Jacobs, Wendy Murphy,** and **Peter Tannen.**

With remarkable providence the Breon Gate was completed in 1924, before the widening of 19th Avenue. Its wide footprint and imposing scale proved a convenient synchronism for things to come. Although not her first choice, the gate's donor, Christine Breon, requested the gateway be placed at the 19th Avenue park entrance because of its proximity to her favorite charity: The Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children.



Charlie the History Poodle visits the Breon Gate, December 2023. (Courtesy of Margaret Ostermann)

Breon had originally proposed an even larger, very heavily ornamented gateway elsewhere in the park, as detailed in an article sent in by **Margie Whitnah**. As Margie remarked: "who would have approved that!" Indeed, the plans were rejected by the Park Commission, leading to this scaled-down version. Before the construction of Crossover Drive, an island lit by a large bronze sculpture stood in the center of the roadway once you entered the park from the south.

The Breon Gate elicited a distinct memory for **Alan Thomas**, whose childhood home was in the Sunset District. During the latter part of World War II, "someone had chalked a 'Kilroy



View north into Golden Gate Park through the Breon Gate, November 20, 1936. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp27.3540)

was here' drawing on the right gate…These chalk drawings were everywhere and I can still picture the cartoon figure, a bald person with a long nose and fingertips looking over a fence. In a way, it was kind of a logo that said 'I was in the war."

A block south into our mystery photo, the arched window of Jefferson Elementary School's auditorium stands out. It is the only survivor of a 1959 school fire, the ruins of which Margie Whitnah remembers her father driving her past to see. A student with a history of arson later admitted to the fire, claiming "his only intention was to destroy a spelling paper on which he had misspelled the word 'ran.'"[1] He had spelled it "rin."

Leif Hatlen, who attended Jefferson, reflected on many details within the mystery photo. He noted the sign with mileage distance at the far left, which was "posted and maintained by the California State Automobile Association." Additionally, harkening back to an era before widespread roadway standardization, a pair of 'Wiley Birdcage' traffic signals flank the intersection. These unique-to-San Francisco signals were designed by Ralph W. Wiley, chief of San Francisco's Department of Electricity.



Jefferson School fire with auditorium in foreground, Irving and 19th Avenue, May 31, 1959. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp27.4680)

Ignore that signal, and you could come up on the short end plowing into a Market Street Railway Streetcar. Both the #17 and #7 routes passed through this intersection until, as **David Volansky** noted, streetcars "no longer ran on Lincoln Way after WWII."

The gas station on the southwest corner was replaced with a large building in 1980, and for the next few decades was a series of restaurants. Some blame a lack of parking for their short-lived existence. And while many businesses have come and gone since our mystery photo was taken, motorists continue to fill up at the Shell service station as they pass through this ubiquitous intersection.

1. "Boy Admits Fire," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 2, 1959.

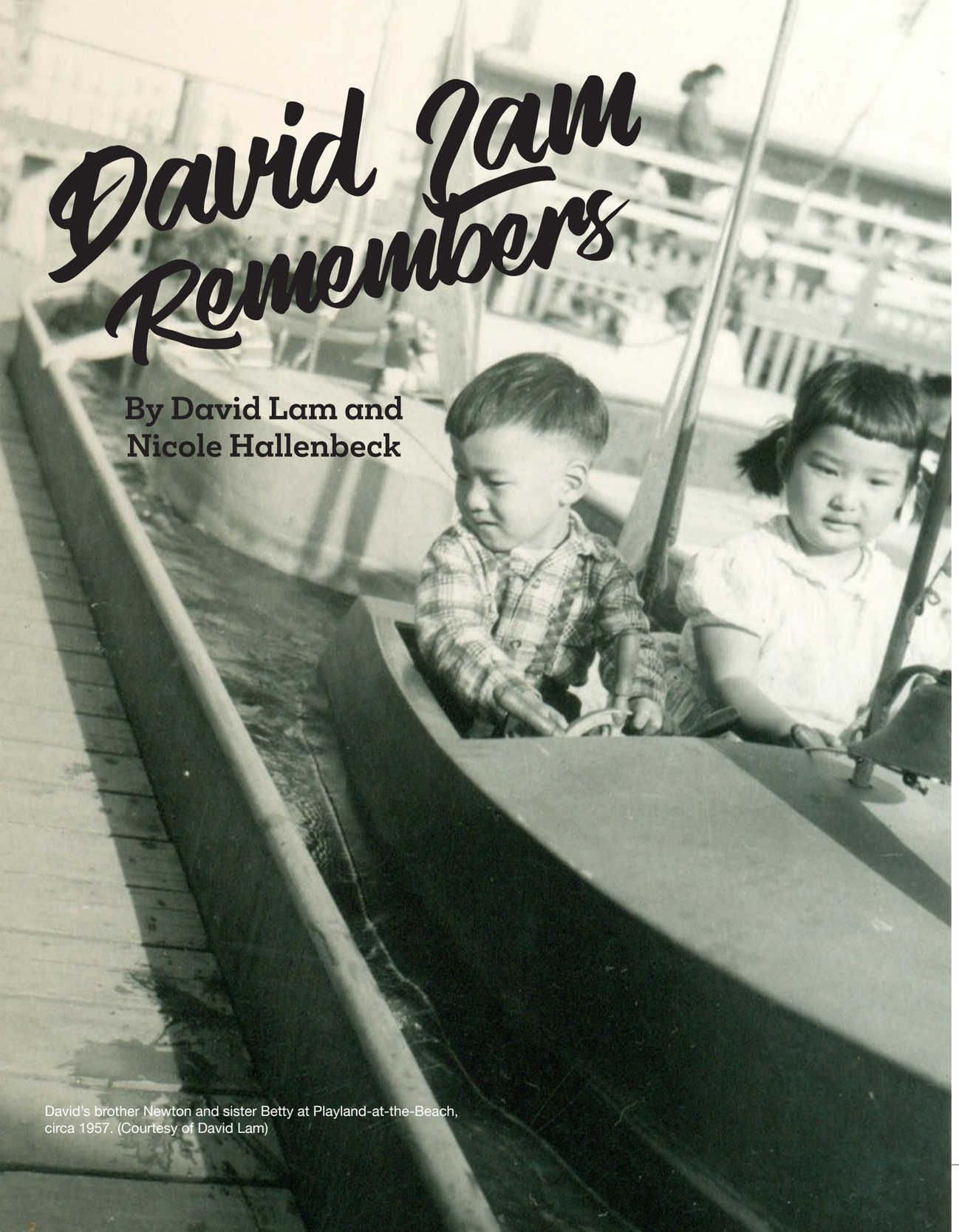
All aboard for our next mystery photo! Can you guess where this is?

Send your guesses to chelsea@outsidelands.org



David Lam Remembers

By David Lam and
Nicole Hallenbeck



David's brother Newton and sister Betty at Playland-at-the-Beach, circa 1957. (Courtesy of David Lam)

San Francisco's west side felt like another world to a young David Lam. "I'd be walking westward on Filbert, looking at Russian Hill, and you'd see clouds way out there, and you knew something was different on the other side." A San Francisco native who grew up in Chinatown and North Beach, David experienced the "other side" firsthand when he attended Lowell High School. In his interview with Executive Director Nicole Meldahl on September 29, 2020, David shared stories of his family's emigration from China, his memories of being raised in the city, and his adult years spent living in the Richmond District.

The Lam Family

According to David, his father, Morris, was a "paper son": a Chinese national who immigrated to the United States using forged citizenship documentation. Many Chinese immigrants did this because of the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882-1943, which severely restricted Chinese immigration and fueled violence and racism against Chinese people. In 1940, Morris left his home village in Kaiping, Guangdong Province, China and sailed to San Francisco to live with his maternal grandfather. In doing so, he dropped his original surname, which was Jue. David states, "He came in as somebody named Lam. He pretended to be someone who was 14. I think he was really closer to 15 when he arrived." Upon arrival, Morris was held at Angel Island for two to three weeks. From 1910 to 1940, Angel Island was used to detain immigrants, and is infamous for its strict interrogation processes targeting non-Europeans.

Morris Lam attended Washington Irving Grammar School for one year before he left to work with his grandfather, who owned a Grant Avenue shop that sold fish, poultry, and vegetables. David adds, "He didn't go to junior high. He didn't go to high school. Everything he did was labor related." In 1947, Morris returned to his village in China, where he was set up with David's mother, Joyce, by a matchmaker. Morris returned to the U.S. and then sent money for Joyce to immigrate to California aboard the S.S. *President Wilson*. After briefly living in Taft and Hollister, the couple moved to San Francisco, where Morris got a job from Joyce's cousin working as a busboy at the Mark Hopkins Hotel on Nob Hill. They went on to have one daughter and four sons, one of whom they named Wilson, after the ship Joyce had traveled on.

Morris later owned the Haight & Scott Market with two partners. David explains, "In those days, a lot of the grocery stores were owned by Chinese merchants. That was their beginning. They taught each other how to run a store, and they'd get a place." The partners broke up and Morris started the Haight & Pierce Market. One of his former partners owned the Superette Market on Haight and Divisadero, which is still in business today. Morris eventually went bankrupt, but later worked for QFI Markets at the Grand Central Market on Fillmore and California (today it's a Mollie Stone's). David remembers, "That was his first good job. A union job. Paid him good wages. He had weekends off. He had life insurance, medical insurance, vacations. For him, it was the happiest time in his life."

Childhood

David Lam was born at Chinese Hospital on Jackson Street in 1953. His family lived in Daly City for a few years before moving back to San Francisco because "we were forgetting how to speak Chinese in Daly City." They lived on Filbert near Taylor Street in North Beach until David graduated college. David recalls joining book clubs at the North Beach Branch Library and growing up reading the encyclopedia at the encouragement of his father, who aspired to have his children attend college. As a child, David first met Chinese people from the west side through Cameron House, a social services organization in Chinatown. He states, "A lot of the kids who showed up there had parents who grew up in Chinatown. Now, they lived in the Avenues, and the parents wanted them to live like they did and get some experience in Chinatown, so they'd bring them back to join clubs, participate in day camps, things like that."

David went to Francisco Junior High School before entering Lowell High School in 1969. He recalls how different Lowell's



The S.S. *President Wilson* in Hong Kong Harbor with David's mother aboard, September 1950. (Courtesy of David Lam)



David with his mother, Joyce, and sister, Betty, in Golden Gate Park, 1953. (Courtesy of David Lam)

Lakeshore neighborhood felt from his own. “It seemed like when you got on a bus, and got on the other side of the tunnel, you didn’t know where you were…I remember seeing houses that didn't touch – detached homes…It took a while to get used to it.” David also remembers not feeling at home because of how few Chinese students there were compared to Francisco. “Where I grew up, you didn't take a shower every day. You didn’t have a shower…These people would come to school in new clothes. Even if they wanted to look kind of tough – so they’d wear Ben Davis pants and white T-shirts – the T-shirts were so white, so you knew that they didn’t live like we did.” When he was 14, David started working as a dishwasher, “so I had money to buy clothing and get newer things.” He later worked at the Rusty Scupper, near Fisherman's Wharf, parking cars.

Although the commute to the west side was a culture shock (and weather shock) to David, he acclimated after some time at the school. “Lowell was a place that felt pretty good after a while. I remember taking trips to Stanford, to Cal, to different colleges, and getting more familiar with the idea [of going to college].” He also made a lot of friends with whom he shared fond memories at places like Kieser’s Colonial Creamery on Irving Street between 19th and 20th Avenues. At the time, Lowell was a closed campus, but David recalls himself and other students sneaking off campus and heading to Stonestown Mall and Lakeshore Plaza.

On weekends, the Lam family climbed into their Dodge Polara and spent time together on the west side. “Whenever there was a family friend who came to visit, passing through or new to the city or something like that, we’d be in Golden Gate Park at the planetarium, the aquarium, the bandshell,

“It seemed like when you got on a bus, and got on the other side of the tunnel, you didn’t know where you were…I remember seeing houses that didn’t touch – detached homes…It took a while to get used to it.”

over to Ocean Beach – take a bunch of pictures there – and then over to Playland. That was our playground, going to the west side.” David recalls learning to skate at the San Francisco Ice Arena on 48th Avenue between Kirkham and Lawton, and trips to the arcade at Sutro’s. He also remembers eating at classic local restaurants like Zim’s, Miz Brown’s, Copper Penny (whose name changed to Lucky Penny before closing) on Masonic, and Sambo’s on Lombard.

Adulthood

After graduating from Lowell in 1971, David went to City College of San Francisco. He jokes, “I’m not a very good student. I didn’t go to very many classes. I don’t remember any teachers.” He does recall being assigned a draft number, but since the Vietnam War was winding down and he had such a high number, he was never called up for military service. “Just carried that draft card forever…By the time I did [stop carrying it], you couldn’t read a thing on it, it had gotten wet so many times” from being accidentally thrown into the washing machine.

In 1973, David transferred to UC Berkeley, where he studied Economics. He lived in Berkeley and states “back then, it was easy [to get into Cal]. I don’t remember exactly, but it couldn’t have been more than $2,000 for room, board, tuition, everything. My father was nothing but a blue-collar worker, and he could afford to send us to Cal.” After graduating in 1975, David worked for Macy’s in the unit control department, where he tracked inventory and eventually became the supervisor. However, the job was unstimulating for him, so he took the PACE exam and began working for the U.S. Department of Labor. David explains, “I was doing surveys for the new minimum wage law, which meant every day, I was in another small town in the valley – Porterville, Visalia, just all over the place, in movie theaters, motels – mostly motels – just looking through their records…it was a tough job.” When that began to wear on him, he decided to go back to school and get another degree to change career paths. David spent a year in the M.A. in Economics program at San Francisco State University before dropping out and pursuing an MBA at UC Berkeley.



David with his parents and older sister inside the Conservatory of Flowers, 1953. (Courtesy of David Lam)

After finishing his education in the 1980s, David moved to the Richmond District. He lived in an apartment on 30th Avenue and Fulton, walking distance to Golden Gate Park and Ocean Beach. “I didn’t know that much about the west side, but you couldn’t really afford anything on the eastern side. For me, I wanted to move to a place within walking distance of restaurants, libraries, movie theaters, and bookstores, especially. Back then, there were bookstores everywhere.” His family relocated to the East Bay suburbs, but missed San Francisco. They returned to the city and briefly lived in Miraloma Park and Mount Davidson Manor before moving to the Richmond again, this time to 26th Avenue near the park. “That was a really nice spot. One of the nice things is that if you’re sitting outside, you see people walking by all the time to go to the park…You meet a lot of people that way, people walking their dogs, neighbors. We had a really good group of neighbors that we knew there.”

David walked with his children to Stow Lake often, and they rented boats and picked blackberries on weekends. He enjoyed bringing his family to the Academy of Sciences (especially the natural history exhibits) and the zoo, where his kids did summer camp. They loved taking their dog for walks to Golden Gate Park’s Bison Paddock, and venturing down to the Sutro Baths ruins and looking through the Camera Obscura (which David remembers was always closed). When their kids went off to school, David and his wife spent days together at Louis’ and the Seal Rock Inn restaurant, overlooking the ocean.

Now that David resides outside of San Francisco, he reminisces about all the people he met on walks while living there, and the local food joints he frequented, like Kirin Chinese Restaurant, Balboa Teriyaki, and Shanghai Dumpling King. Living in the suburbs again, he longs for the diversity of the city. “I really miss the way it is in San Francisco, especially on the west side, because of the Russian bakeries, the Polish sausage places, the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai [restaurants] – all kinds of places that you can walk to. My daughter was a Girl Scout



David (center) with sister Betty, brother Newton, father Morris (glasses) and a cousin visiting from Montreal outside Steinhart Aquarium, late 1950s. (Courtesy of David Lam)

there in San Francisco and her friends are of all sorts. It just seems like I’m going to miss those kinds of people, just ordinary people.”

If you want to be a part of history as the subject of our next interview, have written memories that are just dying for publication, or know of someone who should have their stories saved, email Nicole Meldahl at nicole@outsidelands.org.

OCEAN TERRACE: THE LOST NEIGHBORHOOD OF LANDS END



View northwest showing intersection of 48th and Point Lobos Avenues; Ocean Terrace on left, 1910. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp27.6060)

BY JOHN MARTINI

Ocean Terrace was a vibrant but short-lived commercial and residential street located near San Francisco's famous Cliff House. Situated on the northwest corner of what is today Point Lobos Avenue and El Camino Del Mar, the one-block street was barely 200 feet long and consisted of a large commercial block with six storefronts, and four smaller wood-frame buildings adjacent to the large structure. Designed as a sort of 19th century "strip mall," the ground floors of Ocean Terrace held restaurants, saloons, curio shops, photo galleries, and other amusements geared towards visitors arriving at the Sutro Baths and Cliff House area.

The tiny street was located directly across from the lion-flanked main entry gate to Sutro Heights and faced squarely the train depot on 48th Avenue, where passengers debarked from the Ferries & Cliff House Railroad headed for the Cliff House, Sutro Heights, and Sutro Baths. Ocean Terrace's businesses were clearly situated to separate train passengers from their change. Also, the presence of five liquor establishments on a street only 200 feet long attests to the hearty drinking abilities of early-day San Franciscans.

Residences occupied the upper floors of Ocean Terrace. Several of the storekeepers and their families lived above their shops, along with numerous single men who stayed with them as boarders. Together they created a working-class neighborhood comprised mostly of European immigrants.

At some point in 1918, for reasons likely related to wartime restrictions on liquor sales, all the residents except two families vacated the street. Ocean Terrace itself disappeared from city maps and directories shortly afterwards, and the last resident left around 1921. The buildings were demolished, and the neighborhood was no more.

This is Part I of a two-part series. Part I will explore the historical context and physical development of Ocean Terrace. The forthcoming Part II will look at the businesses and residents that brought the street to life.

Background

The origins of Ocean Terrace are inexorably tied to the legendary Ferries & Cliff House steam train line that wound its way around the Lands End cliffs beginning in 1888. Both Ocean Terrace and the Ferries & Cliff House had their inception in the fertile mind of Adolph Sutro, the engineer, entrepreneur, capitalist, and one-time city mayor who owned much of western San Francisco during the late 19th century.

Sutro began purchasing real estate in the largely undeveloped "outside lands" west of Divisadero Street in the early 1880s, including the Cliff House in 1881. He bought the rocky hill across the road from the Cliff House that same year and established his home there. Sutro's modest house was eventually surrounded by acres of lush gardens coaxed from the sand dunes and ornamented with statuary, hedge mazes, and other Victorian attractions. He grandiosely named his estate "Sutro Heights" and opened its paths and sheltered overlooks to visitors. A major problem, though, was that the Heights lay at the extreme western edge of the city and reaching it was a challenge for people without personal carriages or the means to rent one.

The closest public transit – the Park & Ocean Railroad – terminated at the corner of Balboa Street and La Playa Avenue near the Ocean Beach Pavilion. Passengers getting off the train still faced a several block uphill walk to Sutro Heights. Plus, the cost was prohibitive for many people, since reaching the beach from downtown involved paying two fares totaling 10¢. These factors led Sutro to begin work on a competing railroad to carry people to his seaside attractions safely and cheaply. Before construction was completed, Sutro and his cousin, Gustav, sold the franchise to the Powell Street Railroad Company with the important stipulation that the company must provide service from the downtown area to the Cliff House for a single 5¢ fare.



Ferries & Cliff House train at 48th Avenue depot, circa 1900. (Photo by W.C. Billington, Stein Collection; courtesy of Bay Area Electric Railway Association)



Detail from Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of San Francisco, 1899-1900. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)



Automobiles in front of the Sutro Heights Casino with Ocean Terrace in the background, 1903. (Courtesy of John O'Neill)



Fire Department wagon passing Ocean Terrace, circa 1906. (Courtesy of John Martini)

Service on the Ferries & Cliff House Railroad began on July 1, 1888. The inner terminus was near the corner of California Street and Presidio Avenue, where a depot and rail yard were located on the site presently occupied by the Jewish Community Center. The outer terminus was a gable-roofed wood depot near the corner of 48th and Point Lobos Avenues, directly across from the main entrance to Sutro Heights and about three blocks from the Cliff House. With its large freight doors and overhanging roof, the little structure looked more like a rural railroad station than an urban street railway terminal.

A Street Is Born

Although no actual construction date for Ocean Terrace has been found, photographic evidence shows that Adolph Sutro built his first retail structures across from the railroad depot sometime before 1891. Given Sutro's propensity for commercial development, and considering his expenditure of $40,000 on improvements to his end of the steam train line, it's very likely Ocean Terrace was built contemporaneously with the Ferries & Cliff House line's opening in 1888, to take advantage of the arriving passengers.

The Ocean Terrace complex first appears on a map of the Cliff House area in an undated souvenir album of Sutro Heights printed around 1890. This cartoon-type map shows a single, rectangular building oriented parallel to the steam train tracks and directly opposite the depot building.

The first detailed depiction of Ocean Terrace appears in the 1899-1900 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of San Francisco. It shows a complex of four wooden buildings arrayed in a northwest-southeast alignment, with their entrances oriented east towards the train depot. The largest of these was a two-story, 100 x 65-foot "commercial block" structure located at the northwest end of the street. It contained six store fronts facing the tracks and a large restaurant in the rear. Due to the slope of the hill, the rear of the building also had a basement. The storefronts were given street numbers 1 through 6 running from south to north. Residences occupied the second story.

In addition to the commercial block, three smaller wooden buildings appear at the southeast end of the street, presumably built after the publication of the 1890 album. From north to south these structures were, respectively, a storefront, a photographer's studio, and a residence. The buildings were given letter designations H, I, and J, rather than normal street numbers, possibly because they were late additions to the street. The smaller buildings varied in size from 20 x 15 feet to 30 x 15 feet.

Across the street from Ocean Terrace, at the northeast corner of 48th Avenue and Point Lobos Avenue, stood several additional commercial and residential buildings that were part of Sutro's holdings. These structures included a self-proclaimed "Sutro Heights Casino," several sheds, a dwelling, and the San Francisco Fire Department's "Chemical Station 8."

Photographs showing Ocean Terrace are rare; portions of the street usually only appear in the background of images. A photo taken in 1903 of three early automobiles parked outside the Casino shows a portion of Ocean Terrace. In this view, the first building at the southeast end of the street is revealed to be a two-story wood structure with the name "MECCA" prominently painted on its sides. Next in line are a one-story building with a painted sign reading "CLIFF HOU[SE] / Pictures taken… / GROU[PS]," a vacant lot, and a 1½-story gable-ended building with Queen Anne-style detailing. At the right end is the commercial block, which is sizably taller than the other structures, with a slight mansard roof, dormer windows, and several brick chimneys.

It's interesting to note that the three smaller buildings displayed widely different architectural styles (especially MECCA), indicating they may have been brought to Ocean Terrace from other locations. Moving wood-frame buildings was a common practice in late 19th century San Francisco and would have been a simple matter for Sutro's workers. Relocating buildings was also an economical way to increase the value of one's real estate holdings. Sutro had continued to expand his amusements near Sutro Heights in the years following the opening of the steam train line, and constructed such attractions as the Sutro Baths (1894) and a "chateau-style" Cliff House (1896). As part of this development program, Sutro purchased numerous rides and sideshow attractions from the 1894 Midwinter Fair in Golden Gate Park and relocated them to a "Pleasure Ground" above the Baths, on the site of today's Merrie Way – only a block west of Ocean Terrace. It's possible that the Mecca building, with its tall columns and vaguely Middle Eastern architecture, was a relocated structure from the 1894 Fair or elsewhere, put to a new use.

Although listed as a residence on all the Sanborn maps, the Mecca building looked as if it served another purpose. Perhaps it did. It could have been a meeting hall for a popular 19th century "secret society": the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine. Known today as Shriners International, this branch of the Freemasons was founded in New York City in the 1870s. At the turn of the 20th century, meeting halls utilized by Shriners frequently bore names such as "Mecca Temple," and close examination of historic photos reveals that the Mecca nameboards on three sides of the building included stars and crescent moon motifs, which are international symbols of Shriners.

In 2006, archaeologist Michael Meyer observed that "The photographs of both the Ocean Terrace buildings and the rest of Sutro's enterprises show a contrast between the facades of buildings for public amusement and starkness of practical design for profit. The gabled and mansard roofs at the front of the main building slope to a shed roof at the rear above a monolithic wall of windows. A hedge minimally hides the rear of the smaller buildings…Upon arrival by train to Ocean Terrace, visitors would see the attractions such as the Firth Wheel and disembark in front of buildings with interesting architectural detail. They could walk down the street past the onion dome kiosks or cross through the fanciful gate into the gardens…In contrast, those walking back up Cliff Avenue got a view of the less appealing side of the Ocean Terrace buildings. Presumably, the plan was to have extracted the visitors' money by this time."

The 1905 Sanborn map shows Ocean Terrace little changed from the 1899-1900 version. The primary differences are minor changes in building uses, and the closing of the large restaurant that occupied the rear portion of the commercial block. As will be discussed in Part II, numerous male boarders were living on Ocean Terrace at this time, and it's speculated that the former restaurant area was converted into bachelor apartments by 1905.

Changing Times

A major technological change occurred on Ocean Terrace in 1905 when the Ferries & Cliff House steam train line was replaced by a new electric streetcar line, designated the "Cliff



Detail from panorama looking north and east from Sutro Baths, showing rear of Ocean Terrace complex, 1910. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp26.1078-1079)

Line" and operated by the United Railroads of San Francisco (URR). As part of this upgrade, the long-neglected depot across from Ocean Terrace was totally remodeled by the URR to include both a waiting room and a residence for streetcar company employees. Simultaneously, the depot was moved several feet to the north to accommodate the new streetcar tracks' alignment.

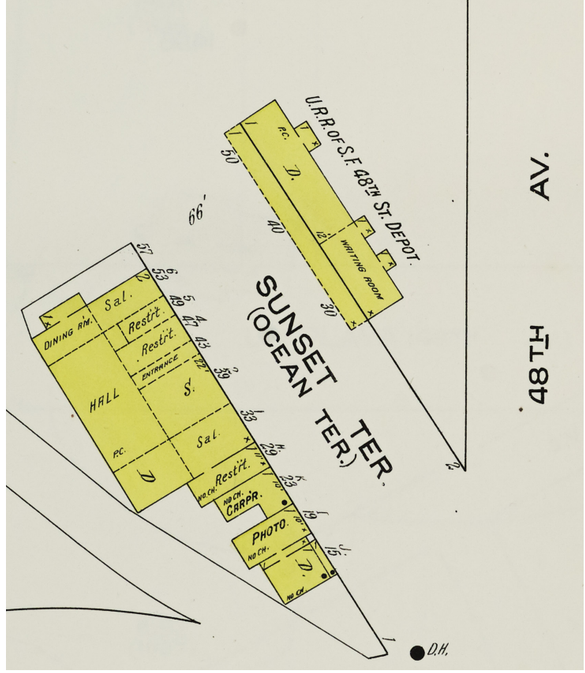
A photo taken from the depot about this time shows a horse-drawn fire wagon passing the north corner of the commercial block (6 Ocean Terrace), with the Firth Wheel visible in the background. Although the fire wagon was clearly the photographer's intended subject, the view also captures such building details as the mansard roofline, the glass front of the saloon at #6, the awning over its windows, a nearby flagpole, and (beneath the wagon) a board fence and shed adjacent to the main building. The photo also gives clues to the shabby nature of Ocean Terrace: the flag is tattered, the saloon windows dirty, and the board fence in disrepair.

In 1909, Ocean Terrace was renamed "Sunset Terrace" by the San Francisco Street Naming Commission. Ocean Terrace was apparently being confused with nearby Ocean Boulevard (today's Great Highway) and the much-larger Ocean Avenue located several miles to the southeast. In its waning days, the stubby street was often referred to simply as "48th Avenue" on many maps and directories.

Sutro had died in 1898, leaving behind a vast and complex estate which included Ocean Terrace and all of its buildings. In 1910, a large illustrated estate inventory was prepared that included several views of Ocean Terrace/Sunset Terrace. The most informative is a photo looking northwest from the intersection of Point Lobos Avenue and 48th Avenue titled "Richmond Blocks No. 20" and showing, from left to right, Ocean Terrace, the URR streetcar right-of-way, and the remodeled train depot. This image documents more of the commercial block at the north end of the row than any previous photograph, revealing that the structure had three gable-end facades facing the streetcar depot, each with its own brick chimney that probably signified a subdivision within the structure.

Another view from the 1910 Sutro Estate Inventory shows Ocean Terrace from the west and documents two lengthy rows of double-hung windows facing the Pacific Ocean. A comparison of this photo with the floorplan on the Sanborn maps reveals the first story windows were mostly in the original restaurant area, and must have provided diners with spectacular views overlooking the Sutro Baths and Cliff House. (The restaurant seems to have been a lively place; in July 1889, the restaurant manager, a Mr. Holling, wrote Sutro asking for permission to hold dances in the hall adjoining his establishment.)

The appraiser of the Sutro Estate, Archibald S. Baldwin, did not think much of Ocean Terrace or its potential. In fact, Baldwin went so far as to consider the parcel's value actually diminished by the buildings' presence. They were also an impediment to his proposed residential development of the



Detail from Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of San Francisco, 1913-1915. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

tract. Baldwin described the street's buildings in a derogatory manner: "I consider them undesirable whether this plan [building a subdivision] is carried out or not, and consequently I have placed no value on them, notwithstanding the fact that they are producing a rental of several hundred dollars per month."

The 1913-1915 updates to the Sanborn map show Ocean Terrace/Sunset Terrace at the height of its physical development. The street had expanded to include another wood frame building labeled "Carpenter" that occupied the formerly vacant lot between buildings H and I. Given the street address "K," this last building was likely the shop of Alfred Kidd, who listed his occupation in the 1909 city directory as a carpenter residing at 48th and Cliff Avenues. Another change was the addition of an enclosure over the shed on the northwest side of the commercial block. The saloon at #6 was split in half and had a dining room at the rear, while the kitchen formerly behind the saloon at #1 became a dwelling. And, the large space on the backside of the building was listed as a Hall, and was presumably used for rentals.

Sunset on Ocean Terrace

Sometime in late 1918, Ocean Terrace became a virtual ghost town. Although city directories up to that year document the same occupants and businesses along the street as in years past, all the businesses had closed by 1920. The federal census for that year showed only two households living on the street.

There are several possible explanations for this sudden exodus and the buildings' subsequent demolition three years later. First, during World War I the military was authorized by the Secretary of War to shut down liquor establishments located within a half-mile of any recruit training camp or military post. In July 1918 the Cliff House restaurant was forced to temporarily close under this ruling, due to its proximity to Fort Miley. It's safe to assume that the liquor retailers along Ocean Terrace (which was even closer to the fort) were also shut down by the military authorities. The saloon keepers along the street likely moved elsewhere and/or found other occupations.

Second, by 1918 the wooden buildings along Ocean Terrace were nearly 30 years old, some perhaps even older (if they'd been moved from elsewhere). The Sutro Estate was probably reluctant to keep maintaining the aging buildings, especially if most of the retail tenants had been forced to close due to wartime liquor restrictions. Rather than hold onto the empty complex and continue to pay property taxes, the Estate may simply have decided it was more economical to evict the last tenants and tear down the structures. Finally, the looming specter of Prohibition (enacted on October 28, 1919) made it unlikely that Ocean Terrace's restaurants and bars would ever be fully occupied again.

Given the Estate's prejudice against its existence, it's little wonder Ocean Terrace was eventually torn down. No exact date for the demolition of the buildings has been found, but it is believed the Sutro Estate evicted the remaining tenants and demolished the Ocean Terrace complex sometime in late 1920 or 1921. Photographs taken during a 1922 reconstruction of Point Lobos Avenue reveal that all the buildings on the site had been demolished and the land left bare. Only the streetcar depot for the Cliff Line remained.

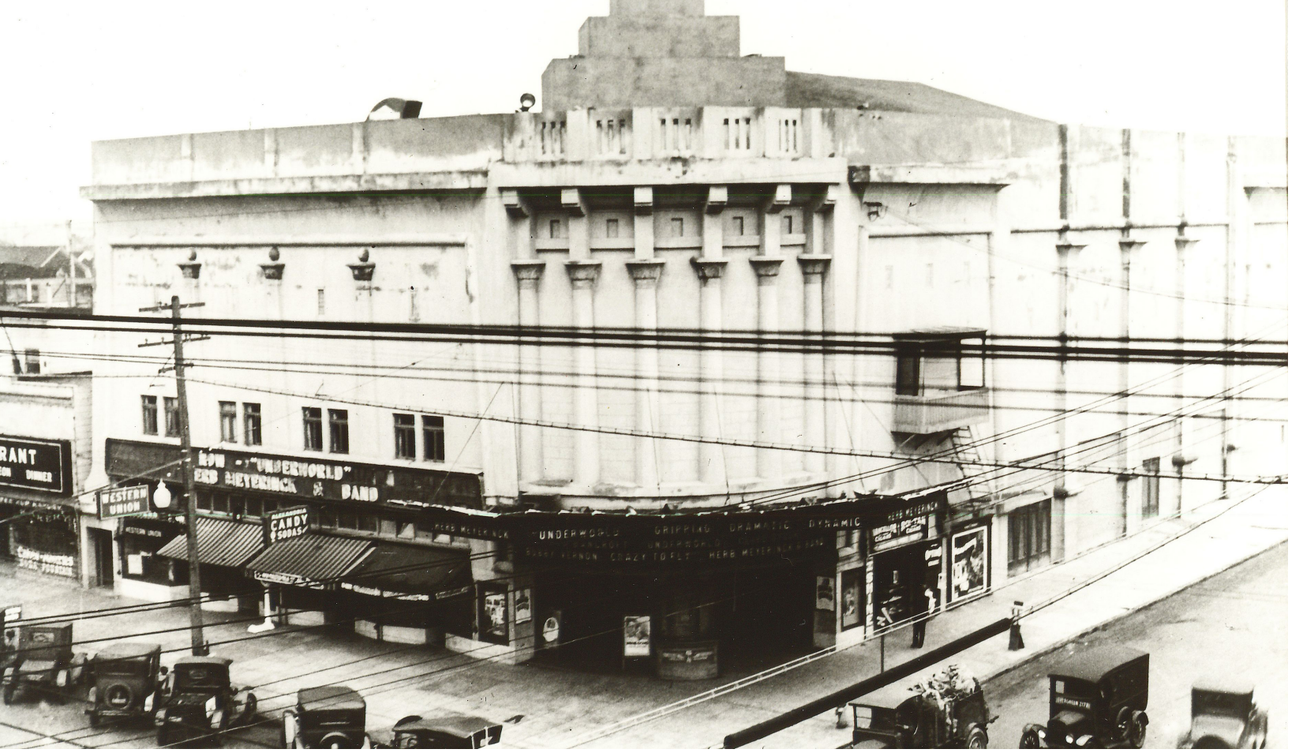
Today, the site of Ocean Terrace is simply a nondescript street corner located across Point Lobos Avenue from the lions flanking the entrance to Sutro Heights. The former sites of the large commercial block and smaller structures that once lined the street are mostly covered by the paved Coastal Trail paralleling El Camino Del Mar. Archeologists working for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area carried out site investigations in 2006 in preparation for the trail's construction. They uncovered the brick piers that supported the commercial block, but no other building remains. In addition, they found broken bottles, plates, coal hunks, and other debris – all consistent with commercial restaurant and saloon activities known to have taken place at Ocean Terrace. They also collected scores of .22 caliber cartridge casings, no doubt the detritus of a long-vanished shooting gallery once located on the street.

Although the buildings are gone, Ocean Terrace's history has been reconstructed through archival research, aging newspaper clippings, historic photographs, and onsite investigations. In our next installment, we'll trace the personal stories of several of Ocean Terrace's long-time residents.

ALEXANDRIA...

I HEAR YOU CALLING

BY WOODY LABOUNTY



Original Alexandria Theater exterior, December 15, 1927. (Courtesy of Jack Tillmany)

Gavin MacEachern and I stood in front of one of the poster cases outside of the Alexandria Theater on the northwest corner of 18th Avenue and Geary Boulevard. Headshots of an all-star cast lined the bottom of a poster for* The Towering Inferno: *Faye Dunaway, Robert Wagner, Richard Chamberlain, Paul Newman, Robert Vaughn, Steve McQueen, Jennifer Jones, William Holden, O. J. Simpson…Gavin went through the line twice. First, it was "lives, dies, dies, dies, lives, lives." Then he started over, telling me how each doomed member of Hollywood royalty would meet their grisly death in the movie: "falls, falls, burns up then falls…"

In such form were spoilers given in San Francisco's Richmond District in 1974.

Gavin and I lived in the same house on the 100 block of 11th Avenue, his family upstairs, and mine in the basement apartment below. The Coliseum Theater on Clement Street and 9th Avenue was "our" movie house, but we were generous nine-year-olds, willing to spread our allowances around by walking across Park-Presidio Boulevard to visit the Alexandria. Disaster movies trumped any parochialism, especially since *The Towering Inferno*'s eponymous skyscraper was played by San Francisco's Bank of America building.

We took for granted the small glamorous details of the Alexandria: the entryway's swirling color terrazzo, the lobby's green-tiled water fountain, the staircase's gilded banister to the upper level and the rose gold panels of warriors and naked women on the walls. Well, to those last we may have paid some attention.

The interior seating was stadium style. Instead of a balcony like at our Coliseum, the levels were stepped apart in height by a wide aisle separating the plebes like us from the hoity-toity "loge" crowd. I think the ticket price was maybe 50 cents difference? One could sneak between sections. It was more easily accomplished than slipping into the box seats section of a Giants game at Candlestick Park. But you did run the risk of a teenager with a red-tipped flashlight busting you.

On the walls flanking the screen were two giant murals of waves and flowers and more naked people. A massive chandelier hung from the domed ceiling. From below, craning one's neck back, it looked like another golden flower, or a shield, or an origami circle made from gold foil. Without a balcony, the 1,500-seat open auditorium of the Alexandria felt vast. I was just a kid occupying a small part of a big adult world, one a child assumes has existed immemorial into the past and will endure unchanged forever into the future.

Egyptian Grandeur to Art Deco Elegance

November 26, 2023 marked the 100th anniversary of the Alexandria's opening. Although always intended as a second-run neighborhood movie house – films usually had their premiere runs at flagship theaters on Market Street – the owners and operators, the Levin family, did not skimp in giving their new theater some character.

The Alexandria was the city's first Egyptian-themed theater. On its rounded façade, six papyrus-topped columns rose above the marquee. A stepped pyramid on the roof sprouted a massive flagpole supported by sphinxes. The entry and lobby featured ankhs, palms, and winged suns.

Ushers did Egyptian cosplay for opening night with cobra-adorned caps. Ben Black, leader of the theater's house band, teamed up with Neil Morét to write a commemorative theme song for the Alexandria's debut. It's a catchy tune with Tin Pan Alley Arabian riffs. I was able to copy the sheet music from friend Jack Tillmany's collection and hired Lisa Sanchez and Doug McKeehan to record it. (Hear it here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rptTu6ihwrA).

The refrain:
Alexandria, I hear you calling,
Alexandria, oh land enthralling,
You know well what haunts me,
It's your spell that taunts me,
And your song all day long I sing.

Over its life, the Alexandria received various cosmetic additions, minor make-overs, and modernizations to keep up with the times. Interior plaster hieroglyphs and Egyptian cosmology were given the heave-ho for Art Deco nymphs, flowers, and speed lines. A heavy baroque vertical blade sign went up in the 1930s and was replaced in the next decade by a sleek rocket-ship strip topped with curves of multi-colored neon. Originally the theater had a simple entry awning. In 1942 the streamlined marquee was installed, emblazoned with the crisp ALEXANDRIA letters and electrified with neon able to cut through any summer fog.



Alexandria Theater, May 1975. (Courtesy of Jack Tillmany)

Egypt came back briefly when *Cleopatra,* starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, made its San Francisco premiere at the Alexandria in 1963. Lines formed all down the block. A bartender at the Gold Chips bar, which occupied one of the theater's Geary Boulevard storefronts, told a reporter "We've had more people in here wearing black ties than I've ever SEEN before."[1] In the middle of the 20th century, hit movies might play at theaters for months, even years. The Alexandria became a first-run house in the 1950s and actually began taking reservations for what were called roadshow runs of prestige films and blockbusters. *Cleopatra* played for 56 weeks at the Alexandria.

It's hard to properly emphasize the role going to the movies played in American life at one time. Just after World War II, 60% of the United States population, some 90 million people, saw at least one movie a week. The Fox Theater on Market Street had 4,500 seats and was just one of 25 theaters downtown. The Richmond District alone had five theaters when I was a kid – the Coronet, Balboa, Coliseum, Alexandria, and 4 Star – and two more very nearby in the Bridge and Vogue.

As with other neighborhood theaters, the Alexandria's gravity held a satellite of businesses which prospered off all these movie-goers. My mother worked at Donut World across the street, my father at Mother's Inn bar (the former Gold Chips) in the Alexandria building itself. My grandmother watched us when both worked late shifts to serve the date night couples exiting the theater.



Ocean-themed Art Deco mural on the west wall of the Alexandria's main theater, May 27, 2004. (Photo by Anderson Gin and David West Reynolds; courtesy of Phaeton Group)



Filmmaking-themed Art Deco relief inside the Alexandria, May 27, 2004. (Photo by Anderson Gin and David West Reynolds; courtesy of Phaeton Group)



Removal of the Alexandria's vertical sign, January 20, 2023. (Courtesy of Woody LaBounty)

About a year after Gavin and I saw *The Towering Inferno*, the Alexandria was converted into a triplex. The upper section of the stadium was boxed off for two smaller screens. Projection for the main room came out of a strange cave between those boxes which also accommodated the surviving chandelier. While understandable from an economic standpoint (three films showing meant more popcorn sales), seeing a film in one of the smaller upper theaters was definitely a lesser experience. One wall was strangely slanted. Sound bled through from the other shows. But on the plus side, some of the floral artwork which used to be high above the audience was suddenly at eye level.

The last operator, Regal Entertainment, gave up on the Alexandria in 2004. The last shows were on February 16 and if you went that day, you had a chance to take home a few of the marquee letters as a souvenir. My last visit had been a couple of months earlier, seeing *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World,* as much a boy's movie as *The Towering Inferno*.

Twenty Years of Waiting

What next, we all asked? The seats, speakers, and projection equipment were pulled out almost immediately. Using Western Neighborhoods Project's status as the local history organization, I was able to negotiate some access. On May 27, 2004, photographers David West Reynolds and Anderson Gin got into the closed theater to document the decorative elements of the lobby, staircase, and auditoriums. I thought it was important.

The building with its adjoining back parking lot on 18th Avenue was sold. I attended a meeting soon after, arranged by district supervisor Jake McGoldrick and meant to inform the community on the new owners' plans. A dozen of us crowded into a room at the Richmond District YMCA. The Alexandria's representative was a college kid with a backpack. Someone's nephew? He couldn't answer any questions and no one knew why he'd come. We all had to wait for some more definite proposal.

Neglected buildings deteriorate quickly. The neon "Parking" sign with an arrow pointing to a small lot on 18th Avenue went fairly fast. At least once in the first decade of closure, some beige paint was slapped on the exterior, erasing the green color which highlighted the original palm fronds. The vertical blade sign and marquee began to rust.

The first real proposal, approved in 2010, was for a mix of offices, a small theater, and a restaurant. It retained what was best about the Alexandria: the murals, staircase, and marquee. I appreciated the hired architect's thoughtfulness and sensitivity to these elements. But after getting the entitlements, the owners did nothing. Pigeons and vandals routinely defaced the entry and got inside the building. A steel fence and hanging wire mesh were put up. The "N" of Alexandria in the marquee went missing.

I was last able to tour the inside of the building about six years ago, when new ownership took over the property. The entryway and lobby were pretty trashed. Some of the gilded medallions had disappeared. But a lot of the ornamentation was still in place, including the massive chandelier and auditorium murals.

The new owners had a new plan. They received permission to build housing on the back parking lot with the promise that the profits from that development would fund a revitalization of the theater building. The Alexandria would be a swim center, offices, and small auditorium. Again, the murals, vertical blade sign, and marquee would be retained and restored. I supported this plan. It was 2017. The building had been closed for a dozen years. Something needed to happen. The housing was built on the parking lot. Nothing happened at the theater. The exterior features of the building continued to crumble away.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the owner decided they couldn't or wouldn't do the work to create a swim center. Now they have floated yet another new plan, although it hasn't been formally submitted: a giant housing project. Meanwhile, storms in January 2023 had the vertical blade sign visibly shaking, ready to detach, so an emergency order was made by the city to secure it. Instead, the owner pulled it off. For a few days, the pieces lay warped and bent under the crumbling marquee. A notice of violation was issued by the city for general negligence and was recently upheld when the owner appealed. Facing daily fines of $250, he's now talking with the city about signing a development agreement and didn't oppose initiation of landmark status.

Housing is fine with me. Affordable housing is even better. Restored, the theater elements of the building would elegantly complement any use, including residential. I can see people clamoring for the cachet of living in "The Alexandria." The real issue is that the city has approved projects for the site and the Alexandria's ownership has never done anything with the building beyond letting it deteriorate into a sad eyesore.

Anniversary Action

One anniversary just passed for the Alexandria, and another is approaching. November 26, 2023 was the centennial of the theater's opening and February 16, 2024 will be the 20-year mark of its closing. For most of the 20th century and what portion we've had of the current millennium, the Alexandria's vertical blade sign and marquee – visible from way up both sides of Geary Boulevard – were significant place-makers for the Richmond District. They can be again. The Alexandria's anniversaries are a chance to send a simple message to its owners: be good neighbors. Respect the businesses and residents of the Richmond District. If you can't maintain your property or finance its revitalization, sell it to the city and let us have affordable housing and a revitalized landmark.

Woody LaBounty is the former Executive Director of Western Neighborhoods Project. He is currently the President & CEO of San Francisco Heritage and writes weekly about San Francisco history at SanFranciscoStory.

1. "1,400 See 'Cleo' –No Stars," *San Francisco Examiner*, June 27, 1963.

Inside the Outside Lands











Lands

Another year come, another almost gone. And, unbelievably, we end this year with very heavy hearts. Just as this issue was about to go to print, we lost one of Western Neighborhoods Project's founding directors. **Arnold Woods** passed away suddenly and far too soon on Friday, December 1, 2023. He was our beloved podcast co-host, a dedicated community historian, an indefatigable researcher, a friendly face at all of our public programs, and so much more. But, above all else, he was our friend. This nonprofit simply won't be the same without him.

There will be more to say when we start to recover from this profound loss, but in the meantime, we'll do our best to carry on the work. WNP's Board of Directors just held its annual officer elections and congratulations are due to President **Carissa Tonner**, Vice President **Edward Anderson**, and Treasurer **Kyrie Whitsett**. We're thankful for the board's service in 2023 and look forward to their leadership in 2024, supported by **Joe Angiulo**, **Michelle Forshner**, **Lindsey Hanson**, **Denise LaPointe**, and **Nicole Smahlik**.

Our board members are joined by other dedicated volunteers who help us do the History here, and this is the time of year that we slow down to count our blessings. WNP's rotating window exhibitions have been more vibrant than ever thanks to the curation and design work of **Lindsey Hanson**. Also on display at our Clubhouse is the most adorable model home, a replica of 623 32nd Avenue. Thank you to historic preservationist **Katherine Petrin** for helping us save this piece of west side history, and to Sunset District artist **Thomas Beutel** and his wife, **Joyce Wong-Beutel**, for restoring the model.

Collections management is a labor of love that is infinite in scope. **Barbara Cannella, Emiliano Echeverria, Greg Gaar, Judy Hitzeman, Christine Huhn, Paul Judge, Michael Lange, John Martini**, and **Art Siegel** continue to work diligently on the OpenSFHistory archive. We're so grateful to **Andrew Roth**, who cataloged two massive 1930s scrapbooks from the Cliff House, and **Ryan Butterfield** and **Harvey Newman**, who helped us retrieve another genuine Cliff House artifact – a massive wooden sign – from Aptos, California.

It's hard for two employees to be everywhere and do all the things, so thank you to **Deb Denison, Clara Dudley, Nicolette Heaphy, Jim Jenkins, Athena Kyle, Judi Leff, Gail MacGowan, Rhian Miller, Reino Niemela Jr., Ken Spielman, Pam Wright, Yameen**, and **Joey Yee** for helping us staff over 40 public programs this year. We love putting on collaborative programs, and we couldn't do it without contributors **Richard Brandi** and **John Martini**, who led over 15 history walks this year; **Gina Caprari**, **Christine Fogarty**, and the staff at the **Global Museum** at SF State; the entire team at **Fort Point Beer Company**; **Adam Bergeron** and the fine folks at **CinemaSF**; and the **Internet Archive** (special thanks to **Caitlin Olson**).

We are grateful to the following people for making their time, talents, and expertise available to us, and sharing their stories this year: **Richard Adrianowicz, Susan Anderson, Bonnie Bates, Rose Marie Cleese, Frank Dunnigan, John Freeman, David Friedlander, Norio Fujikawa, Nicole Hallenbeck, Stephen Haller, Michael Jang, Paul Judge, Peter Kasin, Woody LaBounty, David Lam, John Lindsey** and his **Great Highway gallery, Angus Macfarlane, Margaret Ostermann** (and **Charlie**!), **Gary Parks, Katherine Petrin, Rick** and **Megan Prelinger, Don Propstra, Al Barna** and **Randall Ann Homan** (who also designed the "It's History Time" neon clock that graces our Clubhouse window) of **SF Neon**, and **LisaRuth Elliott** and **Chris Carlsson** of **Shaping San Francisco**.

Laura Macias (with a little substitute help from **John Lindsey** and **Daniel Lucas**) continues to design a beautiful membership magazine for us, and **Ian Hadley** continues to produce our podcast and keep an eye on our books. Thank you to **Jen Firlik** for designing WNP's new online storefront, to **Marc Bertone** and **Thiago Robert** for literally keeping our websites running, and to **Nikki Flynn** and **Vince Rodriguez** for helping us with branding and marketing as we re-envision a new website to celebrate our 25th anniversary in 2024.

Our Oral History program continues to move forward thanks to interviewer **Sarah Wille** and transcriptionist **Penny Miller**. Stories we've captured this year include: **Thomas Beutel, Kevin Brady, Woody LaBounty, David Lazar, Reino Niemela Jr., Bart Schneider, William Smith, Lorri Ungaretti**, and **Lope Yap Jr.** Thanks to **Thomas Beutel, Paul Boles, Tilly Clark, Ken Spielman**, and **King Rhoton** for continuing to add transcripts of our podcast episodes to the website.

And last but most certainly not least, our student volunteer **Drew Moss**. We first met Drew when he interviewed Nicole Meldahl for a class project and then he asked if we needed any help. Since that time, he's become a fixture at the Clubhouse, helping with special projects, social media, staffing events, and, soon, becoming a vital part of our podcast. History will be in good hands as long as we keep meeting students like Drew.



WNP's new neon clock in the front windows of the Clubhouse at 1617 Balboa Street.

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Photos of Arnold Woods volunteering for WNP over the course of 24 years.





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