Outside Lands

San Francisco History from Western Neighborhoods Project

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MOVING HEAVEN AND EARTH



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History from Western Neighborhoods Project
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EDITOR: Chelsea Sellin

GRAPHIC DESIGNER: Laura Macias

CONTRIBUTORS: Richard Brandi, Nicole Meldahl, Coleman Roberts, Walter Stevenson.

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

Cover: View south on Portola near Miraloma, after home removal but prior to street widening, circa 1955. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp28.2846)

Right: Aaron H. Miller speaking on police brutality in Washington Square, August 14, 1960. (SF Examiner Negatives; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp28.2099)

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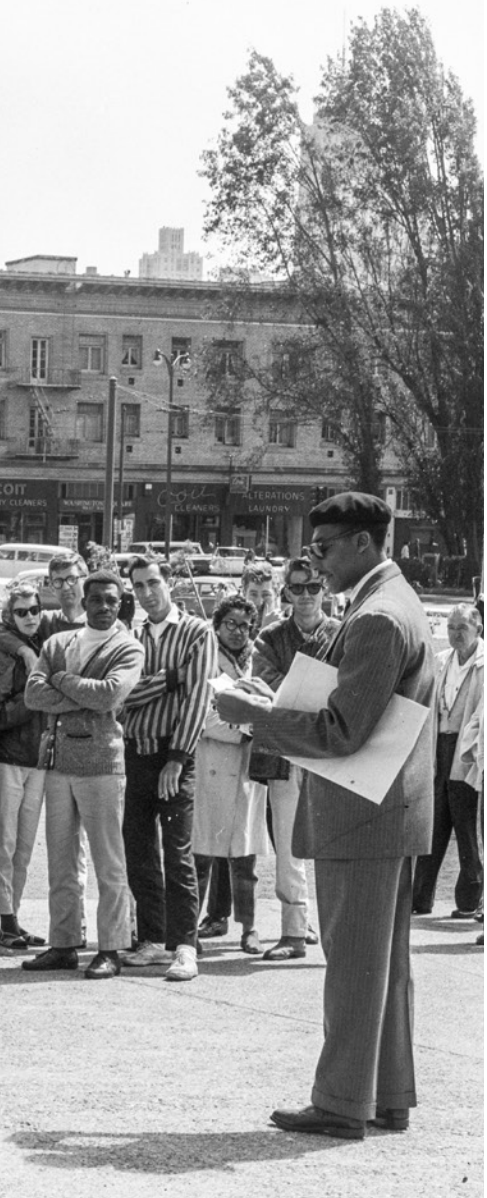
DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Congratulations, WNP Family: we collectively made it through the first quarter of 2021. We have some exciting news to share and grand plans on the horizon, but first, I'd like to take a moment to reflect. The longer I study history, the more I realize how hard it is to be human. We work so hard to carve out our little piece of the world and sometimes it feels like we have to move heaven and earth just to find a little peace.

Moving earth is easy. You only have to browse OpenSFHistory for 20 minutes to see we have a long history of digging, building, buying land and changing it. If a mountain is in your way, dynamite it. If you want to travel a different route, widen the road. Once we as humans set our sights on something, we always find a way to get there. In ***The Transplanted Houses of Portola Drive***, our longtime friend and former board member, **Richard Brandi**, captures this feat (or folly, depending on your point of view).

The heavens are harder to budge. It seems like artists are the ones most likely to reach for the stars, often flying too close to the sun and burning up in the process. San Francisco has always found the artistry in everyday living and might best be known for its Beat poets, those angelheaded hipsters so famously looking for a fix in North Beach, convening around the altar of City Lights Bookstore. But there was so much more to this scene than Jack Kerouac and his Dharma Bums. **Coleman Roberts** examines an often-overlooked mecca for these folks and others who flocked to the neighborhood to find themselves in his article, ***The Bread and Wine Mission: Spirituality, Poetry, and Rebellion in North Beach***.



It's been a real treat for this old Beatnik born in the wrong era to chat with Coleman about his discoveries. Coincidentally, we opened these conversations just as the chapter closed on Lawrence Ferlinghetti's long and inspiring life. It made me look again at some of his work, which is how I found a poem titled "Overpopulation" that appeared in the first issue of *Beatitude* published at City Lights, after the Bread and Wine Mission closed. He wrote: "People still lose / and find themselves / in bed // but we weren't designed / to live forever and ever // All must be begun over / in a new pastoral era // And there must be an end / to all this rotation / around the goofball sun // None of us will ever die / As long as this goes on."

We can reach for the heavens, we can take the land and mold it to our will, but ultimately, it's a spiritual connection to place that enables us to feel truly at home. That's perhaps easiest for the privileged among us who can hold on to their memories without pain and return to the places from their past. **Walt Stevenson** is one of those lucky souls, a West Portal resident currently living in the home where he grew up. You can read about what life was like for this latchkey kid and how he lives with the past while making it his own in our oral history feature, ***Walt Stevenson Remembers***.

None of us will live forever but it's my hope that by capturing these stories, WNP can give members of our community a little bit of immortality – in print, online, and at our Home for History on Balboa. There's peace in that, even if the living isn't always quite so easy.

WHERE IN WEST S.F.?

Our featured photo last quarter might have been a wee bit too obscure, although Ed Kinney was spot on with his guess of Portola Drive and Vicente Street in 1928. While we were suspicious he might have cheated, he revealed his secret: "You had a lot of key words (clues) for this puzzle." Congratulations on reading the clues so closely, Ed.



View northeast on Portola at Vicente, April 13, 1928. (SF Public Utilities Commission – Spring Valley Water collection; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp36.10062)



Charlie on Portola at Vicente. (Courtesy of Margaret Ostermann)

More specifically, this photo was taken at the behest of the Spring Valley Water Company on April 13, 1928 to document pipework in the area. We even almost stumped our fluffiest junior historian. **Margaret Ostermann** wrote, "Your latest Where in West SF photo at first gave me fright. But sure enough, there was Mt. Davidson in the corner giving me a reference point! Thank you big hill. Charlie agreed, so we headed off this afternoon to check it out ourselves (with a bonus trip up Edgehill Mountain thanks to your recent Forest Hill Extension podcast). How quaint Portola looks before its 1958 widening." If you're not sure what Margaret is referring to, all you have to do is keep reading the rest of this issue to be in the know.

If you were standing in this location in 1915, looking the other way, you would have a very different view. It's difficult to read without the benefit of magnification but that sign on the left marks the entrance to St. Francis Wood. Photos like this remind us how far we've come in just over 100 years, and what it took to make a home way out here in the Outside Lands. Hard to imagine but touchstones do still exist, like this stately structure at 1470 Portola Drive – seen here without any neighbors but still standing today as the neighborhood grew up around it. This residence is remarkably intact and worth taking note of the next time you're out for a stroll in West Portal.



View south on Portola at Vicente, November 22, 1915. (Photo by Horace Chaffee, SF Department of Public Works; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp36.01079)



1470 Portola Drive between 14th Avenue and Vicente, circa 1910s. (Marilyn Blaisdell Collection; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp37.04219)

And since we're in West Portal, we'd be remiss not to share the somewhat recent news that Cinemark Holdings, Inc. announced the permanent closure of the Empire Theatre in February 2021, another victim of the pandemic. According to District Seven Supervisor Myrna Melgar's aides, the Office of Economic and Workforce Development is already looking for a new tenant. We're crossing our fingers that the San Francisco Neighborhood Theater Foundation might be able to work its nonprofit magic once again. A staple of the neighborhood since 1925, it's hard to imagine West Portal without the warmth of the theatre's lit marquee.



Empire Theatre, February 1970. (Photo by Steve Levin; courtesy of Jack Tillmany / wnp5.50228)

Next quarter's "Where in West S.F.?" will be brought to you by a special guest columnist!

Here's hoping we hear from more of you, because we're sure our readers are dying to know...why was this outcrop covered with paint and where is it located? Send your ideas to nicole@outsidelands.org







Walt Stevenson **REMEMBERS**

After meeting Walter Stevenson, who goes by Walt, at a virtual trivia night held by Resilient West Portal in 2020, we knew his story was worth recording. Not just because he called out the answers to almost all of our neighborhood history questions before we even finished asking them, but also because he was an absolute delight – sharing stories freely, supported by an infectious laugh. Hearing Walt wax artistically about his past is to experience the joy of community first-hand. It was so lovely to speak with him during an interview that is our longest to date, clocking in at nearly two and a half hours.



Carlotta's Toys on West Portal near Ulloa, July 1957. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp25.6684)

The Stevensons

Walter Stevenson was born in Seattle, Washington, where his mother ran a corner grocery store – the kind of family business that was connected to the living room of their house by a shared door. But the Stevensons have lived in San Francisco since the 1950s. Walt's father, an advertising salesman, came to the city in pursuit of better job opportunities, and found one, selling Williams Lithograph Company streetcar banners that advertised clients like the Manning's Coffee chain. "His job was to make the food look delicious, make you want to get off that bus or the streetcar and go right to Manning's and get your fried egg and toast," Walt remembers.

The family initially rented one room in a boarding house on Polk and California, sharing the bathroom and kitchen with other tenants on the floor. They didn't have a lot of money but his parents made sure their kids experienced their new city. "My mom said, 'We're gonna go someplace every day.' That's part of why I saw so much of San Francisco at such an early age." Cable cars, once just a "see you soon" postcard sent by his father from far away, became real. There were trips to the park, afternoons at the Royal Theatre, and 2:00pm Sunday concerts at Stern Grove. "The one I remember most is the performance of Mikado. It's a light opera, and I remember it so well. As the King was coming, they said, 'Oh, he's getting very close, the king is very close, ah yes we see him in Daly City now!' I thought that was so funny as a kid – all pomp and circumstance around it and then they mention Daly City."

West Portal

After four months in the boarding house, the Stevensons rented a home in West Portal on Kensington Way, and eventually bought a home on Granville Way. Walt entered third grade at West Portal Elementary School, which was middle class in a predominantly white neighborhood but diverse by "happenstance", as Walt recalls, because the children of diplomats who lived in the area attended. Walt's classmate and friend, Basab Basu, was the son of the consul of India. "One Saturday morning we said, 'Hey, let's go swimming at Fleishhacker Pool.' We took the streetcar down and put our nickels up on the counter to get our ticket. I got a ticket and he took my nickel, and then my friend didn't get a ticket and he didn't take his nickel. And we said, 'Well how come?' And he says, 'Because you're not allowed in here.' I'm thinking, what is he talking about? I kind of look at my friend, we're nine years old or ten years old, we have no idea what's going on. You're struck, it's unfair and unjust, we say okay let's go pick the cattails and throw them at the buses. So we



Manning's Coffee Cafe at Powell and Market, October 1961. (SF Examiner; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp27.7384)

were off and doing something else but I have never forgotten that in my whole life, about my initial introduction to discrimination."

By sixth grade, Walt was captain of the Traffic Squad, keeping kids safe when crossing the street to and from school. Identified by a special belt and cap, he was able to leave the classroom five minutes early to take up his position. His squad participated in competitions against other schools at Kezar Stadium, fashioned after military parades. "One of us always carried a mascot rabbit named Pink Ears (kept in the kindergarten room) for good luck. We had won every year for, you know, I don't know how long, and Pink Ears was the reason." [Side note: Walt is very curious what happened to Pink Ears, no one at the school currently remembers him. Please write with news of his travels.]

Walt's mother worked at The Emporium before landing a job as store manager at the S&H Green Stamps western headquarters at 1446 Market Street. "I'm just guessing that our lives had worked out so that I was old enough to be a latchkey child," Walt surmises. He recalls the neighborhood from those days – businesses like Carlotta's Toys on West Portal Avenue, where he looked but never bought (too expensive), spending his allowance more economically on toys from Woolworths. There was a pet shop where they would "look at puppies in the widow – it was the thing to do, you know?" He remembers penny candy at Shaws, but also from a corner grocery store on Taraval and Funston (now The San Francisco Wine Trading Company), across the street from the Portalhurst Presbyterian Church, where he attended summer camp. One memory leads to another.

A Buick dealer on 12th and Taraval, demolished to make way for an apartment building, was particularly kind to local kids. "Walking home from school [we would] go in there and pretend like we were gonna buy a car. The salesmen I think liked us because they used to play along, you know, we'd say, 'Okay, so today we'd like to order a station wagon convertible that's yellow.' And the salesperson would say, 'Well, we don't have one of those on display right now, but we could research that for you and see if there are.'" They did not (as we hoped) let the kids test drive one. "But they used to let us touch them and get in them." Cars are a recurring theme in Walt's life. During high school, he worked for a man named Harry who leased the Mobile station in West Portal.

A World Beyond West Portal

From West Portal Elementary, Walt attended Aptos Middle School, where the boys took woodshop. "I still have the letter holder that I made. I think I used 700 pegs. I was never happy with that, but, you know, you brought it home and you gave it to your parents because who else would want it? When my mom died we were going through her stuff and she still had it on her desk. I feel really good about that." He also remembers a print shop class, which held a particular fascination for a self-proclaimed "struggling artist" and son of a lithographer. One of their projects was a collection of recipes put together into a little booklet. It featured his mother's "killer chocolate chip cookie" recipe and, incredibly, the booklet recently resurfaced at his niece's house in Santa Cruz.

After attending Aptos for half a year, Walt transferred to the newly opened Hoover Middle School. The summer before the school opened, he and a group of kids helped put the new library together. "It was absolutely great. Talk about touching all the books. I am 13 years old or something so every book I picked up I didn't know anything about. You pick up something, you say, 'Oh, lizards!', or 'Oh, sexual practices! Oh, Zimbabwe!' Your mind is just like: whoom!"

Hoover wasn't actually finished when students first walked its halls. "They had tried very hard to get the classrooms open, and some space for some offices" but there was no schoolyard and the gym wasn't open (the cafeteria substituted). Overcrowding in neighborhood schools rushed Hoover's opening, and students came from several junior highs – a fact that Walt said may explain why his class, the first full class to graduate, was "sort of nebulous."

Walt initially chose print shop as an elective at Hoover, but Mrs. Bessie Schettler, his former English teacher at Aptos, encouraged him to work in the counseling office instead. "For some reason, I think because I really liked her and respected her, I said yes. Being a student but also watching other students when they would come to the counseling office, I got a meta view of what was going on in the school. You know what I do now? I'm a college professor. That was a really, really important part of my experience at Hoover."

After graduating in 1957, Walt attended Abraham Lincoln High School, which at that time was only a three-year stint. "I remember some racial stuff stunningly because I hadn't been to school with Black kids. It was like we were separate clubs. I'm gonna say it was self-segregation, right, but I'm not sure it wasn't some institutional stuff."

In Pursuit of Education

Walt looked for work after graduating from Lincoln in 1960, and found an ad for a clerk position at The Hartford Insurance Group. "I went down [to California and Grant] and I looked pretty good, a little pimply, you know, but I looked pretty good, and I guess I looked trustworthy because I got the job." He was a file clerk in the claims department, working on "a big football field floor" bordered by offices and surrounded by rows of file cabinets. After six months, he left for Santa Cruz, where his brother worked as an engineer for Lockheed Martin "in the mountains where they used to test the rockets."

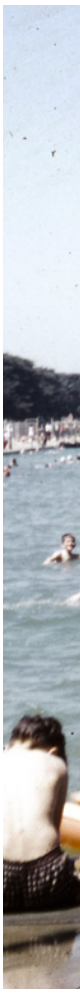
Walt again worked as a clerk, this time in the blockhouse alongside technicians and engineers. "The engineers, they all wear suits and ties and all had like a gray Air Force desk. That was, what I later reflected on, a status symbol. The technicians wore overalls and had no desks and had no offices. The engineers were theoreticians, okay? The technicians made it work." He observed the dynamic between the two, with the technicians often explaining things to the men who were technically in charge. "I just saw the injustice in that and said, well, you could control that. And that got me to go to school. So I left in September and came back to City College."

For two years, Walt attended City College of San Francisco, studying "three different things because I couldn't make up my damn mind." After trying architecture and French, he settled on English and transferred to the University of California, Berkeley. He commuted from San Francisco for the first semester but eventually found housing at Westminster House, a Presbyterian campus ministry on Bancroft Way at College Avenue. Walt graduated with a bachelor's degree in English Literature in 1965, but not before experiencing the Free Speech Movement (FSM) as an "observer" in his final year. After touching on the campus demonstrations led by Mario Salvo, Walt reflected on the activism of the 1960s and the protest movements we saw in 2020. "This has been really interesting to be here in this period of time at my age, I'm maybe 55, 60 years older than I was when I went through the FSM. The same human experience, the same feelings. It's surreal and it's not surreal."

> ***"I just saw the injustice in that and said, well, you could control that. And that got me to go to school."***

Through his mother, Walt worked as a warehouseman for S&H Stamps in Oakland while in school, but he wanted to be a store manager. He eventually ran the small store in Watsonville, then a larger one in Salinas, which unionized under his tenure. Seeing that process play out inspired him to take





"Maybe it only takes a few people to have a root down, to have that keel for the neighborhood to survive."

the next step in higher education, not unlike his experience at Lockheed. "I decided to go back to graduate school so I am NOT the person who gets that message but I'm the person who tells the other people what my message is."

While other kids his age came to San Francisco in 1967 to tune in, drop out, and expand their minds, Walt returned to San Francisco to pursue an MBA at Golden Gate University. When the university moved from its original location in the YMCA on Golden Gate Avenue and Leavenworth to 536 Mission Street, Walt developed and managed its first retail bookstore in exchange for free tuition. This led to a full-time faculty position teaching Business English at Golden Gate University in 1971, all because of the "two academic disciplines which I never, in the whole world thought would ever come together and provide a job, you know what I mean? Never."

Coming Home

As his professional life was unfolding, Walt and his wife bought a home in Balboa Park on Seminole Avenue near Cayuga and Geneva, where they lived for 20 years. After losing his parents, Walt moved back into the West Portal home in which he grew up. When asked how it felt to live in this home with so much personal history, he said, "It's... spiritual. I remember very clearly events that took place, painful ones as well as joyous ones. I go through spaces like right now... I'm sitting in the space where my grandmother died. If you think about it, you're moved, you're really moved. You know, that's the whole thing about time and space: is my grandmother still really here? Or am I intruding on her space? There are many experiences like that."





Left-to- Right: West Portal, circa 1965. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp25.2255) - Fleishhacker Pool, August 1960. (Courtesy of a Private Collector /wnp25.4787) - Stern Grove, circa 1950. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp25.2226)

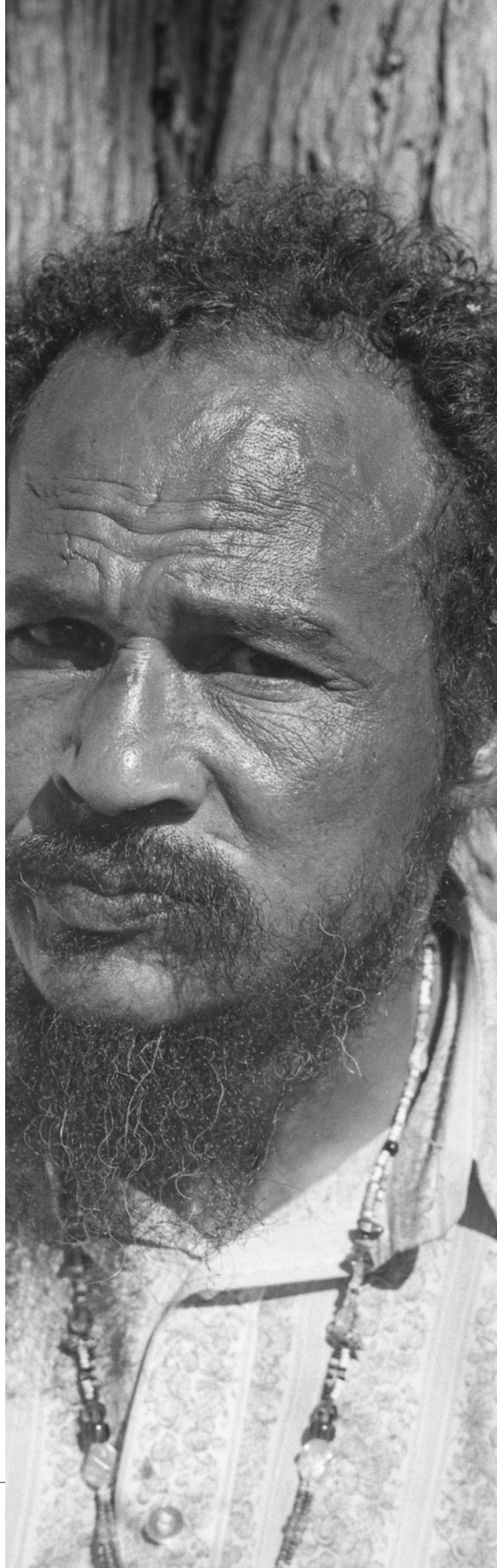
Walt gutted the house and transformed it, respectfully. “My father came in and tried to modernize the place, so we came and tried to de-modernize it. My father was a very frugal man from necessity, he lived through the Depression, so he was always looking for free materials and he loved to build things and to paint things. Shortly after my parents bought this house, he was driving around in this old ‘47 Kaiser and he noticed they were paving the cobblestone street on Dewey Boulevard. They had just thrown the cobblestones on the side.” His father asked if he could have the cobblestones, and they said yes, “so my father makes a hundred billion trips from Dewey Boulevard to our house, putting cobblestones in the trunk of his Kaiser, so he can build walls and stuff around our garden and our house and in the front.” It’s memories like these that Walt moves through while working on projects at the Stevenson home. But he’s okay with that, saying, “Now, I can be in their space and be myself.”

It means a lot to Walt to be a part of the neighborhood’s history, and he reflected on his role as a link to the past, as new folks move to West Portal. “Maybe it only takes a few people to have a root down, to have that keel for the neighborhood to survive. In fact, probably everybody should not have that keel for the neighborhood to survive, but it’s helpful to have some people who do. And that’s kind of the way I see me. I could tell you the seven different retails or operations that have been on the corner of West Portal and Ulloa. It may be not important, but it’s a keel, and so that never gets forgotten.”

As we wrapped up, Walt added “I just want to say that I’ve always felt privileged to have been introduced to West Portal by my parents through a newspaper ad for a rental home. I feel privileged that that was a fate that happened to me because I know it’s really not what everybody gets to say. I’m here, you know, that’s a real privilege.”

If you too want to be a part of history as the subject of our next interview, or know someone who should have their stories saved, contact Nicole Meldahl (nicole@outsidelands.org / 415-661-1000).







THE BREAD AND WINE MISSION:

SPIRITUALITY, POETRY, AND REBELLION IN NORTH BEACH

BY COLEMAN ROBERTS

A person strolling through San Francisco's North Beach might immediately notice that it's a tourist-heavy center of Italian culture and history. While they wouldn't be wrong, they might overlook the role the neighborhood played in one of the most influential literary movements of the 20th century – the Beat Generation. Peppered throughout North Beach are remnants of the city's beatnik past, most famous of which is City Lights Bookstore, founded by the inimitable Lawrence Ferlinghetti (who recently passed on February 22). Although some other Beat hangouts remain, like Vesuvio Cafe, many disappeared by the 1960s. One such place was the Bread and Wine Mission, located at 510 Greenwich Street on Telegraph Hill. Despite the place's obscurity today, the Bread and Wine Mission played a substantial role in the Beat scene by providing a space where artists and intellectuals could commune and make their ideas manifest.

Left-to-Right: Aaron H. Miller speaking on police brutality, August 14, 1960. (SF Examiner Negatives; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp28.2102) - Bob Kaufman, circa 1974. (Photo by Greg Gaar; courtesy of Greg Gaar / wnp72.034) - ACLU attorney Lawrence Speiser and Lawrence Ferlinghetti awaiting trial, August 22, 1957. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp14.10860)



William Margolis, Eileen Kaufman, and Bob Kaufman printing *Beatitude* at the Bread and Wine Mission, April 1959. (Photo by Fortunato Clementi, courtesy of Granary Books)

Before the Bread and Wine Mission emerged, the Beat movement was already underway. From the late 1940s to the 1950s, pockets of Beat poets sprung up around New York City's Greenwich Village and Los Angeles's Venice. The Beats rejected the conformity of mid-20th century America through artistic, literary, and spiritual means. Unimpressed by what they saw as rigid and oppressive institutions like the American government, industry, and organized Western religion, they found an escape in Zen Buddhism and sought inspiration from the experimentation of jazz music. With a reputation for permissiveness, low rent costs, and a somewhat thriving post-WWII literary scene, San Francisco's North Beach proved to be another ideal location for the movement. As the Beats gradually made the neighborhood their home, commercial hubs like the Coffee Gallery, Co-Existence Bagel Shop, and The Place sprung up. The founding of City Lights Bookstore in 1953 and the famous obscenity trial surrounding Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* in 1957 solidified the Beat's presence in San Francisco.

By 1958, a Congregationalist minister in his late twenties by the name of Pierre Delattre founded the Bread and Wine Mission (often referred to as "The Mission"). A graduate of both the University of Pennsylvania (English major) and the University of Chicago Divinity School, Delattre worked multiple jobs before becoming an ordained Presbyterian minister. It was after developing a program on religion and contemporary culture at UC Berkeley when the minister became aware of Christianity's poor reputation within intellectual and artistic circles. Thus, he began to imagine more open-minded approaches to religious fellowship. Inspired by the cafes and hubs in bohemian North Beach, Delattre decided to start a religiously affiliated Beat hangout in the neighborhood. With the help of poet Michael McClure and Congregationalist Reverend Robert W. Pike of the Board of Home Missions, The Mission officially opened its doors.

From the start, the operation was subtle about its Christian leanings. Aware of the institution's severe tendencies, Delattre wanted community to be the focus, as opposed to conversion. Beginning without a formal title, The Mission was originally a place where Beats could enjoy complimentary coffee, food, and, of course, bread and wine. Over time, The Mission became a central hub of Beat culture that rivalled City Lights, hosting poetry readings, live jazz performances, group counseling, and political discussions. Poets Joanne Kyger, Philip Whalen, and Robert Duncan would occasionally meet and have readings there. In 1959, poets Bob Kaufman and William Margolis began *Beatitude*, which became a central literary publication of the San Francisco Beat movement. Issues 8 through 17 were published at The Mission, featuring works by Jack Kerouac, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and Delattre himself.

But for Delattre and counselors at The Mission, the Beat philosophy reflected a psychological predicament just as much as an artistic revolution. Many self-proclaimed Beats who flocked to The Mission were teenage runaways, addicts, and mendicants – few of whom would go on to make any artistic or literary contributions. According to Delattre, their rejection of American conformity and "the establishment" rarely gave way to substantive protest. Rather, these individuals simply wanted to escape a culture they could not see themselves in. In a 1959 interview, Delattre complained that at times North Beach felt like both "the sickest place in the whole world", and other times "the only place that's living".[1] Much like the Beat movement itself, 1950s North Beach was truly a mixed bag, full of artistic enthusiasm as well as emotional resignation.

North Beach
like both "the
"the only

As often happens with countercultural movements, the increased media attention gave way to misconceptions about what the movement represented. As the 1950s drew to a close, "beatnik" became a derogatory term suggesting a drug-addled pseudo-intellectualism, and tourists from around the U.S. flocked to the Bread and Wine Mission to see evidence of such. With growing misconception, tension between the Beats and law enforcement intensified. One police officer by the name of William Bigarani became notorious for harassing the Beats. When a group of Beats, led by Kaufman and Margolis, retaliated by hanging Bigarani in effigy outside of Co-Existence Bagel Shop, a war began which ended in a slew of marijuana raids and 23 Beats arrested in January 1960.



Coffee Gallery, 1353 Grant Avenue, July 25, 1962. (Photo by Mike Musura; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp14.10656)

felt

sickest place in the whole world", and other times

place that's living"

Weeks later, around 200 North Beach residents gathered at Washington Square to protest police harassment of Beats in the neighborhood. But the efforts proved futile, as the scene began to taper out. Both The Place and Co-Existence Bagel Shop closed their doors for good. Another protest against police treatment was held in August 1960 by Aaron H. Miller, a painter who frequented the Bread and Wine Mission. In an interview at the protest for which a mere 25 people attended, he lamented the dying scene. As the hippie and antiwar movements picked up, by 1963 the Bread and Wine Mission closed for good. In a 1970 interview, Delattre looked back on the scene with some disappointment. According to the former minister and Buddhist convert, the "casualties are considerably greater than the Vietnam war", as many Beats "destroy[ed] themselves with the misuse of drugs".[2]

Despite the negatives, overall, the Beats' message was not for nothing. The 1960s and 1970s gave rise to the hippie movement, which adopted similar anti-establishment sentiments along with Eastern religious influences. Evidenced by Pierre Delattre through the Bread and Wine Mission, the Beat Generation has gone down in history as a time when post-WWII America began to question the country's institutions on both a political and spiritual level.

1. "'Beats' in Center of Coast Unrest," *The New York Times*, January 31, 1960.

2. "Echoes, Ghosts Recall Beatnik Scene of '50s," *The Springfield News-Leader*, February 12, 1970.


HANSON BROS.
HOUSE MOVERS

The Transplanted Houses of PORTOLA DRIVE



By Richard Brandi

After World War II, San Francisco widened many streets and built freeways to accommodate automobile and truck traffic. The rights of way for these projects used vacant areas when possible, but countless homes were in the way and had to go. More than a thousand houses were removed to build Interstate 280 in the southern part of San Francisco. BART took another 90 houses.

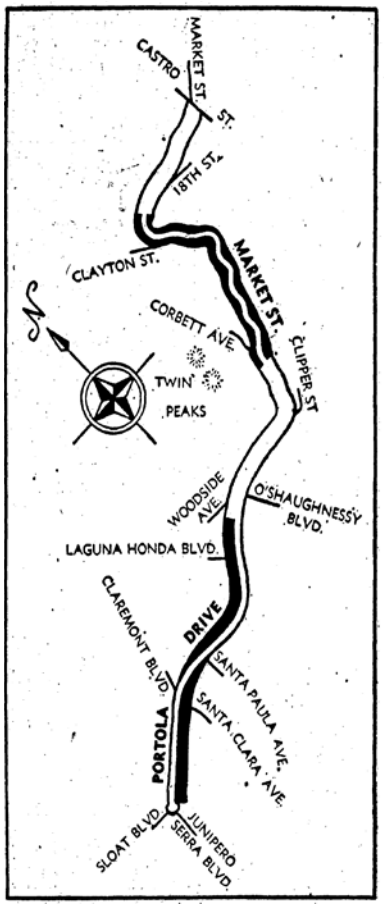
Many homes were relocated rather than demolished. As a child, I was fascinated to watch houses being moved. I couldn't imagine how something so heavy could be picked up and wheeled across town. Although house moving today is rare, it was once commonplace. Homes were moved to not only widen streets and build freeways, but also to make space for apartment houses, government buildings, schools, playgrounds, and even the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition.

One San Francisco residential street that was widened was Portola Drive on Twin Peaks. On June 4, 1954, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors' Streets Committee approved a plan to raze 71 buildings and remove another 45 to widen Market Street and Portola Drive over Twin Peaks, from Castro Street to Sloat Boulevard. Over the objections of many residents, Supervisor James Leo Halley concluded that "the great overall good to the community far outbalances the harm to a few people."[1] As a result, many houses along Portola Drive were picked up and driven to vacant lots in San Francisco and San Mateo County.

Photo: The Hanson Brothers firm tows a house from the 1200 block of Portola to Daly City, November 26, 1955. The photo shows the rear of the house. (Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library)

Map: 1924 Rand McNally Standard Map of City and County of San Francisco (Courtesy of David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries)

View east on Portola Drive (Corbett Road) from about the current O'Shaughnessy Boulevard, June 6, 1916. (Photo by Horace Chaffee, SF Department of Public Works; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp27.0487)



Map of Portola Drive widening project; bold lines show where the street will be widened. (*San Francisco Chronicle*, July 12, 1954)

Evolution of Portola Drive

Portola Drive is a section of the old Corbett Road, a dirt trail dating from the 1860s that traversed the slopes of Twin Peaks. One of several scenic boulevards constructed during the 1920s, Portola Drive was the main route for traveling by car over Twin Peaks. The road had two lanes of traffic, parking along the curb, and many curves and grade changes as it followed the contours of the hillside. During the construction of the Twin Peaks Tunnel in 1914–1917, Market Street – which ended at Castro Street – was extended up and over the hill until it intersected with Corbett Street. At that point, Market Street ended and became Portola Drive.

The steady increase in homebuilding west of Twin Peaks during the 1920s caused a rise in auto traffic. The city's attempts to widen Portola in the 1930s were successfully opposed, and the parking lane was used instead, resulting in four lanes of traffic. But city planners viewed this arrangement as archaic and inadequate. The Planning Commission's 1946 Master Plan initially proposed a freeway for the route. The *San Francisco Chronicle* editorialized in favor of the "Portola Freeway," saying: "Let's get on with this job. Let's design this future San Francisco as we want it, and strike out boldly to reach it." [2]

Two years later, the freeway idea was truncated to a six-lane, limited-access freeway running from Castro Street to O'Shaughnessy Boulevard, at which point Portola Drive would become a six-lane thoroughfare. But even the transportation consultant said that such a project was too costly and would destroy too much housing. Instead, he recommended widening the street. Initially, the consultant thought the widening could be accomplished by narrowing the

sidewalks without affecting any houses. However, residents opposed this plan. "'I would rather have them take the whole house than nine feet at a time,' said Frank S. Fish of 1385 Portola. 'They'll get this plan through only over my dead body.'" [3] Mr. Fish was soon to get his wish; not for his own death, but for a much more ambitious project.

Engineers realized that narrowing sidewalks would not produce a modern, high-speed boulevard. The street required four wide traffic lanes, a parking lane along the curb, and a center median for left turns. Curves would also be eliminated or made less sharp to increase safety (and allow higher speeds). This approach would take more land than earlier plans—much of that land occupied by houses.

As one can imagine, the affected residents were not happy being forced to give up their homes. Most resented being uprooted; some thought the money would be better spent on freeways. "Aside from the destruction of the beauty of the neighborhood, we oppose it on general principles because city officials admit it is only a temporary expedient" said St. Francis Wood homeowner Walter E. Drobisch.[4] However, some neighborhood organizations supported the plan. The West of Twin Peaks Council (an umbrella group of neighborhoods associations) voted seven to three in favor of the project. The San Francisco mayor and board of supervisors approved the plan in 1954.

Opposition increased, as it became clear exactly which houses would be changed or removed. "I will be without a garage, front or back yard, for an unneeded parking lane project," said Ben Dotson of 1441 Portola. "The street is a speedway now and would become a death trap," said Mrs. Marcella Fletcher, whose house at 1325 Portola would be removed. Edith M. Gitsham, a widow at 1260 Portola, had "lived in this beautiful view home for 24 years. I guess they will move our home back, and in so doing our lovely roof garden will be destroyed."[5] (Actually, her entire house was removed.) Some property owners complained that the city was paying them less than it cost to buy a comparable house in another neighborhood. Some felt a perverse sense of relief, having lived for years under the threat that Portola would be widened; at least now they knew how the change would affect them.



The 1000 block of Portola Drive looking north from Mirlaoma Drive, April 3, 1951. Includes sketchings of traffic islands to be installed. All the houses on the left side of the street were moved or demolished. (Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library)



Same location on August 19, 1958. The long scar in the center of the picture once contained houses. (Photo by Eddie Murphy, San Francisco News-Call; courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library)

Claremont Court and St. Francis Wood

Portola Drive marks the boundaries of several residential developments. Claremont Court sits on the north side of Portola from Waithman to Dorchester Way; Miraloma Park lies across the street, on the south side of Portola. West Portal Park sits on the north side of Portola from Dorchester Way to Sloat, with St. Francis Wood positioned across the street.

The widening project fell heavily on those living in Claremont Court and, to a lesser extent, St. Francis Wood. A well-known enclave of single-family houses and generous landscaping (for San Francisco), St. Francis Wood was one of a number of early 20th century "residence parks" that sought to combine city living with a park-like setting. In 1914, Alfred Meyerstein launched Claremont Court, intending it to become a residence park. Houses were supposed to be of the villa type (meaning large), cost from $7,500 to $12,500, lie on generous lots, and sit back 30 feet from the curb line. However, he didn't achieve these goals. The homes vary in size and are set back no more than 15 to 20 feet. Much of the building stock consists of stucco-clad houses influenced by the period revival styles popular in the 1920s.



Looking south on the 1100 block of Portola at Granville Way, 1930. The homes on the right side of the street are 1190 and 1180 Portola Drive (from left to right); both were moved. (Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library)

Roughly speaking, the Portola Drive project took land from-Claremont Court on the north side and St. Francis Wood on the south side. Nearly all of the houses on the north side of the 1000, 1100, and 1200 blocks of Portola were removed. St. Francis Wood houses on the south side of the 1300, 1400, 1500, and 1600 blocks of Portola either were demolished, sited further back on their lots, or relocated. It's not clear from newspaper accounts whether the city resorted to eminent domain to acquire the homes or negotiated prices with the property owners. The newspapers call the houses "condemned" but do not mention any lawsuits.

Based on aerial photos and Sanborn fire insurance maps, the houses on the 1000 and 1100 blocks of Portola were typically one-story bungalows with garages in the rear reached by an alley. The 1200 block contained larger homes with two or three stories. The Department of Building Inspection found eight original building permits. Of these, three had architects (T. J. Welsh and J. W. Carey; D. Jackle; C. O. Clausen); the rest were designed by their builders (Charles H. Manning; James Arnott & Son; Walter Knickerbrocker).

Moving the Houses

Contractors bought the condemned houses from the city with the understanding that they were responsible for moving them. One prominent contractor who purchased several homes was Charles L. Harney, who also won the bid to widen Portola. He paid around $1,000 to $1,500 for each house.

One of four house-moving contractors in San Francisco at the time was the Hanson Brothers, who claimed to have moved 3,000 buildings by 1950. The company was founded in 1916 by Swedish immigrants Nils, Ben, and Herman Hanson. To move a house, Hanson inserted 16-inch, square pine beams through the foundation and under the floor joists, installed another crosswise set of beams to create a crib, jacked up the house four to five feet, installed wheeled dollies, and pulled the house onto the street. Houses either slid beneath overhead utility lines or the lines were temporarily cut, and houses were then towed to a new location.

In the meantime, the contractor who bought the house purchased a vacant lot and constructed a foundation. (During the 1950s, San Francisco still had many vacant lots.) Homes were often placed on a full-height garage so that a former one-story bungalow became a two-story building. In the early 1950s, the cost to move a one-story house that could slip underneath overhead wires was about $1,200—more, if utility lines had to be cut. The cost of constructing a new foundation was about $5,000. Comparing historical costs is problematic but the average annual income of men in 1955 was $3,400. In the mid-50s, a new two-bedroom, one-bath home cost between $14,000 and $16,000.

Where the Houses Ended Up

It's not clear how many houses on Portola Drive found new sites or were demolished. Although permits were required to relocate houses, the records at the Department of Building



1190 Portola Drive now sits atop a new garage story at 330 Harvard Street. Builder Carl Wengard originally constructed the house in 1927 as a one-story bungalow. (Courtesy of Richard Brandi)



1180 Portola Drive now sits at 40 Highland Avenue on top of a new garage. (Courtesy of Richard Brandi)

Inspection are incomplete. Nonetheless, the available records show that homes were moved to the Bayview, Crocker-Amazon, Glen Park, Merced Heights, Miraloma Park, Outer Mission, and Portola Districts. Some ended up in San Mateo County, but the permits say only that the destination was Colma or San Mateo County.

In most cases, house moving was uneventful, but opposition arose in 1955 when Charles Harney got permission to place seven houses on then-empty Dalewood Way in the Miraloma Park neighborhood. The Miraloma Park Improvement Club, the Sherwood Heights Association, and the Sherwood Forest Association appealed to the Board of Permit Appeals, fearing the old homes would lower property values, presumably because the 30- and 40-year-old houses did not mix well with the 1950s architectural style then in vogue. The appeal failed, and the transplanted homes are now surrounded by houses built in the late 50s and early 60s.

One of the houses Harney wanted to move received special crictism: a two-story, L-shaped home previously located on the corner of Kensington Way and Portola Drive. Harney planned to move the house to the corner of Dalewood and Lansdale in Miraloma Park.

Opponents argued that the proposed site was not suitable because the backyard would be eight feet deep. "You'd have to use a rope-ladder to get into the back yard,"[6] said William S. Bagge, who lived three blocks away in Sherwood Forest at 333 Lansdale. The objections were not successful, and the house was moved to its present location.

After the houses were removed and Portola Drive was widened, the remaining land was not deep enough for conventional housing, and it became green space. The Department of Public Works calls the area by the bureaucratic-sounding name, "Portola Slope Protection." There is no hint of the homes and lives that once existed along this well-known thoroughfare.

A version of this article appeared in the Fall 2020 newsletter of the Northern California Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians.

1. "Portola Drive Widening," *San Francisco Examiner*, June 4, 1954.
2. "A San Francisco Story," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 23, 1946.
3. "Twin Peaks Highway," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 11, 1951.
4. "Portola Drive Widening," *San Francisco Examiner*, June 4, 1954.
5. "New Fight on Portola Widening," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 18, 1954.
6. "Neighbors Complain of New House," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 7, 1956.

Inside the Outside Lands

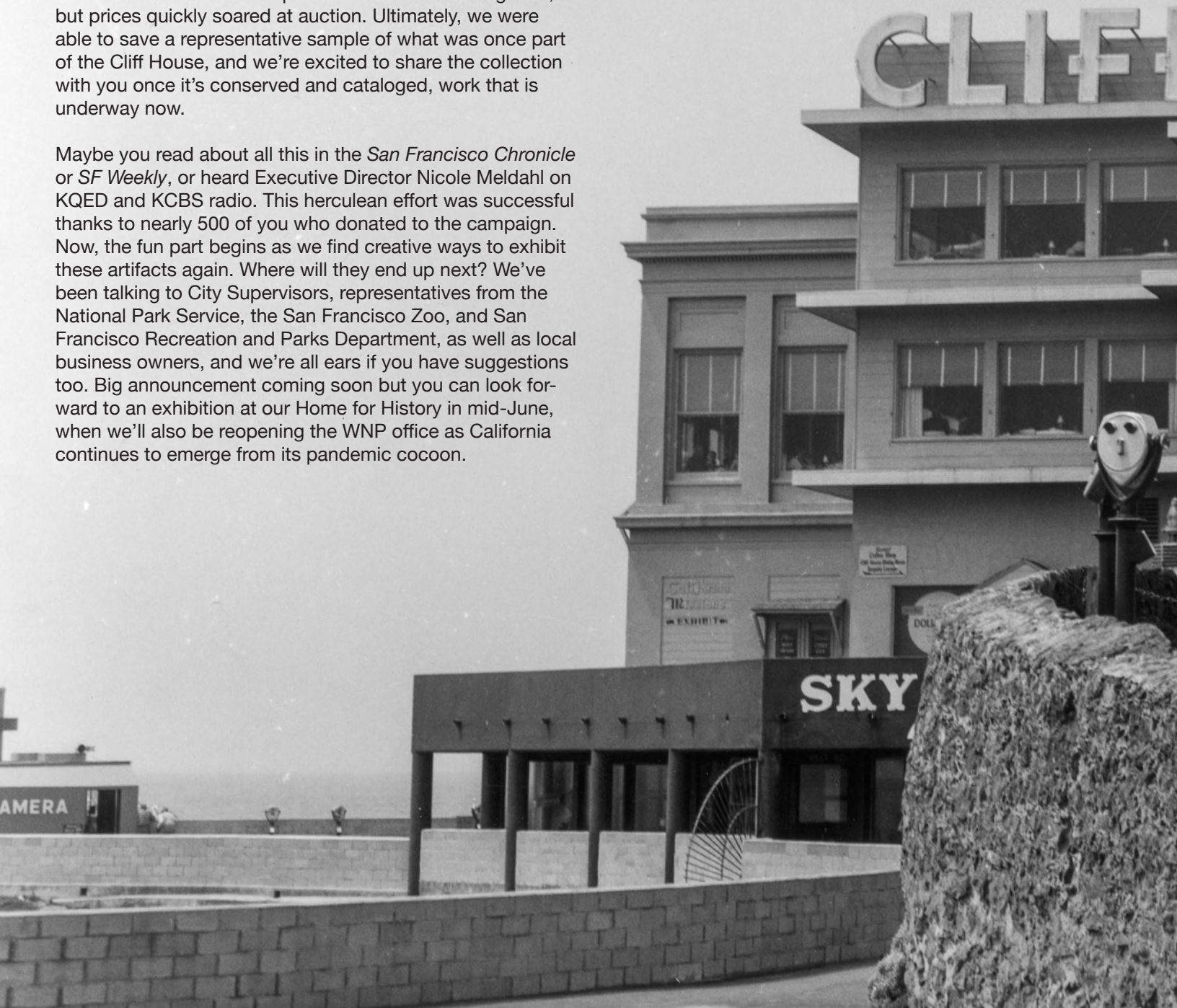
We're only about halfway into 2021 but we've been busy, dreaming big, making new friends, and truly finding the "community" in the community history work we do.

In February and March, we teamed up with Alexandra Mitchell of ACT Art Conservation LLC, John Lindsey of The Great Highway Gallery, and Minnesota Street Project to launch the **Save The Cliff House Collection** campaign. We exceeded our fundraising goal of $150,000 and were able to secure over 100 historic artifacts at auction on March 11-12, including: the iconic totem pole, which will remain in place for now; a small stool stamped "A.S." (Adolph Sutro) that once graced the Sutro Baths; both porcelain muses; one of the original mirrors from the Sequoia Room, dating back to the 1930s and 1940s; and, three small tintype studio portraits. We wish we could have kept the entire collection together, but prices quickly soared at auction. Ultimately, we were able to save a representative sample of what was once part of the Cliff House, and we're excited to share the collection with you once it's conserved and cataloged, work that is underway now.

Maybe you read about all this in the *San Francisco Chronicle* or *SF Weekly*, or heard Executive Director Nicole Meldahl on KQED and KCBS radio. This herculean effort was successful thanks to nearly 500 of you who donated to the campaign. Now, the fun part begins as we find creative ways to exhibit these artifacts again. Where will they end up next? We've been talking to City Supervisors, representatives from the National Park Service, the San Francisco Zoo, and San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department, as well as local business owners, and we're all ears if you have suggestions too. Big announcement coming soon but you can look forward to an exhibition at our Home for History in mid-June, when we'll also be reopening the WNP office as California continues to emerge from its pandemic cocoon.

This is a huge leap for our organization but we're ready because, gratefully, we're doing this work with six new board members. **Ed Franklin**, **Eva Laflamme**, **Dion Roberts**, **Karim Salgado**, **Vivian Tong**, and **Carissa Tonner**: welcome to the WNP Family! Lastly, we began receiving applications in May for our first paid summer internship, which so many of you made possible by supporting our 2020 Winter Appeal. If you're interested in future internships or volunteer opportunities, contact Nicole Meldahl for more details (nicole@outsidelands.org / 415-661-1000).

As we get ready to safely welcome you back to our office and gallery this month (fingers crossed), we're reminded that history is better when we do it together. We can't wait to be together again soon.

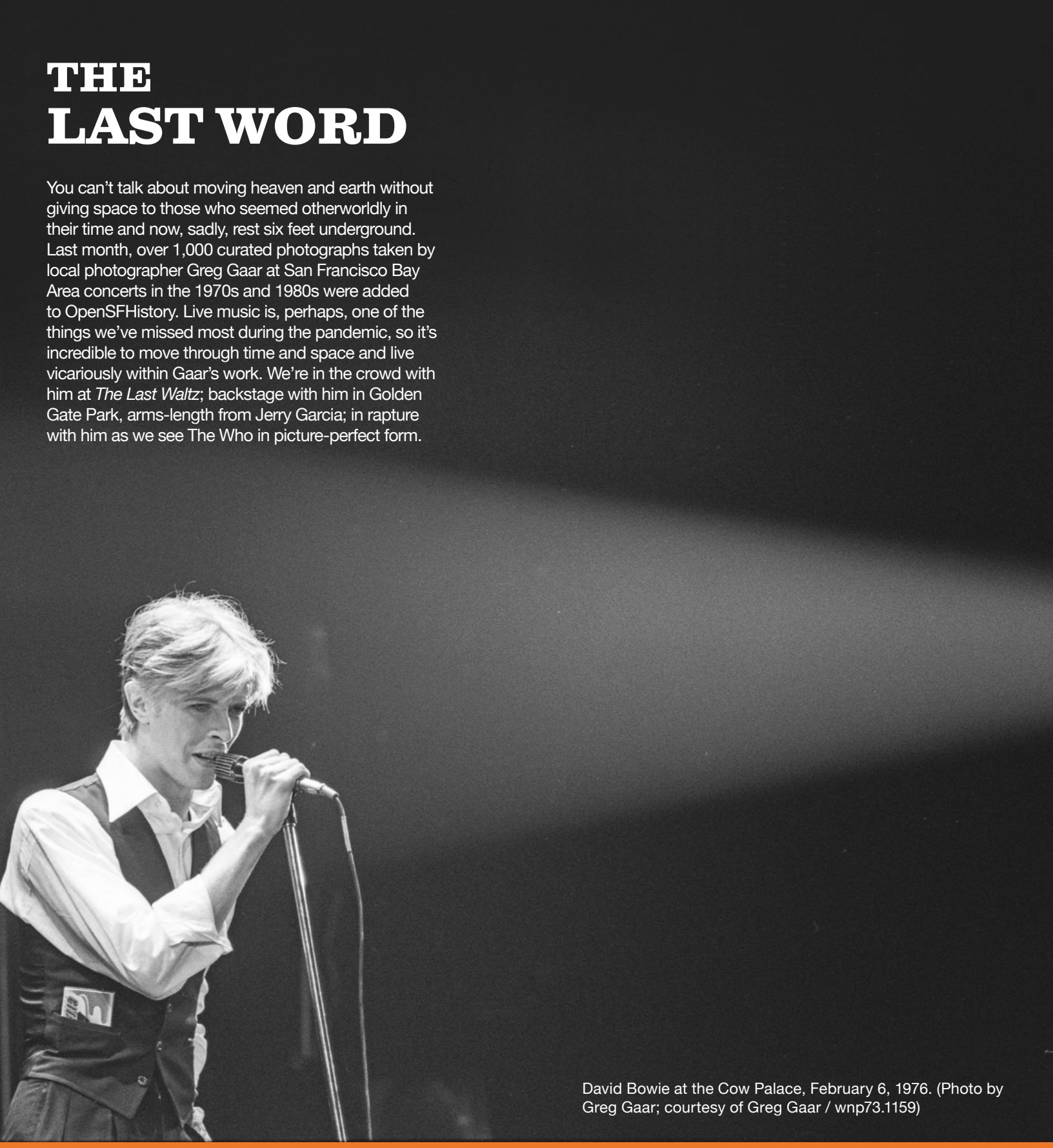




Cliff House, September 18, 1960.
(Courtesy of a Private Collector /
wnp27.0907)

THE LAST WORD

You can't talk about moving heaven and earth without giving space to those who seemed otherworldly in their time and now, sadly, rest six feet underground. Last month, over 1,000 curated photographs taken by local photographer Greg Gaar at San Francisco Bay Area concerts in the 1970s and 1980s were added to OpenSFHistory. Live music is, perhaps, one of the things we've missed most during the pandemic, so it's incredible to move through time and space and live vicariously within Gaar's work. We're in the crowd with him at *The Last Waltz*; backstage with him in Golden Gate Park, arms-length from Jerry Garcia; in rapture with him as we see The Who in picture-perfect form.



David Bowie at the Cow Palace, February 6, 1976. (Photo by Greg Gaar; courtesy of Greg Gaar / wnp73.1159)

Not a WNP Member?

Outside Lands magazine is just one of the benefits of giving to Western Neighborhoods Project. Members receive special publications as well as exclusive invitations to history walks, talks, and other events. If you like what you've read, please join hundreds of other west side fans as a member. Visit our website at **outsidelands.org,** and click on the "Become a Member" link at the top of any page.

