

THE HISTORY OF RUSSIAN HILL

by

Edward F. Bielski

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Although I believe the city block bounded by Hyde, Lombard, Chestnut and Leavenworth Streets is worthy of designation as a historic site, my main purpose in writing this history is not to argue for preservation, but to present a concise, factual and therefore persuasive account of the block's historical significance.

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## I. The Spanish Period

San Francisco may have begun at the foot of Russian Hill, only a short distance from our historic block. The proof is sketchy but convincing.

San Francisco Bay was explored several times between its discovery in 1769 and the establishment of the Mission and Presidio in 1776. The cove at the foot of Telegraph Hill was named Yerba Buena in those days--good herb--after the wild mint that grew there. And good it was! The natives used it as a curative and taught its medicinal value to the white man.

In 1772 Spanish explorer Pedro Fages surveyed the region and in 1774 an expedition led by Fernando Rivera y Moncada surveyed it again. Padre Francisco Palou planted a cross on Point Lobos above Seal Rocks and a year later Juan Manuel de Ayala sailed into the Bay. De Ayala completed a map of the Bay, describing it as "not one port, but many with a single entrance."<sup>1</sup> A land expedition was to have met de Ayala, but newly appointed Governor Fernando Rivera y Moncada found an excuse to delay the party. So as Juan Bautista de Anza's land expedition was arriving in Monterey en route to San Francisco, no site had been selected for a mission or a presidio around which a new settlement could be formed.

Franciscan Missionaries, eager to establish a mission at San Francisco, urged de Anza to start for the peninsula. But Governor Rivera believed that "the peninsula did not afford any suitable site for mission or settlement."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless the Franciscan Padre Font and de Anza journeyed northward from Monterey. When they saw Yerba Buena, they immediately recognized its possibilities as a location for a new colony. De Anza chose the present-day site of Fort Point for the Presidio and the "Arroyo de los Dolores" for the Mission.

But where was this "Arroyo de los Dolores"? Was it near the corner of 16th and Dolores Streets or was it at the foot of Greenwich Street and the base of Russian Hill? Hubert Howe Bancroft mentions in History of California that a theory was "long current that the Mission was first found on Washerwoman's Bay, the lagoon back of Russian Hill."<sup>3</sup> Frank Soulé, John H. Gihon and James Nisbet's Annals of San Francisco and Franklin Tuthill's History of California claim this to be the case.<sup>4</sup> The freshwater lagoon fed by springs on Russian Hill made the area an ideal spot for the mission, both for simple survival and agricultural irrigation.

According to Bancroft, Father Palou recorded that the Spaniards encamped on June 27th near "Ensenada de Llorones." Bancroft believes the "Ensenada de Llorones" was Mission Bay located at the mouth of a creek which emptied into San Francisco Bay. It was named by Juan Acuirre who sailed with de Ayala on an exploration in 1775. Acuirre, who was mate and master of

various transport ships until 1790, figured in later Russian Hill history, a fact which lends some credibility to the theory that the Mission was indeed established at the foot of Russian Hill and later moved to its present site. Wherever the location, it was named for three weeping Indians Aquirre saw standing on the shore. De Anza also applied the name "Dolores" to a spring or stream. It is possible that Father Palou was unable to find the original site at the foot of Russian Hill chosen by de Anza and therefore journeyed to the present-day site of the Mission, where he found a pond. Although the water was unsuitable for irrigation, Father Palou thought it was de Anza's "lagoon" and he named the pond "Dolores."

Franklin Tuthill states that "the first site chosen for the Mission was near the 'lagoon' back of Russian Hill, but the winds were so bitter that it was soon removed."<sup>5</sup> Other historians support the Russian Hill theory: "On the 27th of June, 1776, an expedition which had started from Monterey arrived on the borders of a small lake . . . situated towards the northern extremity of the peninsula of San Francisco. . . . the neighborhood of this lake promised the best place for a Mission, though it was subsequently planted about two miles to the South."<sup>6</sup> Zoeth Eldridge Skinner, in Beginnings of San Francisco, disputes Bancroft's claim that de Anza did not find a lagoon and gives evidence to the contrary. However, Skinner believes that a mission was established on the site designated by de Anza and never moved, meaning that the Mission was founded

on its present-day site.<sup>7</sup>

Bancroft leaves the question open. He assumes that Father Palou and the later historians erred in the correct naming and designation of the site. Skinner's rebuttal to Bancroft that de Anza did locate the site on a lagoon confuses the credibility of the claim. However, the excellent evidence presented in Annals of San Francisco and History of California may indicate that it is highly probable that de Anza first chose the site of the Mission with Padre Font on the lagoon at the foot of Russian Hill. The location was ideal: it was in direct line with the Presidio, with no obstacles to the flow of supplies and traffic. Troops could easily defend the Mission if such a need arose. Furthermore, the lagoon was, as we mentioned, fed by the springs on Russian Hill. José Joaquin Moraga, upon surveying the site during the summer months, probably found it unprotected from the wind and fog and moved it to the present warm, sheltered site. In either case, on October 6, 1776, the Mission church was formally dedicated to San Francisco de Asis on the Laguna de los Dolores.

## II. The Russians

Luis Antonio Arguello, an able commandant who worked diligently to upgrade the Presidio, decided, after the heavy winter storms of 1804, that a portion of the Presidio should be moved closer to the Yerba Buena anchorage site, perhaps on the slopes of Russian or Telegraph Hill.

That April, Count Nikolai Rezánof arrived from Russia to establish trade with California. Gov. José Joaquín Arrillaga welcomed and entertained the Russians and soon established trade agreements. It was at this time that Russian Hill became unofficially named. The hill, made inaccessible by its steep slopes and cliffs, had been ignored by the Spanish and was still nameless. When Russian soldiers died of diseases contracted during the long voyage from home, their Orthodox countrymen were not allowed to bury the bodies in the Catholic Mission Dolores. The shifting sand dunes of Yerba Buena were unsuitable grave sites, so the Russians scaled the steep hill and there buried their dead in the rocky, clay-like soil, a practice that continued until the 1860's.

In 1815 the friendly relations between the Russians and Spaniards ended. By order of the new governor, Pablo Vicente de Sola, Don Luis, Arguello's son who inherited the post of

commandant in 1806, was instructed to halt trade with the Russians. But California, aware that it could not rely on a weakening Spain for assistance, soon resumed foreign trade with the Russians. This commerce played a key function in the revolt against Spain in 1822 and the subsequent designation of California as a province of the Mexican Empire. Attempts were made to suppress any further encroachments by the Russians into California.

In response to these restrictions, the Russians, using American and foreign privateers, were soon smuggling goods into California. They allegedly had a cave in Glen Canyon, then part of Rancho San Miguel. But this site was far from the Bay and made Russian Hill, largely inaccessible and free from intruders, a more logical center of operations. The only outsider the Russians had to contend with was the aging Juan Aquirre who carried fresh water from the springs on the hill down to the town of Yerba Buena by the cove. Law enforcement in the latter days of Spanish rule and under the new Mexican regime was ineffectual and the smuggling continued until the revolt against Mexico in 1846.



### III. The Gold Rush

From the fall of Mexico in 1846 to the discovery of gold, Yerba Buena experienced the Americanization that laid the foundation for the arrival of the 49ers. The name Yerba Buena was dropped and the village became known officially as San Francisco. In the early 50's the city's growth was unprecedented. Water lots were sold rapidly as the shallow bay waters were diked and filled. A monstrous grid pattern of roads and streets crisscrossed even the steepest hills. The view from Russian Hill moved an observer to comment:

Over all these square miles of contemplated thoroughfare, there seems no provision made by the projectors for a public park--the true "lungs" of a large city. The existing plaza at Portsmouth Square, and other two or three diminutive squares delineated on the plan, seem the only breathing holes intended for the future population of hundreds of thousands. This is a strange mistake, and can only be attributed to the jealous avarice of the city projectors in turning every square vara of a site to an available building lot. Indeed the eye is wearied and the imagination quite stupefied, in looking over the numberless square-all square--building blocks, and mathematically straight lines of streets, miles long, and every one crossing a host of others at right angles, stretching over sandy hill, chasm and plain, without the least regard to the natural inequalities of the ground. Not only is there no public park or garden, but there is not even a circus, oval, open terrace, broad avenue, or any ornamental line of street or building, or verdant space of any kind, other than

the three or four small squares alluded to; and which every resident knows are by no means verdant, except in patches where stagnant water collects and ditch weeds grow.<sup>8</sup>

During the Gold Rush, George Hyde, a prominent politician and realtor, was <sup>^</sup>alcalde <sup>^</sup>of San Francisco. The street bisecting Russian Hill bears his name today. On a lower slope of the hill, another street is named for Thaddeus Leavenworth, an Episcopal clergyman and prominent citizen of Gold Rush days.

In 1852, thousands were directed to Russian Hill to witness the hanging of a murderer, Jose Forni, and from that year on it was officially known by that name. Many hangings occurred on the hill and it continued to be popular as a "cemetery" since Mission Dolores was filled quickly and would not accept non-Catholic faiths. Yerba Buena cemetery, once on the site of the main library, also filled rapidly and helped establish Russian Hill as a burial ground.

That same year, the first house on Russian Hill was built at the northeast corner of Chestnut and Hyde by William Penn Humphries, an Indian fighter who first sailed to San Francisco in 1840 aboard the brig Columbia.

#### IV. The Sixties

From the sixties until the time of the great fire, San Francisco experienced its golden age. Those who had made fortunes mining gold were soon surpassed by the silver barons and railroad magnates. It was a city of contrasts, boisterous and lawless, yet tempered by tolerance, civilization and style.

Russian Hill first became a tourist attraction in the 1860's when Captain David Dobson erected an observatory platform on the site of the old Metcalf estate at Lombard and Hyde and charged 25¢ for a look at the magnificent view of the Bay and hills. It is believed that during the Civil War, Czar Alexander II sent a squadron of the Russian fleet to San Francisco as a gesture of good will to President Lincoln. Alexander admired the President because he saw a parallel between the two rulers: Lincoln had freed the slaves and he had freed the serfs. Since conditions had improved little since Count Rezánof's visit fifty years before, many Russian sailors perished and were brought to Russian Hill for burial.

Ship after ship sailed through the Golden Gate bringing hordes of argonauts hoping to strike it rich in California. Mining magnate George Hearst returned with his bride Phoebe aboard a steamer in 1862. They had travelled over Panama and

the long voyage proved trying to young Mrs. Hearst. She never forgot sailing through the Golden Gate, while her husband pointed out the hills of San Francisco. Having an intuitive sense of beauty, Phoebe decided that Russian Hill was where she wanted to live.<sup>9</sup> The Hearsts first resided at the Lick House, the finest hotel in San Francisco. Later they moved to the Stevenson Hotel on California and Montgomery Streets, where William Randolph Hearst was born on April 29, 1863. The next Hearst home was a large, comfortable house on Rincon Hill, but Mrs. Hearst never abandoned her original dream of living on Russian Hill: "Why hide away from beauty by living on Rincon Hill because fashion decreed it as the quarter of San Francisco where one must live?"<sup>10</sup> On the southeast corner of Chestnut and Hyde, Phoebe Hearst found her dream house. The story is told by intimate friends, the Fremont Olders:

Here was what San Francisco called "the country." When she drove with her son and his nurse along the old Toll Road toward the Presidio, she looked at the scattering houses on the hillside of Chestnut Street. High on the right of the hill lived the French Consul Le Breton in a spacious dwelling that had been brought around Cape Horn and erected in 1852. Lower on the left was a rambling one-story house in a tangled garden belonging to Senator Frank Soulé. Nearer the foot of the hill was a double chalet built by a Frenchman and furnished with French furniture. This house nestled in a semi-tropical cup of sunshine.

Once Phoebe Hearst left her carriage and climbed the stairs leading like an S to this place. Since coming to San Francisco she had longed to dwell here. George Hearst never said "No" to his wife, and soon Phoebe Hearst was the possessor of this hillside and happy as a bird mothering one birdling in a sunny tree-top nest.

William Randolph Hearst's first home memory is of this house--the steps leading up to it, the library, the living-room, the carved rosewood furniture. He remembers the English holly tree and the English ivy on the bank concealing the scar where the hill had been cut into for leveling. He recalls the fragrant boxwood, the lilies of the valley, the geraniums, the hollyhocks, the oranges, the lemon verbenà, and the intoxicating senoras de la noche strayed from old Spain. From this high hanging garden the boy drank in beauty--still ships sleeping on the great blue diamond of a bay with its Island of the Angels, Yerba Buena, grim Alcatraz and beyond, the Contra Costa hills. To the westward at sunset burning clouds hung over the Golden Gate. To the north Mount Tamalpais sat like the Indian Chief Tamalpais in purple robes enthroned.<sup>11</sup>

There were other boys in the Chestnut Street neighborhood: Walter Carey, son of Judge James Carey; John Spring, son of Francis S. Spring; and Frederick S. Moody, later father-in-law of Helen Wills Moody, the tennis champion. John Spring's brother was drowned in the Bay and it was rumored that his and other ghosts haunted Chestnut Street. Most of the time the boys played unconcernedly in the beautiful Hearst gardens. The tropical conservatory had passion vines and blue solanum, and one of the first large pale-pink roses of the La France variety ever to be introduced in California grew in the arbors of the Hearst gardens.

Senator Frank Soulé owned the rambling one-story house adjacent to the beautiful gardens. Soulé was a 49er, a poet and founder of the original "Chronicle," suppressed in 1856 for criticizing the then powerful Vigilantes. His daughter, Katherine, was William Randolph Hearst's first sweetheart.

Phoebe Hearst eventually decided to build a stable and

increase the size of her garden. Her husband bought the Soulé house and the Soulés moved to another part of town. A yellow barn and a stable were then built where Montclair Terrace meets Chestnut Street. The spring water in the hill and the raw manure from the stables continued to nourish the gardens. Part of the barn was a studio for Frank Carrol Giffen, a celebrated tenor and voice instructor who taught William Randolph Hearst the clog dance. Giffen's living quarters were in the deceased William Penn Humphries' home, the first house built on Russian Hill.

When young Hearst and his mother returned from a European trip in 1874, George Hearst was in dire straits. One mine had folded and another had failed to prove profitable, so the house, the gardens and the stables were sold. William Randolph and Phoebe boarded with friends while George returned to the Comstock. Although the Hearsts were gone, their mark--the extensive, lush gardens--remained on Russian Hill.

The top of the hill was still a popular place to build large Victorian houses with elaborate landscaped gardens sheltered by cypress trees. John Spring's family owned the house at 944 Chestnut for fifty years. Originally it was surrounded by a moat to protect it from seeping natural springs. For a time it was the home of Bruce Porter, the noted landscape architect. His wife was the daughter of philosopher William James and niece of Henry James, and for many years the Porters made Spring House a salon for the city's intellectuals. Today it is the residence

of ski master Hannes Schroll.<sup>12</sup>

But Russian Hill was also becoming something else. Nearby the flourishing Hearst and other open gardens, small cottages of artists and writers appeared. Russian Hill became the Bohemia of the swelling metropolis of San Francisco. There a despondent poet George Sterling stalked the lanes and gardens and there he died one day by his own hand. A small bench in the single tiny park left on the hill is a memorial to him and a reminder of the hill that was. A small plot of land at Vallejo and Taylor is dedicated to Ina Coolbrith, yet another Bohemian poet. There, too, an ailing Robert Louis Stevenson wandered, the sunshine and flowers perhaps making him dream of the South Seas where he would be buried. After Stevenson's death, his wife returned to live on Russian Hill in a house built by Willis Polk at the northwest corner of Lombard and Hyde. She was a true Bohemian and was often seen wandering about the gardens in a long, flowing Samoan gown. This was the Russian Hill of the nineties: gardened, Bohemian and dedicated to the pursuit of living.

Russian Hill was still a neighborhood of contrasts. Just across the street from the Bohemian Mrs. Stevenson lived a surveyor and his proper wife, the John Bensons. Their home was a "substantial" two story wood frame house purchased from people of Spanish descent, Luisa and Frank Silva.

V. 1906

On the morning of April 18, 1906, William Randolph Hearst was awakened by a phone call to his home in New York:

An anxious voice said, "There has been an earthquake in San Francisco."

"Don't overplay it," replied Hearst. "They have earthquakes often in California." Then he went back to bed.

First came the exaggeration--the city was wiped out--swept into the sea--everyone dead--Hearst thought of his mother.

Finally the truth seeped through. At 5:13 the inhabitants of San Francisco had been shaken out of their beds by a prolonged temblor. The privately owned, ill-cared for water mains of the city were broken. San Francisco, joyous, Bohemian San Francisco, was being scourged by flames.

For three days the fire raged. Two-thirds of the city were charred smoldering ruins. Even the waterfront was destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

On the third day the fire reached Russian Hill. Dynamite halted the spreading flames and the northern slope and the historic block in question were spared. Mrs. Stevenson realized the impending disaster and formed members of the Bohemian Club into a bucket brigade which saved her house from destruction. Grace V. Benson's house burned, but the trees survived. Now a widow, Mrs. Benson continued to live on the site in a portable refugee house, which still stands, now the oldest building on the block.



## VI. Carl Henry

The turn of the century was a time of speculation and building in San Francisco. The fire and earthquake marked the beginning of a new San Francisco and the city seemed destined to become the financial center of the West. Gone was the golden age. A new generation replaced the Bohemians of Russian Hill. Mrs. Stevenson desired a warmer climate and put her famous house up for sale. The city that for a century could not conquer the heights of Russian Hill would do so in a few short years.

An early financier of the new San Francisco was living in sylvan Berkeley at the time of the 1906 disaster. Carl Henry was a truly self-made man, having begun as a financial district newsboy. He had his eye on Russian Hill as early as 1904 when he purchased his first lot in the 1000 block of Chestnut Street, two lots down from Grace Benson. Although he was easily Hearst's contemporary, Henry was not born the prince Hearst was. He did not live in the fashion of Hearst, nor was he a Bohemian. Why then did he choose Russian Hill? Perhaps he sought solitude in a rapidly changing world. The gardens and trees planted by the Hearsts, the Soulés and French Consul Le Breton must have attracted Henry to the location. His dream was to develop the land into

an exquisite garden, dedicated to his first wife and eventually leased to the city as a park.

By 1915, Henry was a joint agent in the Pacific department of several leading fire insurance companies and vice-president and co-founder of the Owl Drug Company. The devastation of the earthquake and fire allowed him to continue his land acquisitions. Shortly after the fire he purchased the Benson cottage and in 1910 he expanded and remodeled it. He jumped at the chance to purchase the two adjoining lots. In 1919 he bought the largest lot on the southeast corner of Chestnut and Hyde which was part of the estate of Sarah Chandler. The deal included two additional lots, the Hearst stable and the Soulé gardens. By the nineteen twenties, Carl Henry had amassed a parcel of land equal to one-half a city block.

It was at this point that Henry began developing his dream gardens. Taking advantage of the existing trees and shrubs, the fertile soil, the abundance of moisture, Henry sank \$70,000 of his fortune into the gardens. He imported rare plants and trees, established a wine cellar, built a lily pond, planted lawns and rose gardens and extensively remodeled and enlarged the house.

The childless Henry lived the life of a rich man. He owned a \$100,000 yacht, the Hopestill, went deep sea fishing, and kept Airedale dogs. The house had a large staff of Japanese servants and a Burns security guard. The curb in front of the house was reserved exclusively for Henry's chauffeured limousine and no one dared stop or park there. But for all his riches, his greatest dream, the magnificent city park, was never realized.

## VII. The Crooked Street

Perhaps the steep, giant cobblestoned Lombard grade, so characteristic of the inaccessibility of Russian Hill, contributed to Henry's desire to own property on the historic block. This inaccessibility assured Henry a hilltop site with maximum privacy. But his sizable purchases forced developers to subdivide the last remaining lots with Lombard Street frontage from two 137.6-foot frontage lots into four 34.375-foot lots.

One of those lots was sold to the Albert Pissis family who were early "settlers" on the hill after the fire. In 1911, Pissis, a noted architect who built many structures downtown after the quake, constructed a beautiful home on Lot 10 of the newly subdivided property, which became 1040 Lombard. In 1935, the Hearst family architect, Julia Morgan, was commissioned to design an addition to the house.

Hettie Belle Marcus, who rented the Pissis house, described her neighbors immediately next door on the upper side of the hill:

Next came the Abdy home. Mrs. Abdy was an excellent well-known artist. She painted all of the California Missions--supposedly the finest series extant. Mrs. Abdy was frail--had a serious congenital lameness. She had a lovely car and chauffeur--which would await her at the bottom of

the hill. She had no time or strength for social contacts. I do not remember that she ever smiled. Mr. Abdy was a "would be" writer. They were finally divorced--and when Mrs. Abdy died, she left the property to the "Shriner's Hospital."

It must have dismayed the staid Carl Henry to have as a neighbor just down the hill in another small portable house none other than a cohort of William Randolph Hearst--the first and most famous sob sister, ex-chorus girl, Annie Laurie. A devoted and loyal friend of Hearst's, she was Mrs. Winifred Sweet Bonfils in real life. Fortunately for Henry, she was only renting. The small house blended well into the gardens. Hettie Belle Marcus remembered Annie Laurie:

She had started out at the same time as William Randolph Hearst--on the "Examiner"--and came down the years with a syndicated daily column. She was short--and much too heavy--and teetered about on tiny feet. When at home, she always wore high heeled red shoes! She had a shock of uncombed white hair--and glittering green eyes. She could not talk without exaggeration and hyperbole. She held you with her fascinating eyes--and you were completely under her spell. So--there was no answer when she told about the son that she carried for eleven months--and who weighed 16 lbs. at birth!

Later--she married Mr. Bonfils--a newspaper man of Colorado. They had two children, I believe. "Annie Laurie," of course had a colorful servant--Juanita, an American Indian--Black Hawk and Cherokee mixture. Juanita wore gay cottons--yellow, orange or red--a beaded band around her hair--and a great necklace of bears' teeth. All on the hill loved her!

These were the days when we all knew each other. If one was ill (Mary Watson alerted us) and we ran with hot soup or a cup of custard. And each birthday was celebrated with a "surprise" party! "Annie Laurie" would tell some one that come Friday she would have a birthday--and then be terribly surprised when we all burst in with cake and ice cream on her day.<sup>15</sup>

W. A. Swanberg describes her exploits:

Annie Laurie, a favorite of Hearst because she was game for anything, continued such exploits as living with Mormons in Utah and exposing polygamy; getting a job in a fruit cannery and publicizing the low wages and miserable working conditions; and interviewing the madam of one of the leading local brothels. Annie's talent for the sob story could at times be constructive. When "Little Jim," the crippled son of a prostitute, was born in City Prison Hospital, Annie pulled out all the stops in a series of pathetic stories that had housewives weeping over back fences. She started a "Little Jim fund" drive that raised \$20,000 toward a hospital for crippled children, that eventually became a reality. These titillating sensations were balanced by long-range drives for reform such as the campaign for municipal ownership of the water system and street railways, and the never-ending assault on the S. P. [Southern Pacific Railway].<sup>16</sup>

In 1922, the residents of Lombard Street were summoned to the City Hall office of City Engineer M. M. O'Shaughnessy.

Mrs. Marcus tells the story:

Mr. O'Shaughnessy explained that a young engineer in his office, one Clyde Healy, had had a "brain storm"--and felt sure that the hill could be opened, with his plan--and the grade reduced from 27% to from 11 to 16%--and so made usable. The city was willing to build the street--if the property owners would pay for brick steps adjacent to their property--do the planting and maintain it (it was supposed to be grass) and put in electroliers (metal standards for street lighting) and maintain them. And so--it was agreed. There were several City Hall sessions--at one we property owners suggested strongly--that as long as the hill would be torn up--why not put all utilities underground. "Oh! No!"--said the City Fathers--"We have a plan for this--and will not reach you for several years."

There was enthusiasm at first--a committee chose the planting, the cost of which the property owners prorated--then we were to each give \$5.00 a month for maintenance. The Misses Wolf declared that they could contribute nothing if veronica was planted on the hill! It proved impossible to collect from the

property owners--and so--for many years, the Cushings and we were the only ones who contributed to the upkeep of the hill.

Electroliers were supposed to be placed on each rampart--the electric wire is deep in each round hole. But altho' there was some effort--this was not accomplished. Mrs. Cushing and I found beautiful electroliers on a wrecker's dump--they had come from the Great Highway--near the Cliff House--when the highway was enlarged, and the lighting changed. Bronze standards, with three light globes--we said that we would buy and cut them down. For some reason this was not allowed.<sup>17</sup>

Today utility poles and wires still mar the appearance of the street and the view from the top of the hill. One improvement the City did make was to change the traffic on the crooked block from the original two way to one way, although two way traffic was allowed for several years after the crooked street was built.

Annie Laurie later moved from the hill and sold her house to Dr. and Mrs. Clain Gelston. Gelston trained under Langley Porter and was his assistant in France during World War I. The Gelston house burned shortly thereafter and Mary Watson, who sold the Marcus home, acquired the property which she in turn sold to Carl Henry. With the Annie Laurie-Gelston property purchase, Carl Henry finally had total privacy, his nearest neighbors being the Abdy's, one lot down the hill.<sup>18</sup>

At about the same time the Crooked Street was being proposed, the Stevenson House was purchased by the Frank Sullivans. Mrs. Sullivan, sister of Senator James D. Phelan, bought the home for the first order of Carmelite nuns from Boston as a temporary convent while the Sullivans were having

a permanent convent built in Santa Clara. When the new convent was completed, Mrs. Sullivan took up residence in the Stevenson House.

The Sullivan's son Noel is nearly forgotten by San Franciscans today. A remarkable man, he had a passion for the arts that could rival Hearst's. As a philanthropist, he contributed to the restoration of the Carmel Mission and gave two million dollars towards eradicating capital punishment in California. Noel served as personal aide to his uncle Senator Phelan and led the life of a true cosmopolite, entertaining every important artist who came to San Francisco. When black artists Marian Anderson and Roland Hayes could not find hotel rooms in San Francisco, they stayed at the Stevenson House.

Mr. Sullivan became paralyzed in the twenties and Noel returned from Paris, where he had been studying music, to live with his father. During the time Noel, a bachelor, and his housekeeper Eula Pharr lived there, the Stevenson house was expanded and remodeled. The Stevenson house overshadowed the Henry cottage and there was little contact, if any, between Noel Sullivan and Carl Henry.<sup>19</sup>

The year 1929 marked the beginning of the end for Carl Henry. In that year the heirless widower married a divorcée in New York City. When Mae Landis married Henry, he was a "socially prominent" man, a member of the Golden Gate Bridge Board of Directors and a self-made millionaire. Four years later, he was dead at the age of 57. Although Henry's estate took roughly

another four years to settle, he died penniless. His \$150,000 yacht with its unpaid crew was valued at a little over \$8,000. The inventory of the will listed the value of his clothes at \$1.50. Claims against the will climbed toward a quarter of a million dollars. He owed \$16.00 for a prescription to the Owl Drug Company which he had co-founded. Yet, due to either a clever attorney or a cunning woman, Mae Landis managed to collect \$1,000 a month from the estate in the midst of the nation's worst depression. The property at Lombard and Hyde appeared nowhere in the inventory of the will, for Carl Henry died not actually owning it, since it was controlled by the Henry Investment Company, one of the many firms Henry set up which subsequently went broke. Mrs. Henry left the house in 1937 to live in an apartment at Chestnut and Larkin.<sup>20</sup>

All talk of the site being given as a park to the City ended in 1937 when the estate was sold. Carl Henry's dream was deferred.



VIII. Elizabeth Huntington Metcalf

The historic block was doomed to the subdividers as one parcel after another was sold to pay off Carl Henry's debts and keep Mae Landis Henry living in style. Montclair Terrace was carved out in 1938 and building sites were designated on both sides. Elizabeth Huntington Metcalf, a descendant of rail barons Henry Huntington and Colis Metcalf, purchased one of the lots fronting Montclair. When the subdividing was over, Mrs. Metcalf had bought one-fourth of the total block, including the bulk of the Henry gardens.

It was ironic that Mrs. Metcalf, the descendant of Henry Huntington, a man Hearst often attacked, should own the land on which Hearst had spent his childhood. The San Francisco News carried the story of the purchase:

CARL HENRY GARDENS BOUGHT  
SAN FRANCISCO LOSES OWNERSHIP DREAM

Hopes that San Francisco would someday obtain the stately Carl A. Henry formal gardens at Lombard and Hyde Streets as a public park were broken today.

It was learned that the property was sold to Mrs. Elizabeth Huntington Metcalf for more than \$100,000.

Mrs. Metcalf, it is understood, will remodel and occupy the cottage keeping intact the famous sloping gardens with its lawns, cypresses and other rare trees, some of which are valued at thousands of dollars.

The landscaping of the gardens alone is said to have cost Mr. Henry more than \$70,000.

Mrs. Metcalf is the daughter of the late Henry Huntington of Pasadena, a public utilities magnate and philanthropist.

She is the widow of John Brockway Metcalf, who died recently of a heart attack en route to Los Angeles.

The late Carl Henry was a wealthy yachtsman who made his millions in a large chain of drug stores and insurance. He often spoke of donating his Hyde and Lombard property to the City, but his estate dwindled considerably at the time of his death.

Mrs. Metcalf's purchase, reported by Baldwin & Howell to the San Francisco Real Estate Board is said to be the largest single residential sale in San Francisco during the past several years.<sup>21</sup>

Mrs. Metcalf did maintain the Henry gardens. She died in 1967 after 30 years on the hill. The estate passed to her son, Edward Huntington Metcalf of Los Angeles, who sold the property in 1970 to Louis Petri, a former neighbor of the Marcus family on the crooked street.

## IX. Project Hopestill

The Metcalf house has since been converted into rental units with the addresses of 1098 Lombard and 2368 Hyde. The garden has fallen into sad disrepair, the lily pond is dry, and many of the plants and trees, some dating back one hundred years, are overgrown and diseased. This historic site that is so much a part of San Francisco is now at the crossroads.

The hill has changed in the past years. After World War II, cubist flats and houses were built on the south side of the crooked street. Modern houses appeared along Montclair in the sixties. In the mid-sixties, Meri Jaye purchased the Abdy home and, in the tradition of Le Breton, Hearst and Soulé, converted it into a French style townhouse with a mansard roof. The entrance was changed to Montclair; doors and fixtures were brought from France, just as Le Breton had done a century earlier.

When the Metcalf property was sold, the residents became concerned about the future of the hill and the last remains of its once fabulous gardens. Many have become alarmed as the site has fallen into total neglect. To protect the gardens,

Project Hopestill was formed. Named for Carl Henry's yacht and with the backing of the Lombard Hill Improvement Association, the project's goal is to preserve the site and fulfill Carl Henry's dream that a city park be created from the remaining gardens.

## X. Natural History

Russian Hill, along with the rest of San Francisco, was formed about one million years ago during the Pleistocene epoch of the Cenozoic Age. It has almost the same geological composition as Telegraph Hill which has experienced landslides from inappropriate building and over-development. Russian Hill has an abundance of natural springs and two predominant rock types: sandstone and shale with thinly bedded sandstone. Both rock types, which bisect the Metcalf property, have good earthquake resistance when dry.

There are some sixty varieties of plants and trees on the hill, many dating from Hearst's time. They include cypress, cedar, Portuguese laurel, English laurel, hoharia, Southern magnolia, South African heather, Carolina cherry, acuba, viburnum, pyracantha, Australian tea tree, pittasporum, Eastern oak, Japanese maple and very old camelia and rhododendron, the century old contemporaries of similar plants in Golden Gate Park.

Sixteen varieties of bird life have been sighted on the property, including some not commonly associated with San Francisco, such as mockingbirds, warblers, and bluebirds--and a rare species known only to Southeast Asia, the white crested laughing thrush.

All of this can be found in a small city block of land  
just ten minutes from downtown San Francisco.

## NOTES

- 1, 2      The source of these notes is John Walton Caughey's book, California, originally published in 1940 and since revised. Caughey is a noted historian and professor of American History at the University of California at Los Angeles. (reference p. 131, 132)
- 3          Huber & Howe Bancroft, History of California, (San Francisco, 1888), Note 3,, Volume 1, p. 293.
- 4, 6, 8      Soulé, Frank, Gihon, John H., & Nesbitt, James, Annals of San Francisco, originally published in the '1880's. This work is considered a rare reference book today. Note 9, p. 542, Note 10, p. 160.
- 5, 7          Zoeth Skinner Eldredge: The Beginnings of San Francisco, V. 1 and 2, Note 5, p. 327, Note 7, p. 328.
- 9,11        Mr. and Mrs. Fremont Older: George Hearst, Los Angeles, 1966, p. 128.
- 10, 15, 18, Hettie Belle Marcus: History of Lombard Street, January, 1965.  
19, 20, 21,  
22, 24, 25,  
27, 28
- 12          Gilliam, Harold, The Face of San Francisco, San Francisco, 1960, p. 59.
- 13          Fremont Older: William Randolph Hearst, New York, 1936, Note 15, p. 289, Note 18, p. 292.
- 16, 23      W. A. Swanberg: Citizen Hearst, New York, 1961, Note 17, p. 241, Note 24, p. 74.
- 19          Biography of Carl A. Henry from Journalism in California, San Francisco, 1915.
- 26          Personal Memoirs of John and Helen Bauer, friends of Noel Sullivan.
- 29          San Francisco News, July 9, 1937.