

Following the Windmill Walk

THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE - July 26, 1987

Author: MARGOT PATTERSON DOSS

The western border of Golden Gate Park is unique, not only for its windmills, but for a little-known trail that links them and a few surprises along the way.

If you thought that the park ended at the jade green Pacific Ocean, guess again. The sand of Ocean Beach and the Esplanade, as earlier San Franciscans called the 20-foot-wide concrete sidewalks running along the retaining wall, are now part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

Whatever the titles on its various deeds say, both beach and park belong to you and me, fellow citizen. The beach has all the rich variety that tides and the changing sea can bring, and the trail within the weathered cypress trees on the other side of the Great Highway is surprisingly rural. If you haven't explored it, take a couple of friends or your dog and transport yourself to Fulton Street and La Playa. (The No. 5 Fulton and No. 18 Forty-Sixth Ave. Muni buses are the most convenient public transportation.)

At the outset, look about you. A short 20 years ago, the area now filled by Ocean Beach Condominiums was Playland-at-the-Beach, the Disneyland of its day. Thousands of San Francisco children celebrated their birthday parties there each year.

In Mayor Adolph Sutro's later years living at Sutro Heights, the area abutting the northwest corner of the park was the Golden Gate Ostrich Farm, supplying plumes for the big-brimmed Merry Widow hats of San Francisco's ladies of fashion. In 1883, it was an even more colorful place called Mooneysville, where squatters hawked cracked crabs and booze on the beach.

Walk to the northwest corner of the park. This area, now desultorily planted, contained a U.S. Coast Guard Life Saving Station in 1870. Neatly surrounded by a white picket fence, its garden gate gave onto the beach.

Follow Fulton Street east again and within a few hundred feet, you will see what seems to be a roadway going into a brick tunnel.

For the moment, continue past it and look instead for a well-beaten path that goes up into the treed area. On weekdays, it is often full of illegally parked workmen's pickup trucks, but today, the forest area should be open, as park planners intended. Follow the path south. It leads directly to the North Mill, although you may find a tent planted in the middle of the path. The young man within complained that we were "trespassing on his home" when our group tried to pass on the path.

Detour to the left if necessary. Finally, you will arrive between the basin of a dry and long-neglected pond and the big Dutch, or North, Windmill. Follow John F. Kennedy Drive to your right. Within a few steps you will be abreast of the Queen Wilhelmina garden whose floral beds make a handsome setting for the recently repaired North Mill.

When it was first built in 1903, the cost of North Mill was \$25,000. In a fresh breeze, the big sails were capable of pumping 30,000 gallons of underground water per hour to Stow Lake. Electricity pumped the water into the park's irrigation system when North Mill was out of order, albeit less thriftily.

After you have walked around the mill, continue west on the sidewalk bordering Kennedy Drive until you have crossed the small bridge. About 50 feet farther along, look on your right for a concrete stairway, and take it down to the tunnel. Bear south, going safely, as the railroad cars once did, under Kennedy Drive.

You will emerge from the underpass near the Beach Chalet, currently being rebuilt behind a chain-link fence.

Early maps show a cyclists pavilion on this site. Later, it was for 70 years the home of the Gjoa, the 1869 Norwegian

herring sloop that Captain Roald Amundsen sailed into the Arctic to establish the position of the magnetic North Pole. After three rugged years in the Arctic, on Oct. 19, 1906, the Gjoa sailed to San Francisco in a howling storm and was thrown up on Ocean Beach. Three years later, the Gjoa was towed off Ocean Beach and moved across the Great Highway to this spot. Her last journey, just a few years ago, was back to Norway. Look for the pylon and plaque that commemorate the valiant Norsemen.

Early maps of the park also show the Beach Chalet on the ocean side of the road. It was, of course, the road that was changed, thanks to the skillful planning of M. M. O'Shaughnessy, the city engineer who created the sea wall and its balustrade. Originally, the wall was intended to go all the way to the zoo.

For many years, the Veterans of Foreign Wars operated a funky bar in the lower level of the chalet. The Lucien Labaudt murals, painted as part of a WPA project in 1936-37, have been carefully protected by plywood during the reconstruction. Farsighted citizens are hopeful that the upper level will one day be used for a restaurant overlooking the sea.

When you have examined the outside of the Beach Chalet, return on the same path to the railroad roadbed behind it and continue south. No matter how windy the beach may be, this long avenue, protected by shrubbery on either side, is warm and sheltered. Don't be tempted to take side paths. Most of these have been made by picnickers.

When you hear shouts, you are abreast of the soccer field. From October to July, the Teutonia, Mercury, Viking, Hakoah and Olympic teams compete here every Sunday. At one point, the shrubbery thins sufficiently to observe the games. A walkway midpoint on the west leads to the Great Highway.

A little farther along, Murphy Windmill, a gift to the city from banker Samuel G. Murphy, looms over the shrubbery like a lugubrious face looking down its nose at the Richmond-Sunset Sewage Plant.

When the arms of the Murphy Windmill were functioning, they were 47 feet from center to tip, made of Oregon pine tapering from two feet thick in the middle to eight inches at the ends. Reputed to be the largest windmill in the world, the Murphy mill could pump 40,000 gallons of water an hour. So far, no philanthropic citizen nor corporation has offered to restore it.

Continue on the roadbed and soon you will reach a little corner that has been planted anew, now that most of the recent sewer construction has been completed. Turn right on it and cross the Great Highway at the stoplight. Then make your way down to the sand and turn right. If you had walked this beach in 1883 when Mooneysville, the squatter town named for ex-mayor "Con" Mooney, was burgeoning, the shacks and shops of 60 claimants would have filled the beach almost to the base of Cliff House.

One year later, according to Ray Clary's history, "The Making of Golden Gate Park" (Don't Call It Frisco Press, 1984), they were gone, thanks to the crusading of Frank Pixley, publisher of the Argonaut newspaper. "Pixley's Army," as a corps of 25 park laborers protected by seven policemen were nicknamed, dismantled every building, rousting all the squatters in a day.

"The following day, close to the Cliff (House) on a neat mound of earth," Clary writes, "a small sign proclaimed 'Here lies Frank. M. Pixley. Keep His Grave Green.' In the center of the grave was a big bottle of whiskey and some glasses. A small sign invited one and all to 'help yourself.' One of the more gullible in the crowd hastened forward to quaff his share. He disappeared into a deep hole that had been cleverly concealed with brush and sand by some diabolical ex-resident of Mooneysville. The crowd roared.

" 'God help the poor.' said ex-mayor Con Mooney. A fitting epitaph for Mooneysville, U.S.A."

Walk the beach until you are once again abreast of the Dutch Windmill, then walk east to find the long ramp, built originally to haul the lifesaving station's whaleboat down to the sand. It serves the GGNRA sand-sweeper just as handily today, as well as the legions of sun worshipers who flock to the beach on warm days. Walk up it and you are back near your starting point.

Caption: MAP, PHOTO

When the Dutch Windmill, which has been restored, was first built, it could pump 30,000 gallons of underground water an hour to Stow Lake / BY DEANNE FITZMAURICE/THE CHRONICLE

Edition: SUNDAY

Section: SUNDAY PUNCH

Page: 6

Column: SAN FRANCISCO AT YOUR FEET

Index Terms: SF ; PARKS

Record Number: 457223

Copyright 1987 San Francisco Chronicle