



## A Modest Old Street

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Time, like any other plodder climbing Nob Hill, seems to have stopped to catch its breath on the obscure, three-block-long shelf called Joice Street. It is a modest street, uncommercial and, although it is only three blocks from Union Square, almost unknown.

For 140 years the frantic life of downtown San Francisco has swirled madly about Joice Street. In all that time, changes have been so gradual, and so reassuringly few, that any walker can retrieve the threads of continuity that link the surreal present with the more civilized recent past.

To see for yourself, get off any Powell Street cable car at Clay Street. Walk down Clay toward Chinatown.

This slope was known as the Clay Street Hill, Ern Hill, Fern Hill or the Hill of Golden Promise when Andrew S. Hallidie, his partners and a courageous gripman named Jimmie made the historic test run on the first cable car built. The hour was 5 a.m., August 2, 1873. By the time they reached Joice Street, they were in a dense fog bank, tense and eager to stop rolling. The trip was a rousing success. The Clay Street Railroad Company, long since absorbed by the Muni, had launched what has since become San Francisco's best-loved anachronism.

As you walk downhill, a big question mark painted on a wall catches your attention. Before you reach it -across from the back side of the Commodore Stockton School, and just past the YWCA designed by Julia Morgan - there will be a simple street sign that says, "End Joice," and below it, the one-way arrow.

Look along Joice Street before you begin to walk it. The unimposing two- to four-story apartments and flats have a noticeable backdoor ambience. The little street is narrow and appropriate to service entrances and stable-door access.

San Francisco's first swank residential section grew up just downhill on Stockton Street. Children in 1850 who walked the path along here to Dr. Ver Mehr's Episcopal parish school called this lane Prospect Place, as it was to be known until 1896. The children must have watched with excitement as "Gold was found in the sand taken from a great depth in sinking wells behind Stockton Street" (in the words of Soule, Gihon and Nisbet in "The Annals of San Francisco"). There wasn't enough gold to start a rush.

Two years later, Soule et al record, "Stockton Street was being ornamented with many handsome brick tenements, which were intended for the private residences of some of the wealthier citizens." One of them, at 806 Stockton, was the home of Francis I. A. Pioche, pioneer financier and bon vivant credited with giving San Francisco an appreciation of fine food. He imported many French chefs and a cargo of fine wines.

Pioche's stables fronted Prospect Place, as several carports and tree-shaded parking areas face Joice today.

Start walking along Joice and you are immediately abreast of brick apartments whose intricate Flemish- or English-bond brick patterns place their origins before the Great Fire of '06. Washlines in the windows above window boxes sometimes hold fish or seaweed for drying.

Farther along, you reach a two-story playground and a parking lot that once held the refuge house of the Presbyterian Chinese Mission, long a sanctuary for the child-prostitutes purchased by exploiters in old Canton and shipped here.

At the southeast corner of Sacramento and Joice is the remaining portion of the mission, also known as Cameron House in honor of Donaldina Cameron, whom the Chinese called "Lo Mo," the mother, for her lifetime of work freeing the so-called singsong slave girls. Her longtime assistant, Lorna Logan, later social work director at Cameron House, reported that the last slave girl seeking shelter came to the community center in 1934.

Brick burned in the Great Fire was used in rebuilding the mission. Inside are old carved cornices, calligraphy and painting.

Cameron House still houses a number of social programs. When I passed this way recently, a sign on the door said, "English Classes Nightly, 7 to 9 p.m.," reflecting the present influx of refugees from Southeast Asia.

Chinatown began at the foot of Sacramento Street and was first known as "Little China." Before you cross Sacramento Street, look north on Joice for a fine vista of the Chinatown YWCA tower, with its quaint, Chinese-style recurved eaves. Cross carefully.

Continue between the apartment buildings, which seem to narrow the street here, and soon you reach, on your right, an unusual garage topped three stories up by a single floor of dwelling quarters. No. 123 Joice, reminiscent of a time when this street had many Victorian-era buildings, has fine old ironwork and beveled glass in its doorway.

Just before you reach the corner at California Street, look uphill. Midway up the first block, behind the Twins Armoire shop, owned by a pair of identical twins so friendly everyone calls them by their given names, Rosalind and Josephine, there is a passage that leads to a lovely old home and garden, a legacy from a time when San Francisco homes often filled a half-block.

Once across broad California Street, which led early on to the great mansions of the Bonanza Kings, you reach the single block originally named Joice Street.

Historian Charlotte Spotts, who has lived on Joice Street for many years, believes it was named for Erastus V. Joice, whose home once stood at 807 Stockton. So do I, largely because T.A. Barry and B.A. Patten, in their book "Men and Memories of San Francisco in the Spring of 1850," indicate the former owner of the Knickerbocker House hotel used to hunt in this very area.

"Mr. Joice," the authors tell us, "is and has been for many years a notary, and bids fair to live a half century longer if one may judge by his step and manner on California street, and better still by the ground he will get over, and the steep hillsides he can climb in a day's shooting, coming in full of spirit and fun, when some of the boys are lame and disagreeably quiet. We hope he may bag his game for many years to come, for we do certainly like good natured men."

Joice Street eases quietly past the beautifully painted 851 California Residence Club for another half a block, then offers several surprises in quick succession. One is No. 50, designed in 1948 by architect John G. Kelley and distinguished, according to a panel of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art a few years later, for its "reticence, refinement and simplicity."

Another surprise is a charming little one-story, shingled white cottage that may well have started as a "refugee shack" after the 1906 Quake.

Most unusual is the broad concrete staircase that drops precipitously just beyond the two eucalyptus trees. One resident ran out to cry, "Woodman, spare that tree" not long ago when a public works crew arrived to cut these graceful street trees, which are heaving up the top step. The Nob Hill Association and the Joice Street Neighbors, who love this hidden enclave, are hopeful the city will replace them with a single well-behaved tree and line the steps with a double row of streetlights to make the charming stairway safer.

The best surprise of all is yet to come. As you descend the steps to Pine Street, look on your right for the well-tended wayside shrine to St. Francis of Assisi, hidden in the shrubs. Built long ago by Joice Street resident Ronald Telfer, it has been tended by Al Lowry and rebuilt by Ed Morris, with gardening assistance by any number of other volunteers down through the years.

**Caption:** PHOTO (3), MAP

(1) The walk begins near the YWCA designed by Julia Morgan, (2) The view down Joice Street at California /  
PHOTOS BY FREDERIC LARSON

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