

## Touring the Russian Hill Roses

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Roses, big gorgeous roses in the subtlest of colors, twining up the wall, rambling around a utility pole support, nodding with every passing breeze, are eliciting oohs and ahs these days from passengers on the Hyde Street cable car, as they swing over Russian Hill. And thereby, as the old storytellers used to say, hangs a tale.

It is a tale that begins on that same cable car a couple of years ago. About to be transferred by the firm he works for, Victor Cowley and his wife, Francis, were house-hunting via cable car when they spotted a recently renovated apartment building on the northeast corner of Greenwich Street at Hyde. Both amateur rosarians and creators of a distinguished rose garden in Malibu, their eyes lit up when they saw the smidgen of almost-bare land alongside the building. Deciding it might get enough sunshine for roses, they got off the cable car.

They eventually moved in, and now the little plot on either side of the sidewalk is abloom with choice modern roses such as an exquisite pink climber called First Prize; a pair of virginal whites known as Iceberg and Evening Star; and the delicate porcelain-like Pristine. Many others are recent introductions to the rose world, such as Playboy, Royal Ascot and Bride's Dream. As in all good aficionado's gardens, plant names are stuck into the ground near each shrub.

Not only does the vignette give pleasure to all who pass, the garden has also stimulated residents to improve every other available inch of land in the entire block and to create the cooperative Greenwich Garden Path Committee. The result is a stunning improvement to the street. There is also an interesting sideshoot - the project has created a safer, friendly, cohesive neighborhood in which residents have come to know one another by working together - the old-fashioned quilting bee or barn-raising updated.

To see for yourself, take the Hyde Street cable car to Greenwich Street. Don't drive. Parking is so tight on Russian Hill that it is pointless to try to find a streetside spot for your wheels on weekends. Bus route Union 41 also stops two blocks south. Once afoot, pause to look around. Several national urban livability studies have rated Russian Hill as the No.1 neighborhood among the cities of the United States. From this point, it is easy to see why. Just uphill is the inviting George Sterling Memorial Park, recently "daylighted" through the good offices of concerned residents on its periphery.

The park's charms include tennis courts, paths to stroll, a viewing spot that looks at the Golden Gate, a mall where old people reminisce in the sun and a bench dedicated to poet George Sterling, who once lived in the very building occupied by the Cowleys. Best of all, the space and green trees give sufficient perspective to the surrounding apartment buildings, whose shared front yard it appears to be.

Resist the park if you will and look south, where a congenial shopping confluence supplies superb ice cream, fresh oysters, caviar, Belgian oysters, French pate, chilled champagne and a choice of good small restaurants. Then north, where the blue of San Francisco Bay presents a jewel-like setting for Alcatraz Island. To the east, Coit Tower looms out of the green copse of Pioneer Park. It is the spacious hilltops and the illusion of unlimited distance that give our city its exhilarating quality. Walkers especially enjoy it as an embodiment of freedom.

Standing here, it is easy to see why Sterling wrote "at the end of our streets are stars." Sometimes at the end of this street are boats. Sometimes clouds.

Start walking east where Greenwich Street descends, and you are at one of the best places in the city to stop and smell the roses. As lush as the little plot looks, it is barely a year and a half old. Tova Wiley, of San Francisco Beautiful, founded by the late Friedel Klussman, told me that one of the organization's 1989 beautification awards went to the Cowleys for the rose garden. "It certainly makes for a more livable city for hundreds of passers-by" she said, while conducting me on this walk. "And that is a major criteria for our awards."

San Francisco Beautiful also made a grant last year to the Greenwich Garden Path Committee, an organization that

grew out of Cowley's efforts. The money was used to prune trees and to establish retaining walls on the lower half of this block. Neighbors have generously matched the funds. Another grant is being made this year to install a thrifty watering system.

As soon as you pass the crosswalk below the rose garden, you have reached the purview of Jerry Mutz, a telephone-company executive who took early retirement and has since made a career of gardening around Greenwich Street's steps. Cross little Southard Lane and the tropical plantings that greet you as you turn to walk down several steps are all to his credit. So are the five purple-leaved plum trees on the upper border of the south side of the street, across from the rose garden, as well as almost every other green space visible in the 1100 block of Greenwich Street.

As any good San Francisco cabby can tell you, halfway down the block the street dead-ends to cars. For the walker, steps continue down to Leavenworth Street. Pause and take a good look when you reach the crenellated bulkhead. This little wall was built as part of the city's beautification plan for the Pan-Pacific Exposition in 1915.

On opening day, a band played here in the street, one of a dozen that were situated on shelflike street-spaces throughout the northern part of the city. They all began playing the identical music at the same time, and they followed the same program throughout the day. No vehicles were allowed for two miles around the fair.

First-day attenders, led by "Sunny Jim" Rolfe, walked, accompanied by music, to the Exposition that day. The handsome bronze lighting fixtures on either end of the wall had globes back then. Subsequently, ivy covered the little park immediately east of the wall. When the Greenwich Street Path Committee got the area below the wall cleaned up, they held a block party to celebrate.

Go down the steps beyond the wall and immediately you are in a little oasis, adorned with redwood trees. Through the cooperation of Mel Baker of the City Department of Public Works, more than 50 loads of garden debris were hauled away during the cleanup, and a water source - a hidden old pipe, long inactive - was renewed. Come along this way next year and rhododendrons and azaleas will have replaced the agapanthus on the slopes.

As you near the lower end of the stairway, look on the right to find an outcropping of Russian Hill's underlying bedrock. And, if you are game for more walking, North Beach, Fisherman's Wharf, and Chinatown are all short minutes away.

**Caption:** PHOTO, MAP

For a neighborhood rose garden exploding in bloom, hop on the Hyde Street cable car to Greenwich Street / BY SCOTT SOMMERDORF/THE CHRONICLE

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