

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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South Park Story

During a recent visit to San Francisco, I was taken on an evening motor tour of the city - to see the lights from Coit Tower the magnificent view from Twin Peaks, but the sight that impressed me most was my first visit to South Park. Now I believe that few folks know about South Park, so I am going to tell our readers about this tiny place, a dusty and threadbare old landmark between Bryant and Brannan streets, as its story was told to me by an old friend, Rev. Maurice O'Moore.

Once it was enclosed by an ornamental iron fence to keep the "shovelry" from the retreat wherein scions of the Gold Rush "chivalry" scampered in seclusion. Today it is an obscure little parkway dominated by the approach of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay bridge. Surrounded by cheap rooming houses and machine shops, only a narrow ellipsoid of earth remains of that historic project which the enterprising George Gordon laid out in the early 1850s after the plan of London's fashionable Berkeley Square. Factories and machine shops occupy the sites of the sedate Georgian houses which encircled the park. Here amongst others lived cattle king Henry Miller; the grandparents of Gertrude Atherton and Gertrude herself was born in this section. Hall McAllister, until he lost his house in a poker game to a Captain Lyons; Senator and Mrs. William M. Gwin, and the George Gordon's family. This George Gordon was named "Lord" Gordon by those who appreciated the magnificent work he performed in making South Park a veritable paradise.

In San Francisco in those early days the south of Market section boasted two fashionable districts, first, South Park, a frigidly respectable square lined with elm trees, and secondly, Rincon Hill. Both of these districts still persist as geographical units, but nothing of their former grandeur survives. Souths Park was a stronghold of the professional set and the abode of languishing ladies in tilting crinoline skirts and beaded dolmans. Its residents hailed from New York and Philadelphia, for the most part, with a fair sprinkling of gentlemen from the South who said: "Yes, Suh!" and "No, Suh!" and went from door to door on New Year's Day in search of eggnog and punch.

The houses of South Park were two-story brick examples of conservatism and crowded close together

just as if San Francisco in the 50's was metropolitan enough to warrant such economy of space. But this compactness doubtless reminded its residents of the cities they had quitted and thus gave them a sense of urbanity amid the many sandhills which hemmed them in.

These dwellings, as already stated, were built around a miniature oval park enclosed by an ornamental iron fence. In the center of the park was a windmill which pumped up sufficient water to maintain the beautiful gardens, but the residents of South Park for many years bought drinking water from a safer source at 25 cents a bucket. A bus line served the neighborhood and carried passengers to Mission Dolores, North Beach, and the Presidio.

South Park was San Francisco's first exclusive residential section. The importance of those handy fabricated, homes was the idea of Captain James Folsom, a long-faced man with heavy black side whiskers that melted into a handsome handle-bar mustache. The captain, after graduating from West Point and fighting the Seminoles in Florida, came west with Stevenson's Regiment and before the Gold Rush, had bought up many sand lots on Yerba Buena Cove, He was among the first to fill in a water lot and remained in trade, becoming most prosperous from the sale of the easily assembled houses to San Francisco newly rich.

(Continued on Wednesday)