

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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South Park Story, II

Maybe it was because the spot of Irish blood in our veins maybe it was for the reason that we love San Francisco and its history, that we became so interested in South Park, a bit Ireland on Third Street, between Bryant and Brannan streets. It was San Francisco's first exclusive, residential section.

The rising aristocracy, forming as fast as changing fortunes would allow, was pushed a few blocks in 1850 when W. Ball's Empire Brewery brought the Brannigans, the O'Rourkes, McMahons, and other Irish families to live near their work in the fog-free section. In the 50's riches, and there accompanying position, were things that might be acquired in South Park in a few days.

South Park had a rival in Nob Hill. Entertainment became lavish as Nob Hill aristocrats out splurged South Park society, with 25 course dinners and every known variety of liquors. People changed their names in South Park, wives harangued rough husbands and social climbers began their ascent.

The grain trade was dominated by one man, a big German immigrant, Isaac Friedlander, who came to San Francisco near the start of the Gold Rush as a young greenhorn. He left the digging of gold to others and made successful plans for getting it second hand. The "Wheat King" was a tall, stooping man with a narrow face, prominent nose, and very white skin, according to records. He dressed in a Prince Albert coat, wore a stove pipe hat, and towered above other traders in the streets where grain charters were made amid a bedlam.

The girl from South Carolina whom Friedlander married, made his mansion in South Park a mecca for those seeking hospitality. Mrs. Friedlander's 17 course dinners placed her and Isaac among the leaders of South Park Society.

The family names upon the polished door plates of South Park would have done credit to the fashionable quarter of any American City. The church, the Army, the Navy, the medical profession and the law were all represented with "Big Business," bringing up an imposing rear, Bishop Kip of the Episcopal church, General Halleck, Colonel McAllister (a brother of Hall and Ward McAllister), General Alexander, Admiral Simpson, Doctor Page, Judge McKinstry, Senator Gwinn

– to mention just a very few! In South Park itself, writes Father Maurice, there was a fashionable rooming house run by Miss James, a sister of Henry James, the novelist.

After the exodus of their fashionable tenants in the 1870's, the abandoned mansions of South Park fell into the hands of Japanese immigrants. Deterioration, the earthquake and fire, and the conversion to mundane uses have been the fate of this pioneer worthwhile development.

Today South Park is given over to a sprinkling of trival industrial plants, cheap hotels, and boarding houses catering to alien ship crews who lounge about their squared lobbies and are unmistakably from Central and South America.

The oval circle, once planted to fresh green grass that gained the name of [ark for this exclusive enclosure, is now a thing of unpainted benches and seared turf, shadowed by wind-bitten elms and maples. And one wonders if the ghosts of Old South Park ever come back to shudder and wail over the many, many changes in its fortune. And one also wonders if the ghosts of the bejeweled ladies of the long ago draw their silk skirts away from the drooling derelict sleeping off bad gin on one of the forlorn benches, or put their lace, perfumed handkerchiefs to their quivering nostrils to shut out the unpleasant odor of the nut-oil from the laundry nearby!

This story of Old South Park in San Francisco as told to me by Father Maurice, who has many friends on the Peninsula and is a frequent visitor here with his brother, William Miguel of San Francisco.