

THE HISTORY OF COW HOLLOW

by Miss Janis M. Horne

Although San Francisco was founded by the Spanish in 1776 and later governed by Mexico, it had just become an American possession when the Gold Rush transformed it from a sleepy village to a thriving city. The population of San Francisco grew from 3,000 in 1848, to 25,000 at the end of 1849, to about 90,000 (according to William McElroy) in 1861.

Yet the Octagon House was literally “out in the country” when it was built in Cow Hollow in 1861. Cow Hollow was that part of San Francisco which was bounded by large sand dunes to the north (about where Lombard Street is today), Franklin Street to the east, Green or Vallejo Streets to the south, and the Presidio to the west. Its primary source of water was Washerwoman’s Lagoon, which was located between today’s Octavia and Gough streets. The area was named after its numerous dairy farms, although it had many vegetable gardens as well. Cow Hollow helped feed the growing city to the south.

The first effort to settle Cow Hollow occurred in 1845, when Presidio Corporal Benito Diaz successfully applied to the Mexican government for a grant of land called Punta de Lobos. The following year, Diaz relocated to Monterey and sold his land to U.S. Consul and real estate speculator Thomas O. Larkin. Larkin and two other Americans tried to develop a new town on the rancho, but their scheme was defeated by the Land Claims Commission, which ruled that Diaz’s original land grant was defective.

As late as 1854, only four homes were known to have been built in Cow Hollow. Killey and Smith are believed to have founded the first milk ranch there in 1853, and other dairy farms soon followed, as well as vegetable gardeners. The number of dairy farms doubled in the 1860s, reaching 23 in 1870 and peaking at 38 around 1880.

Dairy farms and vegetable gardens were not the only businesses in Cow Hollow. Some laundries and a tannery located near Washerwoman’s Lagoon in the 1850s, and they were followed, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, by breweries, distilleries, a shipyard, an iron works, stables, blacksmith shops, coal yards and a gas works, and other enterprises.

Ironically, only about 15% of all of the dairy farms in San Francisco were located in Cow Hollow, though the area was so-named probably because of the density of dairy farms. The cows tended to be crowded into corrals and stables rather than allowed to graze for their feed, and as the density of population increased, the dairy farmers turned to the illegal practice of feeding the cows distillery slops (waste from nearby breweries). Combined, the cows’ crowded, unsanitary living conditions and their type of feed made the dairy farms a potential public health hazard.

In 1889, San Francisco public health officer Dr. James W. Keeney launched a crusade against the dairy farms in Cow Hollow. He encouraged newspaper reporters to

accompany him as he inspected conditions on the crowded farms and warned that milk from the cows caused typhus and tuberculosis. The resulting exposés make fascinating reading. Dr. Keeney also persuaded the San Francisco Board of Health to condemn some of the worst farms. As a result, the number of dairy farms in Cow Hollow declined from 22 in 1889, to 15 in 1890, to ten in 1891, to five in 1892 and three in 1897. The era of the dairy farms was coming to an end.

Other developments were changing the very geography of Cow Hollow. In the 1880s, prison laborers filled in Washerwoman's Lagoon with sand from the nearby dunes. In the 1890s, a private developer used more sand to fill in the tidal lands to the north, creating the Marina district (the area where the Panama Pacific International Exposition would be held). By 1915, the whole area, including Cow Hollow, was called the Marina. Only in second half of the twentieth century did the term Cow Hollow come back into use, to remind us of the days when dairy farms reigned supreme in this part of San Francisco.

Sources: John L. Levinshohn, Cow Hollow: Early Days of a San Francisco Neighborhood from 1776; William Kostura, "The Cows of Cow Hollow" and "Cow Hollow Dairymen, 1853-1911", The Argonaut Journal of the San Francisco Historical Society (Volume 9, No. 1, Spring 1998); and Marina Memories, Local History Studies, Vol. 16 (California History Center, Cupertino, California).