The Sunnyside District

By Thomas W. Malim

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Forward

The Sunnyside district is a small one, as far as San Francisco is concerned. Situated to the south of Twin Peaks, it is crunched between the larger areas of Miraloma Park and Ingleside. Most people, some of them longtime residents of San Francisco have never heard of it. Ingleside? Yes. Sunnyside? Hell, No!

Predominately White, it is also a district whose residents represent the Brown races of the Pacific Basin, various nationalities of the Near and Far East, and the Black peoples of Afro-American heritage. From Samoa to Hawaii and from mainland China they have come to plant roots in Sunnyside.

With the formation of the Sunnyside Neighborhood Association, a catalyst was sought that might weld all these peoples together in an awareness of their district. That catalyst was a structure called The Conservatory on Monterey Boulevard, much looked at, much discussed, but apparently inaccessible.

Ken Hoegger, of Forum Realty, was seeking information on The Conservatory. Luckily, I was working with another Engineer who had been raised across the street from it, and we had several conversations concerning it. I passed this information on to Ken, and suddenly found myself appointed official historian of Sunnyside. One thing led to another and the simple article on The Conservatory did not stop there. My co-worker, Ed Valencia led me to Pat Anderson who in turn pointed out other paths to follow. The overall result was the turning over of stones which had not been disturbed in generations, and an overall picture of Sunnyside was the end result.

As is usual in cases such as this, one person cannot claim all the credit. Therefore, I thank Ed Valencia, Pat Anderson, and Ed Michael of the City Planning Commission.

This booklet starts with a history of The Conservatory, then to the man who built it, the people who purchased it from the bank, and concludes with a general history of the district.

Sunnyside
San Francisco
In researching The Conservatory on Monterey Boulevard, it was not possible to pinpoint exact dates. Some records were lost during the 1906 Earthquake and Fire, and some records were not kept until after 1914. In a case such as this, one has to rely on the memories of others, and whatever records are available. Therefore, conclusions have to be drawn from the facts presented, and errors and omissions might occur.

This, then, is the history of The Conservatory as far as it is possible to trace.

The property on which The Conservatory is located was purchased in 1891 from the Sunnyside Land Company, by a Mr. and Mrs. H. Taylor. Mr. Taylor was a grip man on the Omnibus Railroad which ran on Howard Street. It was one of the many independent companies which served the city in its earlier years. Mr. Taylor seemed to be somewhat of a traveler, as the city directories of that time listed him as being employed by different railroad companies in various years.

The property consisted of seven lots, with a frontage of 175 Feet on Sunnyside Avenue. Sometime between 1891 and 1893, Mr. Taylor built the Victorian style house now known as 258 Monterey Boulevard. The house was first listed as 230 Sunnyside Avenue, then 236, and finally was registered at its present number.

In 1898, Mr. Taylor sold the property to W.A. Merralls, a mining engineer and inventor of international repute. There is no record of the price paid for the property by Mr. Merralls, but shortly after the deal was made, Taylor appeared in the city directory, where his occupation was listed as "Mining Superintendent." As previously noted, Taylor was always listed in an occupation with dealt with the operation of streetcars. The step from streetcar to motorman to Mining Superintendent was a great one for him, so we must assume that Taylor had talents which were latent until he met and dealt with Merralls.
It is not known when The Conservatory was constructed, but it was done while the property was owned by Merralls. It has been established that it was not there when he purchased the property but it was there when he died. The cost of the structure was $7,000, a considerable sum in those days. That sum was the cost of the building only, and did not include the costs of the concrete walkways, the exterior plantings on the grounds or the plants in the interior of The Conservatory.

The Conservatory was built and landscaped within so as to be an extension of the outer grounds. Mr. Merralls had plants placed inside The Conservatory which complemented and were compatible with those of the outside. Practically all the trees and plants on the exterior grounds and within The Conservatory which remain today are those originally planted by Merralls.

Concrete walkways were laid inside The Conservatory, and a concrete driveway entered the east side of the property, and wound around The Conservatory to a parking area at the rear of the house. Merralls, having invented a gas engine, no doubt owned one of the new-fangled horseless carriages of that time.

In 1914, Mr. Merralls was killed in a train accident in Alameda. His wife and son remained on the property until 1916, then, unable to maintain the expenses and the heavy mortgage payments, she allowed the bank to foreclose.

The advent of World War I turned people’s interests to other things, and the property remained vacant until 1919. During this time, the property remained in the clutch of the bank, and the grounds were allowed to deteriorate. The trees grew larger, and heavy brush grew between them, effectively hiding The Conservatory.

In April of 1906, the horrible vibration of the earth under San Francisco and the fire which followed and burned it to the ground, literally forced the people into the streets and to less settled areas which hadn't been shattered but remained rather intact. They moved in with relatives or friends whose homes were not damaged, or camped out in the relative quiet of the unsettled suburbs. Thus they discovered Bernal Heights, Daly City, Sunnyside, and, God help us, Oakland.

Many of those who came to Sunnyside decided to stay, as they became used to the quiet of the countryside, and the San Francisco-San Jose railroad provided good transportation to the downtown area.

Into the growing Sunnyside, came a Mr. Ernest Van Beck and his wife in the year 1919. He from New York, and she from France and educated in the best schools of the Continent, they liked the small town atmosphere of the district. They purchased the former Merralls property from the bank for $12,000. A tax bill of that year shows assessments of $124.12.
The Van Becks assumed the house was the only structure on the property, and that the heavy growth was normal for the area. It was only by an accident that they discovered The Conservatory, and realized the extent of their holdings.

Mr. Van Beck enlisted the aid of the proper craftsmen, cleared the grounds and returned them and The Conservatory to their previous appearance.

On the death of Van Beck in 1952, the property passed to his wife. She had known Pat and Walter Anderson for many years, and made arrangements for them to purchase the property from her when she decided to sell portions of it. The easternmost lot was sold to the Andersons in 1953, and they built their home there, now known as 234 Monterey Boulevard.

Mr. Anderson began work on The Conservatory, as some of the structural members had deteriorated over the years, and much of the glass had been broken by vandals since the demise of Van Beck. In 1970, the Andersons purchased the remainder of the property, with the exception of the original house. Walter Anderson passed away in 1973 and in the latter part of that year, his wife sold the property to others, also named Anderson.

On September 21, 1975, through the efforts of some of the members of the Sunnyside Neighborhood Association, The Conservatory was given Landmark status, which means that it cannot be demolished to make way for multiple dwellings units.

2- THE MAN WHO BUILT THE CONSERVATORY

William Augustus Merralls was born in 1852 in Kent County, England. His father was an engineer employed in the Naval shipyard at Chatham. Young William spent all his spare time with his father, and followed his father’s profession as a matter of course.

Merralls, however, became more interested in mines, and after receiving his degree he attached himself to the mining industry. Being of an inventive mind, it wasn’t long before he saw ways of improving the machinery used in mining operations. The end result was his inventing several pieces of machinery which improved the efficiency of the operations, and also permitted the profitable mining of low grade ore. His machinery sold well in the industry, and soon was being used throughout the world. Later, he was to invent a gasoline engine to power his mining inventions. Sold as a package unit, he became wealthy while still a fairly young man. His gasoline engine was pronounced by diesel experts in Europe as the most advanced and efficient internal combustion of that time.

The real action in mining was in America, and Merralls traveled there, settling for a time in the Eastern part of the country, where he became a naturalized citizen. He studied
the mining operations there, but found no market for his machinery, which was more oriented towards the mining of gold and other metals.

Knowing that type of operation was the basis of the economy in the Far West, he moved to San Francisco, and settled there in 1895. With his international reputation he established himself among the business world of this city, most of which was touched by gold mining in one way or another. With a gregarious personality, he also became a fixture in the social world of the Bay Area.

The wealth of the Comstock Lode had petered out, and the shafts and slopes flooded with the hot waters of the underground streams, but Merralls had arrived at an opportune time. Some small mines were still in operation working low grade ore, and were in need of machinery of the type Merralls had to offer. He invested most of his money in starting the Merralls Stamp Mill Corporation, and manufactured his machinery, subcontracting out the heavier work to local firms.

The progressive discovery of gold in Nevada areas such as Goldfield, Searchlight, and Topopah created a greater demand for his machinery, and he quickly recouped his original investment and further profits added greatly to his wealth.

During this period, the New York subway system had started operating, but it was found that the heat given off by the electric motors of the trains, and the lack of proper ventilation caused a tremendous buildup of heat in the tubes. Casting about for a solution, the city fathers looked westward, sought out Merralls and engaged him to solve the problem. This he did by simply running coils of pipe along the walls of certain sections of the system. By pumping cold ground water through the pipes the heat was transferred to the water, and the warmed water was discharged into the sewer system.

Until a few years ago, parts of that system were still in use. That principle of heat transfer was the forerunner of air conditioning as we know it today.

As mentioned in The Conservatory, Merralls purchased the property on Sunnyside Avenue in 1898. He was a man of many interests, among them astronomy. One of the first things he had built was an observatory at the rear of the house. It was designed by him, and could rotate a full 360 degrees on steel balls. That observatory is still there, but hasn’t been used since his death.

Having exhausted his interest in mining, and being of a restless nature, Merralls turned to aircraft, which were in the experimental stages of development. He invented a combination balloon and self-propelled type of flying machine. He formed a company for its manufacture and named it "The Merralls Safety Aeroplane Manufacturing Company," with an office downtown and testing grounds at the corner of Van Ness Avenue and Hayes Street.
In the stock prospectus, Merralls made note of the fact that when an aeroplane engine stops in the air, "the aeroplane will glide to earth, and in its downward flight it may land on a steeple, house, tree, lake or river. In so doing, the Aviator usually meets his death".

His invention consisted of a balloon encased in a frame of bamboo webbing, to which was attached a gondola which supported four gasoline engines of his own design. Each engine was 75 horsepower. The hot exhaust gases from the engines were led to the balloon for inflation purposes, causing the whole affair to rise. In the event the engines failed, there was a system of burners which forced heated air into the balloon, an added safety feature.

Connected to the engines, and easily detachable, were two propellers which gave the craft it forward and backwards movements and could control the rise and descent. Both propellers were adjustable, and were the original variable pitch propellers which are so common on the prop driven aeroplanes of today and on many types of ships.

The complete safety feature was in the fact that the unit could be safely set upon the ground if the weather became nasty. When the weather cleared, the engines fired up, the bag inflated and ship, crew and passengers were on their merry way. In an operation such as that, it is hoped that the passengers would be well supplied with cold fried chicken and submarine sandwiches, a possibly a chilled bottle or two of Cold Duck.

Also on his drawing board, Merralls had plans for a bi-plane with a wing span of 72 feet, powered by four 100 horsepower engines of his own design. He envisioned these being used for travel, carrying messages, and possibly for military use in times of war. This nation was built by men of vision such as him.

Into the aeroplane venture, Merralls invested all his available capital. During this period, he had The Conservatory constructed. The actual cost of construction exceeded his estimate, and when the time came to landscape The Conservatory and the outside areas, he made arrangements to pay the landscapers with stock in his new company.

In 1910, Lizzie Merralls died, and with a year Merralls remarried, this time, a nurse from Australia named Temperance Laura. It wasn’t long before she decided that the large house and the grounds would make a proper sanitarium. She persuaded her husband of that fact, and in due time the convalescent area was begun. This was in the attic of the house and the shingled extension on the east side was added at that time. Temperance Laura immediately named the property "(Sunnyside Laboratories’", and it was still, known by that name when Van Beck purchased the property.

The plans of the second Mrs. Merralls were never to be fully realized as her husband’s company absorbed all ready cash, and the area upstairs was never completed. The threat of war in Europe had throttled further financing of the aircraft company. It would
only be after his death that the value of Merralls aircraft would be understood by others. His fortune tied up in a seemingly useless venture and his home heavily mortgaged, Merralls had nothing left but his dream.

On September 1, 1914, he visited some friends in Alameda. Returning home in the late afternoon, he was crossing some railroad tracks on a blind curve. No one knows how it happened, but Merralls, apparently absorbed in thoughts of monetary problems and failing health did not see or hear the train coming. He was run down and crushed to death under the wheels of the engine, his life ended by a piece of machinery that he had spent a lifetime trying to perfect.

The newspapers of that day printed his obituary on their front pages, and made note or the act that the world had lost an inventive genius, and one of the great mechanical minds of all time.

Temperance Laura Merralls and her young son continued to live on the property for some time after Merralls death. Unable to maintain the Property or meet the mortgage payments, she allowed the bank to foreclose in 1916, and she and her son left this area, for where, it is not known.

3- THE MAN WHO BOUGHT THE CONSERVATORY

Little is known of the background of Ernest Van Beck and his wife who purchased The Conservatory from the bank. He was from the east, and he and Mrs. Van Beck were married there. Mrs. Van Beck was of French nationality, and heiress to a large and wealthy estate in France which included extensive vineyards. She was educated in the best schools of Europe, and numbered among her friends the wealthy and royalty of that continent. During a visit to New York, she met her future husband.

After the marriage, Mrs. Van Beck decided to remain in America, and turned the operation of her estate over to relatives in France. This was a mistake, as through their mismanagement and dishonesty, she eventually lost all of her financial and landed heritage.

Luckily, Ernest Van Beck was a shrewd businessman. His arrival in San Francisco did not shake the foundations of the local business houses, and he never became as well known as Merralls. He must have arrived with a considerable sum of money, as he entered the bottled water business, and soon held almost a monopoly over most of the water supplied to offices and government buildings in San Francisco. When one considers that the city was using water of dubious quality, it is readily apparent that such a business could be quite profitable. He would not have fared so well today, what with City Hall cutting out the bottled water in an economy campaign.
Van Beck was a promoter and investor. He quickly made and lost two fortunes by investing in gold mines. As is usual with Nevada gold mines and slot machines, more money is put in than taken out. Being well acquainted in a quiet way with the political and business giants here, he managed to always rebuild his fortune.

When he and his wife purchased the Sunnyside Avenue property from the bank, they assumed they were purchasing the house and land only, not knowing that there was a bonus hidden behind the thick growth of trees and brush that covered the property.

Mrs. Van Beck liked dogs, and kept several of them on the property. One day, one of them became entangled in the brush and Mrs. Van Beck, in cutting her way through it in an effort to free the animal came across a concrete walkway. After freeing the dog, they both retreated, and during a later conversation she mentioned the walkway to her husband.

Intrigued by her story, Van Beck hired some laborers to clear the land of brush, and discovered The Conservatory. Realizing the value of the structure, he went to the expense of restoring it to its proper condition, and to bringing the landscaped areas back to their original splendor.

As part of his bottle water business, Van Beck had concocted a fortified type of water laced with various minerals. He designed and had manufactured special jugs for the product. The venture never got off the ground, although in this day of natural foods, it would no doubt be a success in the super markets. The jugs were well decorated, and only one is known to be in existence, and that rather faded.

Both of the Van Becks were reserved persons, and did not circulate among the residents of the neighborhood. One who did become friendly with Mrs. Van Beck was Mrs. Walter Anderson who was to purchase the property with her husband, after the death of Mr. Van Beck. It is interesting to note that Mrs. Anderson was from Australia, as was the second Mrs. Merralls.

Van Beck was a study in contrasts. Extroverted with those among whom he dealt during business hours, he became aloof to others afterwards. Being childless, he presented a stern personality towards the children of the neighborhood and to those parents to whom they belonged. The children dared not bounce a ball against the fence of Van Beck when he was home. Earlier in life, Van Beck had suffered a fall which shattered one of his kneecaps. From that time on, he walked with a pronounced limp, and the story among the children was that he had been a pilot in the war and had lost a leg in a crash. This story added to his mystique.

On the other side, he was a compassionate person. When the year-end holidays rolled around, it was Van Beck who had basketsful of goodies assembled, and then had them
anonymously distributed to the less fortunate families in the district. It was Van Beck who led the fight to have streetlights installed on Sunnyside Avenue, and in later years was in the forefront of the battle to retain the names of some of the streets which others wanted changed. The children did not know that it was he who secretly bought home packages of candy on Halloween, and persuaded his wife to dress as a witch and pass the candy out to them.

Ernest Van Beck passed on in 1953, and the following year the Walter Andersons began the purchase of the property from his wife. Mrs. Van Beck retained title to the original house, but finally sold it in 1973 and moved from this area.

This completes the series of articles concerning The Conservatory and those associated with it. For well over half a century it has endured much as it was when originally built. It stands in silent testimony who realized its worth: The Merralls, the Van Becks and the Andersons.

4- SUNNYSIDE HISTORY

Our district lies in a valley, brooded over by the San Bruno hills on the south, then rises part way up the slopes of the San Miguel hills to the north, whose highest point is Mt. Davidson.

The district was surveyed and the lots and streets laid out in 1892, by Behrens A. Joost, owner of the Sunnyside Land and Development Corporation. He expected the area to be developed into a site for weekend and summer homes, as it was then far from downtown San Francisco, and the area was sparsely settled by vegetable and dairy farmers. The boundaries he laid were: Melrose Avenue on the north, Havelock on the south, Circular Way on the east and Hamburg Street, now Ridgewood Avenue, on the west. Although some of the original streets have been relocated slightly today, the boundaries laid out by him remain the same.

To promote the area, Joost purchased the defunct San Francisco-San Jose railroad, which, after changing part of the system from steam to electricity, went bankrupt. It ran along the San Jose Road which is now covered over by the concrete of Freeway 280. One of the operators of the Joust-owned railroad was Mr. Taylor, who had purchased the property on which The Conservatory was to be built. There was a powerhouse on Sunnyside Avenue near the triangle formed by Circular Way, Baden, and Sunnyside. A picture of its ruins can be seen hanging on the walls of the tonsorial parlor of Ron Davis, on Monterey Boulevard.

Joost ran the cars as far as the county line, until such time as he had sold all the land in his development, when he abandoned it. Shortly, the Market Street Railway purchased it. With the realignment of San Jose Road to its present location, the line was moved to
Mission Street, and the Market Street RR Company began serving Sunnyside with an extension of the Number Ten car. The old SF-SJ cars became the number forty line.

From Baden to Gennessee Street, the new line was a single track, with two bypass tracks a block apart. Occasionally the schedules of the cars would overlap, and the outbound passengers would have to disembark several blocks from the end of the line. After a hard day’s work, that was an added insult. However, that was a part of life in those days and accepted by all. If that were to happen today, no doubt some irate passenger would haul out a Saturday night special and shoot the conductor.

In earlier days, water to the homes came from wells, and the higher one lived up the slope the deeper the well. The area was well supplied with streams and springs, even on the slopes. The earliest recorded hookup for a commercial water supply was in 1909 by the Spring Valley Water Co, to a house at 663 Mangels Avenue. The eventual filling in and paving over of the streams and springs caused them to seek other routes, and there are many homes in Sunnyside today built over underground streams.

With the advent of Prohibition, Sunnyside, being sparsely settled and somewhat isolated from the City, became a bootleggers’ paradise. Swarthy men in dark suits and Borsalino hats would rent a vacant house that was quite a distance from the others. Stills were set up in basements and empty bedrooms, and the air of Sunnyside became redolent with the odors of fermenting corn, and all the other goodies that go into the making of a prime batch of grog. On Saturday nights, the bean and rice sacks of the friendly neighborhood grocers were well stocked with bottles of the local product. It was no problem at all to reach down into the stack, shove the beans or rice aside, and produce a pint for four bits. That method of supply was strictly the property of the working man. As this district was mainly settled by workingmen, they needed a little relaxation after six days of hard work. The more learned residents got theirs from a more genteel source, but it was the same booze.

Occasionally, some of the still operators would get carried away in the tasting of their own product and forget to watch the boiler. The end result was a large explosion, and their heads suddenly cleared of alcoholic fumes, they promptly vacated the property. The sound of the alcoholic sonic boom in an area was the signal for all those nearby to rush into the empty bootlegger’s house and carry away anything that wasn't screwed down. It is rumored that in one instance, two men came in with a pile of wet gunnysacks, and carried away the hot stove on which the evenings meal had been cooking.

In 1920, the St. Francis Wood area was being developed, as were Westwood Park and Highlands. The developers and the early residents didn't like Sunnyside Avenue running through their areas, so they petitioned City Hall to have the name changed to Monterey Boulevard. The residents of Sunnyside, led by Van Beck, fought to retain the original
name of the street, but the wealthy residents of those areas had more friends in City Hall, and their power overcame that or their poorer cousins next door. Their victory was poetic, as today, Monterey Boulevard enters St. Francis Wood for one block, turns hard left and ends ignominiously at Junipero Serra Boulevard, amidst brush and weeds.

In 1927, the residents of Westwood Park and Highlands again joined forces and managed to have the name Hamburg changed to Ridgewood, for the reason that Hamburg bordered their property, and the name wasn't germane to the posts that heralded ones entry into the two Westwoods. Again Sunnyside fought them and again defeated. It was also another empty victory, as there is only one post left on Ridgewood. The name Hamburg was never completely erased, as it can still be seen on the sidewalk at the top of the hill on the southeast corner of Ridgewood and Mangles. The name Sunnyside endured on the sidewalk across the street from the stairs on Detroit. With the realignment of the curbing on Monterey Boulevard recently, that name disappeared. The loss of the name Hamburg ruined the east-to-west alphabetical progression of names and streets in Sunnyside.

For the most part, the architecture of the homes in Sunnyside denotes the fact that they were mostly built on an individual basis. In the late twenties, some attempt was made to mass develop the area, but was stopped by the Depression. In the late thirties development was again started, only to be stopped by World War II. After that, the building boom began again, and we now have blocks of newer homes build by one builder or another. Some of the older homes date as far back as 1893. Some original structures have been crushed to kindling to make way for apartment houses. Cross town traffic roars up and down Monterey Boulevard during the rush hours, yet the aura of residential has not diminished.

In 1943, after a period of torrential rains, a block of homes built shortly before the war on Foerster Avenue suddenly slid into the street. The disturbance of the earth in that area due to grading had removed the natural ground cover, and the earth, having become soaked beyond its capacity, gave way under the weight of the homes above. Eventually, the area was rebuilt, but this time with more attention being paid to the requirements of nature and less to the monetary dreams of the developers.

This is Sunnyside as it was and as it is today. Joost, Merralls, and Van Beck all left their marks here. There are no doubt others who should be mentioned but they left no record of their achievements.

There was Sunnyside, there is a Sunnyside, and there will always be a Sunnyside. Sunnyside? Hell, yes!