

A vertical photograph of a forest path. Sunlight filters through the trees, creating a dappled light effect on the path. In the foreground, there is a large, dark tree stump. To the left, there are some bushes with small pink flowers. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

S.F.'S GOLDEN SANCTUARY

For 150 years, Golden Gate Park has been a unique refuge in a busy city. In this time of social isolation, it's appreciated more than ever.

CULTURE DESK

San Francisco Chronicle SUNDAY, MARCH 22, 2020

OUR SF

10 FAVORITES IN THE PARK

From Hardly Strictly to roller skating to museums, our love knows no bounds

By Peter Hartlaub

Golden Gate Park was founded 150 years ago, but it was defined in 1906. After the April 18 earthquake and fire ravaged San Francisco, tens of thousands of residents fled to the park for refuge.

Three days later, The Chronicle described the scene in the newspaper for the first time, and it was a moving account. The rest of the paper described unfathomable damage, looters being shot on sight and city leaders who had little control of the situation. But in the park, refugees of all demographics — from a Chinese man making eggs for his neighbors to a doctor setting up a temporary practice in a tent — were bonding as San Franciscans.

“Nowhere can the full extent of the calamity make itself better felt than at Golden Gate Park, nor can the universal character of the disaster be better understood,” The Chronicle reported. “Everywhere was a lack of depression. The spirit of courage and grit to fight the thing out was everywhere, from the Chinese with the skillet up through all the intermediary classes to the patricians with five automobiles.”

The city has been redefined many times over since that tragic moment. But the spirit of Golden Gate Park, and what it represents, has been a constant.

The park has continued to welcome the outcast, and be a place where the city’s diverse population can meet as one. Culture, science, sport and social movements thrive in the park, and its traditions, especially the ones that are organic and free of corporate influence, have become some of San Francisco’s greatest stories.

Here are 10 of them. Ten times in the last 150 years that San Francisco citizens have created something wonderful, whimsical or good for the soul in Golden Gate Park, that can still be enjoyed today.

Hardly Strictly Bluegrass (2001)

“If you’re really terrible at something, you always admire those who can do it well. ... This may sound maudlin, but this city, this state, this country has given everything to our family.”

Those were the words of financier Warren Hellman in 2002, when his Hardly Strictly festival was in just its second year, with 12,000 fans coming to three stages around Speedway Meadow. The free festival has grown into a behemoth, with a reported 750,000-plus arriving over three days in recent years.

Hellman’s family history dates back



Jason Henry / Special to The Chronicle 2011

In 1991, the National AIDS Memorial Grove took root in the park. Longtime volunteer Jack Porter walks the grove in 2011.



Caroline Kopp

Kids get an eyeful of a shark’s fearsome jaws at Steinhart Aquarium at the old Academy of Sciences in this undated photo.

to the 1800s, and his banker ancestors were instrumental in the rebuild of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake and fires. Warren Hellman died of leukemia in 2011, but the Hellman Foundation has continued to fund the festival since. It remains free.

The festival is a great gift, and a beacon for future philanthropists, as a way to take personal passions and

generosity and alter the culture of a community for the better.

SF City FC (2001)

When the city announced its coronavirus ban on gatherings of more than 1,000, there was at least one sports club that continued to have options.

SF City FC attendance may number

in the hundreds, but they’ve been a mighty story in Golden Gate Park since the soccer club was founded in 2001. Playing at Kezar Stadium for most of that time at family-friendly prices, SF City is owned by its fans, who design the merchandise, manage the club and cheer with the energy of a much larger crowd.

(The Northsiders, the club’s most loyal fans, chant throughout the game and have been known to ignite a smoke bomb or two ...)

The next season begins in May. And with a little more word of mouth, the crowds will only grow.

National AIDS Memorial Grove (1991)

In 1991, a volunteer group took over a neglected plot of land and turned it into the National AIDS Memorial Grove, the world’s first living memorial to those who died of AIDS.

“It’s been difficult to believe in God,” said David Linger, who lost a lover to AIDS in the 1980s. “I’d much rather believe in trees.”

Fifteen acres of overgrown hillside were cleared, and gardens with tasteful landscaping flourished. But the greatest gift was the restoration of the titan redwood and cypress trees, which were neglected and dropping

San Francisco Chronicle
Local news at your fingertips

Available on the App Store | GET IT ON Google Play

- 1 Real-time updates
- 2 Alerts custom tailored for you
- 3 Easy-to-use navigation
- 4 Free access on all your devices

NEVER MISS A STORY
The Chronicle app is always there!

DOWNLOAD AND START YOUR FREE TRIAL TODAY
SFCHRONICLE.COM/MOBILE-APPS

BRUNO
for your independence

REGAIN YOUR FREEDOM AND LIVE BARRIER-FREE AT HOME

Call Mark Feinman
(510) 295-4665
for a free estimate on your disability access project

Stairlifts
Sales • Service • New • Used

COMPLETE ACCESS

Locally Owned and Operated in Berkeley since 1976
CA License: 659163
Residential Service Sales Support
www.thecompleteaccess.com

Podcasts

Tune in to Chronicle Podcasts

Investigations, interviews, sports analysis, entertainment. Listen to the best of our coverage.

Start listening today, wherever you get your podcasts!
SFChronicle.com/Podcasts

their limbs when the restoration started.

The National AIDS Memorial Grove is a place to think about tragedy and lives lost. And in its sprawling beauty, it's also a place to reflect on our community and the importance of Golden Gate Park as a home for our best causes.

Comedy Day in the Park (1981)

Jose Simon came up with Comedy Day in the Park in the 1970s as a response to one of the grimmest eras in the city's history.

"It was during the Zodiac killings," Simon told The Chronicle in 1985, referring to a string of Northern California murders. "No one would go out at night. I was tired of the rest of the country thinking of us as a bunch of kooks and not a family city."

His timing turned out to be fantastic. The free festival (The Chronicle was an original sponsor) grew as Comedy Day regulars, including Dana Carvey, Paula Poundstone and Whoopi Goldberg became international stars. But if Simon was the mastermind, Robin Williams was the engine, appearing as an "unannounced" closing comic for most of the first decade.

Simon died in 2008 and Williams passed in 2014, but the festival has remained in capable hands, with longtime San Francisco comic Debi Durst running the show. Debi and her husband, Will Durst, lobbied hard to get Sharon Meadow renamed as Robin Williams Meadow in 2018.

Skate Patrol and the Skatin' Place (1979)

Looking at photos of the late 1970s roller skating scene, one sees scenes of beautiful chaos. Thousands of mostly young skaters descended on Golden Gate Park every weekend, listening to disco and funk, crowding the streets and engaging in wholesome fun.

The city didn't see it that way. Rather than harness the skaters, officials moved to ban them. So a group of citizens, previously unengaged with anything political, formed a skate patrol — keeping order, lobbying for their own Skatin' Place (a roller skating oasis near the Fulton Street and Sixth Avenue park entrance) and working with other groups to close streets on weekends and support other pro-pedestrian/bike/skating movements.

Forty years later, you can still skate with many of the original skate patrolers, including their leader David Miles Jr., who continues to preside over the Church of 8 Wheels and other S.F. skating events.

Steinhart Aquarium (1923)

In 1916, the California Academy of Sciences was welcomed into Golden Gate Park after its multifloor downtown San Francisco location was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire.

But the future of that academy would be shaped by the generosity of Ignatz Steinhart, a banker who wanted to donate the aquarium in honor of



Frederic Larson / The Chronicle 1980

The Golden Gate Park Skate Patrol rolls through the park on Aug. 10, 1980.

his dead brother Sigmund. The San Francisco Examiner and preservationists fought the move, accusing the rival Chronicle (which supported the aquarium) of trying to "make a Coney Island out of Golden Gate Park."

But Ignatz Steinhart made a strong argument from beyond the grave, with a will that declared himself a widower with no motivation except to help the children of San Francisco. He paid off the entire Children's Hospital debt of \$75,000 — and gave \$250,000 to start the aquarium.

Nearly a century later, it remains a centerpiece of the park, a generous gift that continues to bring joy and wonder for new generations of children and adults.

Bay to Breakers (1912)

The first Bay to Breakers had 174 runners, was called the Cross City Race and was won by Robert Vlught of St. Mary's College, who (like everyone else) was not wearing a costume.

But the spirit of the race, and the 7.46-mile path across the city, has remained the same. The first Bay to Breakers was organized to lift spirits in a city that continued to rebuild after the 1906 earthquake and fire. After a relatively quiet first 60 years, it became a city-wide party every May in the 1970s, peaking with more than 110,000 runners by the 1980s.

Bay to Breakers has experienced its ups and downs in the years since, as the party arguably got too big and the city and organizers struggled to set a sensible rulebook. (Short version: less drinking, but nudity is still cool.) But it remains a very San Francisco event, always ready in times of strife and sadness to give us one guaranteed day of whimsy.

De Young Museum opening (1895)

Chronicle publisher M.H. de Young was a driving force behind the California Midwinter Exposition of 1894, a world's fair that threatened the status quo in Golden Gate Park — where head gardener John McLaren cherished his huge green lawns above all.

To get City Hall's support for the de Young Museum, de Young agreed to

hand the museum to the parks department when the expo was over.

The opening on March 23, 1895, was such a huge success that the water company waived the museum's \$6,000 water bill.

"Instantly there was a good-natured scramble past the bronzed sphinxes standing near the main entrance and within twenty minutes the building, large as it is, was choked from the main floor to gallery," The Chronicle reported. "Many who had come to criticize were quick to congratulate the promoters of the enterprise, and there were others who frankly promised assistance in making the departments more extensive."

The museum remains the most visible structure in the park; reopening with a 144-foot tower with a stunning observation deck. Once a controversy, it's now a visual and spiritual centerpiece of Golden Gate Park.

Golden Gate Park Band (1882)

The Golden Gate Park Band is one of the oldest traditions in San Francisco, performing continuously since 1882.

An early program published in The Chronicle in 1892 reveals an eclectic mix of music, from the "Hallelujah Chorus" by Handel, to John Philip Sousa's march "Guide Right" to an American medley including "Washington's March" and the "Star-Spangled Banner."

More than 130 years later, the band looks pretty much the same. The 30-piece ensemble filled with brass and woodwind instruments wears traditional uniforms, plays on Sundays in the Spreckels Temple of Music and Music Concourse and favors a classic, eclectic, crowd-friendly program. (John Philip Sousa still makes the occasional appearance.)

Close your eyes while you listen, and you might as well be time-traveling to the 19th century.

Peter Hartlaub is The San Francisco Chronicle's pop culture critic. Email: phartlaub@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @PeterHartlaub

STAFF

Sarah Feldberg
Culture Desk Editor
sarah.feldberg@sfchronicle.com

Peter Hartlaub
Pop Culture Critic
phartlaub@sfchronicle.com

Ryan Kost
Staff Writer
rkost@sfchronicle.com

Danielle Mollette-Parks
Art Director
dmollette-parks@sfchronicle.com

Daymond Gascon
Designer
dgascon@sfchronicle.com

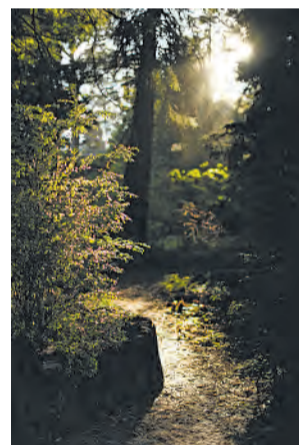
Russell Yip
Photo Editor
ryip@sfchronicle.com

Bernadette Fay
Contributing Editor
bfay@sfchronicle.com

Kathy Castle
Advertising
Account Executive
kcastle@sfchronicle.com

Follow us
Instagram:
@SFChronicle_Culture

Email us
culture@sfchronicle.com



ON THE COVER

S.F.'s golden sanctuary:
The San Francisco Botanical Garden in Golden Gate Park is not only a living museum but a haven for city residents. **Pages 4-5**
Photography: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

San Francisco Chronicle Newsletters
Customize your news feed. Pick the topics that matter to you; sign up for The Chronicle's newsletters.

Tech Chronicle
Silicon Valley and beyond, with a San Francisco spin.

MORE NEWSLETTERS

Political Punch
Politics from a Golden State perspective.

Opinion Central
Hard-hitting views from The Chronicle Editorial Board.

Visit SFCHRONICLE.COM/NEWSLETTERS for more and sign up today!

jest jewels is going to CLOSE

IT'S TRUE! Retirement is in sight! everything is on sale!

Don't wait! Before it's too late!

up to 70% OFF until it's all gone!

Sale excludes piercing earrings but Piercing is still free!

1869 Union St., San Francisco 1791 4th St., Berkeley
Store Hours: 10am-6pm all stores

INDIGO & POPPY
FINE CALIFORNIA LIVING

INTERIOR DESIGN | HOME FURNISHINGS | GIFTS & RUGS

1009 OAK HILL ROAD, LAFAYETTE, CA | (925) 962-9201

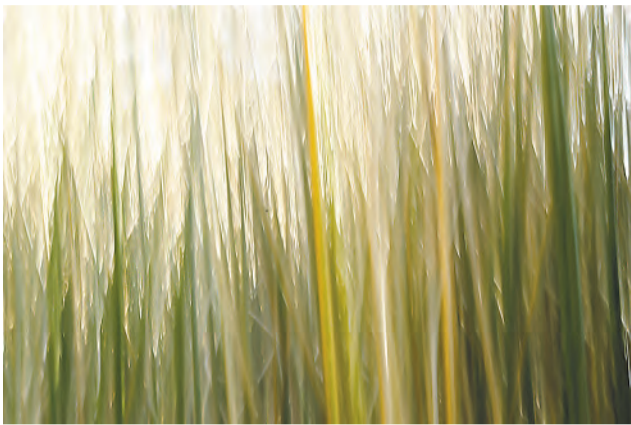
10:00 AM - 5:30 PM | MONDAY - SATURDAY

INDIGOANDPOPPY.COM

150 YEARS

The city's soothing heart

*Among the casting pools
and eucalyptus, an
excellent place to be alone*



North Lake, above, and Stow Lake, right, in the park.

By Anna Roth | Photos by Scott Strazzante

You wouldn't know they were there unless you knew to look for them. Hidden in the wild, foggy western half of Golden Gate Park, out by the bison, are three rectangular concrete pools, together about the size of a football field. Their water is an unnatural shade of greenish blue, far from the flinty color palette of the nearby ocean. The clearing they sit in is peaceful, lined with eucalyptus and scored by birdsong ... and the occasional whip of a fishing line as a fisherman casts it into a pool, where it ripples the glassy surface reflecting trees and sky.

These are the casting pools at the Works Progress Administration-era Angler's Lodge, headquarters of the Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club. Every day, rain or shine, fly fishing enthusiasts pull on waders and practice their casting technique — some doing target practice using the markers on the bottom of the pools, some just throwing out smooth, elegant arcs seemingly for the pleasure of it. I've clocked many hours at these pools, too, but not to practice fly fishing. I come for the calm. The casting pools have long been one of my favorite places in the city to sit on a bench and let the soothing, meditative movement wash over me.

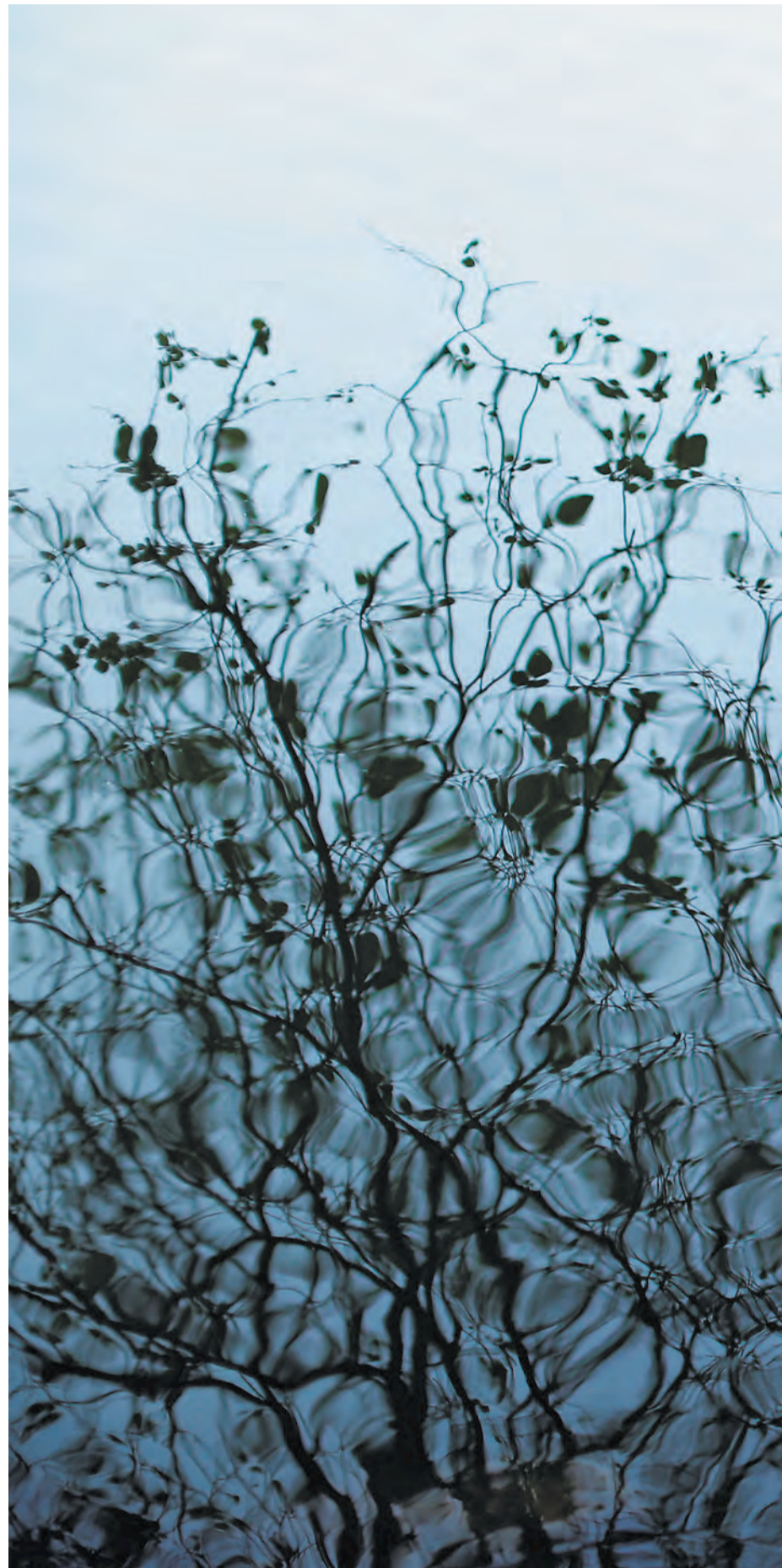
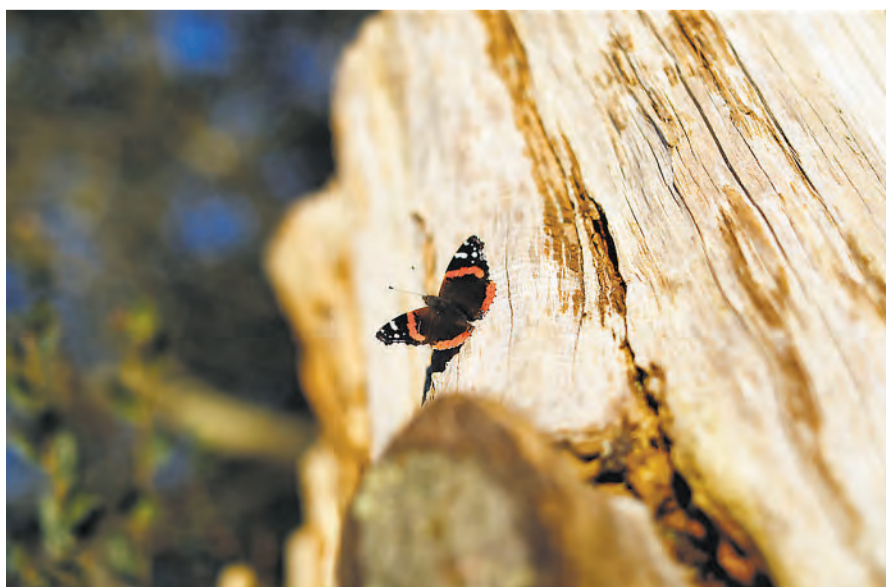
Golden Gate Park is celebrated for a lot of things — its beauty, museums and music festivals — but it's not celebrated enough for being an excellent place to be alone. The park is dotted with tucked-away places like the casting pools that provide lovely backdrops for solitude.

When I lived a few blocks from the park at 20th Avenue and Judah, I had a circuit of these pea corners where I'd spend dreamy hours reading books, feeling feelings, attempting to meditate and generally hiding from my life. It was pretty messy at the time. As a freelancer in an increasingly expensive city, I was constantly stressed about money, and as a professional restaurant critic, I had no separation between my work and personal lives. To forget my anxiety, I usually went out to after-work dinners and drank too much in dive bars in the Mission or on Divisadero with a group of friends who also had nowhere to be in the morning. Hangovers and melodramas inevitably followed.

I should have found a therapist, but that felt like a luxury I couldn't afford. So the park became my therapy. It was my escape valve, the only place where I could detach and relax. I probably would have scoffed at the time, but I was practicing *shinrin-yoku*, literally "forest bathing," a health movement that started in Japan in the 1980s and has been adopted by health-care practitioners around the world. Studies have shown that the simple act of engaging your five senses alone in nature may lower blood pressure, lessen depression and anxiety, aid sleep and boost the immune system. If I'd wanted to, I could have joined the Forest Bathing Club, a local group with more than 900 members on Meetup. But to me this was a solo odyssey.

My park circuit became a kind of addiction. On days when the casting pool clearing felt too exposed, I'd slip into the San Francisco Botanical Garden (always free to San Francisco residents) and find my way to a favorite bench in the velvety darkness of the redwood grove, back far enough to avoid the crowds. The smell of warm pine needles would bring me back to my childhood in the Pacific Northwest.

Some afternoons I'd lie in the grass or on a sun-warmed marble slab in the Garden of Shakespeare's Flowers, a small English-style garden planted with all of the flowers that appear in Shakespeare's works. It's in prime tourist territory just west of the California Academy of Sciences but hard to find even if you know it's there. If you're lucky enough to avoid a photo shoot, you can have it almost entirely to yourself.



Or I'd climb to the top of the waterfall on Strawberry Hill, the island in the center of Stow Lake, sit on the rocks and look at the city spread in front of me. From that vantage, San Francisco looks like a computer-generated model of a perfect city: the lush green of the park, the gleaming modern UCSF medical center on the hill, the fog rolling over Sutro Tower. Up there, I'd be reminded of all the reasons why I loved San Francisco and reaffirm my desire to stay.

It's human nature to take everyday magic for granted. During those years I constantly reminded myself to appreciate the good fortune of living so close to a huge green space where I could walk, bike and jog every day. But it took a move across the country to realize that I'd been appreciating the wrong thing.

I've lived in New York City for a little more than three years now, a decision made for all of the usual reasons. My life is more balanced, but I miss San Francisco, sometimes so much it hurts. When people ask me what I miss, I often say the natural beauty, but what I really mean is the wildness. The way that untamed nature, on a grand scale, is part of your everyday life. The rugged, dramatic landscapes of Golden Gate Park are more special than I realized, even as I walked the park's trails agonizing over the decision to leave.

New Yorkers have a different relationship with nature. The city's large parks are more groomed, even the burlier northern sections of Central Park. More importantly, it's hard to be alone for more than a few minutes. To live in New York means adapting to life in public, but urban walks don't have the same health benefits as forest baths. Your solitude doesn't replenish you in the same way as it does in Golden Gate Park, where you can go 15 minutes without seeing another human,



of solitude & light



A butterfly, far left, and bramble, above, on Strawberry Hill in Golden Gate Park. Left: A bird on a blooming tree at Stow Lake.

reminded that you're in the city only by the occasional sound of a muffled motorcycle.

Which is not to say that you can't find other people in the park if you want to. When being on my own felt unbearable, I'd find ways to be alone in a crowd. I'd eat an Arguello Super Market turkey sandwich in the Conservatory of Flowers garden, or sit and watch the disco roller skaters dance in the rink. One day, passing the bandshell on one of my walk-

abouts, I happened upon the free weekly performance of the Golden Gate Park Band, a classical orchestra dressed in red jackets and hats, looking like ghosts from its conception 137 years ago. The Sunday concert became a regular stop, an interlude on one of the green metal benches under the pollarded trees, part of the crowd but separate.

Afterward, I'd decompress in the quiet of "Three Gems," the Turrell Skyspace tucked away in the (free!)

sculpture garden at the de Young Museum. It's an empty white room with a round hole in the ceiling open to the elements; a blank slate for your thoughts. Eventually all my thoughts would cancel each other out and it would just be me, existing under an orb of blue California sky.

Anna Roth is a freelance writer and former restaurant critic for The Chronicle. Email culture@sfbay.com

150 YEARS

WORLD'S BOTANICAL MAP

Living museum of hundreds of thousands of plants is in the care of a meticulous team

By Ryan Kost

A couple days before everything changed, I found myself walking through the San Francisco Botanical Garden with a few members of its staff. We kept at a distance as we cut through the park's 55 acres on paths paved and unpaved. The garden, we joked in a not-joking way, was a very good place to practice our new normal.

At one point, Stephanie Linder, the executive director, plucked a leaf off a tree and started crunching it up in her hand. After a few seconds of this, she lifted it to her nose, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She caught herself as she went to offer her hand.

"Oh, I'm not supposed to hand you anything," she said. "But I would recommend — pick a leaf, crumple it up in your hand and smell."

So I did. The leaf was crisp and dry and fell apart like a cracker. I smelled it a few times, wondering what that sweetness was. It smelled a bit like childhood.

"Cinnamon," said Ryan Guillou, the garden's curator.

Technically, the San Francisco Botanical Garden opened in 1940. But like the garden itself, with its trails and private moments and cinnamon leaves, its history is more sprawling and complicated than a single year.

From almost the beginning of Golden Gate Park's development, John McLaren, one of the park's original architects and later its superintendent, wanted to include a botanical garden. He even took the step of detailing plans. But while he had the desire, he did not have the money. Still, he and others began to plant trees in the vast sand dunes, and some of those, planted all that time ago, stand as the highest trees in the garden today. They offer their branches in service of the vast canopy and their roots in service of the hidden foundation.



The trees came from places far and wide. If you'd like a "classic example," Guillou can show you one, right at the center of the park. It's a great big New Zealand Christmas Tree. (Guillou could probably tell you the scientific name, something Latin with syllables rubbing against each other. "Just think of all the things I can't do because I can remember to do that," he says.)

The tree, which probably arrived during the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition exposition, is now a huge and deeply rooted tangle of thick branches and arterial roots that start brown and turn a deep red as they stretch toward the ground. In a few places, they come together and bunch up so that they look like long dog ears or maybe paddles.

Do you have any favorite spots or trees or plants?

When I wrote this question down in the back of my mind, I knew it was an obvious question. I don't think I considered that it might also be an impossible one.

"He refuses to answer," Linder said of Guillou.

"I like spots. I have spots,"



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

The S.F. Botanical Garden's waterfowl pond, top, attracts birds of a feather, which includes humans. A rhododendron blooms in the aptly named rhododendron garden in the Inner Sunset treasure.

Guillou said.

"He won't answer favorite plant though."

Guillou's been the garden's primary architect for three years now. It's like managing a living museum. "Our pieces of art can grow really big. Our pieces of art can die. Our pieces of art can spread themselves."

He says it took him a year to walk every path. His first year on the job "was my brain exploding," but he was meant for this as much as anybody can be meant for anything. When he was a kid, he curated aquariums, each one an

ecosystem — an Amazonian river, one made to look like a piece of Lake Victoria in Africa. "At one point I had over 200 gallons of water in my room."

So now this is his "aquarium," and he has to balance conservation and climate and aesthetics. Right now, he's working on a new Afromontane cloud forest, drawing from Africa's high-elevation tropical regions. San Francisco's climate is uniquely suited to plants from cloud forests. A blessing, really, given that those regions are endangered with development, extractive industries, climate change all pushing them higher and higher. "The mountains don't go up forever," Guillou says.

According to their records, there are about 27,000 "plant centers," or groupings of a single species, and hundreds of thousands of plants growing on this piece of land. So says Steve Gensler, the man who has been in charge of meticulously mapping the garden for the past 10 years. His official title is "GIS manager" (geographic information system), and he'd found us wandering near the greenhouse.

Gensler's time is spent tracking down the history of the specimens and recording their lives. Each plant center has its own identification code, and he can pull it up on a tablet and find a long list of facts, pictures and video, too.

"You have a medical record, right?" he asks. "So you might have gone to the doctor at one point and had a cold. Next time you went you might have the flu or you broke your arm. Well, same thing for the trees. We create historical records of the plants that we have in the garden, so that way we can track what's going on with them and how they're doing, measuring their growth. So 100 years from now when people look — 'This tree went in the ground as a sapling at 3 feet tall, and over a period of 50 years has started to bloom

on this year and grew to this height and this size.' "

Two days after our walk, I went back to the garden for another. It was one of the few places still open to the public. The numbers were against me, but I wanted to find my own favorite place — then maybe my favorite branch and petal and leaf.

There is the grove of redwoods, full of 100-year-old giants. About halfway up, many of them explode sideways with branches in every direction. There's some debate about why and how this happened. Maybe it was a single destructively windy day or maybe it was lots of windy days, finally calmed by new neighborhoods growing up and sheltering the grove.

There is the Puya alpestris — "sapphire tower" — a bromeliad that blooms with a long, alien stalk covered in flowers the color of every single shade of blue all at once, and then right at the center, a burst of orange. The flower of the King Protea looks like an exploding sun, and its petals feel like satin.

People have carved messages and initials into the pads of a prickly pear cactus and also on tall, thick stalks of bamboo. The bamboo feels like cold steel to the touch, and if you put your ear up to it and knock, you can hear it's hollow.

Up front, the aging Monterey cypress, one of the garden's very first trees and three times taller than anything you'd find in nature, is losing limbs and near the end of its life. Its bark is white and rough like a grandfather's hands. There was another tree with ribbed bark, and another with bark covered in bumps that felt like braille. One tree was the color of dark chocolate, and another looked like it was full of fire.

After all that and so much more, I finally understood — really understood — something from two days before.

"We're trying to get people not to get attached to a tree, because plant conservation isn't about protecting that tree," Linder had told me. "I think it's sort of like the way researchers don't name the animals. It's not about the one tree that's here. It's about biodiversity on the planet."

The same day she told me that, I found myself constantly thanking everybody — again and again — for giving me their time on a hectic day and on short notice and with everything going on. I think, though, I was also thanking them for letting me be in that space, for holding it open and clear of the city and all its complications.

It was fine, Linder said. She'd rather be outside anyway, and once we were done with our walk, she'd have to write a long note about the garden's contingency plans.

"We're staying open by the way," she said.

That was only true for two more days. On Monday, like much of the rest of the Bay Area, the San Francisco Botanical Garden finally closed.

The news cut deeper than most of the other closures. Maybe that's because I've been thinking about the garden so much lately. Or maybe it's because the garden is a single place that also feels like the whole world all at once. At least when this is all over, we know the garden will be waiting.

Ryan Kost is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: rkost@sfgchronicle.com. Twitter: @RyanKost

ALEXANDER
WINDOW SPECIALISTS
C O M P A N Y

Family Owned & Operated For Over 45 Years

Vinyl, fiberglass, wood and aluminum installed at competitive prices

REPLACE YOUR WINDOWS NOW!

***Special Spring Installed Pricing. Act Now!**

***New Customers only, ask for details. Expires 3/31/20.**

Low Prices 1322 Marsten Rd., Burlingame 94010
FREE No-Obligation **www.alexanderco.com**
In-Home Estimates **650-288-0813**
Showroom Open: **CONTRACTORS LIC. #642553**
M.-F. 8-4, Sat. 10-4

150 YEARS



Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Jean Keyes (left) and spouse Chris Keyes at the S.F. Lawn Bowling Club in Golden Gate Park.

ANCIENT SPORT AIMS FOR NEW VIBE

By Gregory Thomas

The official Lawn Bowls Almanac, published in 1985, characterizes the activity as “the trickiest sport ever devised by the mind of man.” That feels like a stretch in the era of chess boxing and American Ninja Warrior, but there is something intrinsic to the human experience in this ancient activity.

“People have been throwing stuff at other stuff for eons,” said John Grimes, president of the San Francisco Lawn Bowling Club, during a recent tour of the group’s clubhouse, a squat building in Golden Gate Park. The city club, which dates back to 1901, is recognized as the oldest municipal club in the United States.

The basic premise of lawn bowling, which involves rolling globular “bowls” along a green to bring them to rest as close as possible to a smaller “jack” ball, is at least eight centuries old. Some primitive rolling bowls — heavy thick-centered objects the size of a human skull — date back to 5,200 B.C.

We came to a painting of Sir Francis Drake — poofy trousers and lace frills — standing with his posse on a green, bowl in hand, apparently arguing with an opponent. Allegedly, the moment was captured as the Spanish Armada amassed just offshore in the English Channel.

“He said the armada could wait, he had to finish the game,” said Grimes, a 72-year-old former urban planner who is tall and affable, with wispy white hair and square glasses. “I found out he lost that game. But then he went out and crushed the armada.”

Such is the rich lore surrounding the sport. But like many traditional cultural activities, lawn bowling’s popularity is on the decline. In San Francisco, Grimes is the guy responsible for reversing that trend and keeping the 119-year-old club on its feet.

“There’s this stigma around lawn bowling,” Grimes says. “You ask someone to play and they say, ‘Remind me when I’m 89 and I’ll come join you.’ We’ve got to break through that.”

The lawn bowling club is woven into the city’s DNA.

In the decades following the Gold Rush, San Francisco civic leaders and business titans started looking at ways to make the most out of the unoccupied acres of sand dunes on the west side of the city.

Golden Gate Park was established in 1870, and because some of the city’s wealthiest and most influential residents had immigrated from Europe, they set aside a small plot for their favorite outdoor amusement: lawn bowling. John McLaren, a Scottish horticulturalist who was park superintendent at the time, made sure the area was “graded, loamed and manured” for the first game, bowled in October 1901.

During the club’s first century, lawn bowling’s global profile attracted a diverse mix of international members, many of whom already knew the game. By the time Grimes took over as vice president in 2017, the club was hemorrhaging members. There were just 89, almost all of them retirees. Most prospective members were unaware of the sport before wandering by the green and wondering about the old folks rolling oddly shaped balls back and forth.

“As a former urban planner, I look at this club as a public asset,” Grimes said. “It was mostly under-utilized and we have a responsibility to optimize the use of it.”

Grimes is doing his best to modernize the club’s vibe and attract younger members. He is pushing to install lights above one of the greens so people can roll after work, as well as a lounge area inside the clubhouse. There

are barbecue socials and happy hours. More free lessons. Less formality.

“In the old days, nobody talked on the green,” said Arnie Barros, who, at 97, is the club’s oldest member. “You had to wear nothing but white, with collars. But little by little, everything changed.”

“That quiet game had its time,” Grimes said. “Now it’s not as regimented. People come after work to blow off steam.”

The club now has 128 members. Grimes wants to top 200. He likes to point out that the annual membership cost is only \$138. “It’s the best recreational value around.”

I visited the clubhouse recently to get a feel for the club and try the sport for myself.

A revolving cast of members circulated during my visits, trading friendly barbs about their ages and the deteriorating state of each other’s skills. Everyone seemed to know everyone else. Women bowled with men; a refreshing aspect of the game is that the sexes are evenly matched.

Out on the green, I was ready to roll my first bowl, but instructor Robb Pawlak was not impressed with my form. Grimes stepped out ahead to demonstrate proper technique, essentially a deep squat-lunge. “You might feel it in your thighs tomorrow morning,” Grimes said.

“They’re half our age, they won’t feel anything!” Pawlak barked.

I made a few more halfhearted practice lunges and, indeed, started to feel my thigh wearing out. On my first bowl, I bent a little low to show Pawlak I was good for it, over-exaggerating the smooth bowling motion, and promptly yanked my hamstring on the release.

“Nothing to it!” I said, careful not to grimace at the shooting pain in my leg.

At some point in early adulthood I decided I’d start paying attention to my elders, or at least observing their habits and routines to see if there was something to be gleaned from their behavior. Age has a way of narrowing down a person’s priorities, so how, I wondered, after 70 or 80 years on the planet, do people choose to spend their time?

One of the things I picked up on quickly is that they like to play games. Dominoes, cribbage, backgammon and chess at the table; bocce, petanque and croquet on the green; shuffleboard and its million variations on pavement. Light but tactile activities that blend strategy with chance and can be played easily, reset quickly and enjoyed endlessly.

They’ll tell you it’s a way to keep their bodies limber or their minds sharp. And that may be partially true. But really it’s a way to stay socially connected.

One afternoon at the club, I met a retired couple from Marin who’d recently joined. I asked them what they enjoyed about belonging to the club.

“We both love being out in the beauty of nature, getting exercise,” said Rosemary Miller, 68. “It’s something we can do together, that’s one of the main appeals to me.”

“It’s social, for sure,” replied Tom Fitzsimons, 68, Miller’s spouse. “But you have to have your head in it if you want to be good.”

The club closed in mid-March indefinitely due to concerns about the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. All of its upcoming events have been postponed for the foreseeable future. For more information, visit www.sflbc.org.

Gregory Thomas is the Chronicle’s editor of lifestyle and outdoors. Email: gthomas@sfcronicle.com. Twitter: @GregRThomas

Advertising Feature

THE FINDS



420WALDOS WATCHES - GET LIT! - 26 MODELS

420, a Bay Area term since 1971. Each watch sale supports legalization. Watches feature all-night glow. Use “Get Lit” code for a 20% discount.

Time Concepts, LLC
415-924-4952 (office) • info@timeconcepts.net
www.420waldoswatches.com • www.timeconcepts.net



IF YOU LIKE WATER...

You’ll love this “Waterfall” wedding band with stippled finish of 14K yellow gold over 1 carat total weight of flush and head set diamonds

STEPHAN-HILL
JEWELRY DESIGNERS

1226 Fourth Street, Downtown San Rafael, CA
415.459.5808
www.stephanhill.com

sole terra



BE STRONG. WEAR RED. SOLE TERRA SANDALS.

We are closed til April 7. Visit www.shoesonsolano.com to sign up for future informational emails.

Shoes on Solano
GURPERT IS STILL

1774 Solano Ave. Berkeley
5933 College Ave. Oakland
1386 N. Main St. Walnut Creek



LINDBERG TRUNK SHOW

Saturday, April 4th

FOCAL POINT
opticians

2638 Ashby Ave. (near College Ave.) Berkeley
510.843.5367 • Mon.-Sat.: 10am-6pm
www.fpopt.com



ICARO EXTENSION DINING TABLE BY CALLIGARIS ITALY.

Shown in matt ceramic marble. Available in other materials and sizes. Come visit our Showroom and explore our Sample sale on now!

KCC
modern living

805 University Ave., Berkeley
510.704.9928 • kccmodernliving.com



San Francisco Chronicle

To Advertise in Finds
Call Kathy Castle: 415.777.7258

OBSERVED Words and Images By George McCalman

Artist and creative director George McCalman captures the style and personality of attendees at Bay Area events with his illustrations.

GOLDEN GATE PARK / MARCH 15

It's a cosmic coincidence that the theme of this section celebrates the underappreciated splendor of Golden Gate Park. This month it seems to be a welcome reprieve from the omnipresent conversation around COVID-19. I walked around the park for hours, got lost in grooves and pathways, met colorful strangers (from a healthy distance, of course) and was reminded that most of us don't spend enough time here. What I saw amongst the variety of human beings I met was an urgent sense of gratitude for this patch of the natural world in the middle of our chaotic urban lives.



"Every time I walk through the park I discover something I've never seen before. Grounding myself to the earth, it's bringing some balance to the uprooting intensity that is all around us right now. Reminding me of the health, abundance and beauty that we have around us."

— Margo Moritz, photographer



"My first trip to Golden Gate Park to check out the skate scene and they (were) having a skate competition put on by Red Bull. This was 1999! Next Sunday we get there and the place was buzzing with skaters circling the rink, dance skaters in the middle and people just watching. One of the skaters comes over as we're standing, staring in awe, and tells us if we want to learn the dance moves, go ask that guy over there. So we check it out and later the same guy comes over and asks if we'd tried the slalom course over by the conservatory. We head over there, and in about half an hour, I'm like OK this time we're going down boy/girl and you're doing one foot, you're doing crisscrossing, you're slaloming! I was hooked on skating and learning as much as I can to keep on improving. It's the closest thing to flying! Skating is my fountain of youth!"

— Colleen Jones, skate diva



"I'll tell you what's more amazing than this coat ... the person inside. Do you know how much therapy it took to get here?"

— Lonnie Leben, gift to the world



"We've been friends and enemies, and friends again, since we were 5 years old. We've been mainly walking and laughing all this time. Only 69 years of material!"

— Ronnie Z., artist



"They're old, but they're still puppies. They boss me around. They go through so much conditioner, you wouldn't believe."

— Emanuele Bariani, owner, Bariani Olive Oil

