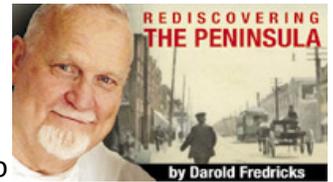


ORANGE MEMORIAL PARK, SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO

By Columnist Darold Fredricks, San Mateo County Daily Journal (May 17, 2010)



When you think of a park, you usually think of a green space, but you'd have to go all the way around the color-wheel to "orange" to find the name of this very special place in South San Francisco. The 20-plus acres of Orange Memorial Park are framed by Orange Avenue, Memorial Drive and Tennis Drive.

While Colma Creek does divide the Park, the once-unruly rush of water is contained now within a concrete flume. It was not always so. Subject to winter rains and tidal influence, the creek spread out over much of the area, creating a marsh. While not exactly like the Everglades (and no alligators were ever spotted), the thickets of scrub willows were nearly impenetrable. One early benefit (and maybe the only one) of the tangled vegetation and marshy footing was as a cattle barrier. The Miller and Lux Cattle Company fattened their livestock in this area that was then called Baden. There were also several dairy farms, and the maze in the marsh kept the cows from wandering off. But for the most part, the thickets were trouble and kept the land from being used by people. Even the early Spanish explorers had trouble with scrub willows and reeds and marshes. They had trekked all the way up from Mexico to the northern tip of the Peninsula, but when they tried to continue exploration up into the Delta, they were stopped in their tracks at the edge of the Bay. It's very hard to make tracks in a marsh.

The motto of the City of South San Francisco is "The Industrial City" and they mean it. The words are spelled out in concrete letters up on Sign Hill for all to read. And the people are industrious. When things need doing, they get them done. They thinned out the thickets and filled in the marshes, making the area useable. Farmers soon began raising vegetables there.

When people are just beginning to settle an area, they don't need a special place to spend leisure time in because they don't *have* any leisure time. It was all they could do just to survive. But by the late 1800s and early 1900s, folks were beginning to have some free time and they needed recreation areas. Children especially needed some safe place where they could play with other kids. Before the town was incorporated in 1908 – and the name was changed from Baden to South San Francisco- the South San Francisco Land and Improvement Co. owned pretty much everything and provided all the necessities: water, sewer, lighting, roads, etc... But the people began to ask for more amenities from the developers. Want to build a new neighborhood? OK, but also please provide us with a new park.

They did. And one of the best is Orange Memorial Park. The 20-plus acres came as a gift in 1925 from the Land Co., sort of. The proviso was that the Land Co. would build streets on both sides of the Park, but that all future street paving and upkeep would be paid for by the City. More park-land was also purchased by the City, 4.7 acres near Martin School and 3.3 acres on Martin Avenue, for \$22,000, paid for over a period of ten years. One of the first improvements to Orange Park, after the thickets were pulled out and the land leveled, was to lay out a baseball diamond. Baseball had been one of the early-on favorite pastimes. The tracks of the #40 trolley line from San Francisco to San Mateo ran along the west side of the Park, and the tracks became the "road" down which players from Burlingame, San Bruno and Daly City would walk to their games in South San Francisco.

Baseball has never lost its hold here. There are two fields of dreams at the Park, on the west side of Colma Creek. The Bob Brian Field was dedicated on April 10, 1993, recognizing Brian's work in organizing the South S.F. Pee Wee Baseball League in 1960. The Archie Fregosi Field is also here, dedicated April 25, 2000, in memory of his coaching and his sponsoring of little league teams.

Another favorite game, especially of the early Italian settlers, was bocce ball. Many local businesses, such as Jacopi's General Store, had their own bocce ball court for their families and customers. In 1990, more bocce ball courts were added to the two lanes already there at Orange Park, a joint project between the City and the Italian American Citizens Club, and lights were installed for night-time games. The courts are used extensively throughout the year and for tournaments.

Just opposite the baseball field and to the south of the Park, the Baden Kennel Club built a racetrack in the early 1930s that featured greyhound coursing. Ten-cents would get you into the race. What you got out of the race depended on how much you had wagered and on not getting caught. Betting was illegal. The racetrack went out of business when the Great Depression took the fun out of spending ten-cents. But most of the activities that were started here at Orange Park have kept going and growing. Tennis courts and a soccer field were added. Even a skate-board area. There are two little-kid playgrounds, renovated in 1998, and better than ever. There is even a special walking trail, called Centennial Way, that begins (or ends?) at the SSF Bart Station area and goes all the way to the San Bruno Station, with the possibility of more miles being added later, maybe to Millbrae.

In 2003, the Park added a special 40 X 100 foot sculpture garden and won the California Parks and Recreation Society's Award of Excellence for their creative effort. The rectangular shape is softened with a winding walking path, with beautifully placed works of art at the curves and bends. Look for a pair of Puzzle People. Look closer. Two people turn into multitudes. Check out a two-piece "rusty" metal sculpture called Yin and Yang. Yin stands nice and tall, a few feet away from Yang who is seated, forming a bench. You are invited to be seated on Yang's bench and contemplate Yin in front of you. It is then that you realize Yang has been cut from Yin. If you don't get the hang of Yin and Yang, you might enjoy the child-size statue of a little boy and his dog or the larger statue of a mother and child called "Safehaven".

The vegetation in and around the sculpture garden is like an old-fashioned granny quilt, with individual planted-patches. Each patch is tended by a volunteer, identified with a marker. The volunteers are part of an on-going program called "Improving Public Places in S.S. F." with plants, flowers and trees.

One of the great attractions at Orange Memorial Park is its indoor swimming pool, built in 1970. Until then, SSF kids didn't have a good place to swim. Pools are costly items for a city to build and maintain. This one measures 75' by 45', enough for six wide lanes and a sauna. Their swim programs begin as early as 5:30 am for the lap swimmers, with adult swimming at 10:00 am. There is no membership fee, with non-residents paying a bit more than residents. Marcus Nava and Gus Vellis, veteran SSF Rec. personnel, direct the program. It is well-patronized and much appreciated. In 2009, a new recreation building was constructed near the swimming pool and was named in honor of Councilman Joe Fernekes.

While SSF is most certainly an urban and metropolitan city, its Orange Memorial Park somehow still has a small-town ambience. There's even a weekly Farmer's Market there on Saturdays. Spring's here and summer's coming. Gather up your kids (regular or grand) and let 'em have a good time in the playground areas. You could get some hot dogs and whip up some potato-salad and have a picnic. (Cautionary note #1 – My resident editor has just informed me that you don't whip potato-salad. To do so would result in mashed potatoes.) So, maybe hot dogs and potato chips. (Cautionary note #2 – I checked this week with the Park and Rec Dept. and they tell me you can picnic on the grass, no problem. But if your group requires tables, you must get a permit and pay a fee in advance. Call "Susan" at (650) 829-3800 for more info. Picnic or not, you can have a good time at SSF's Orange Memorial Park and take one more pleasant walk down history lane.