



# Point Richmond



Fran Oetiz

*Designer Ann Swanson in her Mediterranean house on Western drive which was the studio of writer Eugene Burdick at the time of his death. Below, boat-slips at new Richmond Yacht Club, one of four marinas on the busy Point, which is also a fishermen's center.*







Pt. Richmond's street fair, which occurs annually on July 4th. Its profits bring three foreign high-school students here each year, send three local kids abroad. Firehouse below was being dedicated when this 1910 photo was made. Jail in rear was in use until 1947. Building is now being converted into period shops.

## *The hidden village you can only find by slowing down . . .*

By R. B. Read

**P**T. RICHMOND is the Bay area's Hidden Village. Few San Franciscans know about it, and few of these have ever been there. It is an intact, turn-of-the-century relic, and what screens it from view is Time.

The Richmond-San Rafael bridge is very long, and its approaches are long and lonely. Where the road off the bridge straightens into freeway on the Richmond side, all today's imperatives to speed operate on the harried driver. Instinctively, he presses the gas pedal and his eyes glaze to that shrouded wariness of the Freeway Stupor.

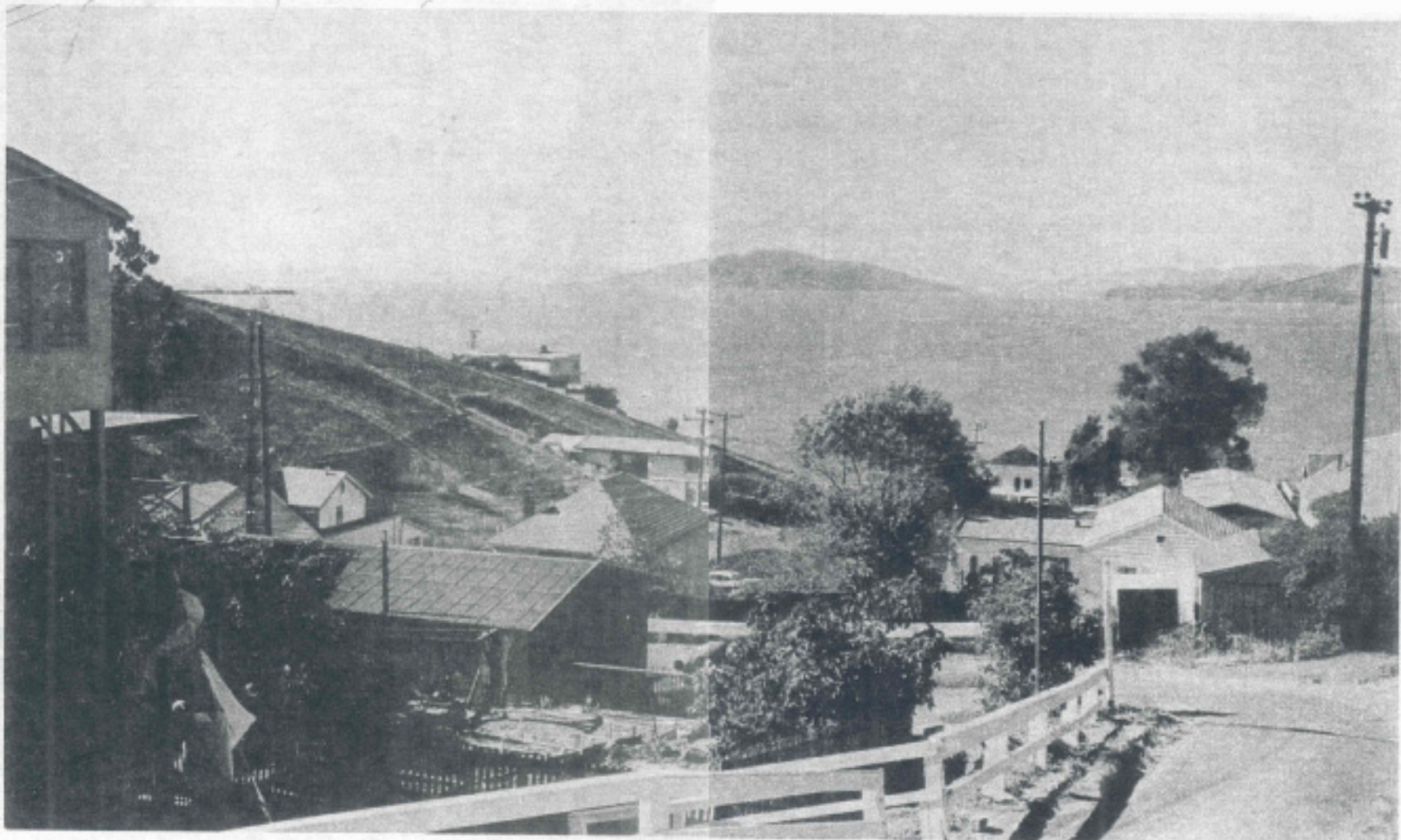
Just then, in his anxiety to make up time, he is passing—without seeing it—the one local remnant of those unhurried Bygone Days he claims in his reveries.

Vaguely, to his north, he glimpses the visceral enormity of Standard Oil's refineries. To his south, he sees a blur of shabby bars and dead-eyed store fronts. To discover his dream village, he'd have to slow down for a right-angle turn into this unpromising facade. He does not, of course, and it is his urgency—multiplied by the thousands of cars whipping past each day—which has preserved this enclave of quiet for the delight of its approximately 2700 residents.

One of these residents is me, and I hasten to preface this unveiling of "The Point" with a note about housing. All that's readily available are ultra-modern apartments—with spectacular views and at rentals well below their counterparts in San Francisco or Marin. But houses—for rent or purchase—well, you have to know somebody. There's some transiency in the old







*Most of Pt. Richmond lies along streets as steep and aimless as goatpaths. The Bayside views are to north Marin.*

## *The relic of a boom that ended 55 years ago . . .*



downtown buildings (not a few onetime shops, with display windows, have become dwelling places), and you might hit it lucky. I did. My building dates from 1902 (the first structure went up in 1900). The town plumber operated downstairs, and his family lived above. He built with the period's sense of human scale, and its disdain for closets (people used wardrobes). I view the world from seven-foot windows under nine-foot ceilings.

But on the Bay side of steep Pt. Richmond, Western Drive is a residential mile of natural beach frontage unique on the Bay except for a few undisturbed patches of the Marin shore. Last year three pieces of this property came on the market and were sold by noon on the days of their listing. To settle in here, it isn't enough to know somebody: you have to have him in your hip pocket.

Pt. Richmond was a promotion that boomed then died. It was founded when A. S. Macdonald persuaded the Santa Fe railroad to make the site its western terminus. The land deal was concluded in 1897, and in 1900 a ferry from San Francisco

brought 100 passengers to a makeshift station on stilts, whence Santa Fe's first through train chugged off to Chicago. The year after, Standard Oil established the Nation's third largest refinery at Pt. Richmond, and in the first five years of its life the town's population soared to 2,000. It hardly ever got bigger.

There was this problem about the land deal—in fact, two problems. In the first place, the Point was hilly, and what wasn't hilly was marshy. It had, in fact, originally been an island, part of the vast Castro Spanish grant. In the untangling of claims to this great holding, one Dr. Tewksbury emerged as owner of much of the marshland. The levees he built caused shoaling which finally closed the sloughs for good. Point Potrero (as it was then known) joined the mainland in 1872.

Much of the rest of the Point area, including the hilly part, was owned by John Nicholl (memorialized in the landmark Nicholl Knob, whose shoreward side is now likely to become a Regional Park). It was Nicholl who sold the railyard land to Santa Fe. And this was the second problem: Macdonald, the visionary, was left clutching the laurel of history and nothing else.

So Macdonald laid out his own town (for a while ignominiously called East Yard), on the level land east and north of the Point. By 1912 the business center had shifted to this more easily developable land along Macdonald Avenue, whose namesake thus reaped a more substantial reward. The present city of Richmond grew up around this core.

Pt. Richmond came to a dead halt after its first decade of growth, and it stands there today as an architectural monument of the century's debut. With few exceptions, all the houses on the Point were built before 1910 or after 1950. The Mac Hotel (1911) was the last commercial structure of any note. The half-century of atrophy has left the village untouched by technology's diabolic



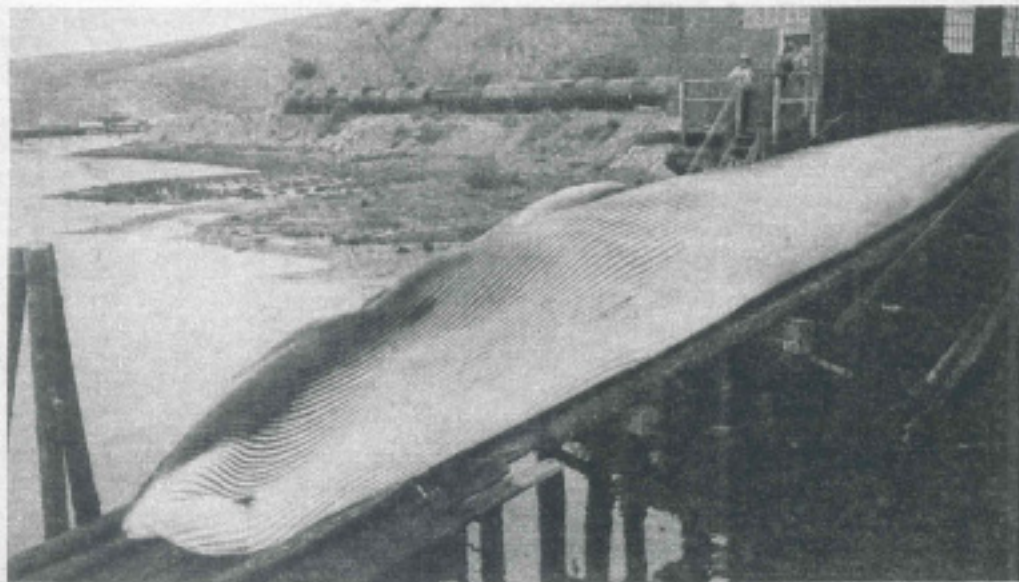


*Some houses on Western Drive where neither love nor money but only luck can buy a lot.*

## *A town you've only imagined . . .*



*The old brick theatre, simply but elegantly refurbished, will soon open as the Point Orient restaurant. A finback whale, below, moves upramp at the last U.S. whaling station, whose merry crew enlivens the Baltic bar on main street.*



refinements—tract housing, neon allure, supermarket centers, through-street speedways.

Many of the hillside streets are like paved goatpaths; others, named on the grid plan, were never actually laid out, or not built through, so that they end in quiet culs de sac.

It is a pedestrian community, with tree-planted commercial streets and tasteful restorations of downtown buildings and uphill houses. A large colony of architects, professors, artists, writers and professional people have settled into the Point with a sigh of relief and joined the solid core of oldtimers in a continuing project of gimcrack-free refurbishment.

A minor commercial boom is underway, as the old brick theatre is renovated to become the Point Orient, an elegant Chinese restaurant. The Baltic, a thoroughly authentic oldtime bar, has recently expanded to accommodate a widening clientele. The firehouse and jail next door is becoming a miniature Ghirardelli Square, with shops in period decor.

The new Richmond Yacht Club, designed by Jens Hansen, opened this year on Brickyard Cove, and is but one of four active marinas on the Point. The perky El Toro, Northern Californians' favorite sailboat, originated here, and the little bullship regatta is a big annual affair on the Point.

Bigger is the Fourth of July Street Fair, a joyous, multi-boothed frolic which raises money for the American Field Service foreign scholarship program. A large tank is set up at the modern firehouse and community center in the town square opposite my place, and for 15 cents anybody can throw a ball to drop Assemblyman John Knox, the Mayor, or a pretty girl from the rigged target seat to a surprise dunking. As night falls, fireworks explode from Nicholl Knob.

Pt. Richmond, a charming place to live, has housing for only a few lucky people. But there's nothing to keep anyone from paying a visit—especially on that gloriously festive Fourth.

To get there, just follow the signs to the Richmond-San Rafael bridge. When you glimpse the refineries, SLOW DOWN. Turn off the highway at a bar called The Spot. Park. Get out and walk. You're there—in that hidden village of your sweet imagining.

END