

The Outsiders:

The Hidden History and Emerging Culture of the Outer Sunset

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Given the miles of identical mid-century, stucco-encased houses and the propensity for fog-laden gray skies, it's difficult for most San Franciscans to imagine that the Sunset District has ever been anything more than a suburban wasteland built upon dunes and landfill. However, before the dunes were covered with housing to fit the needs of San Francisco's growing middle class, the Outside Lands (as the present-day Sunset was called in the 19th century) was one of the city's final wild frontiers.

The most fascinating and unsung history of the Outside Lands belongs to the settlers of a late 1800's community who made their homes out of the city's discarded street cars beside Ocean Beach. This community

came to be known as Carville-by-the-Sea. With the introduction of electric streetcars and cable cars in the 1850s, horse-pulled streetcars were sold off, reportedly for \$20 (or \$10 without seats). Many cars were snatched up and used as offices and children's clubhouses, but toward the end of the century a number of brave souls shared a vision of affordable housing in relatively uncharted lands. These early settlers towed their revolutionarily modular recycled homes to the Outside Lands—far past established neighborhoods—in search of cleaner, cheaper, and perhaps more honest living. And you think you've gone green?

Woody LaBounty, Carville's most dedicated scholar and author of *Carville-by-the-Sea: San Francisco's Streetcar Suburb* (Outside Lands Media), is also the co-founder of the



Western Neighborhoods Project, a nonprofit organization formed in 1999 to preserve and share the history of the often-overlooked western side of San Francisco. Sure, everyone knows about the Barbary Coast (thanks to Herbert Asbury), but what of the origins of the Sunset, Richmond, and Lake Merced areas? WNP's website (www.outsidelands.org) has made the Outside Land's bohemian past accessible through their extensive collection of oral histories, photographs, and documents.

According to LaBounty, Colonel Charles Dailey—a Civil War veteran and friend of Adolf Sutro's—is the man responsible for Carville, although he never lived in a streetcar himself. Believing in the health benefits of ocean air, Dailey lived amidst the dunes in a former realtor's shack. Daily purchased three horse cars from Sutro (who owned most of the Outside Lands) to run as rental properties. In 1895, he opened a "coffee saloon" near the present-day corner of 47th Avenue and Lincoln Way. By 1898, seven

cars had appeared around 48th Avenue, serving as homes, artist studios, and clubhouses for organizations such as a women's bicycle club called The Falcons. The population of Carville grew steadily as word spread of clean air, cheap living, and a certain amount of societal freedom. Reports from 1908 reflect that the Carville community had grown to 2,000 residents. The recycled streetcars were connected and stacked for larger living spaces, and some were even shingled and ornamented to fit in with the time's architectural styles. Restaurants and tea rooms opened to cater to the growing population and their visitors, and even a two-story Episcopal church called St. Andrew's was built from streetcars on 47th Avenue between Irving and Judah.

San Francisco's earthquake and fire of 1906 spurred further growth of the area. Disaster refugees had been living in shacks provided by the relief effort, which were set up in camps inside public parks and spaces. During the following year, the city closed these camps and the refugees had to disperse. Many landed in the Outside Lands due to the cheap and plentiful land. Several brought their shacks with them, combining them or building additions to them to create full-fledged houses. Traces of earthquake relief shacks can still be seen in the Sunset to this day. In 2005, Woody LaBounty and the Western Neighborhoods Project were able to rescue four shacks on Kirkham Street near 48th Avenue from the wrecking ball. One of the shacks was restored and displayed downtown as part of the 1906 earthquake centennial commemoration. The shack will soon be on display to the public at the San Francisco Zoo.



As San Francisco's public transportation improved and automobiles became more common, Outside Lands' property increased in value. The area west of 40th Avenue soon became known as Oceanside and a growing number of residents moved into newly-built conventional houses. These residents organized improvement societies that not only lobbied for improved roads and utilities, but also angled for the dismantling (and even burning) of Carville, which they viewed as an embarrassment. Early in the 20th century, the Outside Lands became known as the Sunset District and the Oceanside as the Outer Sunset. The 1920's through the 1950's saw the populating of the land east of 40th Avenue with row after row of utilitarian housing. As the former Oceanside rebuilt, Carville simply disappeared—sometimes within the new structures. According to the WNP website, there are only two known visible streetcars left in the Outer Sunset; A three-story, multi-unit building on 47th Avenue near Judah Street and a two-story house on the Great Highway near Lawton Street. Only the later of the two properties retains the original internal structure of the streetcar.

The ground-breaking history of Carville, and even much of Adolf Sutro's Outside Lands-taming development, may appear to have been buried beneath the city's mad dash for housing. However, LaBounty encourages sidewalk history buffs not to despair in their search for the lost Bohemia of Carville. "The backyards of the Outer Sunset are home to a ridiculous number of structures including water tank towers, streetcar houses, and likely more earthquake refugee cottages. I'd ask Outer Sunset residents to look out their back windows and tell me what they see."



One doesn't have to look far to see that the D.I.Y. spirit of Carville is returning to the Outer Sunset, almost exactly where it left off over 100 years ago. Within the past five years, a number of establishments have opened in the Outer Sunset, brightening up the badlands west of 40th Avenue with their own particular brand of eccentric pioneering. These shops and cafes aren't just businesses, but community hubs run by individuals with solid philosophies about how to live. The spirit of the current revitalization of the Outer Sunset—largely

sparked by prime movers such as Mollusk Surf Shop, Trouble Coffee, Tuesday Tattoo, Outerlands, Carville Annex, and (most recently) General Store—seems to channel the original pioneers of the battered dunes. These businesses have tamed the wasteland all over again by enforcing the bonds of community and making the once-desolate area a desirable place to live.

Trouble Coffee owner Giulietta Carrelli may not acknowledge any connection between the Carville pioneers and herself ("I am here and now"), but



one would be hard-pressed to find a more adventurous and eccentric personality in the Outer Sunset...or any neighborhood, really. As Carrelli puts it, she chose to open her extreme coffee bar at 4033 Judah because she's "an ocean swimmer, dune sleeper, and coffee maker." In fact, she swims most mornings at the crack of dawn in the Pacific Ocean with a group of old Russian men.

Prior to Trouble Coffee's opening in 2007, the

shaped the Outer Sunset's morning ritual but provided something the neighborhood was desperately lacking—a communal meeting grounds. Following the success of Trouble, other businesses such as Tuesday Tattoo, Outerlands, Carville Annex, and General store opened in short order. In just three years of operation, Carrelli has fought the desolation of the Outer Sunset, revitalizing the block and even creating a buzz amongst

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stretch of Judah between 45th and 46th Avenues had little going for it besides Celia's Mexican Restaurant and a Chinese take-out joint called Wo's. The 7-11 across the street provided a stoop for several shady types who otherwise stalked the block in search of meth. Things were looking grim, but suddenly there was Carrelli's quizzically-named café serving just three things: strong coffee, coconuts, and cinnamon toast.

"The neighbors had nowhere to meet until I opened," Carrelli says. "However, it was not easy for the locals to walk into a 224 square foot café with a chick in a coonskin hat serving up 8-ounce triple lattes with no sugar to be found on the premises. On top of that, I only sold coconuts and toast. I can't even count how many people said I would never make it unless I got bagels! But the customers that did choose to come back are still walking in today."

Carrelli's coconuts and coffee have not only

coffee fiends city-wide. She explains the phenomenon in her characteristically aphoristic way, "Trouble is living its manifesto. We are building a network. We are building a block."

Daily, Trouble posts maxims on a chalkboard out front, brightening the neighborhood with their crisp, inspiring messages. Whether it be "GUTS. HONOR. TOAST" or "STAY STRONG. STAY LEAN. STAY ALIVE," the message is clear to patrons. This is more than just coffee. It's community and communities take work. To quote the title of a meal deal from Trouble's menu, "Build Your Own Damn House" (that's coffee, toast, and a coconut in case you were wondering). But community also means that you're never alone. When asked why she called her business Trouble, Carrelli responds, "We will help."

Carrelli, a new mother of twins, hopes the future of the Outer Sunset is filled with children.



"The local Ocean Beach dwellers always tell me of their kickball games back in the day on the Avenues. I hope the same for their children and mine. Having children is a life of constant change, patience, and love. This is what a soul needs to live out by the beach."

Lana Porcello and her husband David Muller opened Outerlands—a homey restaurant specializing in organic, wholesome, hearty fare—at 4001 Judah Street in February of 2009. With their cozy interior lovingly constructed entirely of recycled materials such as driftwood collected off of the beach and repurposed barn wood, Outerlands feels like a direct descendant of a Carville structure. Porcello, who describes the style of Outerlands interior as "rustic and simple," explains that the restaurant was a communal project that took over a year to open. "We came to see the build-out as a stage for enacting the core of the project—community exchange. The process connected us to our community much more deeply than if we had turned around and opened the doors over a short time. More than anything, this exchange inspired and informed the development of the space, and I think that it helped create a sense of shared success."

It helps that the young couple are particularly handy and have a talented network of friends. Craftsman Keith Aderholt—who also worked on interiors for Mollusk Surf Shop, Trouble Coffee, and Tuesday Tattoo—conceptualized and installed much of the restaurant's impressive woodwork. When surveying his mark upon the new generation of D.I.Y. businesses of the neighborhood, it becomes apparent that his style is unmistakably organic and imaginative. Co-owner Muller created the mesmerizing driftwood patterns on the front counter and the mysterious cave-like loft on the back wall.

Porcello acknowledges the influence the pioneers of Carville have had on her and Muller. "We feel a strong interest in the rich history

of the district, which was founded on many of the same values that drew us to this special place: love of the sea, a spirit of wildness, a willingness to be forgotten in favor of a little breathing room, and a creative drive to build something on the fringe of the city that celebrates its unique qualities."

Fans of Woody LaBounty's research and his book *Carville-by-the-Sea*, Porcello and Muller opened the Carville Annex, an art gallery/studio space, just a few doors away from Outerlands in the summer of 2009. (It turns out that LaBounty is a fan of Outerlands'. And with their amazing soups and homemade bread, who isn't?) The momentum of Outerlands' popularity as a meeting house in the fog showed Porcello and Muller that the neighborhood wanted more. Porcello explains, "Our ultimate goal was to establish an exchange with our community and to facilitate a venue for people to come together here. We appreciate that we have learned so much about our neighborhood through the process."

Mollusk Surf Shop has the distinction of being the first of the new wave of pioneering Outer Sunset businesses. John McCambridge, an Outer Sunset resident of ten years, opened Mollusk Surf Shop at 4500 Irving Street (on the corner of 46th Avenue) in 2005. Aptly enough, the shop





is just two doors down from the site of the old Surf Theater, which closed its doors in 1985 (San Francisco Swato Christian Church currently occupies the space). McCambridge observes, "When you look at old photos of this block it was hopping; there was a bar, a theater, a market, and a dance studio." By the time Mollusk moved in, the Busy Bee Market was the most happening business on that block of Irving. However, the Outer Sunset seemed like a natural choice for McCambridge. "I picked Ocean Beach to open my surf shop because it's a surf shop and this is a beach, and the two go together like peanut butter and jelly."

Inspired by SF Surf Shop owner John Schultze, the Tolkienesque natural building techniques of SunRay Kelly, and the psychedelic art of Vaughn Bodé, McCambridge melded the concept of surf shop with art gallery and devoted a portion of his large store to installations and shows. Mollusk has become a beacon in the intersection of surf culture and the arts. "It turned out to be a great thing for the shop. It really brought a lot of people out of the woodwork." Since 2005, McCambridge has opened Mollusk Surf Shops in Venice, California and Brooklyn, New York.

Mollusk's first employee and gallery director was local surfer and artist Serena Mitnik-Miller. In December of 2009, Mitnik-Miller and her fiancé Mason St. Peter opened the carefully curated General Store at 4035 Judah, joining Trouble, Tuesday Tattoo, and Outerlands on the now-lively block. "We felt the neighborhood was lacking a store like ours, so when the space became available we knew we had to do it," says Mitnik-Miller.



Like a general store of old, General Store carries wares for living such as plants, furniture, tools, books, and the like. However, all items in the shop are either vintage or created by local artisans. The minimal and Spartan atmosphere of the shop gives it the feel of a gallery full of beautifully useful items. "We wanted a nice, fresh, clean space where people could come and feel comfortable," explains Mitnik-Miller. "We are influenced by a less-is-more approach." The couple designed and built the store themselves, adding quirky architectural nuances such as a tunnel-like passageway from the front to the back of the store. They plan to open the store's backyard garden in the near future, which will feature a greenhouse designed by local artist Jesse Schlesinger.

Woody LaBounty, commenting on the bohemian legacy of the neighborhood, says, "The Outer Sunset, because of the beach no doubt, has always drawn eccentric and artistic characters. The 1960s brought lots of hippies and counter-culture types to hang out in the dunes and share rentals. The surf culture... There's definitely still an alternative spirit out there today, but there's lots of regular families taking their kids to school in the morning too." The newly revitalized Outer Sunset seems to merge the wild call of the ocean and all the freedoms it symbolizes with the anchored world of suburban functionalism. Knowing the hidden history of the Outside Lands' first community somehow makes the rows of stucco less smothering and the lattes at Trouble Coffee so much more exciting.