



Western Neighborhoods Project

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Newsletter for WNP Members

Summer 2007

WNP News

We are happy to report that the paperwork has been signed and the San Francisco Museum and Historical Society has taken ownership of "Shack One", the 1906 earthquake refugee shack we restored and put on display last year. Hopefully, SFM&HS will find a great opportunity to place it in the public eye once more. In the meantime, it patiently waits backstage at the San Francisco Zoo.

The last two months have been heavy with WNP appearances. On May 21, 2007, Lorri Ungaretti and Woody LaBounty gave a presentation on the history of Carville and the Oceanside neighborhood for the annual membership meeting of community group S.P.E.A.K. (Sunset Parkside Education Action Committee). SPEAK has done some great work investigating the architectural resources of the Outer Sunset District and presented their findings in two very slick and informative

publications. Both can be published for a small fee. Email SPEAK at SAHRIC@yahoo.com for more details.

Lorri and Woody teamed up again (or rather, Woody horned in on Lorri's show) on May 30 for a talk on the history of the Sunset District at the Parkside branch library.

On June 2, 2007, Woody gave a show on the history of the Ingleside and Westwood Park neighborhoods to a crowd of 75 people at the Ingleside Branch Library. The 20-minute film we created from historical newsreel footage on the building of Westwood Park was a big hit. Ground will be broken for a new branch library later this summer, and the event was sponsored with the Friends of the Library to help spread the word. While the building is funded with bonds, money still has to be raised for furnishings.

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Our presentation on June 2, 2007, filled the Ingleside Branch Library.

"The John Freeman Newsletter"

We are honoring a very special member of our organization with this issue of the newsletter. What hasn't John Freeman given to the Western Neighborhoods Project? We are the frequent beneficiaries of his research and writing abilities, as this issue attests. He offers us extensive use of the historical photos, newspapers, ads, and western neighborhoods ephemera from his private collection. If that isn't enough, John almost single-handedly resuscitated our efforts to restore a 1906 earthquake shack with his carpentry skills and leadership.

John was born and raised in the Richmond District. The only time he lived anywhere else was to buy his first home in the Sunset, lasting there only 2 ½ years before selling to buy a larger home back in the Richmond. He attended Frank McCoppin Elementary, Star of the Sea, and St. Ignatius High School. He still gets together with a group of guys from his 1950s car club for a yearly picnic alongside the Pioneer Lodge in Golden Gate Park.

"We called our "car club" (everyone had to have a car club in the '50s - but we didn't have any cars) the Lairds. There were a few other similar clubs in the neighborhood like the Leaders and the Vanahays. Our common bond was hanging out at McCoppin's schoolyard. Some guys had come from Star [of the Sea], but we were adolescent punks. Many attended (loosely interpreted) George Washington High School."

John majored in history at the University of San Francisco, but when he applied to the USF School of Education an advisor encouraged him to get a minor that would always guarantee a job. "In a post-Sputnik world, math and science were 'hot', so I started taking math courses. I taught both subjects in a junior high school, but it wasn't long before math trumped history."

For 35 years John taught in the San Francisco Unified School District, the last nine at George Washington High School. When he retired in June 2001 he revisited his interest in history.

"A term paper I had done a cursory job with in 1962 was my main motivation. It was on the reconstruction of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake and fire. That topic has been my main focus of research since I retired, so quite naturally the housing boom after the earthquake in the Richmond District is related to the larger theme of reconstruction."

John's knowledge of the reconstruction period led him to serve as historical consultant for the Oakland Museum's earthquake

centennial exhibition, *Aftershock!—Personal Stories from the 1906 Earthquake and Fire*. He acted in a similar role for the "Chutes" section of the San Francisco Museum and Historical Society's *Amusing America* exhibit.

In addition to the articles he's published here and on the WNP Web site, John has contributed articles for San Francisco's Architectural Heritage Newsletter, the San Francisco Museum & Historical Society's, *The Argonaut*, and to that organization's on-line Encyclopedia. He has also been an active member and writer for the San Francisco Bay Area Post Card Club.

"The period from about 1905 to about 1915 was called 'The Golden Age of Postcards' and it fits perfectly into my area of research. It was a time when the telephone was in its infancy, so few people had phones, but for a penny stamp, you could send a message on a postcard. It is amazing how much history from those years was recorded as images on postal cards. The completion of new buildings in San Francisco was proudly depicted on postcards. All kinds of the local parades were recorded on postcards. The social issues of the day were found on postcards."

John and Alanna—his wife of 43 years and a 4th generation San Franciscan—still live in the Richmond, although their two sons (with two grandchildren each) have left for Los Angeles and Montreal.

For the "John Freeman Issue," John has written us another great article, provided some unique images, and unearthed more treasures. Enjoy!

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Advertisements from The Richmond Banner, December 29, 1916. Sperry & Lewis was the first automobile dealership in the Richmond District. McAvoy & O'Hara are still in the neighborhood and are no doubt still modernly equipped. Courtesy of John Freeman.

Fernando Nelson: Father of the Richmond District

by John Freeman



Fernando Nelson was the pioneer residential builder in the Richmond District whose quality construction set a standard of excellence and affordability that drew hundreds of families out beyond the cemeteries to make their homes in this emerging neighborhood in the early 20th century. Because of his influence in those early years of development, he should be recognized as the Father of the Richmond District.

By the time Nelson came to the Richmond District, he was a respected contractor who had built a number of quality homes in Noe Valley, upper Castro, and Duboce Park.¹ The first parcels of land that drew his interest out to the "wilderness" north of Golden Gate Park had been the site of the old Bay District Race Track that had served as Camp Merritt, a staging area for troops awaiting deployment to the Philippines during the Spanish-American War in 1898. The advantage of the property was that it was graded, near

public transportation, and had just had water and sewer lines completed when he bought it in 1902. In the area of First to Third Avenues, A to C Streets,² Nelson would acquire two full blocks and two half blocks for development.

There was a simple formula to how Nelson worked. He didn't build a tract of land as a modern subdivision speculator would today – building mostly identical floor plans, advertising and hoping for sales. Nelson's methods were more personalized. He built to the customer's specifications and budget. He only started a project when he had a commitment from the client. If a person wanted to buy just a lot in his blocks so another contractor could build their home, Nelson had no hesitation in selling it. He also generally left corner lots vacant to be sold at a higher price for apartment buildings or commercial space. Nelson's specialty was homes and flats, not apartment houses and stores. He had worked with his brother-in-law as a partner from 1889 to 1891, building flats in the Haight-Ashbury, and understood the design features needed to stack units.³ He even built his early homes with plumbing in the rear of the structure, so that the single-family house could easily be converted to flats. The properties at 676 and 680 – 2nd Avenue, shown under construction in 1903 (*above*), are perfect examples of the convertibility of a Nelson home. Both were built as homes, but as the building permit for #676 said in 1914, "home originally designed to be turned into flats. One



676 and 680 - 2nd Avenue, 1903
Courtesy of Paul Trimble

Nelson found little need to advertise, letting his craftsmanship, business style, and auto exploits do it for him. He could always be counted on to drive his automobile in all the Richmond District parades. Nelson developed a method of operation in Eureka Valley that he replicated in the Richmond and in all subsequent projects. He would move into the neighborhood, build a fine home to live in, and conduct business from there, with his shops and lumber storage on adjoining lots. For the first

story added to kitchen with porch and outside stairs." This allowed for the addition of a story in the rear for an upstairs kitchen, with a partition alongside the interior stairway to the top floor. The property at 680 – 2nd Avenue has come full circle, since it was built as a home, converted to flats, and restored to a home again. Nelson generally offered two floor plans, which he carried in his pocket

on an index card. On one side of the card was plan A, and on the back was plan B, but in striving to meet customers' needs, he could make additional variations to these plans upon request.⁴ The exterior elevation details usually came from a planing mill's

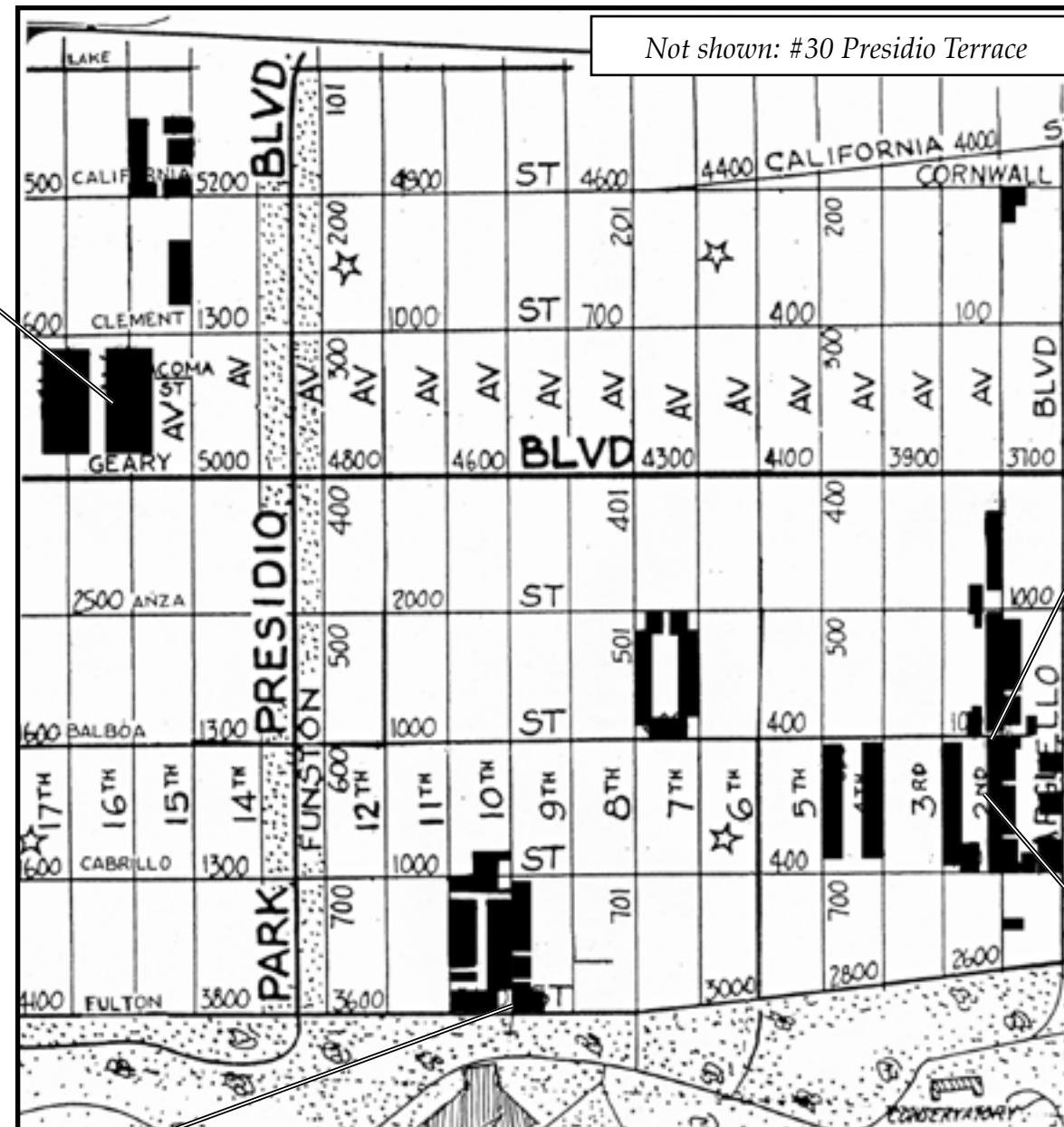
pattern book or from Victorian embellishments Nelson designed and bought in bulk. One signature detail, consisting of redwood pieces jigsawed into circles and attached in a row above the front entry, became known as "donuts" and can be used to identify some Nelson homes in the Eureka Valley or inner-Richmond neighborhoods.

Nelson became the consummate developer by acquiring the property, designing the building, and even financing the sale, but he always had an eye to customer satisfaction. In one of his rare ads, in the *San Francisco Call*, Fernando Nelson nicely summed up his operational credo. The ad read "I will aid you in selecting and perfecting the design, plan all the details, work out all your own personal wishes, gratifying every fancy, and build your home for a small down payment and balance the same as rent."⁵ Nelson also carried the mortgage on the property in his early years of operation, even making personal calls to collect cash payments every month.

As passionate as he was about his construction business, he was equally passionate about the automobile. By 1900, Nelson became one of the earliest automobile enthusiasts in San Francisco. He loved road challenges and is credited with being one of the earliest people to drive an automobile into Yosemite Valley. His bigger claim to fame was setting a record of eighteen hours and thirteen minutes between San Francisco and Los Angeles over rough, muddy roads in November 1906. In December, the Novelty Theatre advertised "Get Some One to Hold You While You Watch Nelson's Columbia Car Break the Los Angeles Record" and then promised "ten minutes of wild enthusiasm."⁶ By 1908, he and his crew of three, in a larger White Steamer, set a new record of seventeen hours and thirteen minutes to Los Angeles.⁷

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Fernando Nelson Developments in the Richmond 1903-1914



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projects in the Richmond, he built his home at 684 – 2nd Avenue, with a shop adjoining the back of the property facing C Street. By 1909, he had built a fine corner home for his newlywed eldest son William at 694 – 2nd Avenue, while he lived two lots away with his wife and three younger sons and daughter.

From this 2nd and C compound, the Nelson family conducted its business. The earthquake of 1906 interrupted operations when the military confiscated all Fernando's lumber to build temporary housing or storage facilities, and Nelson's car was volunteered for emergency use. By November 1906, the neighborhood newspaper, *The Richmond Banner*, reported that "F. Nelson is building two story residences on the entire block bounded by Fourth and Fifth avenues, B and C streets. The houses sold before being built."⁸ After the earthquake and fire, housing was scarce but reconstruction money was plentiful, so Nelson built most of this block as flats to accommodate the housing demand. The *Banner* again reported on December 4, 1908, that "Fernando Nelson has purchased the entire block between Eighth and Ninth avenues, A and B streets on which to build flats and houses of any description to suit the purchaser."⁹

By 1909, Fernando Nelson was a wealthy man and a pillar of the community. He was an officer in the Richmond Improvement Club and president of the Richmond Masonic Temple. *The Richmond Banner*, in its neighborhood booster issue of August 27, 1909, took a few liberties in praising Nelson. They claimed "Mr. Nelson has erected upon an average at least one house in the district for every working day in the week for the past six years, and it is agreed that if all of the homes erected by him were placed

side by side that the total aggregate would reach nearly eight miles."¹⁰ Although his home volume was greatly exaggerated, still Fernando Nelson was being respected as a leading citizen in the neighborhood, who had done more than any other single individual to effect the phenomenal growth of the district at that time. Buoyed by his new wealth and position, Nelson-the-carpenter/builder would make a dramatic change by moving to the wealthiest enclave in the neighborhood. In 1909, he bought a double lot in Presidio Terrace and had the leading architectural firm of MacDonald and Applegarth design a mansion later described as "an Elizabethan cottage on a mammoth scale."¹¹ Nelson & Sons would build their first home designed by professional architects, and it would influence their work from then on.

While building #30 Presidio Terrace in May 1910, Nelson bought the entire block and a half that had been the Chutes amusement park, stretching from the east side of 10th Avenue and the block across the street between Cabrillo and Fulton streets, 10th and 11th Avenues.¹² At the northeast corner of 10th and Fulton he would build a half-timbered home with heavily textured stucco, leaded casement windows, and a rolled roof resembling a Cornish thatched cottage that was closely modeled after his home in Presidio Terrace. Instead of Fernando moving from Presidio Terrace, William and his family moved in and managed the business, with its lumber storage and carpenter shop alongside and behind the home, facing Fulton Street. The last Victorian-style buildings Nelson had used since the 1890s were built on these blocks in 1911, and his last few flats were constructed there as well. These blocks were also the start of his transition to the then-popular Mission and Mediterranean styles, with greater emphasis on

elegant homes. The next eldest son, 21-year-old Frank Fernando, had joined the firm, bringing the asset of having taken correspondence courses in drafting and architectural design, which he would get to apply in all future buildings. Fulton Street offered an opportunity to experiment with building on larger lots, so the Nelson office-home on the corner of 10th Avenue and four homes in the next 3400 block were designed for larger lots. The 700 block of 10th Avenue shows the clearest example of the transition of styles, where wood and shingles give way to stucco, projected brackets, and curving roof lines.

In February 1911, while work was moving rapidly on the Chutes property, Fernando Nelson bought a new parcel west of Park Presidio Boulevard, between Geary and Clement.¹³ For \$90,000, Nelson secured the half-block on the east side of 16th Avenue, the full block in between, and the west side of 17th Avenue at roughly \$1,000 per lot. He would have to do the grading and pay for sewer and street work himself, but the frontage on both Geary and Clement streets could be sold for commercial lots, and he would build homes in between. When the project was ready for building near the end of 1912, son Frank occupied the first home at 315 – 16th Avenue, and the Nelson project management style continued. From that location, the Nelson brothers oversaw two smaller projects in the west side of the 200 block of 15th Avenue and a half block north of California Street between 15th and 16th Avenues.

These homes would be the last projects in the Richmond District for the Nelson family. By 1914, they had their eyes on two new parcels in the Sunset District. Both properties required far more sand moving and grading than any project in the Richmond. The first project they

called Parkwood Heights stretched up from Carl Street to Parnassus Avenue, between Arguello Street and Hillway Avenue.¹⁴ William again moved in 1915 to a corner home at #1 Hillway to supervise the building of forty homes on a very steep block. Frank remained at 16th Avenue to complete the Richmond District buildings, but moved to Lincoln Way in 1916. Fernando too would leave the Richmond in 1916, selling #30 Presidio Terrace and building a home at 28th and Lincoln Way to supervise the construction of a new development called Parkway Terrace. On the opposite end of that block of Lincoln Way, on the corner at 29th Avenue, the Nelsons built a home for Frank and his family, with the construction yards on the lots in between. Parkway Terrace would provide a greater opportunity for the Nelson family to get away from the restriction of 25-foot-wide lots and build detached homes on wider lots. The plan had been to build six blocks of the Parkway Terrace development, but a new opportunity surfaced that year and they stopped the project at three blocks and sold the rest to finance their purchase of West Portal Park.

For thirteen years, Fernando Nelson and his family were involved in building the new Richmond District. He and his sons built sensible homes with character and stability. Some of those homes have succumbed to the bulldozer to allow for building more units on the lots, or have been enlarged by remodeling, sometimes to the extent that today there is no clue to the building's original appearance. But in most cases, the Nelson details have been preserved and cherished to provide a charming texture to the neighborhood. The father of the Richmond District built well and has left us a legacy of buildings of character well worth preserving.



Geary Bakeries 1925

Even neighborhood institutions that seem to have lasted forever can have their predecessors. Recently the venerable Dave Sullivan's Sporting Goods on Geary Boulevard near 17th Avenue closed. The store rambled into a couple of buildings, offering ski equipment, baseball gear, and camping goods for decades. Before Dave Sullivan occupied 5323 Geary in the 1940s, there was Geary Bakeries, shown here in a 1925 photograph courtesy of John Freeman. How do we know it's 1925? John explains:

"I went after the name 'Geary Bakeries' and struck out. That name never made the City Directory. I had to work on the other names in the photo background to at least get close before I found the bakery."

"It turns out that Charles Buchan was the baker. He lived with his wife Nina upstairs at 5321 Geary but had a bakery and confectionery shop at 3228 Sacramento Street, between Presidio Avenue and Walnut, and another shop at 2339 Clement Street near 23rd Avenue,

across from the La Bonita (now 4-Star) Theatre. Sometime in 1925, he took over the store downstairs from where he lived, to have three shops. By 1926, he abandoned the Clement Street shop and only had the Geary and Sacramento locations. The truck says 'Geary Bakeries' and lists all three locations.

"Next door at 5327 Geary, was Lindy Electric. I first thought that Lindy was related to Charles 'Lucky Lindy' Lindberg, the hero of the solo trans-Atlantic flight, but the flight wasn't until 1927. It turns out the electric and radio supply business belonged to Irwin Lindenbaum, who must have gone by the nickname Lindy."

"At 5331 was W. G. Miller, Real Estate Co. with a sign below that read 'Dr. F.A. Gawthorne, Builder.' Those two guys were associated at that address only in 1925. By 1926, F. Arthur Gawthorne's contracting business had moved to 5000 Geary (NW corner of 14th Avenue) and William G. Miller had branched out into home building."

Larraburu Brothers Vans, 1940

Below is another beauty from John's collection: the delivery trucks and drivers of Larraburu Brothers on 3rd Avenue between Geary and Clement around 1940. Like salty fog air and the waft of coffee from the Hills Brothers building, Larraburu bread provided one of the great "Smells of San Francisco."

The director Alfred Hitchcock was said to be a regular visitor to the Richmond District just for the famed sourdough bread. Linda Hayton provided a sensory memory of it on our Web site message board:

"My dad and I would get up early and head down for a loaf hot out of the oven. I can still smell it. We would drive down to the beach and sit on the sand eating while the sun came

up. I remember how nice that hot bread felt in my hands. Talk about comfort food!"

A photo of the delivery vans is a sadly appropriate way to remember the Larraburu story. When one of the company trucks tragically struck a child, an ensuing lawsuit revealed that the company was woefully under insured. Both the insurer and Larraburu went bankrupt in the late 1970s.

Parisian, another Gold Rush-era baker, closed its doors recently, and the selection of amazing sourdough bread options in the City of San Francisco just isn't what it used to be.



(continued from page 1)

Our "Parkside History Day" took place on June 16, 2007, at the new Dianne Feinstein Elementary School. About 30 people brought us memories, class photos, and interesting facts about the neighborhood to aid us in the creation of a document on Parkside history.

The historic context statement we create will define the cultural, natural, and developmental history of the neighborhood. After a series of reviews, the paper will be presented to the Planning Department for adoption to help the City make informed decisions on permit applications, demolition requests, and zoning changes. The document will also be a great resource for property owners, residents, developers, or anyone interested in the history of the Parkside District.

Anyone with information or images pertaining to Parkside history is encouraged to contact either Woody LaBounty (415-244-8739 or woody@outsidelands.org) or Richard Brandi (richard@outsidelands.org).

The Western Neighborhoods Project is a California nonprofit corporation founded in 1999 to preserve and share the history and culture of the neighborhoods of western San Francisco.

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Membership fees and most donations are fully tax deductible (ask your accountant).

Questions or comments?

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Notes for John Freeman's "Fernando Nelson: Father of the Richmond District"

1. The Nelson buildings in these areas are documented in *Victoria's Legacy* by Judith Lynch Waldhorn and Sally B. Woodbridge, 1978.
2. Before being changed on December 27, 1909, the east-west streets south of Point Lobos Avenue (now Geary) were only letter designations, not Anza, Balboa, and Cabrillo.
3. Fernando Nelson and William Hamerton's work can be seen on the SW corner of Masonic & Waller and west on that block.
4. Personal details about Fernando Nelson's working style came from an interview of his son, George, conducted in 1974 by Judith Lynch Waldhorn and Gary Kray. Draft notes are found in the San Francisco Public Library History Center in the F. Nelson file.
5. *The San Francisco Call*, March 12, 1910.
6. *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 16, 1906.
7. *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 30, 1908.
8. *The Richmond Banner*, November 30, 1906.
9. *The Richmond Banner*, December 4, 1908. The west side of the 500 block of 8th Avenue shows the most change from when it was built because this block's zoning allowed multiple-unit buildings. Nelson built sixteen homes and two flats on this block. Only twelve of his homes remain today.
10. *The Richmond Banner*, August 27, 1909. If you calculate six years at 250 working days a year, Nelson would have had to build 1500 homes, or since most of Nelson's buildings in the Richmond were on 25-foot frontages, he would have had to have constructed 1370 homes by this time. The reality is that by 1909, Nelson had constructed 246 buildings in the Richmond District. Even counting flats as two homes, it would only mean 322 units in the neighborhood, nowhere near either figure.
11. Patrick McGrew, *The Historic Houses of Presidio Terrace and The People Who Built Them*, 1995.
12. *The Richmond Banner*, May 27, 1910.
13. *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 10, 1911.
14. Parkwood Heights is the only project done by Fernando Nelson & Sons that has completely disappeared. The homes were torn down to build a multi-level parking structure for UCSF Medical Center.