Sunset nativeâ??s determination to show district past fascinating not boring sparks late-in-life career as San Francisco historian

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With the exception of Golden Gate Park, San Franciscoâ??s Sunset District is well off the beaten tourist track. The sprawling neighborhood bordering the south side of Golden Gate Park has its attractions â?? Ocean Beach, Stern Grove, Depression-era murals â?? but its foggy weather, wide and sometimes treeless streets, and row upon row of lookalike, single-family homes, and boxy fourplexes hardly make it a travel destination.

Lorri Ungaretti has written five books on the history of San Francisco with a focus on its neighborhoods and local notables. (Photo courtesy of Lorri Ungaretti)

But Lorri Ungaretti knew of its many pleasures, both simple and sophisticated. She turned a native daughterâ??s curiosity about her childhood neighborhood into a late-in-life career as a chronicler of the district and its history. â??People thought the Sunset was so boring, that it didnâ??t have any

history,â?• said Ungaretti, now 70. â??I proved them wrong.â?•

When she could find no books on the history of the Sunset, Her mother, Dorothy Bryant, a playwright and novelist, told her she should create one. So, at 51, she embarked on a career as a local historian and writer. â??I loved spending so much time finding out about it and putting together pieces of the puzzle,â?• she said.

Over the years sheâ??s supported herself as a substitute teacher, a writer of marketing materials for two law schools, and an editor of supplemental materials for teachers. She also wrote a monthly column informing teachers about affordable classroom aids. Sheâ??s a member of the San Francisco Historical Society and managing editor of its journal, â??The Argonaut.â?• And, for the past 15 years, she has been giving historical presentations to various city organizations, and on Zoom for groups around the country.

But her main claim to local fame is the five history books she has written, including two on the Sunset District: â??San Franciscoâ??s Sunset Districtâ?• (2003) and â??Stories in the Sand: San Franciscoâ??s Sunset District, 1847-1964 (2012),â?• which she purposely ended in the year of Proposition 14. It was â??mostly so that I could include the Rumford Fair Housing Act (1963) and the 1964 State Proposition 14,â?• she said. The latter legislation, overturned two years later, allowed California residents to refuse to rent or sell residential property to anyone. â??I was only 12 years old, but I knew that Proposition 14 was evil,â?• she said.

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In 2014, she focused on the whole of the cityâ??s west side in â??Legendary Locals of San Franciscoâ??s Richmond, Sunset, and Golden Gate Park.â?•

Playing in the streets

The former Fleishhacker swimming pool, between the San Francisco Zoo, the ocean, and Fort Funston was a thousand feet long, so big that lifeguards patrolled it in boats. It held 6.3 million gallons of chilly ocean water. (Photo courtesy of OpenSFHistory.org)

In the Sunset of Ungarettiâ??s youth, children played in the streets. There werenâ??t stop signs at every street corner, but drivers werenâ??t so aggressive. Residents didnâ??t park on the street; they kept their cars in their garages.

The beach was nearly 30 blocks away, and her parents worried about the undertow, so she didnâ??t play there. But there the Fleishhacker saltwater swimming pool. And the Playland amusement park. â??We went there, but only when our mother drove us,â?• she said, because it was also far from home. â??We spent most of our time at the Funhouse. I donâ??t remember the admission fee, maybe 25 cents?â?•

Her mother never worried about their safety, she added.

In the 1940s, the L Taraval line, shown here at 40th Avenue, ran through the sand dunes. (Photo courtesy of OpenSFHistory.org)

More often, she and her friends took city transportation to the zoo â?? the L Taraval streetcar; Golden Gate Park attractions â?? the 28 19th Avenue bus. â??We often went to the De Young Museum, the aquarium, the original Academy of Sciences, and the Japanese Tea Garden. All free,â?• she said, except 26 cents for tea and cookies at the garden.

The Gold Mirror, a family-owned Italian restaurant at 18th and Taraval, was a favorite. â??Itâ??s still there, but the sign says it opened in the 1960s. It first opened in 1953, and we went several times in the late 1950s.â?•

A house sits alone on Taraval near 33rd Street in 1920. (Photo courtesy of *OpenSFHistoryorg*)

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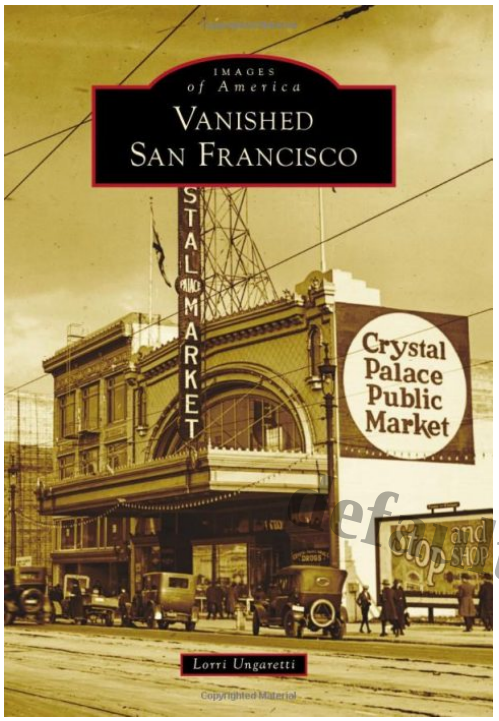
In 2001, she became a San Francisco City Guide, taking people around the Inner Sunset. â??I love sharing the history of a neighborhood, especially when I know an amazing story that helped make the neighborhood what it is.â?• People especially liked the old photos, like a house surrounded by sand, she would show them.

Although the pandemic has temporarily paused her work as a guide, Ungaretti continues to write and unearth facts about the west side of San Francisco. Her other books explore the Richmond District, which mirrors the Sunset on Golden Gate Parkâ??s north side, and legendary locals.

City delights

Ungaretti at 15 and a student of Abraham Lincoln High School in the Parkside section of the Sunset District. (Photo courtesy of Lorri Ungaretti)



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her historical explorations eventually broadened to the rest of San Francisco. She published a history of the Richmond District in 2005, and this year, â??Vanished San Franciscoâ?• which chronicles the cityâ??s many physical changes over the years. Her video presentation for the historical society recalls the massive Crystal Palace Market, a 70,000-square-foot emporium of food stuffs, butchers, and services such as a hat blocker and a hair salon. Open from 1922 to 1959, â??People came from all over the city to shop there,â?• she said.

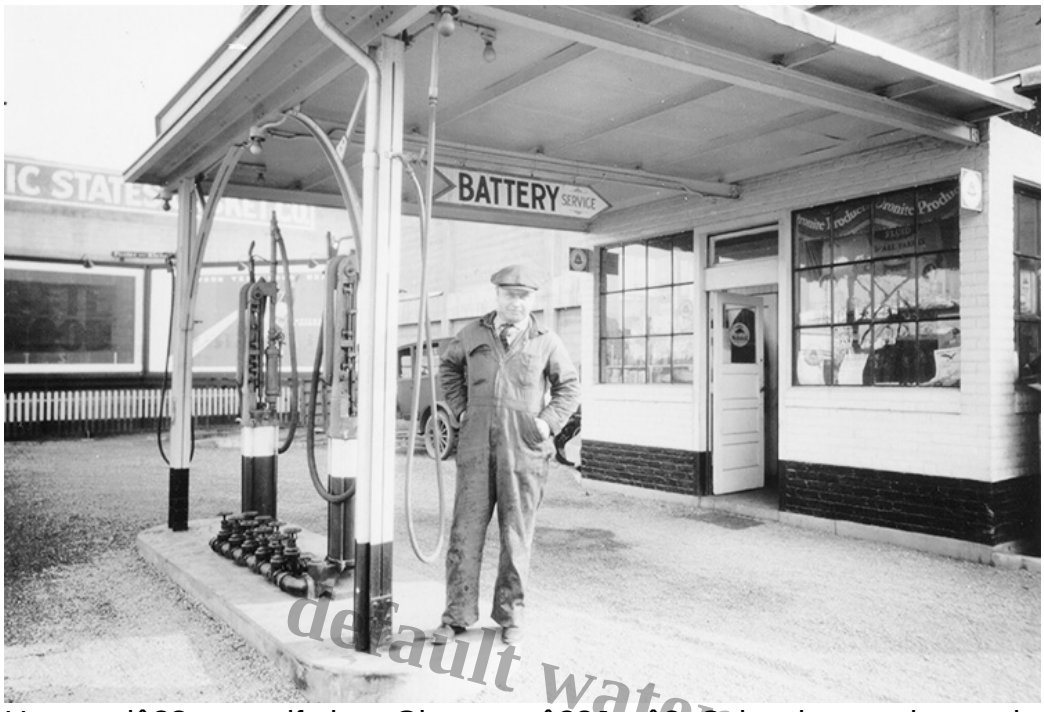
As Ungaretti grew older, she didnâ??t just hang out in the Sunset District. In high school, she and a friend visited Ghirardelli Square and the Cannery. Their favorite stop was the Portofino Cafe on Ghiradelliâ??s second floor.

Ungaretti in front of her former elementary school, Juan Crespi Home School. Serving grades K-4, it was one of several built in the â??50s for the growing population of the children of baby boomers. Lincoln High School can be seen down the block. (Photo by Robin Evans)

â??We ordered inside and then went out to the tables to watch the bay. Espresso drinks were rare then, and thatâ??s where we discovered them,â?• she said. Itâ??s been closed for probably 50 years, and no cafe ever reopened on the spot, she added. â??Too bad. It was a great place, with outside heaters to keep us warm.â?•

Sometimes they went to the Ghirardelli Chocolate Manufactory, where you could get sundaes. But ice cream could also be had in the Sunset, at a popular parlor called Wallyâ??s at the corner of 24th and Taraval. Itâ??s been gone for about 50 years, Ungaretti said, â??but you can ask any Parkside adult, and he or she will probably remember Wallyâ??s. We got ice cream, but I remember the frozen bananas best.â?•

The Sunset District comprises a bevy of sub-neighborhoods, all having their own history and attractions. The Parkside, for example, is named for the Parkside Realty Company, which developed land from 1905 through the 1920s as the new streetcar lines and the automobile made the area more accessible.



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Ungarettiâ??s grandfather, Giuseppe â??Joeâ?• Calvetti, owned a service station at 8th and Mission streets across from the Crystal Palace Market. (Photo courtesy of Lorri Ungaretti)

Now San Franciscoâ??s largest neighborhood, the Sunset encompasses 5.7 square miles. In the cityâ??s early days, it was deemed uninhabitable â?? its underpinning of sand dunes, builders thought, made construction too difficult.

Developing the dunes

It was only after the 1906 earthquake and fire, which leveled most of the city, that developers looked to the Sunset to figure out how to build houses there, Ungaretti said.

Sunset houses began to overtake the dunes in 1936. The wide road down the middle of the photograph is Ortega Street. (Photo courtesy of Lorri Ungaretti). Below, the Sunset District in 2010. (Photo courtesy of Chris Carlsson/foundsf.org)

Ungaretti in front of the Sunset District home she lived in as a child. (Photo by Robin Evans)

One of the developers who brought affordable housing to the neighborhood was Henry Doelger. By 1934, when he was 38, he was completing two houses a day. Selling for $5,560, the homes were made for working-class families that previously couldnâ??t afford one. â??A nice thing about Doelger, and other Sunset builders,â?• Ungaretti said, â??was that they built homes in the neighborhood for them and their families.â?•

As she walks around the Sunset, she likes to point out little-known landmarks. The front faÃ§ade of St. Anneâ??s Church, on Judah Street near 14th Avenue, is adorned by a frieze created by Sister Justina Niemierski, a trained artist. The building on Hugo Street where Doelger lived is still standing but was damaged by a fire.

Ungaretti points to the frieze adorning St. Anneâ??s Churc. Created by a Dominican nun with an art background, it depicts Christian history from Abraham to Jesus. (Photo by Robin Evans)

Writing came easily to Ungaretti, so she decided to major in English. She earned a bachelorâ??s degree from San Francisco State College (now university) along with an elementary school teaching credential. Later, she earned a Master of Science in Business Administration.

Her plan to become a teacher when she graduated in 1976 was stymied by Reagan-era budget cutting and population shifts. â??Teachers were getting laid off left and right, and if anyone was hired, it was

one of those,â?• she said. â??I really wanted to stay in education.â?•

She finally found her niche with small, independent educational publishers. Those companies produced supplemental and alternative teaching materials for teachers. She worked for a few in the Bay Area, and one in Pennsylvania.

When large textbook companies started buying up these smaller publishing companies, Ungaretti returned to San Francisco and started work at Golden Gate Universityâ??s School of Law. She helped produce marketing materials, catalogs, and its alumni magazine. She ended her career working at Hastings College of the Law (now University of California College of the Law, San Francisco.)

History as comfort

It was on a City Guide walking tour she realized that as a native, she knew more than most about San Francisco. So she joined the group and started doing tours of the Inner Sunset. She soon created several more tours, including the Parkside and Stern Grove. â??I love sharing the history of a neighborhood, especially when I know an amazing story that helped make the neighborhood what it is,â?• she said.

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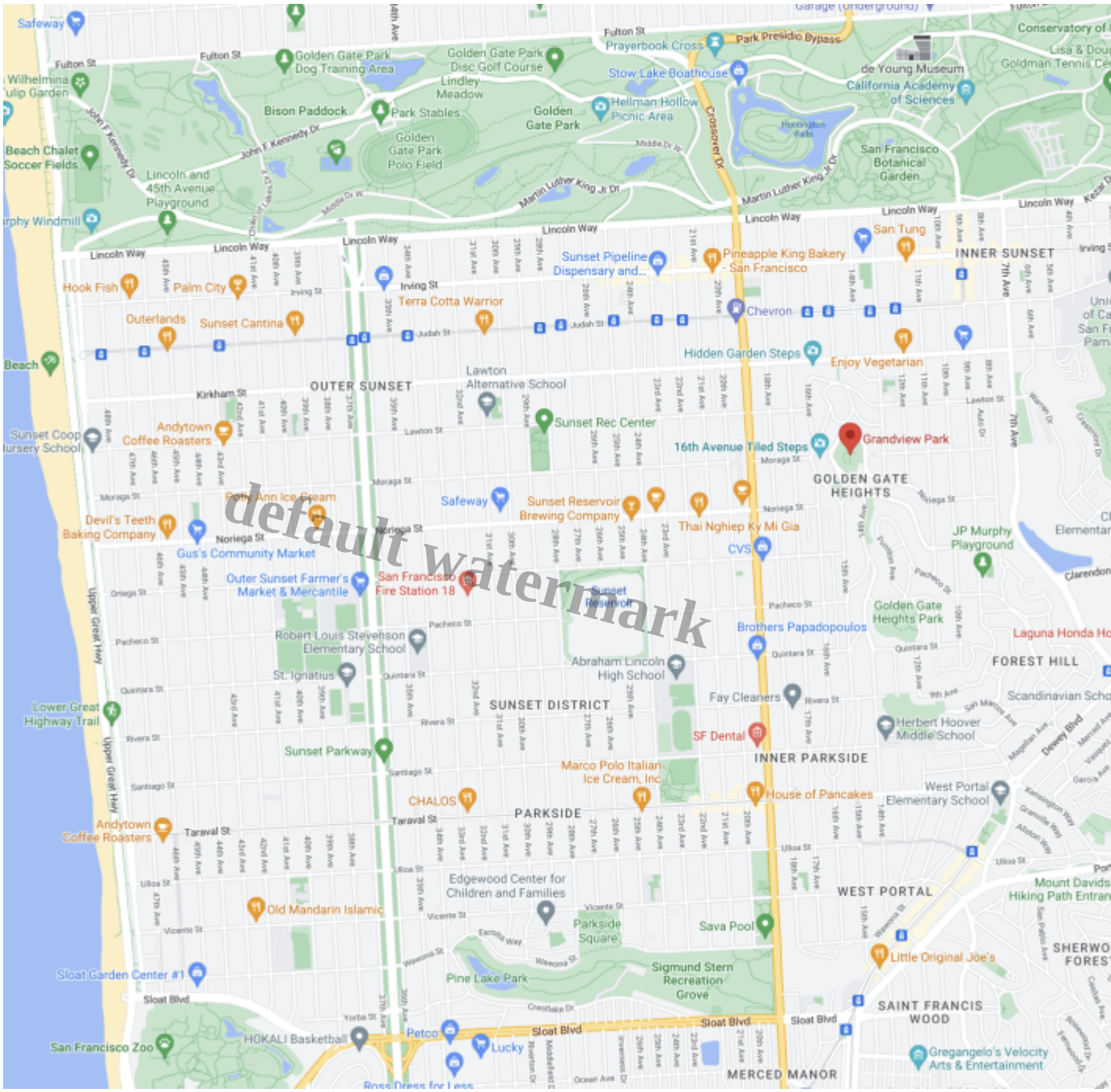

The Sunset District. (Photo from Google maps)

She had to be fully ready for her presentations whether the tours attracted two people or 30. Working with City Guides and the San Francisco Historical Society not only supported her love of history but provided her a family of sorts.

â??My dad died in 2010, and so when my mother and stepmother passed away within 11 days of each other in 2017, I felt very much alone,â?• said Ungaretti, who never married or had children and now lives on Nob Hill.

â??Doing research, writing and publishing six books on San Francisco, being known throughout the community in different historical groups, giving presentations in schools and in other places has

definitely changed my life for the better,â?• she said.

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