

Historic Piedmont Avenue

Recollections of Old "Glen Echo"
on the Tree-Lined Road to Piedmont



In 1977 Mr. Nels Carlson walked up and down Piedmont Avenue in Oakland with me. As we walked, he pointed out the locations of old family homes and businesses. He described what had changed, what had vanished since his family moved into the neighborhood in 1906 (when he was five years old). Nels had inquisitive eyes and a mind that recorded and remembered details that the average person soon forgets.

One of this pioneer's vivid memories was of the Decoration Day (Memorial Day) parades up to the cemeteries. There were soldiers marching up the Avenue to Mountain View, firing rifle salutes over the graves of military heroes. A marching unit of League of the Cross Cadets assembled at Sacred Heart Church, 40th and (then) Grove,

Broadway and Piedmont, looking north, about 1910. Broadway is at left; Oakland Traction Company streetcar will take the waiting passenger downtown. (Ted Wurm collection)

marching up 40th and turning on Howe Street to St. Mary's Cemetery. Incidentally, St. Mary's recorded its first burial shortly before Mountain View opened in 1863.

We started our walk in front of Chapel of the Chimes, Julia Morgan's architectural masterpiece. In earlier times the last block of Piedmont Avenue was home to several establishments offering marble monuments for the graveyards. Massard Florist was there, and a rose nursery at 4499. The east side of the street was mostly open fields before 1910. At the first intersection, where Pleasant Valley now crosses, was "Piedmont Junction," a watering place many years ear-



Nels Carlson, our guide on this history tour, resident of the Piedmont Avenue neighborhood from 1906. (Ted Wurm)

lier for teamsters engaged in hauling redwood lumber out of the hills and down to the Estuary. Firpo's Saloon was on the northwest corner (later Bud Voigt's, now King's X), and Cronin's Bar across the street.

Public transportation came to the area in 1876, when Piedmont Avenue was still called Webster Street. A horse-powered street railway brought visitors to the cemeteries from 7th and Washington via Broadway and Webster. With the coming of cable cars in 1890, service improved and eventually the

car line was electrified and extended up Moraga Road to Piedmont.

Wandering down Piedmont Avenue, about two blocks from the cemetery, one would pass a large fenced area on the left. This was the Hume Estate, 4320 Piedmont, home of George and Anne Hume. It extended back all the way to Rose Avenue on the hill. Young Nels watched construction of a concrete block fence footing - one of the first - along the Hume frontage on Piedmont Avenue. An iron fence was erected above the footing. At the Piedmont School property line was a cypress hedge and the Hume house stood way back at the hillside, about where Gleneden Avenue ends today.

When this big property was sold in 1939, the home was dismantled and a new street was run in from Piedmont Avenue. This long block was named Gleneden Avenue, and it was soon lined on both sides with attractive bungalows erected by builder Art Beckett. By coincidence, the designer of most of these houses was Nels Carlson. After grade school at Piedmont Avenue and high school at Oakland Tech, Nels earned a degree in architecture from U.C. Berkeley in 1926.

The present Piedmont Avenue School is on the same site as the old wooden three-story antique, built in 1891 with peaks and towers, bearing the name "Piedmont School" because it served children of the whole

Hume Estate on Piedmont Avenue opposite John Street, c. 1932. The Hume house, 4320 Piedmont, was through the gate and back against the hill. The site became Glen Eden development about 1940. (Ted Wurm collection)





Piedmont School, at Piedmont Avenue and John Street, built 1891. Photo c. 1910-11. (Ted Wurm collection)

area before Piedmont became a separate city in 1907. The new Oakland Tech, Nels recalled, was built in 1912 on the former circus grounds on Broadway.

On the next block of Piedmont, at 4237, was the branch post office, just a few doors up from St. Leo's Church. Right across the street was one of the Avenue's two Safeway stores (closed in June 1962). The post office was relocated at the old Fenton's Dairy property on 41st Street in 1963. And, oddly enough, that old Safeway at 4226 is the present location of the popular Fenton's Creamery.

At the corner of Piedmont and Ridgeway is St. Leo's Church. The property was acquired in 1911 by the first pastor, Father Owen



Original St. Leo's Church on Piedmont near Ridgeway, c. 1915. Father Owen Lacey at center front. After the new church was built in 1925, this 1912 building became the parish hall and then the school auditorium. (Ted Wurm collection)

Lacey. The house at that corner had been the home of Thomas Hill, renowned painter of California landscapes. Alongside this house, facing Piedmont Avenue, a small wooden church was constructed in 1912. A rapidly growing congregation replaced it with the present St. Leo's in 1925-26. The original church was moved around to Howe Street, where it serves as the school auditorium. The new church is in cruciform shape in the Italian Romanesque style, set back from the avenue so a pleasant garden could be developed along the street. Over the doorway is a ceramic by San Francisco's renowned artist and sculptor, Father Luigi Sciocchetti, who worked in the style of Della Robbia and whose work appears on many Catholic churches in central California.



Belle Vue Hotel, Piedmont and 41st, in 1908. In front of the entrance is Mrs. Jones, who owned and operated the hotel and dining room--25¢ meals. (Ted Wurm collection)

Continuing down the Avenue, Nels Carlson pointed out 4171 Piedmont, the office of Dr. Moore, the dentist. 4150-52 was the Royal Grocery ("just about the fanciest thing going"). On the corner of 41st, present location of Citicorp Savings, was old Belle Vue Hotel, with a barber shop and restaurant ("MEALS 25¢") at street level and a cigar store on the corner. Key Route Fuel and Feed was across the street. Its stocks of coal and wood, sacked feed, and other commodities were delivered in railroad cars on a spur track behind the Key Route train station. This attractive rustic station opened in 1904, when Borax Smith started his electric train system.



Key Route station in 1936--a mini-park on Piedmont Avenue.
(Vernon J. Sappers collection)

Trains from here headed westward through a cut between Howe Street and Broadway, ran all the way down 40th Street and out on a long trestle over the bay to meet ferryboats. The station was located directly opposite and facing Glen Avenue. When trains started running on the Bay Bridge in 1939, a new station was built at the corner of 41st (the J Hamburger place is part of the onetime station). The present parking lot was an area of tracks, some for freight cars, others for the passenger trains that

reached San Francisco. In recent grading to enlarge and improve the parking lot, train tracks were uncovered that had been paved over in 1958, when the last train rolled gently down Piedmont Avenue and turned toward the Bay Bridge.

In this block of Piedmont across from the station was Curly Freeman's famous pool hall at 4060. It had been the site of the area's first nickelodeon movie house, according to late long-time resident John Keller. This tiny cinema soon folded, replaced by a larger, finer picture palace about a block down the street at 3974. Operated by Katherine Heber, the building had a sort of false front, with blank upstairs windows to make it look like a residence. Nels Carlson said the theater featured mostly westerns made at Niles, with Bronco Billy racing around to a lively piano accompaniment.

When the nickelodeon was opposite the train station, that busy block was the business center with lots of foot traffic. People were getting on and off the street cars that connected downtown with upper Piedmont. Other cars of Oakland Traction (another Borax Smith enterprise) came into Piedmont station from Rockridge, traveling down Broadway to 40th, through the cut to 41st and Piedmont. Locals referred to this as the "Country Club Car Line." The term



The second Piedmont Theater (1914-17), between Montell and Monte Vista. (Vernon J. Sappers collection)



Barber shop on Piedmont Avenue, 1914; Shubert's grocery at right, Freeman's pool hall to left. Identified participants are Fred Ward, Jack Hall, Billy Shaeffer (seated) and "Dan" (bootblack)."

(Ted Wurm collection)

Piedmont Junction was often used for Piedmont and 41st. The station, the hotel, the pool hall and cigar store, barber and shoe-shine stand - they were all here in that block across from the trains. Up at 4125 Piedmont in 1924 was Skagg's Cash Store, listed in the 1928 directory as "Skagg's Safeway."

Piggly Wiggly was one of the earliest grocery chains, established by Andrew Williams about 1921. Branch store #5 was at 3966 Piedmont. McMarr Stores, another early chain, had branches at 4080 and 4214 Piedmont. Hagstrom's, an East Bay chain, had a popular store at 4021. That number appears nowadays on the central entrance of the Julia Morgan building at 40th and Piedmont, designed for Elsie Turner with Morgan's "trademark Della Robbia wreaths" set in the brick walls. There is an interesting upstairs space, originally the Chauffeurs' Union Hall (note the emblem in the transom over the door). Most chauffeurs in early Piedmont belonged to this union.

Across the Avenue here is the Piedmont Grocery, established in the 1890s by Herman F. Sack and operated for many years by his son Herb. Next door was Piedmont Meat Market, operated by the Guerra family. The two businesses were consolidated in 1964. Just down from here at Monte Vista is one of the last mom-and-pop corner stores - the Monte Vista Food Center. Wells Fargo's new bank across the street replaced an attractive American Trust Company bank built in 1927. Well built, in fact; so well that it

took three times as long to demolish as had been estimated by the wreckers in 1971. Adjacent Red Arrow Cleaners was razed at the same time; it was once famed as the shop of Tony Martin's dad. The original Piedmont Branch Library came to 3975-77 Piedmont Avenue in 1925, moved to 3943 in 1930, and finally settled in the attractive Spanish-style building on 41st in 1933.

Farther down Piedmont Avenue, opposite Yosemite at 3791, was the lovely brick Plymouth Congregational Church. The vine covered church extended across through to Howe Street. Neighborhood boys used the church hall in the evenings for basketball games and other beneficial activities. The present multi-story parking garage is a poor replacement for the old brick walls and gardens of this Avenue attraction. But

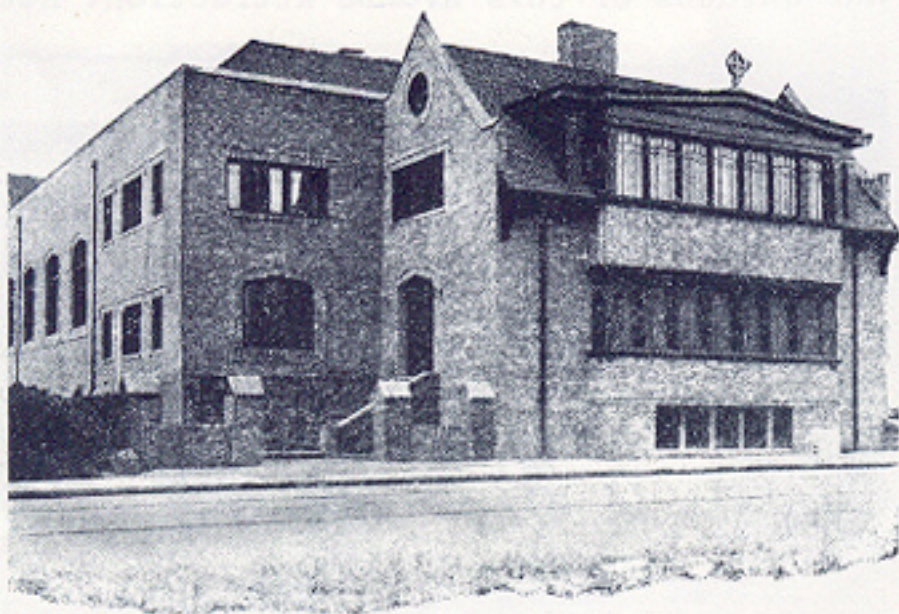


Piedmont Market; 1929 photo by owner Rene Guerra. Tom (left) and Leo (in doorway) are Guerras. (Ted Wurm collection)

church membership had diminished and a smaller facility was wanted. It was built in a quiet residential neighborhood on Oakland Avenue.

Our walk down Piedmont Avenue finally brings us to Moss Avenue, now known as MacArthur Boulevard. This broad roadway was created to feed the Bay Bridge and opened in 1936. Old Moss Avenue, a narrow, winding segment of Highway 50, had ended at Telegraph Avenue between 37th and 38th Streets. There was considerable agitation, supported by Piedmont Avenue merchants, to make 40th Street the main bridge approach, since it was already 100 feet wide (but carrying trains of both Key Route and Sacramento Northern lines). "The Bay Bridge 40th Street Lateral Campaign" promoted using "the streets we already have." Moss won out; it was straightened and widened and a few Piedmont Avenue stores were wiped out.

Below MacArthur, Piedmont Avenue's historical associations diminish. On the left is Albert Brown Mortuary, dating back to the early 1900s when the move was made from their 1873 downtown location. Across the street alongside the freeway is the old Piedmont Hotel, the area's first "high-rise," with 7 1/2 stories. This building, designed by William Weeks, served for many years as part of Kaiser School of Nursing. Looking straight down Piedmont Avenue from here before 1928 we could have seen St. Mary's College set back on a hill at 30th and Broadway. Catholic residents of the area often attended Sunday services at the college chapel before St. Leo's existed.



Plymouth Congregational Church. The parish hall, facing Piedmont Avenue, was a neighborhood social and recreational center. (Oakland History Room)



St. Mary's College at 30th and Broadway, c.1912. College started in San Francisco in 1868, was in Oakland 1888-1928, and then moved to Moraga. (Vernon Sappers collection)

And baseball teams from several of the old neighborhoods used the college diamond on Sundays during certain seasons of the year.

Nels Carlson, who started us on these reminiscences, left me with a reminder not to get too close to the present. We have to remember that there were horse-drawn wagons making deliveries, and others collecting castoffs with the "rags-bottles-sacks" men. The two-horse garbage wagons of Oakland Scavenger, painted blue, were known as "Blue Taxis" to their operators. These were everyday sights to teenagers like Nels in the 1920s. And they all knew Manuel Rose, Piedmont's first policeman, who covered his beat on horseback.

As a young boy, Nels Carlson delivered milk from cows that were milked within a block of Piedmont Avenue. He and his friends wore themselves out on dirt-road bicycle races from the Avenue up to what is now Montclair, up Moraga Road. And how they relished the ride back! There were coaster races down Piedmont Avenue. The finest adventure, apparently, was riding their bicycles to the great World's Fair in San Francisco in 1915. No, not all the way around the bay, but via the "Nickel Ferry" from the foot of Oakland's Broadway.

--Ted Wurm

Author's note: Some of this material originally appeared in "PANIL Notes," monthly bulletin of the Piedmont Avenue Neighborhood Improvement League. Added to Nels Carlson's reminiscences are details from old city directories and my discussions with long-time Avenue residents including John Keller, Lee Gilpin, Leo Guerra, Helen Ayres, and Tom Disher.