

Lucy L.

San Francisco, CA

The Ghosts of Point Lobos Avenue

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas

Throughout my life, I have spent a sizable amount of time on Point Lobos Avenue in San Francisco. Whether I was eating breakfast with my family at the Cliff House or Louis' Diner, learning to draw in Sutro Heights, exploring the ruins of Sutro Baths, or driving the winding road home from school, I've always felt a profound connection to the area. As a child, I was only partially aware of the history that surrounded me, but as I grew older, I began to do more and more research on the Cliff House and Sutro Baths. The more I knew, the more I could see when I went there. All you have to do is see a photo, read a story, or recall a childhood memory, and suddenly you can see the ghosts of past structures. My research paper focuses on the history of the area surrounding the Cliff House and consists of four short stories, from the perspective of two characters, about their memories of Point Lobos Avenue. I used my writing to illustrate how stories, photos, and memories can preserve the spirit of things long gone, and to highlight the importance of recording, sharing and learning the history of the places where you spend your time. For my artwork, I was inspired by a particular relief sculpture that used to be displayed in Sutro Baths and was eventually moved to the Cliff House. It depicts a woman in a flowing dress surrounded by yellow tiles. In my artwork, I turned myself into this ghostly figure with acrylic paint, oil pastel, and colored pencil. Surrounding the self portrait are images of the structures on Point Lobos Avenue, some long gone and some still standing. I layered these buildings with tile patterns found in the Cliff House and Louis', and newspaper clippings from articles about the area. My artwork captures the complicated and fascinating history of Point Lobos Avenue and implies that the ghosts of buildings remain in the places they once stood by connecting pieces of different structures to each other. The background is grouped into three sections. Sutro Heights Park, the Cliff House, and Sutro Baths. Even though not all of these buildings are there today, once you become aware of them, you can feel their presence in the places they stood. There are ghosts everywhere, you just have to know where to look.

The Ghosts of Point Lobos Avenue



Lucy L.

The Oxbow School

OS49

Writer's Note: Throughout my life, I have spent a sizable amount of time on Point Lobos Avenue in San Francisco. Whether I was eating breakfast with my family at the Cliff House or Louis' Diner, learning to draw in Sutro Heights, exploring the ruins of Sutro Baths, or driving the winding road home from school, I've always felt a profound connection to the area. As a child, I was only partially aware of the history that surrounded me, but as I grew older, I began to do more and more research on the Cliff House and Sutro Baths. The more I knew, the more I could see when I went there. I can now picture the Victorian Cliff House where the modern restaurant stands now, and the glass roof of Sutro Baths towering over the murky abandoned pools. All you have to do is see a photo or two, and suddenly you can see the ghosts of past structures. Of course, memory can keep these buildings alive too. Both Louis' and the Cliff House closed down in 2020, but when I look through the dusty windows of Louis', I will always see the waitresses with little notepads and my family sitting in a diner booth. The following paper consists of four short stories, from the perspective of two characters, about their memories of Point Lobos Avenue. My goal was to illustrate how stories, photos, and memories can preserve the spirit of things long gone, and to highlight the importance of recording, sharing and learning the history of the places where you spend your time. There are ghosts everywhere, you just have to know where to look.

Alfred, age 17 - January 16, 1887

Despite the fact that a schooner full of dynamite had exploded on the rocks below the Cliff House only a day prior, a hand painted "bar open" sign hung on the damaged building. My family had been awoken late that night by the blast caused by the destruction of the *Parallel*, and upon hearing the news in the morning that it had been a ship of explosives, my father decided

that we were going to go and see the wreck. The five of us hopped on the steam rail, which took us all the way to Sutro Heights. Normally, my mother would have liked to take a stroll through Sutro's carefully maintained gardens, but that day we had our minds set on the *Parallel*—or at least what was left of it. As we walked down Point Lobos Avenue, it became clear that we weren't the only San Francisco residents curious about the explosion. Hundreds of people were gathered along the fence that blocked the road from the cliffs, and hundreds more stood on the beach below, picking through the wreckage for any sort of valuables. Papa, of course, wanted to join those on the beach. But the rest of us— especially Clarence, who was only six years old— were hesitant to join the throng of people.

“But Papa,” he cried as he clung to Marie's faded green skirt. “I don't want to!”

“Me neither!” Marie piped in, crossing her arms and making an exaggerated angry face. As my siblings pleaded with him to spare us from being stuck on the overcrowded beach, I turned my gaze towards the Cliff House. Through the masses of people and passing horse drawn wagons I could tell that the entire north wing of the small main building was destroyed, along with the stables and carriage sheds. All of the windows had shattered. Although the damage seemed dire to most, I knew that it would be rebuilt in no time. The Cliff House and Sutro Heights were run by a man named Adolf Sutro who, according to my father, made a fortune by designing and building a rather long tunnel that drained and ventilated flooded silver mines. Papa had read all about Sutro in the paper and was fascinated by the fact that one invention could lay the foundation for so many men's fortunes in silver. He hoped to someday invent something that could make him rich too, or to benefit from another man's invention if that failed. If Adolf Sutro could build gardens as grand as Sutro Heights— and have them open to the public— he could afford to rebuild the Cliff House.

“Alfred, are you listening dear?” My mother asked, directing my attention back towards the conversation. “Would you rather stay here with Papa or return home with the children and I?” I gazed down at the people desperately scavenging for anything that they could sell for a decent sum of money, and then at my father, who seemed to want nothing more than to dig around in the sand for treasure.

“I’m done here,” I responded. “I’d like to go home.” My father furrowed his brow, but said nothing. After a moment, he spoke.

“I’ve changed my mind, we should stick together.” He then looked over towards the Cliff House and gestured towards the sign that read “bar open.” “I’ll go and get you kids some soda-pop, and then let’s go home.”

Alfred, age 32 - January 8, 1902

The fog was so thick that I could barely see the top of the Cliff House. I now understood why the papers called it “Sutro’s gingerbread palace.” It was quite a sight, six stories complete with spiraling towers and turrets. Compared to the Cliff House that I had known in my youth, this building certainly was a palace. Of course, I had been right about Adolf Sutro rebuilding after the damage done to the Cliff House by the explosion of the *Parallel*. However, I failed to predict a second and more fiery blow to the restaurant. On Christmas day, 1894, the Cliff House burned to the ground, due to a defective flue. Funny enough, the chimney that may have caused the fire was the only thing left standing.

In August of 1890, my father left. I was twenty years old, and worked as a carpenter, just as he had. When Adolf Sutro became mayor of San Francisco in 1894, and then died four years later, I wondered if my father read the news and thought of me. I wondered if he remembered

teaching his son about Sutro, if he remembered our trip to the Cliff House to see the wreck of the *Parallel*. I hoped he remembered the soda-pop he had bought for my siblings and I. My gaze traveled from the towering resort down to the beach. There was no trace of the debris that once littered the sand. I could picture it though, the pieces of splintered wood and metal, and all of the people, the old Cliff House, my family. All five of us. The day that my father had the opportunity to leave us— even just for a day— but chose to stay.

“Alfred,” my wife tapped me on the shoulder. “Why’d you stop walking? We’re almost there.”

“Oh,” I tore my gaze from the towering Cliff House and looked back towards her. “I’m sorry Margaret, I did promise you that we’d go swimming.” As the two of us continued walking up Point Lobos Avenue, arms linked, a sign reading “Sutro Baths” came into view.

“There it is!” Margaret exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. She loved Sutro Baths, and because she loved them, so did I. Every time we went to the baths, I was always captivated by the grand staircase, lined with real tropical plants, and the massive arched ceiling, which I had read was made of 100,000 square feet of stained glass. After changing into our itchy wool bathing suits, Margaret and I would always swim back and forth in the largest pool, talking and laughing, and splashing each other with salt water like little kids.

“That’ll be 15 cents,” the man standing in the entrance to the baths said in a monotone voice. I handed him three nickels and Margaret and I began our descent down the stairs to the pools.

Daisy, age 8 - January 11, 2013

“I see one!” I grinned, holding up a pair of binoculars built for a larger face than mine. The whale’s back disappeared again under the water.

“Where? Where?” My little sister whined, trying to pry the binoculars from my fingers. I pulled them away from her. “It’s gone now.” I turned my head back towards the window and leaned my elbows against the wooden windowsill, scanning for another cloud of steam.

“Daisy, finish your breakfast and let Emma have a turn.” My mother said. I sighed and passed her the binoculars. As my sister held up the binoculars the wrong way and complained that she couldn’t see anything, I looked back down at my partially eaten food. Two slices of french toast remained on the plate, sprinkled with powdered sugar. I began to take bites of one slice, but my eyes stayed glued to the window. Outside of the tiny wood-paneled diner was one of my favorite places ever: Sutro Baths. I watched as seagulls landed on the surface of what was once a swimming pool, and tourists snapped photos of what was left of the magnificent bath house. Sutro Baths burned down in 1966, long before I was born. They say it was arson, that the developers did it to get the insurance money. Even though I never got to see it, I knew what the baths had looked like because there was an illustration of the interior by the entrance of Louis’ Diner, where I sat chewing on my french toast. In the picture, a line of people in matching black swimsuits stood on a platform above a pool bigger than any I’d ever swam in. There were slides and trapeze swings, and sometimes I wished I could have gone there, to that version of Sutro Baths. Gazing down at the eroded foundation, overgrown with creeping wire vine and filled to the brim with sea water from the ocean waves that crashed against it, I could almost see the arched ceilings and crowds of swimmers.

I put down my fork. “I’m full.” I declared. “Can we walk down to the pools?”

Daisy, age 18 - January 29, 2023

As I pressed my iPhone against the window, a perfectly clear image of the interior of Louis' Diner appeared on the screen. It looked almost the exact same as the last time I had eaten there. The same red diner booths and wood paneled walls, and the lights were on despite the excess of light coming in through the windows. I could see the spot where I used to look out over the ocean and the ruins, as I ate my usual order of french toast. If I hadn't known otherwise, I would have thought that the diner had simply closed for the night. I took three pictures and then put my phone back in my pocket.

"C'mon Emmett, Let's walk down to the pools, this is making me sad," I said to the boy standing beside me, his face against the glass. "I don't think I've been to Sutro Baths since Louis' closed down during Covid."

"Wow," he responded, as he often did. "Let's go then." As we resumed our walk down Point Lobos Avenue, my eyes were caught on the Cliff House. After 157 years, it was empty too. Unlike Louis' though, I had no doubt that it would be back. The physical building, of course, never lasted. In Fact, the first and second Cliff Houses both burned completely to the ground. The second one was my favorite. I read online that they called it "Sutro's Gingerbread Palace," a name that it definitely lived up to. After scrolling through countless images of it, I decided that it was one of the most beautiful buildings I'd seen; an elegant chateau perched on the edge of the city. But that didn't stop it from meeting the same fate as its much smaller predecessor in 1907. Even after fire claimed the first two buildings, another was built. The third Cliff House looked a lot like its current version: two stories with neoclassical architecture. It was then remodeled into a midcentury roadhouse in 1949 (my second favorite version), and remodeled again in 2003.

“Wow,” Emmett said again, as I realized I had just been talking about the Cliff House for five minutes straight.

“Sorry, I just think it’s interesting—this whole area. Sutro Baths too.” I laughed, putting my hands into the pockets of my jacket.

“It is,” he responded. “You can also tell me about Sutro Baths— I mean, if you want to.” I looked up at him, surprised.

“Yeah, I suppose I can,” I smiled and let my gaze drift down to the ruins. “The Bath House was opened in the 1890s. The entry was like a small classical temple; it was up there.” I pointed up the hill towards an empty space next to Louis’. “You’d then walk down a stairway to the museum gallery. Adolf Sutro— the guy who built the place— had a massive collection of art, taxidermy, and other stuff that people a hundred years ago were interested in. From the gallery you would walk down the grand staircase, which was right around here,” I continued, drawing a line down the cliffside with my finger. “And then you’d be in the real bath house part. We can still mostly see where the pools were, but they were once separated into six different tanks, each a different temperature of sea water pumped in right from the ocean. There were slides and swinging rings and a diving board too. Above the pools were rows and rows of bleachers, reaching halfway up to the arched glass ceilings. Where we’re walking now was a part of it too, there were restaurants and balconies, and an amphitheater... They had lots of live performances. It was amazing.” I paused as the trail began to steepen and we had to walk more carefully, which was difficult in my platform sneakers.

“And then it burned down, right?” Emmett asked as the path evened out and we reached the beginning of the ruins.

“Well, not yet,” I responded. “The Great Depression made it pretty expensive to keep the whole thing running, since nobody could afford to spend money on recreation. They ended up sectioning off part of the building and turning it into an ice skating rink, and then eventually decided to close it down altogether. And *then* it burned down.” I stopped walking and sat down on a large rock. The two of us sat in silence for a moment, looking out at the concrete foundations of Sutro Baths.

“I can see it now,” Emmett suddenly said.

“See what?”

“Sutro Baths. I can see the walls and the glass ceiling, and the people swimming. It’s all right here.” He gestured to the ruins. I smiled.

“I see it too.”

Works Cited

- Black, Annetta. "Ruins of the Sutro Baths." *Atlas Obscura*, 29 June 2009,
www.atlasobscura.com/places/ruins-of-the-sutro-baths.
- Delgado, James, et al. "The History and Significance of the Adolph Sutro Historic District: Excerpts From the National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form Prepared in 2000." *National Park Service*, 2000,
www.nps.gov/goga/learn/historyculture/upload/sutro_history.pdf.
- Echeverria, Emiliano. "Exploring Sutro's in the 1960's." *Western Neighborhoods Project*, May 2014, www.outsidelands.org/sutros_60s_echeverria.php.
- Hountalas, Mary Germain. *The San Francisco Cliff House*. Random House Digital, Inc., 2009.
- naboomboo. "SUTRO BATHS SAN FRANCISCO Circa 1958 From 'the Line Up.'" *YouTube*, 16 Jan. 2010, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JklqpaDdYX0.
- National Park Service. "Statement of Significance." *NPS History*,
npshistory.com/publications/goga/cli-sutro.pdf. Accessed 14 Nov. 2023.
- Stark, Gary. "Introduction." *Cliff House Project*, www.cliffhouseproject.com/introduction.htm.
- "Sutro Baths History." *National Park Service*, 25 Feb. 2015,
www.nps.gov/goga/learn/historyculture/sutro-baths.htm.
- Woods, Arnold. "The Parallel Disaster: A Closer Look." *Open SF History*, 17 Jan. 2021,
www.opensfhistory.org/osfhcrucible/2021/01/17/the-parallel-disaster-a-closer-look.