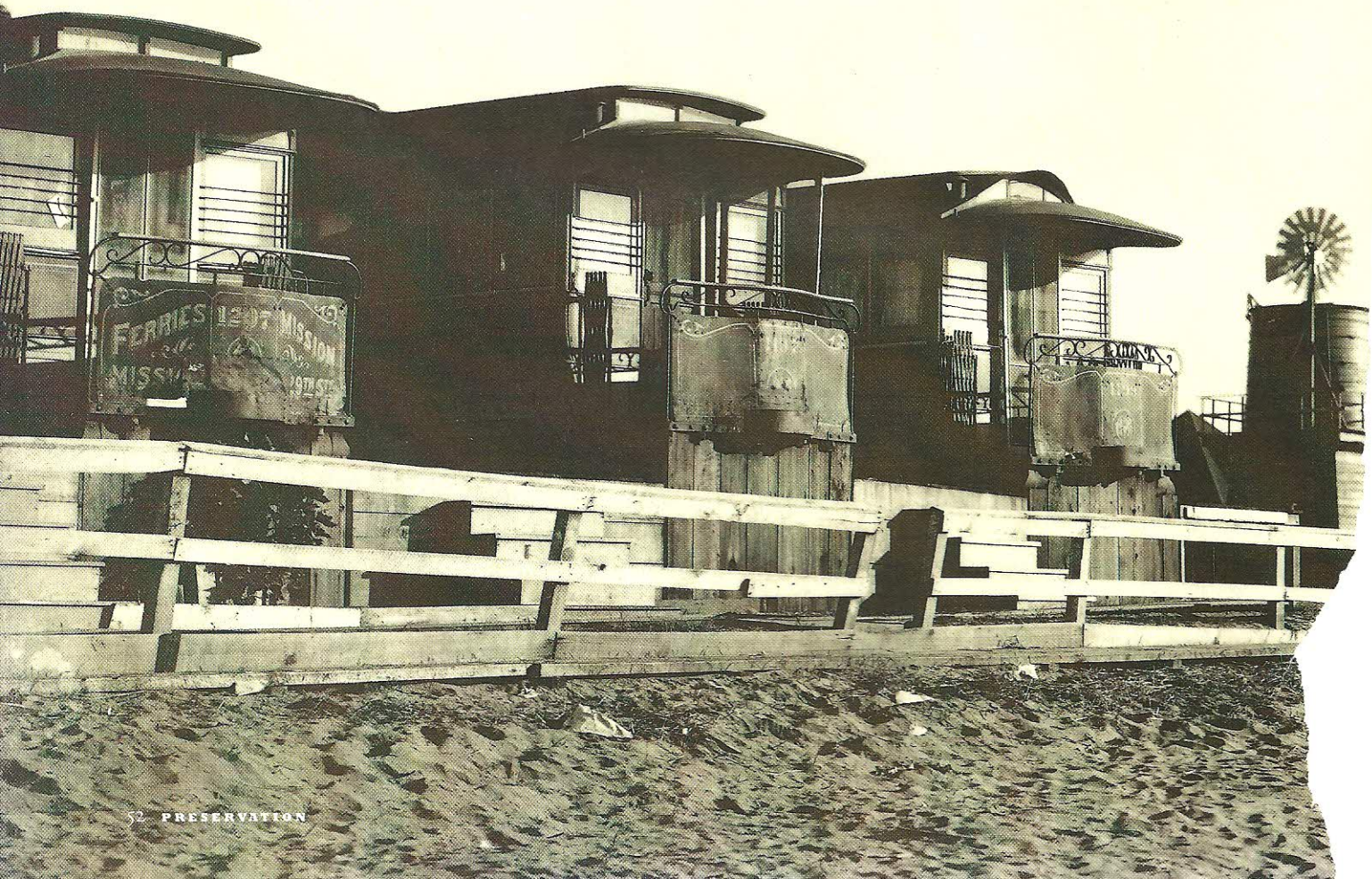
STREETCAR

San Francisco's windswept Sunset, a nondescript neighborhood by the Pacific, was once a romantic enclave called Carville, where the houses were literally made of trolley cars. ▪ BY JENNIFER REESE



SUBURB

"The great desert of San Francisco. How incongruous the words seem! As if there could be a desert in San Francisco. But there is, and it is as wild a piece of land as can be found on the face of the earth. It covers several thousand acres within the city limits, and beyond that stretches away in solitary grandeur into the hills …

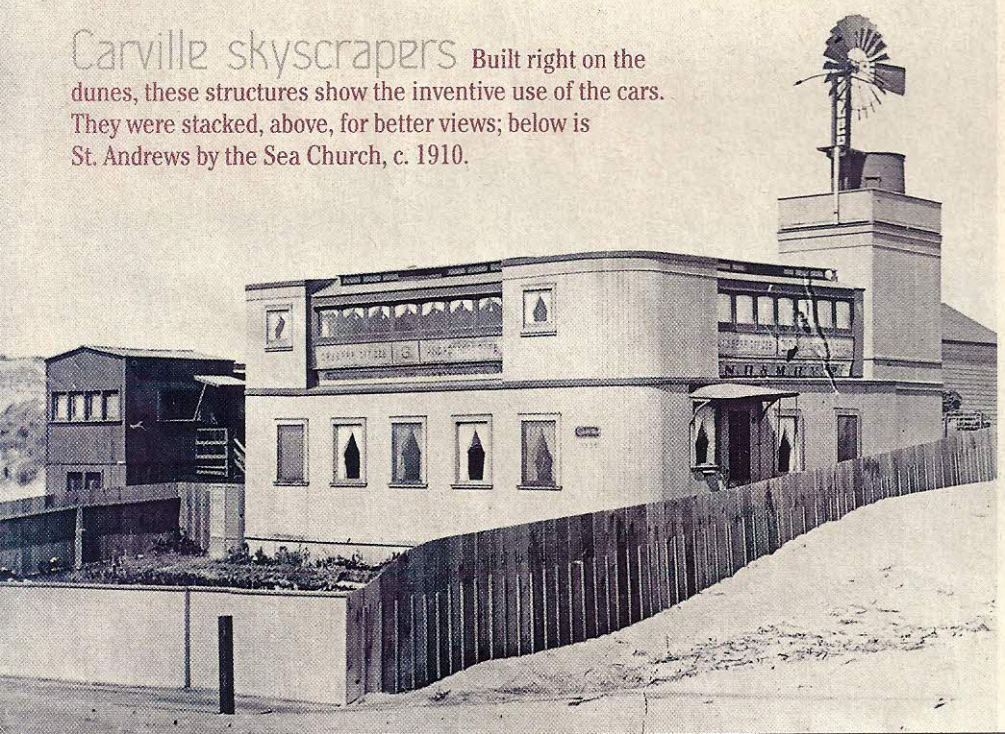
"Along the edges of the desert, which is about half a mile from the park, there are a few homes owned by people living there for their health. From the appearance of these places it is hard to believe they are only a short distance from civilization. The general aspect is that of the barren lands of Arizona. … Go to the doors of any of the houses–or streetcars, as the case may be, for many of the houses are old streetcars pressed into service–and ask the owner why he lives there. Only one answer will you get–'Health.'" –*The San Francisco* Call, *May 23, 1897*

IN THE EARLY 1990s, a young filmmaker named Scott Anderson moved to a generic apartment in the Sunset, the enormous and decidedly unchic westernmost district of San Francisco. Anderson had been living in the trendy Haight-Ashbury, but he wanted a quieter neighborhood, preferably near the ocean, because he liked to surf. His friends were surprised at his choice. A city more vain of its beauty and heritage than San Francisco would be hard to find, and the Sunset may be its only neighborhood without a trace of apparent charm or history, a vast, drab tract of stucco houses sloping down to the sea.

Nonetheless, he found that he liked the place. "It's probably the most peaceful living in the city," says Anderson, a visual effects designer who won an Academy Award for the 1995 movie *Babe*. One day he walked past a house with a for-sale sign out on the Great Highway, the forlorn boulevard abutting the ocean, and he went back later to take a look. What he found amazed him.

The exterior of that house hardly gives a taste of what lies within. It is a shingled box with aluminum frame windows, set back from the street behind a garage and a nondescript yard. It sits on a block of shabby modern apartments and seriously rundown beach cottages. While the ground floor of the house was fairly standard, the second story puzzled Anderson. There were built-in wooden benches, antique hanging glass lanterns, and arched ceilings of tongue-and-groove slats. The small side windows were etched with flowers. The house looked a lot, Anderson thought presciently, like it had been built from old streetcars that had been spliced together. "I was really stunned," says Anderson. "The Real-

WYLAND STANLEY COLLECTION



Carville skyscrapers Built right on the dunes, these structures show the inventive use of the cars. They were stacked, above, for better views; below is St. Andrews by the Sea Church, c. 1910.

tors knew it was different, but they didn't have any historical information."

Anderson bought the house. Without even realizing it, he had purchased what is probably the most intact remnant of the all-but-forgotten village of Carville, a bohemian enclave of streetcar houses that flourished in the dunes near the turn of the century before being absorbed into the acres of cookie-cutter houses that arose starting in the 1920s. Looking at the Sunset today, it is hard to believe it has any history at all, let alone a glamorous one.

IN 1889, Adolph Sutro, a Prussian-born tobacco merchant who made a fortune building a mining tunnel in Nevada, fell in love with the rolling sand dunes that sprawled west from the heart of San Francisco–then a city of 300,000–to the ocean. He purchased many acres of these so-called outside lands, convinced they were conducive to good health, free, as he put it, of those "tiny, flitting particles called bacteria." He also thought he'd found himself a really great investment. As one reporter of the time wrote, "The location, thinks Mr. Sutro, who is a man of much foresight, has a future. What other great city has a seaside resort at its doors? he wants to know. Here is a London with its Brighton in the suburbs, a New York with a Narragansett Pier on its waterfront. Why, it will be worth millions yet."

It wasn't an outrageous idea. Why wouldn't oceanfront land in San Francisco be choice real estate? But others saw things differently and, it turns out, somewhat more clearly. There was, noted one writer in the San Francisco *Call*, something deeply inhospitable about the outside lands. "The surroundings are enough to make one die of lonesomeness," he wrote in 1897. "There is no more desolate spot on earth than the heart of this region. Sand mountain after sand mountain rise on all sides and stretch away into the distance until they melt in a soft haze of pearly gray."

But it was the weather that disturbed the writer most. "Fogs come up from the sea in remarkably short order and then all landmarks instantly disappear. The feeling when surrounded by the intangi-

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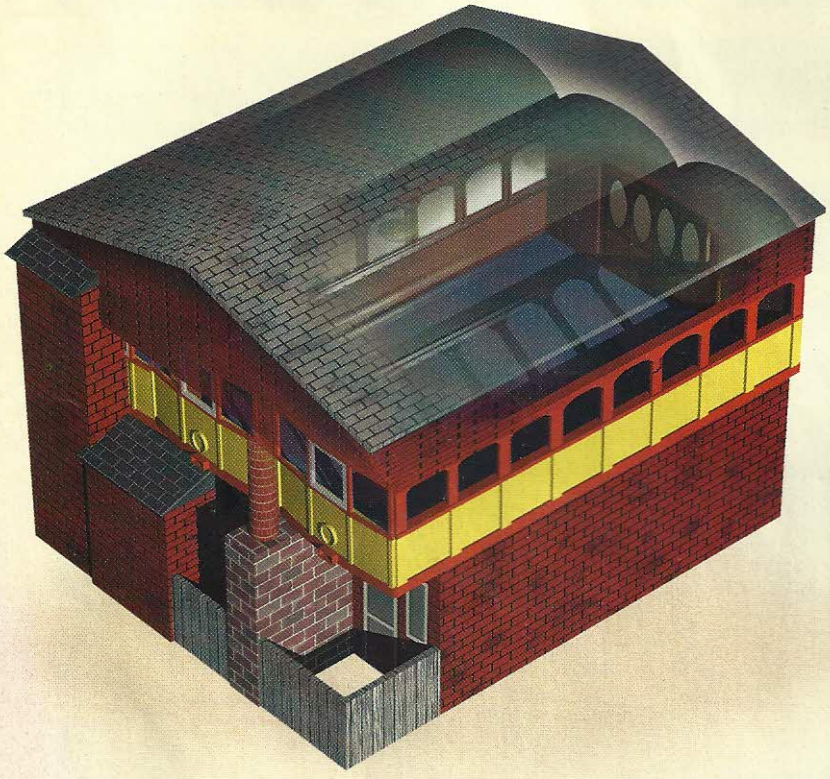
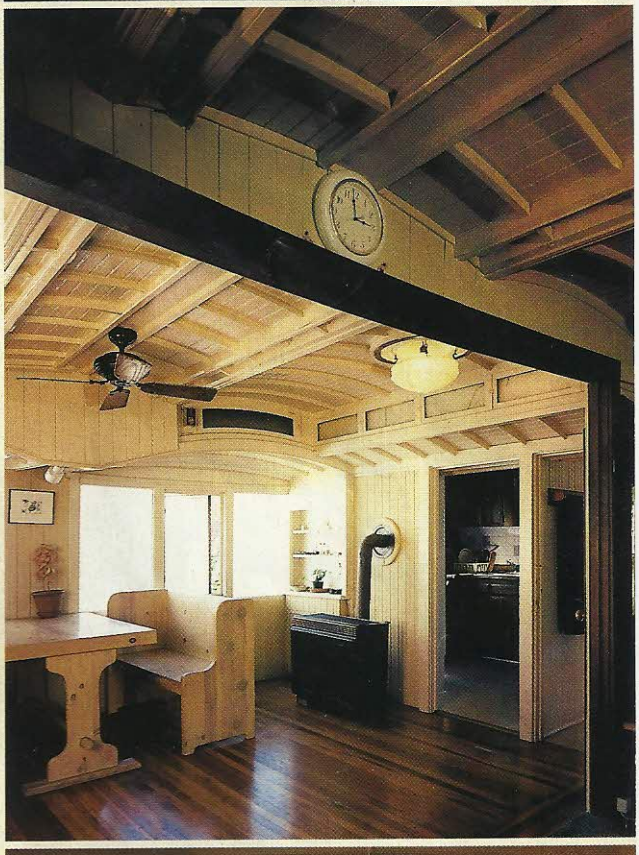
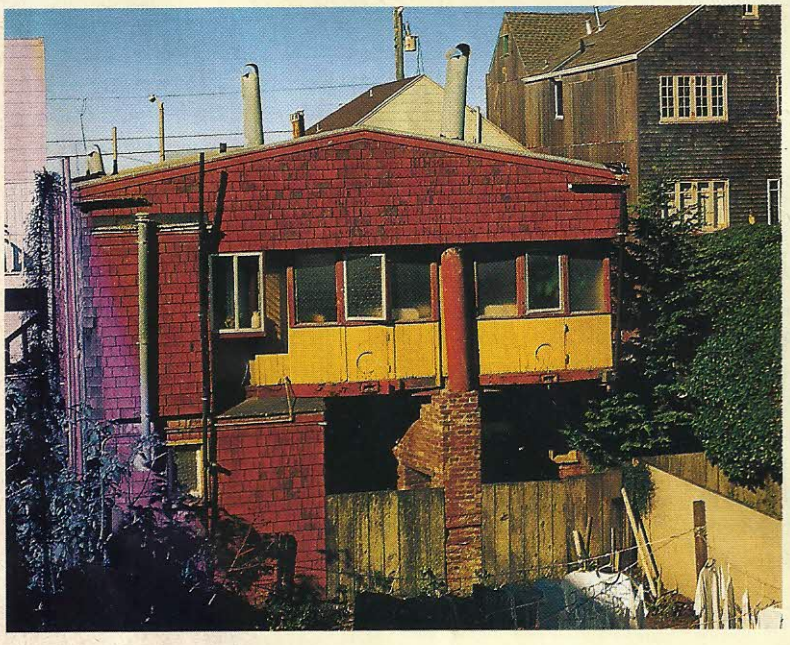
Trolley car transformation

The illustration below of Scott Anderson's house shows how a horse-drawn car and two matching cable cars were attached and made into the second story. The only exterior evidence of the origins of the house is visible from the back, as seen in the illustration and the photo below it. Inside the house, though, the streetcar interiors are evident and well preserved. From the top: the two joined cable cars form a living room at one end and, center photo, a dining area at the other; the horse-drawn car contains a kitchen (visible in the center photo), a bathroom, and a bedroom, bottom.







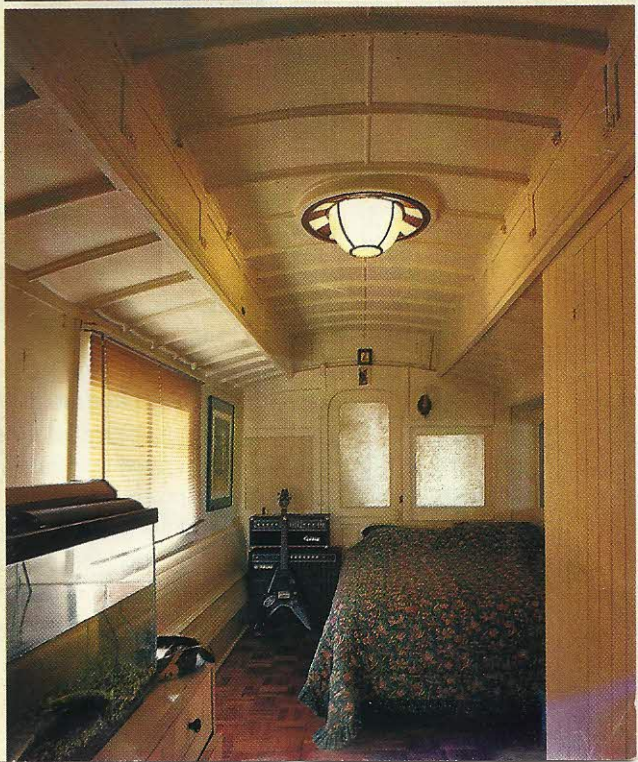


ILLUSTRATION: DOUG STERN; PHOTOS: BOB SWANSON

ble vapor is a most unpleasant one and really is like being contained in a dungeon," he wrote.

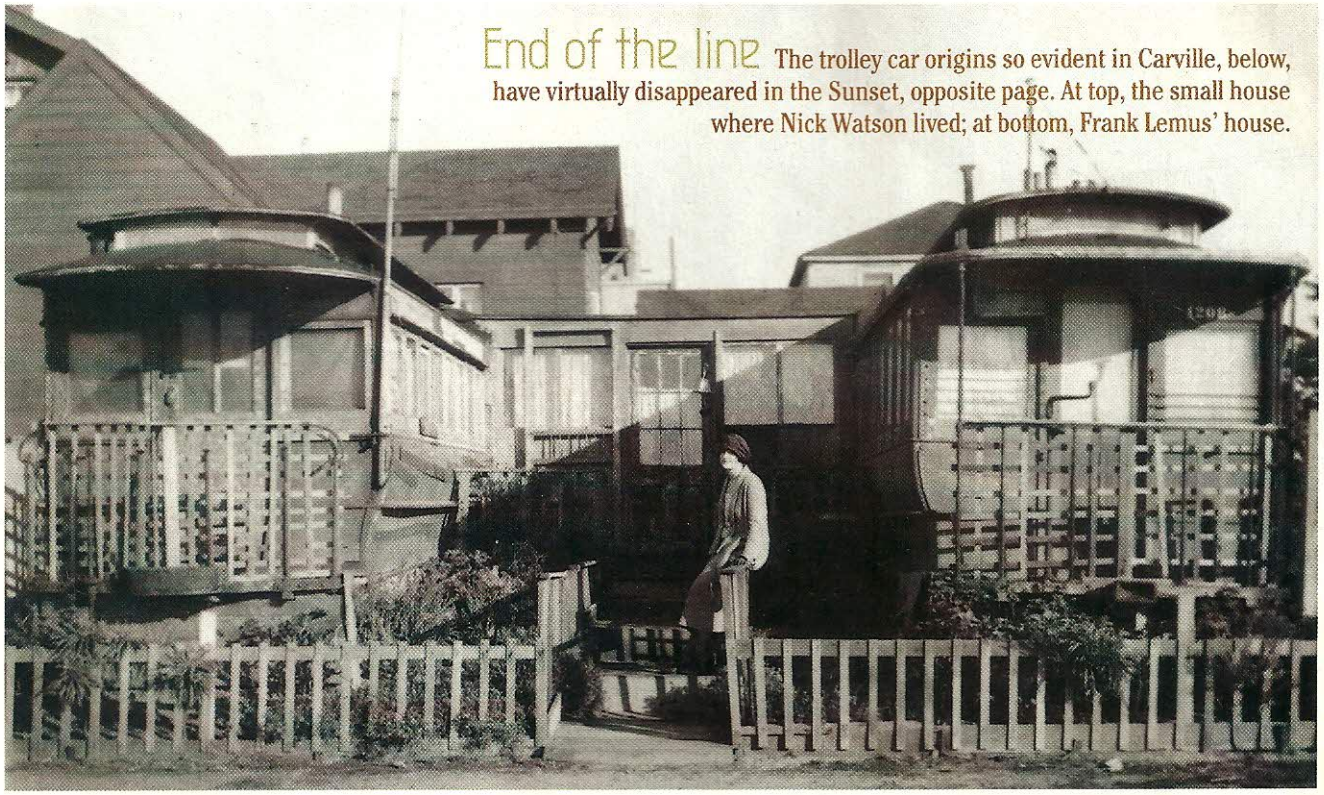
Even today, the area is virtually treeless, frigid and surprisingly desolate despite the tidy rows of houses and a lively, multiethnic population. The commercial strips are crammed with Asian groceries offering live frogs, Vietnamese soup restaurants, and counterculture coffeehouses. But step off the bustling main thoroughfares and the Sunset can feel as lonely and melancholy as it did a century ago. In the heart of summer, when the rest of San Francisco and California bask in sunshine, the Sunset remains wintry. As the legendary San Francisco newspaper columnist Herb Caen once wrote of the city's weather, "Not a sky in the cloud." Nowhere else in the city is that more true, more often, than in the Sunset, which is one reason the property values remain relatively low and the population solidly middle class.

The first settlers of the windy dunes were hardly plutocrats. In 1895, a railway company started selling off old horse-drawn trolleys–$20 with seats, $10 without–that had been made obsolete by electric cars. By the end of the year, four had been dragged out to the dunes, one to be used as a café, the other three as rental cottages. Probably the first Carville resident was a Civil War veteran who built a hut from driftwood and eventually added three streetcar annexes, one of which he used as a refreshment stand. He decorated his eccentric compound with washed-up coconut shells and debris from shipwrecks, and his thrifty use of the streetcars quickly inspired imitators. Newcomers to the area spliced cars together, removing walls and tarpapering over the connections, to make larger dwellings. Some arranged cars in U-shaped formations to create sheltered central courtyards. Cars were frequently elevated on stilts to keep them above the drifting sands and give the occupants a view of the sea; others were simply stacked, one on top of the other. People set up weekend cottages, year-round homes, and clubhouses in streetcars. Sutro happily rented out plots, though it was only after his death in 1898 that chunks of his land started going up for sale.

By 1901, according to a story by Leslie E. Gilliams in the *Strand,* a British magazine of the era, more than 50 families were living in streetcar houses. "The houses are mostly flat, a Cartown [*sic*] 'skyscraper' being only two stories high," Gilliams wrote.

Visitors from about the turn of the century wrote paeans to Carville's charm. Stories about "the Odd City on Ocean Beach" appeared in San Francisco's newspapers, as well as in national publications like *Scientific American* and *Country Life in America.* It was, by all accounts, a singularly eccentric and picturesque place. There was a clubhouse for a group known as the Fuzzy Bunch–longhaired intellectuals including the writer Jack London. An organization of women who liked to bicycle also kept a celebrated streetcar clubhouse in Carville. On weekends, reported the San Francisco *Chronicle*, they swam in the ocean, "choosing a moment when the beach is deserted," and invited the likes of writer Ambrose Bierce to play whist and eat roast turkey at their enormous dining table. Their curtained car was, noted the *Chronicle* reporter, "admirably adapted for entertaining."

After the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, refugees made permanent homes in the clubhouses and weekend cottages. By 1908, Carville had a population of 2,000, as well as "its own stores, restaurants, churches, hotels, its artistic settlement, its colony of prominent musicians from the city, and, best of all, its quaint homes, real yet of almost nominal cost," wrote Gibbs Adams in the *Overland Monthly,* a literary magazine of the period. "This is the paradise of the clerk and small business man,



End of the line The trolley car origins so evident in Carville, below, have virtually disappeared in the Sunset, opposite page. At top, the small house where Nick Watson lived; at bottom, Frank Lemus' house.

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who can daily enjoy a morning plunge in the invigorating breakers, yet whirl to work in town by electric car in an hour or less."

But the popularity of Carville inevitably changed it. Well after the earthquake, a real-estate advertisement claimed, "thousands flocked out to the beach to discover Carville and the wonderfully exhilarating effect of the bracing ocean breezes. The climate of the beach put vim and life and activity into their limbs, rich blood into their bodies and then was the time that Carville became known to city folks as an ideal place for REAL HOMES."

Cottages and more ostentatious houses were built among the streetcars, and some cars were enlarged until they became unrecognizable. In 1913, an organization of neighborhood boosters got permission to destroy 30 decrepit cars and watched them go up in flames. "May San Franciscans never again be reduced to living under such miserable conditions," pronounced Mayor "Sunny Jim" Rolph.

"Real homes" started going up rapidly in the 1920s and '30s–redwood-frame structures with slightly varying facades tacked on. The area became known as the Sunset, named after a housing development there. Roads were built through the dunes, where 25- by 100-foot lots were created. Each lot had its patch of front yard, which some residents paved and painted green or covered with white stones. The streetcars that remained after 1913 gradually receded into the landscape, remodeled and so completely ignored that people living in them often didn't know their houses had once been streetcars. Some probably still don't.

In 1961, Frank Lemus bought an idiosyncratic dwelling with some very weird ceilings. One morning a decade later he looked out his window to see people gazing up at his house. A newspaper story had cited it as having been built from streetcars. In fact, Lemus' house had been one of Carville's most famous structures, inhabited for decades by a popular city official. This was the first time that Lemus, who still lives in the house, had ever heard such a thing.

Nick Watson had a similar experience when an elderly man stopped and asked if he knew that the quirky shoebox of a house he rented had once been a streetcar. Watson mentioned it to his landlord, who said, come to think of it, a contractor working on the house had once found wheels under the floorboards.

This anecdote is a fairly accurate indication of the state of historical consciousness in the Sunset today. In the early 1980s, a Sunset woman named Jane Cryan became fascinated with the quaint and minuscule cottage she rented and learned it was one of the shacks built by the government to house refugees of the 1906 earthquake. Faced with its possible demolition by her landlord, she founded a society for the preservation of earthquake shacks and has managed to save the little house she was living in. But the vast majority of earthquake shacks have disappeared, some since Cryan's organization was founded, despite her heroic efforts. Today only 19 tiny earthquake shacks remain–eight in the Sunset. The streetcar houses have found no such last-minute savior: None has landmark status, and most people who live in the Sunset aren't even aware that they exist, or ever did.

IN 1997, FOUR YEARS after Anderson bought his place, the neighbors to the north proposed a three-story addition to their building, which would have put Anderson's property in a deep, shadowy canyon and changed the building's wonderful, homey feeling. "The first night I slept here," says Pat Halloran, an artist who has rented part of the house from Anderson for four years, "it was kind of hard–I thought the place was going to move. But in the winters, especially here at Ocean Beach, the wind really blasts the storms in, and when you're sitting in this little house, it's kind of like being in a boat. It's incredibly cozy." Moreover, says Anderson, neighbors would lose their view of the back of his house, which still looks like a streetcar.

He decided to fight and started researching the history of his property. The bedroom, he learned, had once been a horse-drawn car, and the living room was built from two cable cars that had run on a line abandoned after the earthquake. In 1908, the original streetcar house was raised on a frame; sometime later, though it's not clear when, an apartment was built underneath. It seems likely that Anderson's is by far the best preserved of the remaining streetcar houses. "I knew it was rare," he says. "But I didn't know how rare. If indeed mine is the very last one, it's a resource that almost slipped away without anyone knowing it existed. Even as its buyer I wasn't given any indication that it was a one-of-a-kind thing. Old warehouses get more attention than the buildings out here. It was lucky I got the place and enjoy it in that form, or the history would just be gone."

He won an unexpected victory with the planning commission, and his neighbors have, for the moment, abandoned plans to expand. It's good for Anderson and good in a small way for the Sunset that a piece of its obscure and quirky history has been recognized and preserved. Although it does seem like very little, very late. P

BOB SWANSON (2)