

How the Mission District went Latin

And other stories of the evolving city

RUTH RAE, born around 1922, moved to San Francisco as a child with her parents. Her grandparents and uncles, including Seniorino Hernandez, arrived several years earlier. The family owned many grocery stores and other food businesses South of Market and in the Mission District, the longest-lasting of them La Cabana Bakery, 2919-16th St., which opened in 1949 as the La Cabana Tamale and Tortilla Factory and closed in 2006. Rael, now 90, told *The Extra* when we reached her by phone in early April that she wasn't sure when she stopped working there.

Following are excerpts from an interview with Rael and Hernandez conducted by Oral History staffer Isabel Maldonado April 10, 1978.

When did your family come to San Francisco?

Ruth Rael: My dad moved from Guadalajara to Bakersfield and then [we moved] to San Francisco in 1927, following his brothers. He and my uncles started by working at Western Sugar Refinery at the end of 23rd Street out by the Bay and were still working there when they decided to go into business. At the time we lived on 23rd and Tennessee on the other side of Potrero Hill in an area they call Dogpatch now. I remember walking to a really pretty little wooden school one block up from Third Street and seeing truck farms and cows grazing on the hill. There was no freeway then, only the old Bayshore Highway, and empty lots and open space. We were very poor then, but I didn't realize it and everyone else was, too.

What were your first impressions of the city?

Seniorino Hernandez: When I came in 1925, it was beautiful, different all together than now — Twin Peaks had old ranches, small gold ranches on top of the hills. We all lived around Bayshore because of the transportation — you're gonna live where you work. The shifts at the sugar refinery were 8 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon, 4 to 12 at night, then 12 to 8 in the morning. You had to walk to work because of the odd hours and there probably wasn't any transportation anyway. Then, when we quit the refinery and opened our first store, we moved.

What do you remember about the early stores and South of Market?

Ruth Rael: My father and uncles opened a series of grocery stores. My father's first one was on 11th and Kissling [between Howard and Folsom]. His brothers helped him a lot because he wanted his own business — he just put in shelves, opened up a store, without ever having had one. It was the Depression and he had a family to support. We sold salami, French bread, cans or olives, regular red Italian wine. It was the Prohibition and a lot of Italians made wine and the Germans made beer. My daddy used to make beer, too, and then we learned how to make wine, which we did every year. That was so much fun. I used to like to cap the bottles with the little machine.

Seniorino Hernandez: The grapes



PHOTO BY BILL CARLSON, 1978

Ruth Rael tends the store at La Cabana Bakery, the last of the local food businesses in the Mission owned by her family.

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were brought in from the valley and you could buy them anytime, right here in San Francisco. We worked hard at the store — used to start at 5 a.m. and quit around 11 p.m. At 5, we'd pick up the French bread in a big old sack [from the bakery] and then go out to deliver milk and bread. We'd put the milk bottles next to the door and just hang the bread on a nail outside the door. Bread on a nail and no one would steal it — isn't that amazing? I can't imagine leaving a crumb outside now.

Ruth Rael: We moved from Dogpatch to 10th and Bryant when I was 6 years old. I remember a brewery nearby and a bar and lots of small factories and horse stables. I liked it — it was a mixed neighborhood with Greeks, Mexicans, Spanish, Italians. We went to Franklin School on Eighth and Bryant. It's not there anymore, but our principal was Bessie Carmichael and later they named a school after her. I remember we played in the street — right in the street. We'd pick up hoops from the brewers and roll them out in front of cars. Oh, we were terrible, but we never got in trouble for it.

Seniorino Hernandez: We had a lot of stores: 11th and Kissling, Ninth and Harrison, Natoma between Sixth and Seventh, and one on 24th Street that Ruth's father gave up after only a year. I'll bet there weren't enough Latins there then. And there was a store on Third between Harrison and Bryant,

one on Shotwell between 14th and 15th, around 1930 or '31, and the tortilla factory on 20th and Shotwell that my mother started, and another one in the Fillmore, which was an up-and-coming neighborhood then.

The first concentration of Latin people was South of Market, around Third Street, in the early '20s. Later, they moved to Sutter and Fillmore, and when the colored people started moving into the Fillmore during World War II, the Latins settled around Second and Fourth. Little by little, they started moving south, to around Ninth, then 16th, then 24th streets.

San Francisco was really beautiful then because it was safe. I mean, you could go anyplace in the city, 2 or 3 in the morning, nothing to it. No danger of anything.

Ruth Rael: We didn't lock our front door. When we were kids, we didn't know what a front door key was. We'd just come home, open the door and walk in. The Mission was very nice with nice department stores like Hale Brothers, and then we had the Mission Sweater Shop where we bought our wool sweaters and skirts, and nice theaters — the New Mission and El Capitan. They had good feature films and comics and newsreels and vaudeville with a big orchestra. Sometimes they played the organ and we'd sing along.

What else did you do for fun?

Ruth Rael: We used to take our lunch and take a streetcar to Golden Gate Park or to Fleishacker Pool, the salt-water pool down by the ocean at the end of the park. To get there you'd go through blocks and blocks of sand dunes — there weren't any houses then.

When I was big enough, I used to go swimming there every day it was open. Sometimes it was so cold we'd get in the water and just stick our nose [out]. After we got dressed, we'd go out to the beach to eat our sandwiches and then take the streetcar back. There also was what we called the "Nickel Pool" over on Valencia and 17th. To this day I don't know what its real name was. It was indoors and for a nickel they'd rent you a towel and a bathing suit.

Seniorino Hernandez: We'd go to parties on the weekend, sometimes up to six parties on Friday and Saturday nights. We'd spend an hour at one, two hours at another, whichever was best. You don't hear about that anymore. Now you spend all your time watching television and ruining your eyesight. In the daytime, you could go out of your house with a dollar in your pocket — I don't mean \$15 or \$20 but \$1 — and that would pay for 5¢ carfare, 10¢ for the pictures, 35¢ for a nice meal in a restaurant, and you'd still come home with money left over.

Ruth Rael: We also used to go to Playland at the Beach — it was beautiful on a Sunday night.

Seniorino Hernandez: And you'd take the streetcars everywhere. The streetcar used to come right to the corner of 10th and Bryant where we lived. It turned right there on the corner — that was as far as it went. It was a beautiful neighborhood then. Beautiful. ■

This is the fourth of a series of excerpts, edited by Marjorie Beggs, from the Neighborhood Oral History Project interviews that Study Center conducted in 1977-78 under a federal CETA contract.