

"SUNSHINE CORNER": ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE DOMESTIC REFORM MOVEMENT IN WEST OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

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ABSTRACT

Domestic reformers described West Oakland as a "district of great ugliness," "a law-abiding workingman's district settled chiefly by hard-working foreigners, with a sprinkling of Americans." From the mid-1880s, local women's clubs worked in West Oakland founding a community center that included a kitchen garden, kindergarten, boys' club, mothers' club, Salvage Bureau (or household goods recycling center), and a School of Domestic Science. This community center was surrounded by 39 blocks that will be developed for reconstruction of the earthquake-damaged Cypress Freeway. The archaeological research design for this project addresses a variety of issues that are relevant to this 19th- and early 20th-century working-class neighborhood, including Victorian ideology that was supplemented by the progressive ideas and social activism of the domestic reform movements. While the movements' goals and activities in West Oakland are well documented, only archaeology can provide indications of its success in translating progressive, modern values to the area's culturally diverse families.

In his novel *Valley of the Moon* (1913), Jack London sited his figurative struggle between Capital and Labor in West Oakland—a very logical choice, as the streets and railyards of this city had seen many actual battles. From the front window of his family's home on Pine Street, Jack had a good view of the comings and goings at the Southern Pacific Railyards.

It is from this cottage that Saxon, London's heroine, witnessed a brutal confrontation between strikers and Pinkertons. The violence of the event caused the young woman to think deeply about the modern, urban way of life and to conclude that, in London's words, "jobs are bones" (1913:189) over which poor men fight; and that "the man-world was made by men, and a rotten job it was" (1913:254). "Her eyes showed her only the smudge of San Francisco, the smudge of Oakland, where men were breaking heads and killing one another, where babies were dying, born and unborn, and where women were weeping with bruised breasts" (1913:256). Even the clams that people gathered from the nearby marsh caused typhoid fever, "still another mark against Oakland, she reflected—Oakland, the man-trap, that poisoned those it did not starve" (London 1913:286).

So, in the midst of her despair, Saxon meets a boy—who surely represents Jack London himself—who casually speaks the words that would change her life: "Oakland," he says, "is just a place to start from" (London 1913:267). Then Saxon begins her journey to the rural Valley of the Moon, a natural world where men don't fight over bones.

London's early Socialist juxtaposition of labor and capital changed to an artist's conception of the healthy, natural world opposed to the brutal, artificial, man-world that includes both labor and capital and by which all human relationships are tainted. His characters' flight from Oakland and its problems

to the countryside mirrored London's own journey: "When the time comes," he wrote, "I'm going to stay right on my ranch at Glen Ellen and let the revolution go to blazes" (Stasz 1988:787).

Although Jack London articulated many of the problems of West Oakland, his solution was useless for people who couldn't simply pack up and leave for the rural north. Groups of local women were also aware of the suffering, but they sought a more practical solution. Parallel to and often intersecting with the labor movement, which worked to improve wages and working conditions, these domestic reformers strove to improve conditions in the home and community for women and children.

In contrast to the problem areas of larger cities, West Oakland was never considered a slum, for it lacked the packed tenements, and most working-class families achieved a modest and respectable livelihood from the railroad and local industries. In 1900 a woman correspondent to *Overland Monthly* wrote flatly, "It is an ugly locality, lined with small unattractive, crowded dwellings...a law-abiding workingman's district settled chiefly by hard-working foreigners, with a sprinkling of Americans" that reportedly housed 21 nationalities and 35 saloons (Carlin 1900b:247).

In West Oakland, domestic reformers sought as their subjects these immigrant and working-class housewives, who were said to be "ignorant of science and its immutable laws; all lack the knowledge which in any form 'transmutes existence into life'" (Carlin 1900a:426). The correspondent was appalled by the fact that all of some families' everyday activities—cooking, eating, sleeping, sex (she didn't actually mention this one), childbirth, illness, and death—took place in the same small domestic space. She interpreted the custom of using

front steps and sidewalks as social space as symptomatic of the "over-worked and ill-tempered" women who were "turning their backs on the dreariness within." The cooking and hygiene habits of immigrant women also alarmed West Oakland's domestic reformers. The immigrants' food, they wrote, "is selected without regard to its nourishing value. It is badly cooked, untidily served and often eaten irregularly."

Boys and young men were particularly at risk in West Oakland. The saloons and the corner grocery store that sold liquor illegally were described as the "storm centers of child-crime." According to the reformers, the lack of wholesome amusements, combined with the adventurous spirit of youth, often led to gangs—and to the police station. Now, this concern was not unfounded, for many turn-of-the-century accounts describe the sometimes brutal exploits of young West Oakland gang members. So it is not surprising that reformers first set out to civilize the boys before teaching the girls to cook.

Affectionately dubbed "Sunshine Corner" by reform advocates, the community center on Atlantic Street began as the West Oakland Free Kindergarten in 1886. By 1900 it had evolved into a community center administered by the New Century Club, which included sewing and cooking schools, a kitchen garden as well as a kindergarten, a boys' club, a household goods' recycling center, and a mothers' club. In the same group of buildings, the Oakland Club opened a School of Domestic Science, which offered courses in cooking, waitressing, and laundering.

The first home of the West Oakland Free Kindergarten was in a room formerly used as a saloon. With the resources of her family to support her and a few private subscriptions, Elizabeth Betts volunteered her teaching skills without pay. Thirty children came to the first class, where Miss Betts offered "simple lessons in the better way of living, by gently enforcing order and cleanliness, and training the hand to respond to the brain" (Oakland Club 1900:27).

As the West Oakland Free Kindergarten Association, the school expanded to model the system of industrial education developed by Pauline Shaw and adopted by the Boston School System (Oakland Club 1900:28). Soon the school moved to a larger building just up the block. The sewing school was the first addition to Sunshine Corner in its new location; at the first meeting, 40 girls between the ages of 8 and 13 enrolled. Volunteer "women of leisure"—their term, not our's—assisted the head teacher every Tuesday afternoon in instructing the girls in the "St. Paul system," which consisted of 9 levels of sewing skill. As a form of handwork, sewing was an integral part of the industrial curriculum for girls advocated by domestic reformers. Besides being a wholesome activity for the young, sewing was a marketable skill by which many local women, both married and single, supported themselves or brought in extra cash for their families. When a girl completed the 9 steps of the St. Paul system, she was allowed to join the Garment Class, which had an average enrollment of 50 students. The articles sewn by the girls were then sold back to them for 10 or 15 cents, "to make them feel they give an equivalent for what they receive."

When the former West Oakland Free Kindergarten Association regrouped as the New Century Club in 1900, Elizabeth Watt added a Kitchen Garden, or Little Housekeepers' Class, to the program. The Kitchen Garden borrowed the methods developed by the educational theorist Froebel, but replaced Froebel's blocks with miniature kitchen implements. The goal was to train young girls in modern household industry so that they could command higher wages as professional domestic workers; at the same time, it was a solution to "the servant problem" by enlarging the pool of competent maids (Hayden 1981:134-135).

The New Century Club Kitchen Garden and the kindergarten admitted children of all races and ethnic backgrounds. The most notable segregation was by gender. In the Kitchen Garden only girls were taught to be happy little housekeepers.

While subservience and obedience were taught to little girls, "who bore," according to the correspondent, "with indulgent patience the sounds of the Boys' Club below," their brothers learned the Arnoldian principles of self-government and were encouraged in what she described as their "wide-awake boy instinct to find out what is going on: the instinct that leads to the exploration of new territory and a share therein, by conquest, if necessary" (New Century Club 1901). After the boys had taken courses in "Scrub-ology" and "Soap-ology" at the backyard pump, they engaged in craft work: stamping leather, weaving rope mats, and making scrapbooks, or practiced military drills. The Boys' Club conducted meetings and held elections for officers of the club, in which some of the boys allegedly prepared for their future role as voters by stuffing the ballot box.

Housewives trying to stretch a dollar could buy a variety of used household goods through the Salvage Bureau at Sunshine Corner. The sales of the Salvage Bureau, in turn, provided the chief source of revenue for the New Century Club. Similar to the Salvation Army program, the Club offered a pick-up service for bags full of cast-off clothing (New Century Club 1902).

Both the New Century Club and the Oakland Club advertised cooking lessons. In the *Domestic Science Monthly*, the official organ of the Oakland Club, the benefits of the school were touted using various arguments for domestic reform. First, the school serviced middle-class women by providing trained domestic labor. Second, by attending a certified and "scientific" program, young women were promised a respectable and pseudo-professional status as domestic workers, which would, it was hoped, bring them higher wages. Finally, as in the Kitchen Garden and sewing programs, the manual aspects of housework and cooking were viewed as particularly appropriate for working-class and immigrant girls.

In a column on scientific cooking in the *Domestic Science Monthly*, Ellen Richards reiterated the connection between the state of the kitchen and the state of the nation, writing that: "The prosperity of a Nation depends upon the health and morals of a people, and the health and morals of a people depend mainly upon the food they eat and the homes they live in" (May 1900:47).

Hygiene and sanitation were important issues for domestic reformers. With the acceptance of germ theory in the 1880s and 1890s, middle-class Americans feared that the contamination and disease that was rife in poor communities would spread unabated to their neighborhoods (Seller 1978:309). Reflecting this fear, the New Century Club called for applying sanitary science beyond one's own household:

We must have a clean house, a clean street: we must go farther and have a clean neighborhood, and perfection demands a clean city and community. To secure health for ourselves we must secure it for those who lack our training or our standard. In one part of town a cesspool sends out disease germs; some neighbor's body is weak from poor food, and thus some plague finds a stronghold from which to hurl its forging battalion upon the community [1901:n.p.].

Sunshine Corner served the neighborhood until 1960, when it was demolished along with 12 surrounding city blocks for a massive new postal facility, called Project Gateway. An enterprising former race-car driver made quick work of the demolition by using a Sherman Tank that could level a residence in 10 minutes flat. "We're doing this area a favor," said the Postmaster General, though presumably not to the 1,000 displaced people who had once lived there.

More recently, on the 17th of October 1989 at four minutes past five, just as the San Francisco Giants and the Oakland A's were taking the field to play the fourth game of the World Series, a massive earthquake shook the neighborhood and destroyed a 1.5-mile section of freeway that funneled traffic through West Oakland to the San Francisco Bay Bridge. When the California Department of Transportation announced that it would rebuild the freeway, the neighborhood voiced their opposition and proposed an alternative that would avoid their area.

This new route cuts a swathe through former working-class neighborhoods where immigrants from diverse countries lived alongside Euro- and African-Americans. The route encounters the sites of dwellings (including one of Jack London's boyhood homes), boardinghouses, hotels, saloons, stores, churches, and brothels on more than 40 blocks that are highly sensitive for historic archaeological remains. The New Century Club was in the midst of this neighborhood and had, we feel, an influence on the families living there.

Between April and early December, we excavated portions of 83 parcels on 8 city blocks and found more than 550 wells, privies, and refuse pits dating to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and we dug more than 200 of them. And we expect to dig another 8 or so blocks this year. Literally hundreds of boxes of artifacts have to be cataloged and analyzed. Following the project research design, we organized a multidisciplinary force that includes archaeologists, historians, architectural historians, and folklorists to bring various approaches to issues such as domestic reform.

Previously, we have used the model of American Victorianism to examine the way in which people from traditional, pre-modern societies selectively adopted the values and prac-

tices of mid-19th-century America that had emerged from the country's system of industrial capitalism. By the end of the century, other influences had come to the fore, notably progressivism, of which the women's domestic reform movement was an important element. We take a highly contextual approach focusing on the influence of turn-of-the-century progressive institutions and values on the continuing process of modernization. However, the two movements were dissimilar in one important way: While Victorians tried to absorb and transform immigrants and the working class, the domestic reform movement was more accepting of diversity of traditional cultural practices to the degree that they did not conflict with the basic values of the movement.

Our co-researchers, Paul Groth and Marta Gutman, are examining the use of public space in our study area. This theme has been looked at by Suzanne Spencer-Wood, who has written extensively on how women reformers influenced public space in Boston. Suzanne has also identified certain highly distinctive artifacts used in schools run by proponents of Froebel's educational methods. For the most part, however, our's are domestic sites that contain the remains of everyday activities. How can they speak to us of progressivism and domestic reform?

To answer this question, we have to consider the basic goals of the domestic reform movement—which were to promote scientific housekeeping and sanitation—and to figure out how these might show themselves in the archaeological record of working-class households. Now, it's difficult to make this kind of statement without sounding glib, shallow, and historically naive. So I ask you to bear with me as I hit the high points without qualifying every statement to death.

So, how would the influence of domestic reform on sanitation be represented in the ground? First, through comparing the presence of sewer hook-ups and septic tanks to that of out-houses. Archaeology shows that practices varied widely from household to household. And this variation does not relate solely to wealth. The occurrence of ad hoc, backyard refuse pits also varies from parcel to parcel. These excavations are often little more than shallow scoops that were filled in a single disposal episode. Some parcels have many, others have few or none. What does this mean? On the scale of the individual household member, personal hygiene would be shown by the relative occurrence of items such as toothbrushes, combs (including lice combs), and hygiene product containers.

Scientific housekeeping emphasized precision, efficiency, and nutrition. While "old-fashioned" practices were unconcerned with the exact quantities of ingredients, the little housekeepers of Sunshine Corners were taught to weigh and time their recipes. Consequently, measuring devices, such as graduated cups and spoons, timers, and oven thermometers would have been essential in a well-run kitchen. Similarly, the reformers touted the health benefits of baking over frying in oil and encouraged the use of such esoterica as chafing dishes to introduce variety into meals. The archaeological reflections of these practices are self-evident.

Using the contextual approach allows us to examine issues, such as domestic reform, from a variety of perspectives and scales. We feel neither constrained to stay exclusively with material culture that has dirt on it nor, in Bob Schuyler's classic phrase, to "kiss the butts of the historians" by sticking to narrow historical issues. Our goal is, I suppose, a sort of cross-disciplinary study that is accessible to humanistic scholars in History—with a capital H—and geography, as well as our traditional audience in anthropology. Whether we will

succeed or get shot down in flames over professional meetings like this one—well, as the anchor on Channel 2 News once told me, "Only time will tell."

Note

This paper was also presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology in Washington, D.C., 5 January, 1995.

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