City’s problem: nowhere to grow

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City's problem: nowhere to grow

Nearly surrounded by water, S.F. lost population as suburbs boomed

By Christine Delsol, *San Francisco Examiner*
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When California became a state, its focus was almost exclusively on the Gold Country and the Bay Area, and San Francisco was the only city. At the turn of the century, The City's 343,000 citizens still looked upon Los Angeles, only then reaching the 100,000 mark, as a village.

By 1950, when San Francisco had 775,357 people, the surrounding population had grown to about 2 million. In the decades since, San Francisco's population has dropped while the rest of the Bay Area keeps growing — to the point where one of its "suburbs" is now bigger than The City. San Jose is now larger than San Francisco ever was.

Many of the forces that led to the suburban flight were the same ones that gripped most U.S. cities: congestion, high land values and, most important, the auto. But unique forces were at work here, too, the most obvious being geography. Surrounded on three sides by water, The City has nowhere to sprawl.

The shift of population, if not influence, was set in motion many years before San Francisco's numbers began to decline.

Some suburban seeds were planted, literally, by gold seekers who did not strike it rich and turned to farming and commerce. San Jose added the prune to its pear and tomato crops in 1856. Agoston

Haraszthy introduced wine grapes to Sonoma County the same year Charles Krug started Napa Valley's wine industry. Contra Costa grew grain, grapes and walnuts. These farms and accompanying flour mills, breweries and fruit processing plants spawned new towns like St. Helena, Sebastopol, Healdsburg, Rio Vista and Fairfield.

The bay that separated San Francisco from its neighbors soon became its first commute corridor as abandoned vessels that had brought the 49ers were resurrected as ferries. Regular service began in 1850 between the boom city and Oakland; soon an extensive fleet served about 30 Alameda and Marin destinations.

The earthquake's role

At the turn of the century, more than half the state lived within reach of the Bay's shores. The 1906 earthquake and fire, which left more than half of San Francisco homeless, sparked an exodus to surrounding communities. Southern Pacific estimated it carried 225,000 people out of The City the day following the quake. Thousands more fled on foot down the Peninsula or by boat to Alameda or Marin. Many decided to stay on what they thought was safer ground.

San Francisco quickly, if not miraculously, rebuilt and even grew after the earthquake, tallying 416,912 people in 1910, a 22 percent gain since the Big One. But the rest of the Bay Area had nearly doubled, to 119,782. The Santa Fe put its western terminal in Richmond and Standard Oil opened one of the world's largest refineries there, while Shell built in Martinez and U.S. Steel in Pittsburg.

By then, the automobile ruled; virtually every home built after World War I included a garage. Ford and General Motors added to the East Bay's industry with plants in Richmond and Oakland.

New highway construction was most active first in San Mateo County, never well served by streetcars and ferries, with Skyline Boulevard, Highway 1 and El Camino Real. The first bridge across the Bay, the railroad Dumbarton, had connected Newark to Redwood City in 1910; a second bridge for cars came in 1927.

Commuters flock to bridge

As soon as the Bay Bridge opened in November 1936, traffic was so heavy that the 65-cent toll was more than ample to make it self-supporting. Accordingly, the toll was reduced to 50 and then 25 cents. A year later, the Broadway (Caldecott) Tunnel opened, bringing new homes to the outer reaches of the East Bay.

The Golden Gate Bridge had been opposed by those reluctant to spoil The City's picturesque approach and by others who doubted a second bridge could lure enough traffic to pay for itself. But Marin, Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino and Del Norte counties, determined that the planned U.S. 101 would not break at the Golden Gate, joined San Francisco to form the Golden Gate Bridge and Highway District. In the year after opening in 1937, the bridge averaged more than 9,000 cars daily, and he toll was reduced from 50 cents to 25.

In the decade that brought two colossal bridges and more new roads, San Francisco gained just 142 residents, while other Bay Area counties gained thousands. Most newcomers treated The City as a reception center, settling in the suburbs.

The City had bought the site of today's San Francisco International Airport in 1927. But not until Treasure Island, whose 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition buildings housed SFO's predecessor, was taken over by the Navy as World War II heated up did expansion of the former Mills Field get under way, bringing more jobs and residents to the Peninsula.

"World War II had as great an impact on the city's economy as any event since the Gold Rush," historian Oscar Lewis wrote. The years from 1941 to 1945 brought unprecedented growth. Factories increased by one-third, the number of industrial workers more than doubled, and servicemen and women streamed through. The influx was more than the already crowded city could contain.

From the attack on Pearl Harbor to Japan's surrender, more than 1.6 million military personnel passed through the Golden Gate on their way to Pacific fronts — not just at San Francisco but Treasure Island, Angel Island, the Oakland Army Base, Camp Stoneman near Antioch, and at Richmond, Sausalito, Stockton and Vallejo. The greatest volume of shipbuilding took place at Kaiser's new yard in Richmond, where the population exploded from 24,000 to 100,000 in three years and Bechtel's in Sausalito, a sleepy village suddenly inundated with nearly 90,000 workers.

The auto's impact, limited by the Depression and the war, came into full bloom after the fighting stopped. Workers recruited for the war effort were content to stay, and veterans returned, settling throughout the region and traveling long distances to work. As postwar development spread along major transportation corridors, which after 1972 would include BART, small towns became cities within a few years.

"Little boxes" on Peninsula

On the Peninsula, contractors like Henry Doelger built endless rows of "little boxes," while SFO's expansion stimulated growth along the new Bayshore Freeway. In 1957, nine subdivisions merged into the new city of Pacifica, and in 1961, Foster City was created on reclaimed tidelands east of San Mateo. The county's population grew fivefold between 1940 and 1970. Santa Clara County's orchards were mowed down for housing tracts, and construction became a major industry; the residential developments of Campbell, Saratoga, Los Altos and Milpitas incorporated, and the population doubled in a decade.

In Marin, development along the Sausalito-to-San Rafael corridor quadrupled the population between 1940 and 1970. The wine country, further north, had been among the first areas to recover from the Depression when Prohibition was repealed in 1933, and after World War II it flourished. Sonoma County's population tripled, with growth concentrated along U.S. 101.

Contra Costa County's 1980 population was six times what it had been in 1940, growing mostly along Highway 24 and Interstate 80. The 1950s effectively ended commercial agriculture in San Leandro and Hayward. Fremont's incorporation in 1956 created a city from five older agricultural communities and its population doubled in the next decade. San Lorenzo Village, begun in 1944 south of San Leandro, was a forerunner of scores of new planned communities of virtually identical houses. Agriculture also gave way to heavy industry, with General Motors moving to Fremont and Ford to Milpitas.

San Francisco's boundaries have not changed in more than a century. Its less than 45 square miles of land makes it the country's most compact city and the most densely populated in California. In the 1960 census, it had an average of 15,553 people per square mile, compared with 6,935 in Oakland, 5,451 in Los Angeles and 2,979 in San Diego.

The City's transition to peacetime was difficult. Even the Richmond, Sunset and Twin Peaks areas were full by 1940, leaving nowhere to expand for the wartime glut. There were housing shortages, traffic congestion, overcrowding and large run-down areas.

The region's minimal black population had increased exponentially with wartime recruitment from the South, and as war-swollen industries cut back, blacks were the first fired, devastating

neighborhoods like the Western Addition where they had settled. Soaring land values in remaining desirable areas sent middle-income families in search of suburban dream homes.

Federal and state subsidies abetted suburban development. Low-interest mortgages were far easier to get for new suburban tract homes than for older housing in racially mixed urban neighborhoods. And government poured money into highway construction. In 1957, state highway engineers reported that they had built 200 miles of freeways in the Bay Area since World War II; by 1980 freeways circled the Bay.

Dawn of the age of the mall

This was also the dawn of the suburban mall, with vast parking lots covering far more ground than the stores. Ironically, the first mall was Stonestown in The City. It was soon followed by Hillsdale, Stanford, Sun Valley and dozens of others, which became economic and social centers and the downfall of many old downtown shopping districts.

Professional offices and even headquarters followed retail centers to the suburbs, especially to the Peninsula and East Bay. Even in the 1950s, the high percentage of suburban residents who worked near their homes instead of commuting to San Francisco startled planners.

The massive freeway construction that made suburban life and commuting easier degraded life in San Francisco. After the Embarcadero Freeway created an ugly barrier between the central waterfront and the rest of The City, supervisors rejected further freeway plans in the affluent northern and western areas. Commuters accustomed to easy freeway access now found The City's congested surface routes even more aggravating, but San Francisco preferred that to the alternative.

The Bay Area as a whole added a million residents in the 1950s, primarily in southern Alameda, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. Between 1960 and 1970, the Bay Area grew by another million, all while San Francisco lost 100,000 people.

The most spectacular growth was in Silicon Valley, roughly from Belmont to San Jose, which far outstripped the economic success of the East Bay's older industrial center.

Frederick Terman, "godfather of Silicon Valley," began teaching electrical engineering at Stanford in 1925. Unhappy that his best graduates had to go to the Atlantic Coast for electronics jobs, he persuaded former students William Hewlett and David Packard to start Hewlett-Packard Co. in a Palo Alto garage. After leading a government research project during World War II, he used his influence to attract federal funds to Stanford and neighboring firms. Lockheed and Westinghouse located huge defense plants there, funneling millions of dollars in lucrative federal contracts into the region (defense also supported UC's Lawrence Berkeley and Livermore labs in the East Bay). IBM and General Electric also established major research plants there after the war.

Terman also promoted leasing of some of the university's vast lands to industrial firms. In 1951, Stanford opened about 700 acres for development and Hewlett-Packard was among the earliest tenants. While earlier development needed to be close to markets, resources and transportation, electronics companies were attracted in droves by the proximity of big brains and technical skill. By the late 1970s, the valley had more than 50 private industrial parks.

In 1956 another Stanford professor, William Shockley, was instrumental in developing the transistor. Engineers and scientists from his firm left to form Fairchild Semiconductor, which in turn had spun off at least 40 other firms by 1980, when Silicon Valley accounted for nearly 70 percent of the dollar

value of durable goods produced in the entire nine-county region. This became the model for Silicon Valley development.

In contrast to population trends, jobs in San Francisco increased over those three decades, although its share of total jobs shrunk. The City recognized early on that it would never again dominate through sheer numbers; a Postwar Planning Committee appointed in 1945 concluded it would be better to limit The City's population to obtain "a larger proportion of permanent residents, actively identified with the city's true functions. ... The pursuit of numbers alone may lead to serious problems of unemployment and relief."

The City's postwar goal, then, was to improve quality of life. Its role would be not as the Bay Area's population center but its business (with an eye to the Pacific Rim), cultural and entertainment center. Funds were steered into high-rise and hotel development, museums and other cultural facilities. The City began actively cultivating its reputation as "America's favorite city" to spur tourism. Redevelopment, a revolt against sprawl, and renewed popularity of urban life sparked an increase in population after its 1980 trough; the 1990 census stood at 723,959.

Just as San Francisco will always be the historic heart of the Bay Area, so will it be limited forever by its geography. Already this is a unique metropolis without a city where the bulk of the population is concentrated. The Association of Bay Area Governments predicts San Francisco, Oakland and San Jose together will capture less than 13 percent of the region's population growth through 2015, while Solano, Contra Costa and Sonoma counties will see the highest rates of growth.

The very concepts of "city" and "suburb," already fuzzy here, are destined to become even more so.

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