GOLDEN GATE PARK IN THE GILDED AGE

The Society of California Pioneers Museum and Library
This exhibition of rarely-seen photographs, gleaned from family albums and nineteenth-century studio catalogues in our collection, is our contribution to the celebration of Golden Gate Park’s sesquicentennial.
In 1867, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors drafted Order 800, an outline for the purchase and development of the westernmost expanse of land dismissed as “the outside lands” or “the great sand dunes” on early maps. Their plan included a beachfront promenade and a grand public park similar to those in New York, London, and Paris.
Carriages at The Golden Gate Park Racetrack
Carleton Watkins, 1888
Hansom cabs and horse-drawn buggies, top hats and walking sticks, parasols, and well-dressed children appear often in the photographs selected for this exhibition. We begin with this early Watkins work because it features all of these emblems of The Gilded Age. It also establishes themes repeated throughout the exhibition: status-conscious San Franciscans who understood that it was the park where one could see and be seen, as well as once-popular attractions that no longer exist.
The Carousel at The Quarters for Children
photographer unknown, circa 1890
Gathering Around the Junipero Serra Statue
photographer and date unknown
Golden Gate Park played a significant role in the lives of San Franciscans during the Gilded Age. The dedication of every monument or new attraction became a citywide celebration where working-class immigrants crossed paths with nouveau-riche social climbers, all wearing hats.
The Victorian Bandstand
Carleton Watkins, 1887
The Casino in Golden Gate Park
Carleton Watkins, date unknown
The Victorian Music Stage
Isaiah West Taber, date unknown
Public venues were built, altered, updated, and removed from the park over time. Seen here and on early maps of the park, The Casino offered an indoor respite and libations, but no games of chance. The ornate, curvilinear design of this genteel, early outdoor music venue delighted those who considered San Francisco “the Paris of the West”; the equally photogenic Spreckels Temple of Music replaced it in 1900.
The Spreckels Temple of Music
photographer and date unknown
The Stadium at Golden Gate Park
photographer and date unknown
The Landing of a Trans-Pacific Telegraph Cable
photographer and date unknown
The Gilded Age in San Francisco coincided with the advent of amateur photography and, in turn, the family photo album. Technical innovations made cameras both portable and affordable, making it possible to document any stroll in the park or day at the beach. With a few notable exceptions, the images in this exhibition are the work of unidentified photographers.
Anita at Ocean Beach
The Lengeman Family Albums, 1880 to 1910
Amateur photographer and innovator George Lengeman, an early adopter, documented family outings to Ocean Beach and Golden Gate Park. His work is a prime example of vernacular photography: images by uncredited or amateur makers, including those found in family photo albums, never intended for publication or exhibition but important to historians nonetheless.
The Tennis Courts in Golden Gate Park
Newman Postcard Company, circa 1900
Sailing Yachts on Spreckels Lake
Photographer and date unknown
Stone Bridge with Trolley
Photographer and Date Unknown
Bicycles Passing the Conservatory of Flowers
photographer and date unknown
Transportation to Golden Gate Park and its popular attractions evolved with the times; hitching posts disappeared, rules for automobiles were established. The men who drafted its original design anticipated challenges the park still faces. Today, park traffic regulations seek a balance between ease of access and the preservation of natural beauty, holding at bay aspects of an ever-encroaching city.
The Boys Riding an Elephant in Golden Gate Park
photographer unknown, 1891
This unique image depicts an odd, temporary attraction featuring Baldy and Queen Jumbo, elephants on loan from The McMahon Brothers Circus for six months. It was found in My Views of San Francisco, a recently catalogued album of unpublished works by an uncredited photographer.
The Lake and Observatory atop Strawberry Hill
photographer and date unknown
The Sweeny Observatory After The Earthquake
photographer and date unknown
The Sweeny Observatory high above Stow Lake and the parapet along the rocky cliffs overlooking Ocean Beach, seen in photographs throughout the exhibition, once offered bird’s-eye views of the park and the Pacific coastline to those willing to make the effort. In the second photograph, children pose among the ruins of The Sweeny Observatory in the aftermath of the earthquake.
The Sharon Building After the Earthquake
photographer unknown, 1906
The Great Earthquake damaged many buildings in Golden Gate Park, including the iconic structure seen here; fully restored, it stands today as The Sharon Art Studio. The following two photographs feature some of the more than five thousand San Franciscans, made homeless by the earthquake and fire, who lived in Golden Gate Park encampments in 1906 and 1907.
Earthquake Refugee Camp in Golden Gate Park  
Photographer Unknown, 1906
Golden Gate Park Earthquake Encampment
photographer unknown, 1907
Ocean Beach and the Original Cliff House
photographer and date unknown
The Cliff House
photographer and date unknown
Ocean Beach Last Sunday
Photographer and Date Unknown
During San Francisco’s Gilded Age, the westernmost expanse of land, dismissed as “the outside lands” or “the great sand dunes” on early maps, became a grand public park and a popular beachfront promenade. We end with these images to confirm the premise behind this exhibition: little has changed; much remains the same. Or is it the other way around?