

# Southwest Berkeley: Re-inventing Industry

by Susan Schwartz

*This text is from a handout for a walk sponsored by BPWA on July 8, 2006. The walk was led by Susan Schwartz and Charlie Bowen.*

West Berkeley has been industrial almost since Captain Jacobs established a landing just north of the mouth of Strawberry Creek during the Gold Rush. But the coming of rail in 1877-8 spurred the growth of factories. (At that time, Berkeley rails were a spur from Oakland; the transcontinental tracks ran through Niles Canyon.) Southwest Berkeley's only real survivor of that pre-1900 growth is National Starch and Chemical, whose current building at the west end of Grayson dates from the 1950s.

The 1906 San Francisco Earthquake sent industry as well as residents fleeing to supposed safety east of the Bay. Dates and names on the map show the variety of firms established early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Many of these were built by the Austin Company, a now-international Ohio firm founded in 1878 that pioneered a rapid design-build method using standardized steel-frame modules. Many buildings were handsome and light-filled, but air could be almost unbreathable. Waste piped directly into the Bay fouled the water and Berkeley's crescent of sand beach. Rotting waste from canneries near Ashby ate paint from buildings and turned Bay water black in summer.

The area was never exclusively industrial. Many blocks were mainly working-class housing, often with street-level shops. There were taverns and the like, including two social clubs for Italian workers.

Almost 50 years after the quake, the upheaval of World War II brought another kind of boom, with industries working multiple shifts to supply the troops. Short-lived Camp Ashby trained black MPs for a still-segregated military. Little new was built due to material shortages, but pent-up demand after the war led to imaginative prefabricated forms of construction, including precast concrete walls with embedded glass blocks for light.

This boomlet was short-lived. The eclipse of rail as interstate highways were built, lower-cost land and labor elsewhere, and the nationwide decline of "smokestack" industries all led to widespread plant closing from the 1960s through the 1980s. Artists and crafts people began moving into the vacant spaces in the 1970s, along with higher-technology firms and specialty manufacturers, from scientific glass to snowshoes. Cutter Labs, founded in 1903, metamorphosed into Bayer, making pharmaceuticals through the most advanced biotechnological methods. Despite Berkeley's plans to maintain well-paying blue-collar jobs, faux-industrial-style live-work and condominiums and high-end home-furnishing businesses have flooded in since the 1990s. "Victorian" homes and rooming houses are being restored or strikingly refurbished. A rails-to-trails greenway is partly built (Emeryville built, Berkeley lagging).

There is plenty to worry and argue about -- artisans' hopes to keep low-cost space, plans for a grocery store, manufacturing vs. gentrification, lack of green space. But for now, this is a fascinating, vibrant area to explore.

*Many thanks to Dale Smith and the Berkeley Historical Society. I have cribbed shamelessly from Dale's map and essay, *The Evolution of Industry in West Berkeley*," prepared for a walking tour sponsored by the Historical Society and available from them. The responsibility for errors is entirely my own – Susan Schwartz.*



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MN (14.7° E)

0 180 360 540 720 900

Data Zoom 15-0

Data Zoom 15-0

“House” symbol indicates interesting architecture or gardens, from a building to a block.

Dotted lines mean interesting for walking – but explore and find your own route!

