

## Preface

Growing up in San Francisco, I never liked gold rush history. There was too much lore about miners and big-hearted dance-hall girls, frontier justice, saucy newspaper editors, and the rise to power of mining and railroad elites. The stories all seemed to swirl around the same key events and figures—like Emperor Norton, Belle Cora, the Broderick-Terry duel, Vigilance Committees, and the Big Four. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with those stories but, from my vantage point, they just weren't that interesting. So there is a certain amount of irony in the fact that I've written this book. Or maybe not, given that what I hope to have accomplished here is to have written a different kind of history about the growth and development of San Francisco: one that moves beyond familiar stories and into a new and different way of conceptualizing the city that I will always regard as my home.

Instead of stemming from an early fascination with gold rush history, I actually think the germ of this book was planted in all the time I spent riding the bus—first as a city kid trekking to school and roaming with friends, later as a car-less urban dweller and working commuter. Because, when I rode the bus, I watched the parade of people around me and wondered about their stories—about who they were, where they came from, and where they were going. Public transportation is an amazing cultural frontier. You pay your fare, climb aboard, and for the length of your ride, you are allowed glimpses into moments of other people's lives—people that you might never otherwise interact with. If you are a careful observer you have the opportunity to take in what your fellow riders wear, read, and carry; whom they talk to and what they say; where they get on, where they get off. You might not know regular riders' names but you may have a pretty good idea of where they work and live. You might even have an interesting, if fleeting, conversation, meet someone new, or witness an altercation. Granted, if you bury your head in a book, stare out the window, or just don't pay attention, you can miss all of that. But that wasn't my modus operandi. For me, what was going on inside the bus was usually the

fun part—however weird, wonderful, uneventful, or disturbing the interactions between passengers on a particular ride might be. I fell in love with observation. And when I began this love affair, in San Francisco in the 1970s, the city was a pretty colorful place so there was a lot to take in. I credit those long-ago bus rides with starting me down the path of wanting to know how the world I observed was put together—and that dovetailed with wanting to know how my city had been put together.

But there were other things besides my innumerable bus rides that had a hand in leading to writing this book. Things that in a legendarily cosmopolitan and tolerant city made me incredibly conscious of how differences rooted in race, class, and gender intersected with social power. I rode the city bus to a school across town because my parents opposed busing, which started the year I began first grade. They'd worked hard to buy a modest house in a neighborhood on the west side of Twin Peaks with good schools close by. Sending me to a school in the Mission District, a poorer neighborhood, with schools that were less good and people who were less white was unacceptable to them. As a result, I ended up a nominally Protestant student in a Catholic school far from my home neighborhood for all but one year of elementary and high school. I memorized all the prayers, prepared for all the sacraments, but since I never actually made them, I sat in the pew—with the Russian Orthodox and Chinese kids—when everyone else went to communion. During a couple of early elementary school summers, I had a blast going to Cameron House day camp in Chinatown. I knew that as a big white kid, I sort of stood out, but I had such a good time singing camp songs and going on urban adventures that I barely noticed. It was where one of my best friends from my neighborhood was going, so it was where I went, too. But my parents drew the line at me going to Chinese school—that my Chinese friends would have to do without me.

In a strange twist of fate, in 1976, the year that I didn't go to Catholic school, I went to a public junior high school literally next door to where I would have been bussed. Other neighborhood friends were going there, I wanted to be with them, and since I was accepted into the gifted program, my parents accepted my desire for change. That year, I found my way to disco, learned how to cut class and explore the Mission and the Castro, and aspired to be a chola. I got as far as the Ben Davis pants and remember experimenting with lots of hairspray and eyeliner, but my awkward junior high self couldn't quite pull off that kind of artful style. The next year, despite or because of all

## PREFACE

xi

the life-altering educational experiences I'd had inside and outside the classroom, I opted to go back to Catholic school. While reconnecting with my friends there that I had known since first grade, I learned that acceptance hinged on giving up disco and soul and reclaiming rock-n-roll. Sitting in a friend's downstairs room learning to get comfortable with the initially ear-splitting sounds of Led Zeppelin and Rush instead of the smooth tunes of the Commodores and Earth, Wind & Fire was a serious lesson in relearning the tropes of urban whiteness.

In high school, I was taught by nuns who embraced social justice, who taught me about feminism, the evils of apartheid, and how to boycott Nestle. But tables in the cafeteria often self-segregated along racial lines, and the prevailing understanding was that a pregnant schoolmate had been asked to leave as she began to show—even though she had ostensibly done the right thing. I knew boys who proclaimed W.P.O.D., which didn't mean "White Punks on Dope," as the Kinks suggested, but "White Power or Death," and who adorned their trucks with Confederate flags and called their steel-toed boots "nigger stompers." Racist jokes and anti-immigrant sentiment were part and parcel of my everyday life. It wasn't until I was in my mid-20s that I entered a house in Pacific Heights. And then I joked to my friends that I was attending the fancy party I'd been invited to by a college friend as a representative of San Francisco's working class. I was, after all, the daughter of a teamster, had just recently been driven to try out grad school at San Francisco State by the bleakness of a four-year-long series of secretarial jobs, and I was wearing \$10 Payless Shoe Source shoes.

I've included these biographical snippets in order to give you a sense of the personal stake I have in the story that follows. The city I grew up in was cosmopolitan and tolerant, but at the same time it was also bigoted, angry, and fearful of its own diversity. The story of San Francisco's nineteenth-century past that I offer here is my contribution to figuring out how it got that way. When I attended the bash in Pacific Heights, I was at the beginning of my journey of becoming a historian. That training, as well as my undergraduate study of sociology at UC Santa Cruz and my skills of observation, well-honed from years of bus riding, has given me the kind of tools that I hope have allowed me to capture the contradictions and wrinkles, beauty and ugliness, exceptionalism and sameness of San Francisco's history. I should mention that if you had asked me that night in Pacific Heights what I wanted to focus my historical studies on, I seriously doubt that I would have ever said anything about local history. Women's history, sure. Immigration history, maybe. Something

that revealed how power worked in society, even better. But I never intended initially to focus my research on San Francisco.

Yet by that evening I suspect that I may have begun to develop my attraction to cultural history. And it was cultural history that brought me to the history of my home town. As I explored that burgeoning field, I found myself reading all sorts of wonderful books about theaters, saloons, dance halls, amusement parks, blackface minstrelsy, bare-knuckle prize fighting, and myriad other nineteenth-century cultural practices. The vast majority looked at the rest of the nation from a New York City-centered viewpoint. Painfully few paid any attention to the premier city of the nineteenth-century West—San Francisco. When push came to shove, and I needed to pick a research paper topic in one of my first graduate seminars at the University of Michigan, I realized I knew San Francisco's urban terrain much better than I could ever hope to know New York's. As a San Franciscan, I knew that New York wasn't really the center of the universe. And I also firmly believed that San Francisco's cultural history, despite those who told me I wouldn't find material because of the destruction of the 1906 fire and earthquake, was a story just waiting to be told. Soon I would stumble into the history of the American West—it took me a while to realize that San Francisco was part of that history, which I still somehow associated with rural spaces and cowboys and Indians—and the insights of that field allowed me to figure out how to connect San Francisco's local story into a larger story of nation-making and empire-building.

This book, which has grown from a life lived mostly in urban settings and many years spent in school, looks at nineteenth-century San Francisco through the lens of the classic frontier questions that ask how a society was organized and a new American place formed, but with a twist. Instead of the more traditional realms of law and politics, the focus here is on cultural spaces—like restaurants, hotels, and boardinghouses; places of amusement; Chinatown's tourist terrain; and fairs and expositions. I looked to these places as a historian, in part because, as an urbanite, these were the kinds of places where I came face-to-face with other people—where I made sense of who they were, and who I was. In the history I've written, I use these places, which I call *cultural frontiers*, to illuminate how race, class, and gender relations were hammered out in the course of everyday life. In nineteenth-century San Francisco, establishing nationally dominant forms of race, class, and gender hierarchies was an essential part of making the recently

PREFACE

xiii

acquired, heavily immigrant city into a recognizably American place, and cultural frontiers functioned as key arenas of this process. Implicit in offering this new, differently focused narrative of San Francisco's history is a recognition of the power of stories and that stories are embedded in structures of power. My hope is that taking a journey back into an exploration of the stories generated on San Francisco's nineteenth-century cultural frontiers will spur greater mindfulness about the power of twenty-first-century cultural frontiers that continue to shape the meanings we make about the human diversity that surrounds us.