

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

CHALET RECREATION FIELD AT GOLDEN GATE PARK (Beach Chalet Athletic Fields)

HALS NO. CA-49-A

- Location:** Bounded by John F. Kennedy Drive to the north and east, former Richmond-Sunset Sewage Treatment Plant to the south, and the Old Railroad Trail to the west, San Francisco, San Francisco County, California
Latitude: 37.36880 Longitude: -122.50880
- Significance:** The Chalet Recreation Field is representative of the active recreation features integrated into the Olmsted-influenced design of Golden Gate Park during the Great Depression.
- Description:** The Chalet Recreation Field is an approximately 19-acre site at the western edge of Golden Gate Park, near Ocean Beach. The site contains an approximately 8-acre natural-grass meadow, 1/2-acre parking lot, and restroom, all surrounded by a forest edge of shrubs and trees. The forest edge slopes gently up to the north, east, and south, and gently down to the west.
- The environment is challenging to plants, due to the strong, salt-laden winds from the west, sandy soil, rainy winters, and foggy summers. The predominant surviving species in the forest edge are Myoporum (*Myoporum laetum*) and Monterey Cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*). The forest edge acts as a windbreak and visual screen.
- Due to this forest edge, the Field is not visible from the surrounding roads. Other features of Golden Gate Park are not visible from the Field, except for the windmills and the Beach Chalet. It is the multiple functions of the Chalet Recreation Field—naturalistic forest and recreation field—that give it its unique character. To passers-by, the space continues to function as naturalistic forest. It is only when one rambles through this forest edge that one discovers the secondary function of a recreation field. These two functions combined present the occupant with a sense of discovery on the first visit to the Chalet Recreation Field and a recurring sense of seclusion on every visit thereafter.
- There is one modern intrusion: an eight-foot high, uncoated chain-link fence was added around the playing fields circa 1998. The fence gives a formal edge to what had been a more informally defined space.
- History:** The period of significance for Golden Gate Park is 1871 to 1943. In February of 1871, the Park Commission adopted a topographical survey and master plan for the park by William Hammond Hall (1846-1934) and hired him to oversee the creation of the park. Much of the western end of the park was shifting sand dunes with coastal brush and dune scrub. Hall stabilized the sand by planting

grasses and building a sand bulwark along the beach. He began planting tree seedlings at the eastern end of the park. Due to political vagaries and funding problems, the afforestation effort did not reach the western end of the park until the mid-1880s or 1890s. John Hays McLaren (1846-1943) was hired by Hall—who was then acting as a consultant—as assistant superintendent in 1887. McLaren was promoted to Superintendent in 1890 and held that position until his death in 1943. McLaren integrated active recreation features into Hall’s “sylvan retreat.”

Hall proposed the construction of 15-acre saltwater lake, and McLaren a salt-water bathing pond, on the site of what is now the Chalet Recreation Field. In 1894, the *San Francisco Examiner* wrote that, because it was to be a tidal lake, the site “remains the only place in the Park where no embellishment by growth of trees or shrubs has been attempted.” In 1895, McLaren wrote that the material excavated to make the proposed bathing pond could be used to make a “shelter embankment on the west side... The banks and slopes would, of course, be improved with highly ornamental groups of trees and flowering shrubs.” McLaren’s bathing pond was never constructed on this site. Photographs from the 1900s through the 1920s show shrubs and trees on the site. A salt-water pool (Fleishacker Pool) was constructed further to the south and opened in 1925. In April of 1926, in honor of McLaren’s eightieth birthday, the Park Commissioners proposed the construction of a 12-acre lake for boating on the site. It was to be named McLaren Lake and paid for entirely by public donations. The funds raised for McLaren Lake were instead used at McLaren Park.

The addition of active recreation features to the Park accelerated during the Great Depression, due to relief programs. A March 1930 photograph shows forest on the site of the future Chalet Recreation Field. In April of 1933, the Park Commissioners allocated funds for the construction of a convenience station at the “new meadow.” In August of 1933, they allocated funds for dressing room facilities at the “new recreation field.” A June 1934 aerial photograph shows the meadow. In January of 1938, the federal works program administrator reported “spading and re-seeding unsightly areas, planting shrubs, trimming trees, removing snags and stumps, repairing and widening paths, removing and burning weeds and brush chiefly in West Meadows” sometime between October 1935 and December 1937. In February of 1939, the Park Commissioners approved the submission of suggested improvements to the facilities at the “Chalet Field” as a possible Works Progress Administration project. During World War II, the 30th Infantry camped on the field for one night in March of 1941, and a military “listening appliance” was positioned at the north end of the Field beginning in January of 1943.

The Chalet Recreation Field was initially a multi-sport recreation field. In October of 1933, the Park Commissioners approved the location of a baseball

diamond at the “new recreation field.” A 1937 guide lists five fields for soccer, football, or rugby at the “Chalet Recreation Field.” Park Commission minutes and historic aerial photographs, maps, and books indicate that the Field was used for soccer, football, rugby, cricket, and softball until the early 1960s. Since then, historic aerial photographs, maps, and books indicate that the Field has been used primarily for soccer. The Field has also occasionally been used for special events, such as the 1997 Summer of Love concert and the 2001 Fifth Annual Friends of Recreation & Parks Multicultural Kite Festival. Current demand for the Chalet Recreation Field by soccer and lacrosse teams is so great that it raises the issue of the carrying capacity of a historic resource with a contemporary use.

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Wilson, Katherine. Golden Gate Park: The Park of a Thousand Vistas. Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1947.

Photograph and Map Collections

Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.

CalAtlas. <<http://www.atlas.ca.gov/quads/>>.

North Baker Research Library, California Historical Society, San Francisco.
The earliest known aerial photograph of the meadow at the Chalet Recreation

Field is "Artist's conception of the Bay Bridges taken from Associated Oil Co. airplane Flying A at 16,000' elevation," 1 Jun 1934, Folder SF—General Views—1930-39 (large photos) #1.

David Rumsey Collection <<http://www.davidrumsey.com/>>.

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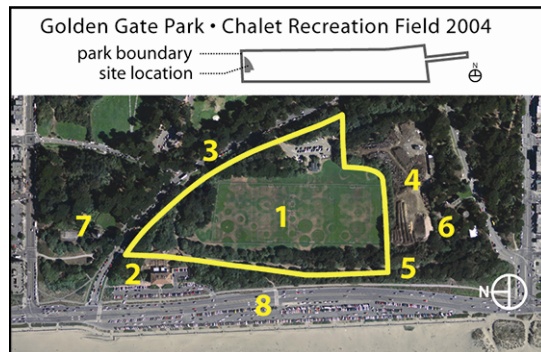
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HALS Northern California Chapter
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Image:



Site Map

1. Chalet Recreation Field (ca. 1933)
2. Beach Chalet (1925)
3. John F. Kennedy Drive (ca. 1872, formerly Main Drive)
4. Refuse Area (ca. 1997, site of former Richmond-Sunset Sewage Treatment Plant (1937-1996))
5. Old Railroad Trail (1947, site of former Park & Ocean Railroad streetcar line (1883-1946))
6. Murphy's (South) Windmill (1905) and Millwright's House (1909)
7. Dutch (North) Windmill (1902)
8. Great Highway (ca. 1870s)

Base image courtesy the U.S. Geological Survey, Urban Aerial Imagery 27 Feb 2004.



Active Recreation Features in Golden Gate Park

- A. Big Recreation Field (1893)
- B. Stow Lake and Boathouse (1893, 1946)
- C. Tennis Courts (1901)
- D. Lawn Bowling Greens (1901-1928)
- E. Handball Courts (1902-1937)
- F. Dog Training Field (1905)
- G. Golden Gate Park Stadium or Polo Field (1906-1909)
- H. Pétanque Court (1907)
- I. Horseshoe Courts (1922-1937)
- J. Kezar Stadium (1924)
- K. Chalet Recreation Field (ca. 1933)
- L. Flycasting Pools (1936)
- M. Model Yacht Basin (1938)
- N. Archery Field (1938)
- O. Golden Gate Park Stables (1939)
- P. Bercut Equitation Field (ca. 1940s)
- Q. Golf Course (1951)
- R. Sixth Avenue Skate Area (1987)
- S. Disc Golf Course (2003)

Base image courtesy the U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agriculture Imagery Program 2009.