

23. Westlake (Daly City)

BORROWING PHRASES FROM a publication of the United States Division of Mines, a long time Daly City resident described the acres of land stretching east and west from the developed sections of Daly City to the ocean and south from Lake Merced to the Pacifica Hills as "a section of soft sedimentary rocks and of buff sands and clays with interbeds of pebbles and shells and known as Fog Gap."¹

The area was described by Edmund Cavagnaro, who was born on a nearby ranch, as a wild place before 1945, where canyons came down from the Colma Hills and men went hunting because all kinds of game were seen there.²

In 1945 the firm of Henry Doelger Builder, Inc. purchased this foggy land of pig ranches and cabbage patches from the Spring Valley Water Company, which had owned it since acquiring it from the owners of the old Laguna de la Merced Rancho. Turning a deaf ear to realtors who advised against building in the area, the Doelger Company carefully laid plans for building a subdivision in Daly City in the area which was soon named Westlake.

The vision of an area of homes, schools, churches and shopping centers belonged to Henry Doelger and his brother John. This is illustrated by the things now recalled by their associates and employees. "Come and help me build a city," Henry Doelger is reported to have said to his associates and employees. They came, hard working, efficient people and business firms.³

In 1948 the Doelger Company started building in a section called Unit One and did not cease until 1962 when all the land in Westlake was covered with homes and the Doelger Company stood ready to build the Fairmont section of the City of Pacifica.

Some critics have branded Westlake as "a look-alike, think-alike instant suburb" and it is reported that it inspired a popular ditty about ticky-tacky boxes. Others, however, have called it "polished Westlake" and spoken of it as the "highfaluting area" of Daly City. In truth, it is a community that satisfies many of its residents. Their sentiments were expressed by Daly City Mayor Bernard Lycett when he said, "If people didn't want to live in this city and did not like what Doelger built during twenty-seven years in Westlake, it would still be sand dunes, cabbage patches, and hog farms."

Henry Doelger brought to the Westlake project experience gained in a lifetime of building. In 1922 he closed his hot dog stand on the corner of San Francisco's Seventh Avenue and Lincoln Way to join his brother Frank in the real

estate business. Within a short time he was building houses in the Sunset District of San Francisco.

The highlights of Henry Doelger's career were recorded by newspaperman Frank LaPierre:

There was only one way to sell homes out in the Sunset District of San Francisco in those days; you hammered a few nails along with the carpenters and when a prospective buyer came along, off came the coveralls and, presto, instant real estate salesman.

That is what Henry did!

He built 25 homes on 39th Avenue in 1926, his first year in business. Business increased as the population expanded and folks began moving into the "suburbs" of the city.

But the Great Depression hit Doelger hard, as it did everyone else.

For 18 months he gave up trying to build homes, let alone sell them. No one had any money.

By 1932 business was on the upswing again for Doelger.

He built homes that are standing in good repair today along 31st Avenue.

Between 1934 and 1940 the fellow who started with a modest hot dog stand was America's biggest homebuilder.

Doelger was doing what some builders had considered impossible—building two homes a day. By today's standards this is a simple feat.

Doelger City, they called the area that stretched from 27th to 39th Avenues between Kirkham and Quintara. Next was Golden Gate Heights on 15th and 16th Avenues.

World War II came along and Henry offered his services to the Army Corps of Engineers. He was assigned to build defense housing in the Bay Area, specifically in Oakland and South San Francisco where some 3,000 such units were constructed by Doelger.

The defense housing projects are currently under planning for replacement—27 years after Doelger built them.

Along with brother John, who retired from the company three years ago, Henry built homes along MacArthur Boulevard between Oakland and San Leandro. He returned to the Sunset and Richmond districts after the war and built 3,000 apartments. [Henry Doelger Builder, Inc. reports that this is the approximate number of homes, not apartments, built in the Sunset and Richmond districts.]

Open space suitable for housing was becoming harder to get. Turning a deaf ear to realtors who advised not to build in Daly City because no one would possibly want to buy a home that far away from

downtown San Francisco, Henry purchased 1,350 acres from the Spring Valley Water Company in 1945.

Swamps, gulleys, hog ranches, cabbage patches, barren sandy land, and foggy, windy, biting cold greeted the builder. Friends predicted Henry had been "had" when he bought the property.

More than two decades after he started pouring concrete in Westlake, mapping streets, and pounding nails, an orderly community of more than 22,000 people have moved in.⁵

In after-years when Henry Doelger disposed of his interests in the shopping centers and apartments that had remained his property, many residents of Daly City expressed their gratitude to him and his company for the creation of Westlake. Among them was James V. Grealish who penned the following letter that appeared in a local newspaper.

Dear Editor:

The sale of the Westlake apartments would appear to mark the passing of an era of great significance not only to the City of Daly City and San Mateo County, but also to the entire Bay Area.

Since it was the last sale of properties built by Henry Doelger in the development of Westlake, it completes the cycle started in 1948 with the first homes built in what had been for many years vegetable gardens. In addition to homes and apartments, the excellently planned growth of this area included parks, schools, churches, etc. which provides a complete, well-balanced community.

Credit for this tremendous undertaking goes to a man (Henry Doelger) who had the foresight, ability, and above all, the confidence in the future of the area. He not only planned and supervised the entire development, but, unlike most of his fellow developers, he lived in the community. He not only provided excellent homes at excellent prices to young families of the area including many veterans of World War II, but he provided countless jobs in the process. It would seem to me that he has made an invaluable contribution to our area.

Yet, nowhere have I read of any plans to honor this man with the recognition he so richly deserves.

James V. Grealish⁶



WESTLAKE HOMES UNDER CONSTRUCTION—1949

The homes built in the Westlake area include a wide variety of styles and finishes. The apartments include motifs of Italian, French, Chinese, and others. Many of these homes and apartments are near Lake Merced and adjacent golf courses. There are two shopping centers in the area which include stores of every variety.



DOELGER'S WESTLAKE HOMES

