

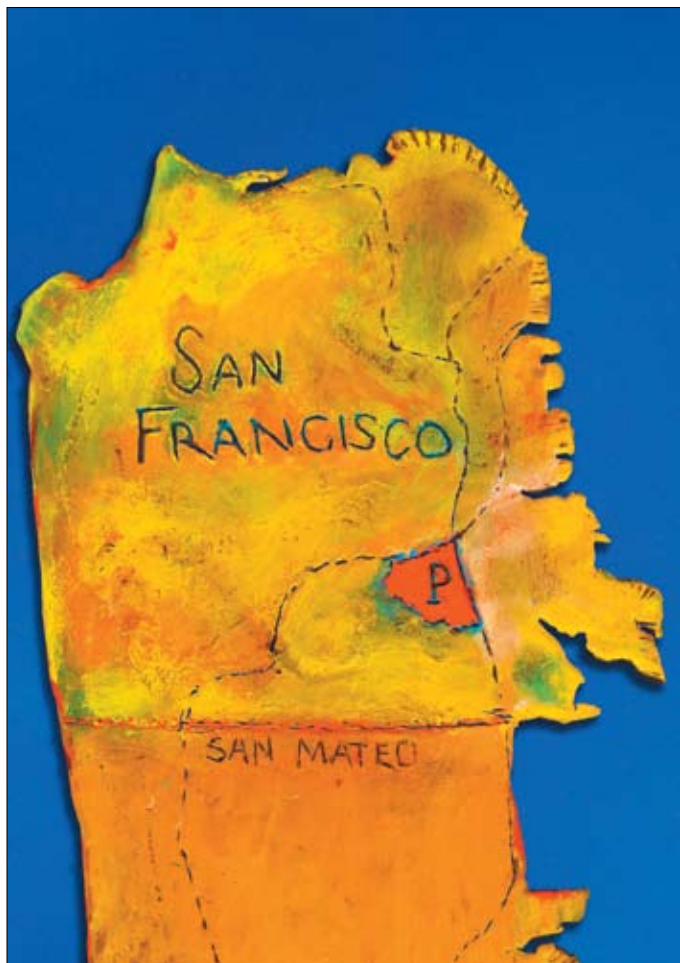


# Portola at Play

PART 1  
The Portola: Neighborhood Pictures

By Kate Connell and Oscar Melara





# The Portola District of San Francisco

Not so long ago, the hills and valley of the Portola District were filled with birds, rabbits, foxes, wolves and native plants. For many thousands of years, Ohlone people traveled these hills, traversing between villages in Visitacion Valley and those on Mission Creek. Spanish explorers settled the area in the eighteenth century, ultimately displacing the Ohlone. The Spanish divided the area into ranchos and named the region of the Portola “Rancho Rincón de las Salinas y Potrero Viejo” in part for the salt marshes around Islais Creek. Homesteaders later further divided the area. Small farms, corrals, homes, businesses and green houses with windmills were built on the freshly divided plots. The still rural Portola District, then at the edge of the city, kept the name “San Francisco’s Garden,” because produce and cut flowers for all of San Francisco were grown here for many years. The Portola also held two homes for young, unwed mothers, an immigration station and housed many churches and religious organizations. This southeastern San Francisco neighborhood has always been a portal for people new to the city. Many Italians, Jews, Maltese and Greek immigrants settled in the neighborhood and have been followed by successive arrivals including African Americans, other European Americans, Filipinos, Chinese, Vietnamese and Latinos.

Portola spirit is strong—there is even a closely guarded way of pronouncing the neighborhood name “We say POR’ da lah, you say Por TOE’ la.” Any way you say it, it’s a great neighborhood filled with working people, gay and straight, families and singles as well as a vital mix of cultures and religions. The new Portola Branch Library is at the heart of the community.

# Portola at Play

Geographer Gray Brechin calls the Portola and nearby neighborhoods “San Francisco Incognito,” because they and their history are so little known to the rest of the city. The authors of this project, four artists from the Portola, set out to explore the District from different perspectives, get to know more neighbors and represent the Portola with new imagery from many sources. The project has culminated in a portrait in a variety of media: visual arts, music and film.

The four parts of Portola at Play:

## [PART 1 The Portola: Neighborhood Pictures](#)

A book that describes the neighborhood with illustrations and text by Kate Connell and Oscar Melara.

## [PART 2 Out the Road and Other Portola Stories](#)

A film on DVD with oral histories and residents’ personal photographs by Gustavo Vazquez.

## [PART 3 Musical Reflections of the Portola](#)

A CD of original music composed by John Calloway with recordings by neighborhood school children all on CD, produced and recorded by John Calloway.

Parts 1, 2, and 3 can be borrowed from the San Francisco Public Library, [www.sfpl.org](http://www.sfpl.org).

## [PART 4 Porto-Loteria](#)

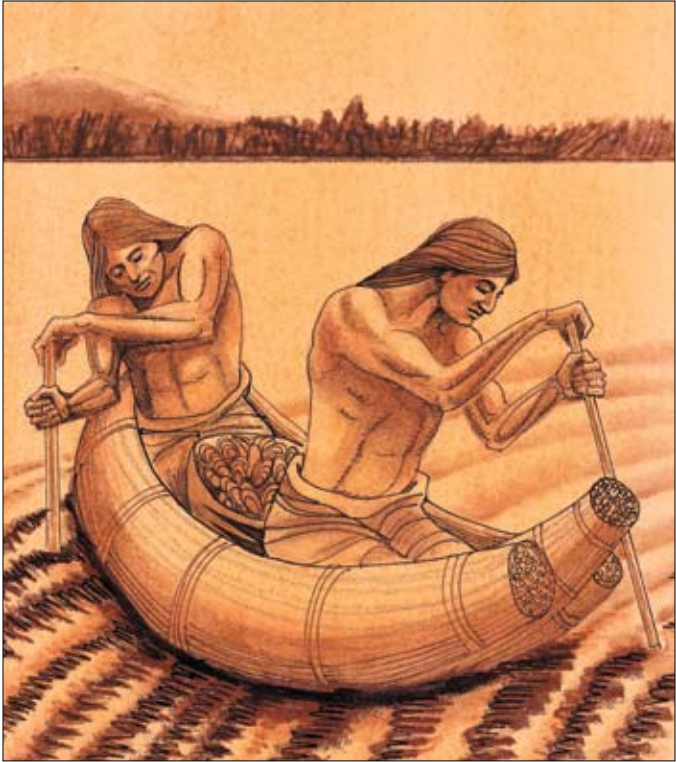
A board game with 54 images of the Portola District by Kate Connell and Oscar Melara, on site at the Portola Branch Library.

All four parts can be found at the Portola at Play website, [www.madeintheportola.org](http://www.madeintheportola.org).



## The Street Fair

Welcome to the Portola District. In October, when fog drifts over McLaren Ridge down to sunny San Bruno Avenue, neighbors gather for the Portola Street Fair. Children pet goats and llamas and teens decked in sumo outfits battle crazily in the padded game area. Classical Chinese music blends with Zydeco, hip hop, country-western, Bhangra and soul. Take your pick: pupusas, ribs or dim sum? The Fair is a symbol of renewal for this richly layered neighborhood where residents come together to build a new library or plant trees. The history of the working-class Portola extends back centuries.



## The Ohlone

The Ohlone lived on the San Francisco Peninsula for thousands of years. Islais Creek still borders the northern end of the Portola District; the Creek and surrounding salt marshes were once home to fish, birds and other wildlife that provided a rich and varied diet for the first residents. Shellmounds, historic sites that reveal how the ancient Ohlone lived in this area, can be found nearby in the Bayview and on San Bruno Mountain. Ohlone descendants still reside throughout the Bay Area actively protecting their ancestors' historic sites and revitalizing Mitsun, one of their native languages.



## The Explorer

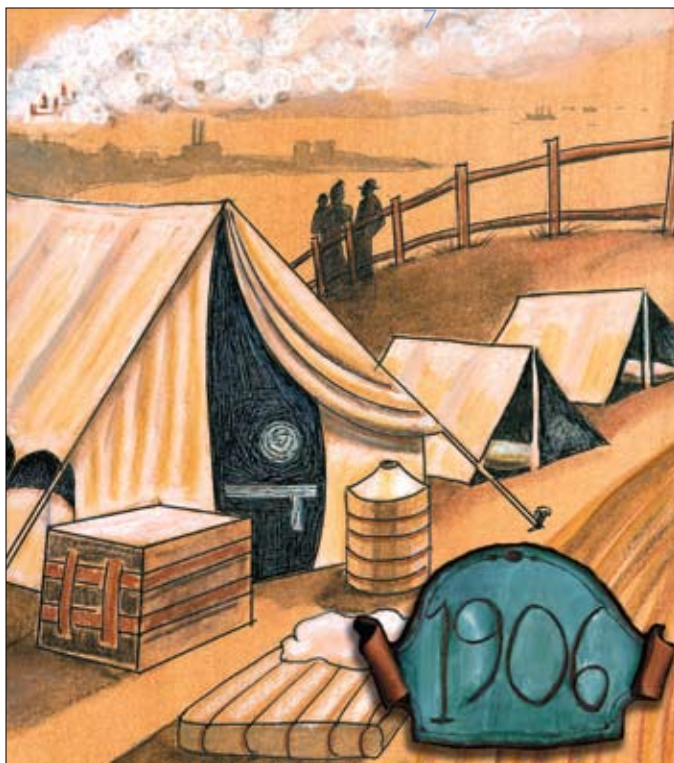
Gaspar de Portolá, a Spanish explorer, led an expedition to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1769 bringing the first European language to the Bay Area. Spanish is now one of the three most spoken languages in San Francisco, due to subsequent waves of immigrants from throughout Latin America. In 1909, the city celebrated its recovery from the 1906 Earthquake with the Portolá Festival, a grand celebration of the 140th anniversary of Portolá's arrival here. When the city was preparing for the Festival, many city place names were changed; it has been suggested that this might be the origin of the District's name: The Portola!



## The Rabbi

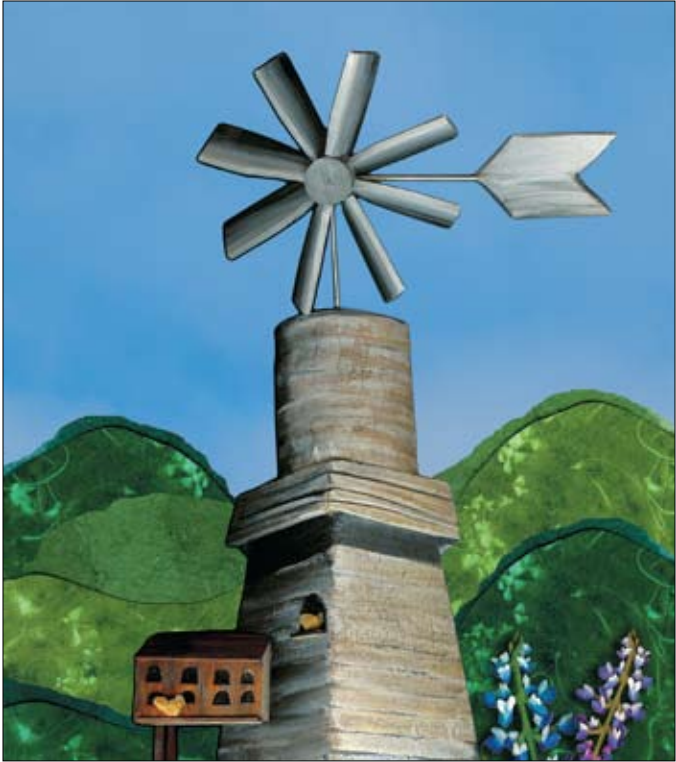
When Rabbi Morris Block came to serve the Jewish Community of the Portola in the early 1900s, it was called “Little Jerusalem” and “Out the Road.” Two synagogues, a settlement house with sewing classes and a well-baby clinic, Liebowitz Kosher Butcher Shop, Weinberg’s Dry Goods Store and a Hebrew school were all a part of this vibrant District. Over time, members of the Portola Jewish community have moved to other San Francisco neighborhoods. The Apostolic Assembly of the Faith in Christ Jesus Church was one of the Portola synagogues; the original Star of David stained glass window is still visible.





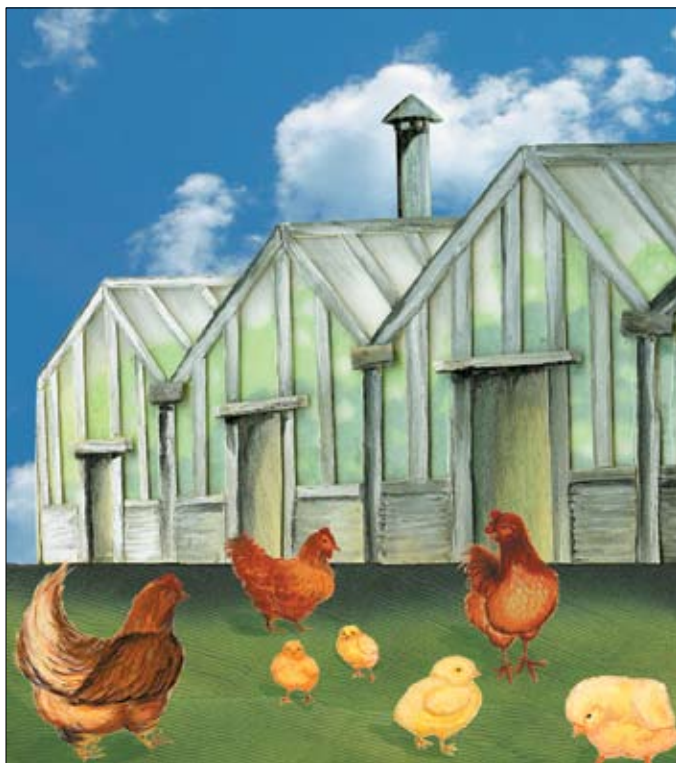
## The Earthquake Tent

One neighbor, who raised a family in the Portola, was a six-month-old baby wrapped in blankets, sleeping in a dresser drawer when the 1906 Earthquake struck San Francisco. The earthquake shook the city at 5:12 am, so her family walked from their home South of Market out to Butchertown (now the Bayview). With other refugees from the broken and burning city, they took shelter in the boxcars of cattle trains. In the following days, a family friend let her father put up a tent in his corral, where Palega Recreation Center is now, until he could build a new home nearby on Brussels Street.



## The Windmill

The agricultural neighborhoods in southeast San Francisco were filled with windmills, many topping water tanks. In the Portola, farmers and nursery owners used windmills to irrigate their crops, drawing water from underground. One still stands near Wayland Street; it was probably supplied by water flowing from nearby Yosemite Creek. The original owner added a dovecote to the side of his windmill to welcome the morning doves. In the 1990s, a large windmill was installed in the SLUG garden, now Alemany Garden, as part of the move to reestablish windmills as a significant source of green energy throughout San Francisco.



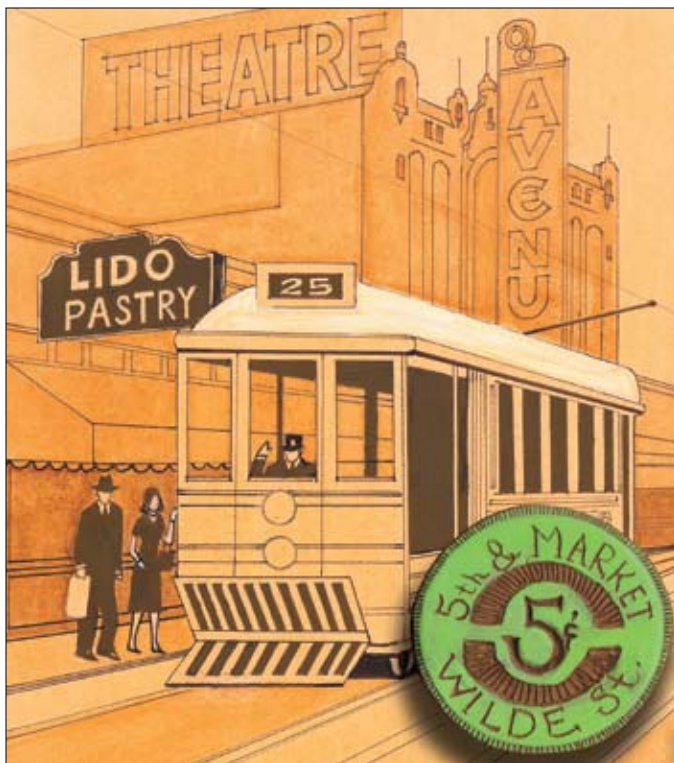
## The Greenhouses

Italian families who moved to the Portola from another San Francisco district, North Beach, or directly from Italy owned many of the Portola's nurseries. Each nursery specialized in different flowers including roses, carnations, orchids, Easter lilies, snapdragons and begonias. Nursery owners also grew cut flowers such as stock and French marigolds in open fields. Irene Crescio describes how, when she was a little girl during World War II, her family raised baby chicks and sold them since there wasn't a market for cut flowers.



## The Workers

The Portola District has always been a working class neighborhood and over the years has been home to workers in a wide variety of professions: first corset makers, firemen, policemen, bus drivers, chicken pluckers, farmers, nursery people, store owners, clerical workers, nurses, nuns, priests and ministers, still builders, waitresses, cooks and bakers, barbers, machinists, car and motorcycle repairmen, retail workers, and now postal workers, manicurists, teachers, librarians and social workers, artists, musicians, filmmakers, real estate agents and computer programmers.



## The Streetcar

Streetcars were the most popular form of transportation in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. The 25 San Bruno streetcar ran all the way downtown, to Fifth and Market Streets from its terminus at Wilde Avenue. This picture is based on a photograph taken in 1947, when the 25 line was close to forty years old. Streetcars crisscrossed the City and traveled as far as twenty miles down the Peninsula to San Mateo. By the end of World War II, the automobile, oil and tire industries joined forces to dismantle streetcar lines and promote the benefits of traveling by car.



## The Festa

Growing up in the Maltese community of the Portola, Barbara Fenech remembers: “We used to go to the Maltese Club for *tiatrin*. Men and women, recently arrived from Malta, did skits and made jokes that were really funny in Maltese. Because of where Malta is located in the Mediterranean, our language is a melting pot of many languages.” Every year on February 10th, the Maltese celebrate the feast day of Saint Paul of the Shipwreck at Saint Elizabeth’s Church with a mass in Maltese followed by a community banquet.



## The Parol

When Mario Verneza and his wife, Teresita, emigrated from the Philippines they wanted to reach out to their community in the Portola; “In 1986, thank God we decided to make a Pilipino store. That’s when we became so excited because we met so many Pilipinos and we were able to cater to the Pilipino needs. Being the only Pilipino store in the area (on San Bruno Avenue), we became the place to gather, the place to meet.” At Christmas time you can see parols, the traditional lantern from the Philippines, lighting the windows of homes across the Portola.



## The Bee

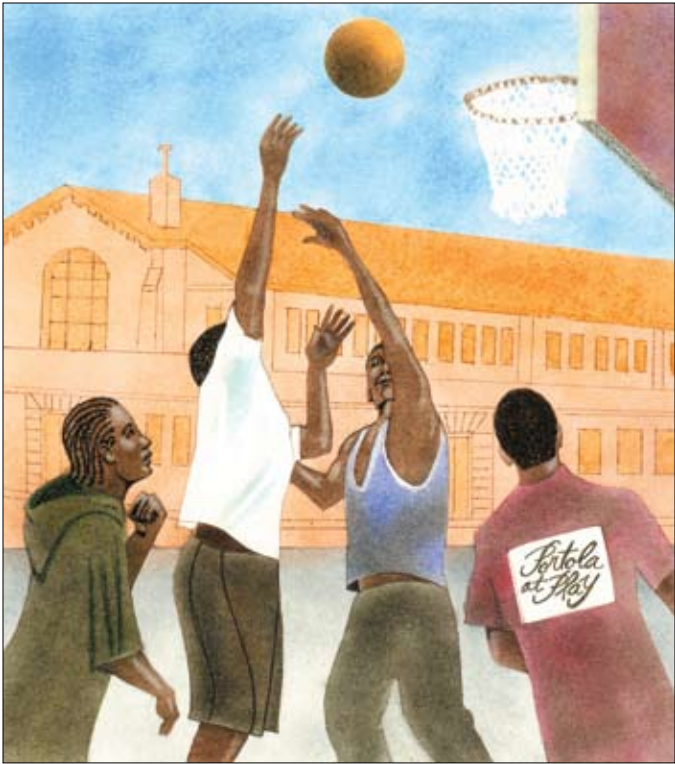
On a sunny day in the Portola small clouds of bees buzz around clumps of California Poppies that used to cover whole hillsides. Historically, bees have been important to the District's flower and food crops, as both pollinators and honey makers. Bees are responsible for a third of the food on our plates. As a species they are now in need of our protection, both locally and globally. The honey produced by bees in San Francisco has a different taste in every neighborhood. San Francisco beekeeper Robert MacKimmie says honey from McLaren Park is "kind of cinnamon-y and spicy and a little rich."





## The Water Tower

The sky blue water tower in McLaren Park is one of southern San Francisco's landmarks. The La Grande Tank holds in reserve water that can be used for drinking or to put out fires in both the Portola and the neighboring Excelsior District. The 350,000 gallons of water in the Tank come from Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in the Sierra Nevada Mountains and from pristine local runoff. The Tank sits above the natural springs near the McLaren Park reservoir, one of the best places in San Francisco to hear the American Goldfinch—it's the only bird whose chirp sounds like "potato-chip!"



## The Hoops

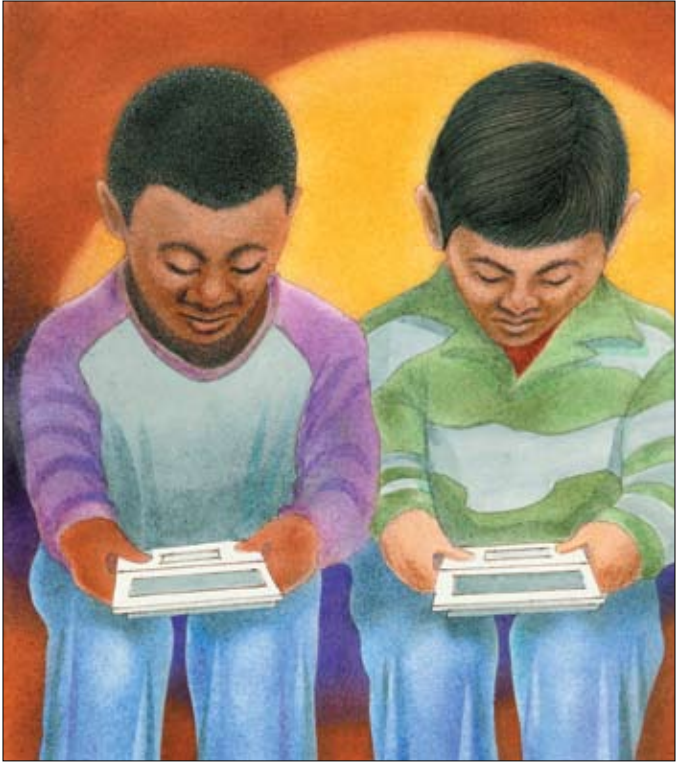
Children and teens from the Portola hang out at the lofty Palega Recreation Center, popular in any weather. Kids from all backgrounds gravitate to Palega Reconnect which offers programs from homework help to Easter egg hunts. Aspiring athletes play pickup games on the courts there. “We’ve had guys who’ve come out of our playground, they’ve proved themselves by playing All City basketball and then gone on to play for colleges like San Francisco State and USF,” says one staff member. Soon the Recreation Center will be rebuilt in order to serve new generations of athletes.



## The Athletes

Joe Gaggero, a Portola native, began his career as a baseball team manager and umpire with a “farm team” he organized in the neighborhood. For many decades he managed local teams, supporting them himself if sponsors were not available. The Joe Gaggero Sr. Field at Palega Center is named for this Portola hero.

Sululagi M. Palega, Jr. was a much-loved young Samoan athlete and community activist who played ball at the recreation center that now bears his name. Out of town for a basketball tournament in 1994, he was the victim of a random shooting. The Sululagi M. Palega Recreation Center was named in his honor.



## The Gameboys

“If you were making a picture of the Portola, what would you put in it?” Young gameboys shouted “Sonic!” (Jason) “Bakugan!” (Jun). When pressed, Jason added “E.R. Taylor.” One of the largest elementary schools in San Francisco, occupying a whole city block, is named for Edward Robeson Taylor, Mayor of San Francisco from 1907 to 1910. Taylor is quoted as saying that what mattered to him most was “the reading and writing of poetry.”



## The Herbalist

San Bruno Avenue is home to many Chinese herb stores. The sign in front of Han Hing Herb Company says “Hablamos Español!” For fourteen years, Sergio Lee and his wife, Helen, have served customers in three languages: Chinese, Spanish and English. Sergio was born in Nicaragua and his wife in Venezuela. In addition to selling herbs, they offer acupuncture and acupressure treatment and sell tea, dried mushrooms, soaps and Agua Florida cologne.



## The Recyclers

The District has been home to recyclers for decades. In the early twentieth century, there were stores on San Bruno Avenue like Cohen's Junk Store and Lichtenstein's Second Hand Store. In recent times, families with trucks collect and recycle cardboard and recyclers on foot collect plastic and glass bottles. Some walk out to the Recycling Center next to the San Francisco dump on Tunnel Avenue near Little Hollywood, across Bayshore Boulevard from the rest of Visitacion Valley.

# Contributors

## KATE CONNELL AND OSCAR MELARA

Visual Artists

PART 1 The Portola: Neighborhood Pictures

PART 4 Porto-Loteria

*The Portola reminds us of the San Francisco neighborhoods we grew up in, filled with families and children playing in the street. We wanted to engage our neighbors in an interactive portrait of the Portola, so we captured the details of the neighborhood and combined them to make a board game and book. We used the Mexican game of Lotería, a visual bingo, as our inspiration for Porto-Loteria. Come visit! You're invited to play the neighborhood's own game in our new Portola Branch Library. You can see some of the game images in this book. We used a new process we developed to make the images, and combined two and three-dimensional artwork. We describe it on the project web page: [www.madeintheportola.org](http://www.madeintheportola.org).*

## GUSTAVO VAZQUEZ

Filmmaker

PART 2 Out the Road and Other Portola Stories

*In this video documentary portrait on the Portola District in San Francisco, I approached the subject as a poetic mosaic of voices, images and music to share the flavor of the place—through different eras—in this dynamic working-class community that deserves recognition for its unique history. Thank you to all the members of the Portola neighborhood who shared their stories and their personal photographs.*

## JOHN CALLOWAY

Musician, Composer, Educator

PART 3 Musical Reflections of the Portola

*I have lots of memories of growing up in the Portola and the Excelsior. I remember Simpson Bible College — no one we knew ever went there — The Nite Life, located where El Toro is now and a popular bar for big names in Latin Rock, like Malo, in the 60s and 70s; the Maltese Hall that always had live music and the greenhouses, which filled me with wonderment for the flowers and those that tilled them. I've also included a piece for the Ohlone by José "Dr. Loco" Cuellar, a work in homage to early Jewish residents, a piece reflecting the Asian influence on the Portola, and a hip hop track written by Victor Menacho, Jairo Vargas and Maria Remos and produced by Victor Menacho. For many years I've taught music students in the Portola. I've included their sounds, the newest voices of the Portola, on this recording. Camilo Landau engineered, mixed and mastered this work, which was recorded in June 2008, and January through February 2009.*

### Songs on the CD

1. Before the Portola
2. Settlement House
3. The Greenhouses
4. Bible College
5. The Hall
6. San Bruno Avenue East
7. Down San Bruno Way
8. The Nite Life
9. Portola Boogaloo

*With musical contributions from the Portola's children:*

10. **Allegro** El Dorado and E.R. Taylor elementary schools
11. **Circle Dance (Bulgarian folk song)** The Violin Ensembles of El Dorado and E.R. Taylor elementary schools



12. [The Water is Wide](#) Martin Luther King Middle School Chorus

13. [On Eagle's Wings](#) St. Elizabeth School 8th Grade Chorus

14. [Jasmine Flower](#) The San Francisco School Orff Ensemble

15. [Sing Song Kitty](#) The San Francisco School Orff Ensemble

### **Musicians**

Piano: John Calloway, Bass: Louis Christopolous, Guitar: Camilo Landau, Flute: John Calloway, Clarinet and Saxophones: Elijah Samuels, Trumpet: Mario Silva, Native American flute: José “Dr. Loco” Cuellar, Violin: Christina Stanley, Drums: Nick Fishman, All Instruments on Portola Bugaloo: Víctor Menacho, Vocals on Portola Bugaloo: Jairo Vargas and Maria Remos, Keyboards: John Calloway and Camilo Landau, Additional percussion: John Calloway and Camilo Landau

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SFPL's branch libraries are unique in their ability to offer a range of cultural, intellectual and community resources to the communities they serve.

## Thank You

We're grateful for all the contributions of big-hearted neighbors, resourceful librarians and technicians, talented and hardworking design/production folk, fellow artists, querida familia, beloved friends and generous funders.

We appreciate the wonderful *refranes* created for the Porto-Loteria game by Ms. Lindsay Dowdle and her 4th and 5th grade Spanish bilingual class at E.R. Taylor Elementary School. We're grateful for the work of Cynthia Vazquez who also worked her magic on *refranes* for the game.

For more Thanks Yous, please go to [www.madeintheportola.org](http://www.madeintheportola.org).

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# Portola at Play

## A San Francisco Neighborhood Portrait

PART 1 The Portola: Neighborhood Pictures, a book

PART 2 Out the Road and Other Portola Stories,  
a movie on DVD

PART 3 Musical Reflections of the Portola,  
original music on CD

PART 4 Porto-Loteria, a neighborhood board game

By Kate Connell and Oscar Melara,  
John Calloway, and Gustavo Vazquez

In collaboration with the San Francisco Public Library

[www.madeintheportola.org](http://www.madeintheportola.org)

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