

Adolph Sutro's Ancient, Watery Attic

By Al Zelter
WHEN a middle-aged catleman from Crescent City came to San Francisco for an initial visit not long ago, he recalled the advice of his father offered years before and headed straight for Sutro Baths.

"Son," the old man had said, "if ever you get down to San Francisco, there's only one real sight worth a man's eyes in the whole city. It's that stuffed ox up in the gallery at Sutro Baths. Man, that must have been the biggest thing of its breed that ever lived!"

At the Baths, 14 Cents Gets You \$1,000,000 Worth of Nostalgia

It is plain that Sutro wanted to do something big with his money. In order to understand why anybody would spend \$1,000,000 on a set of the largest indoor bodies of water in the world, bordering immediately on the Pacific ocean, which is the largest outdoor body of water in the world, it is necessary to understand the 1890's.

There used to be seven plunges; now there are five. Half of the biggest one was converted to an ice rink in 1937 in order to draw winter crowds; and two of the smaller plunges were covered over to make room for a volleyball court, a basketball goal court, bars, a barrel roller, and other play equipment.

'Practice Baths'

It was a time when the intense desire to swim the English channel (a desire which has not noticeably subsided) led men to build what were called "practice baths" in various parts of Great Britain. It

wasn't long before the idea spanned the Atlantic to the United States, and the grandiose result in the far reaches of the west was Sutro Baths. For the most part it stands unchanged under its high vaulted glass roof, and according to the manager, Robert A. Bratton, "This is and always has been the largest institution of its kind in the world."

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Last week one of the pools was being cleaned, and a sign at the ticket window said: "Four Plunges Operating." Bratton explained: "The human animal is funny. Not many places have two plunges; 99 per cent only have one. But if we happen to be cleaning a pool, and we don't warn them at the box office, they always complain that they wanted to swim in the empty pool. I don't know why. There are four other plunges to choose from, and a man can only swim in one at a time anyhow."

The "modernistic" towers outside the baths, with their facets brightly painted in canary yellow, electric blue, apple green, and vermilion do not suggest the faded elegance which waits inside. The outside itself, however, is worth mention. The color scheme is one of the most undiluted ever to be found outside of a child's crayon set. Anywhere else the pure colors might be said to look garish; but somehow, out in front of the Tropic Beach, it is becoming. Bratton complained that, because of the fog and corrosive salt air, it was difficult to keep any painted surfaces out at the beach from looking neglected.

540 Color Schemes

"We are always repainting the front," he said, "and figuring out new color schemes was quite a job."

So Sutro's held a Coloring Contest. Boys and girls were provided with mimeographed line drawings of the front of the building. Five hundred and forty San Francisco children dug out their crayons, filled in between the lines, and entered the contest. The winner was a girl named Arline Morris, who trimmed her entry with lace and red silk ribbon, but all the entries were gratifying, and, for Sutro's front, useful.

"Now," Bratton beamed, "we have color schemes to last us indefinitely."

It costs only 14 cents to be a spectator at Sutro's; and once you pass through the turnstyle, you find yourself in an atmosphere compounded of one part London Crystal Palace, one part amusement park, and two parts background for a French movie produced to appeal to the same exclusive people who like Ronald Firbank's novels.

Victorian Flora

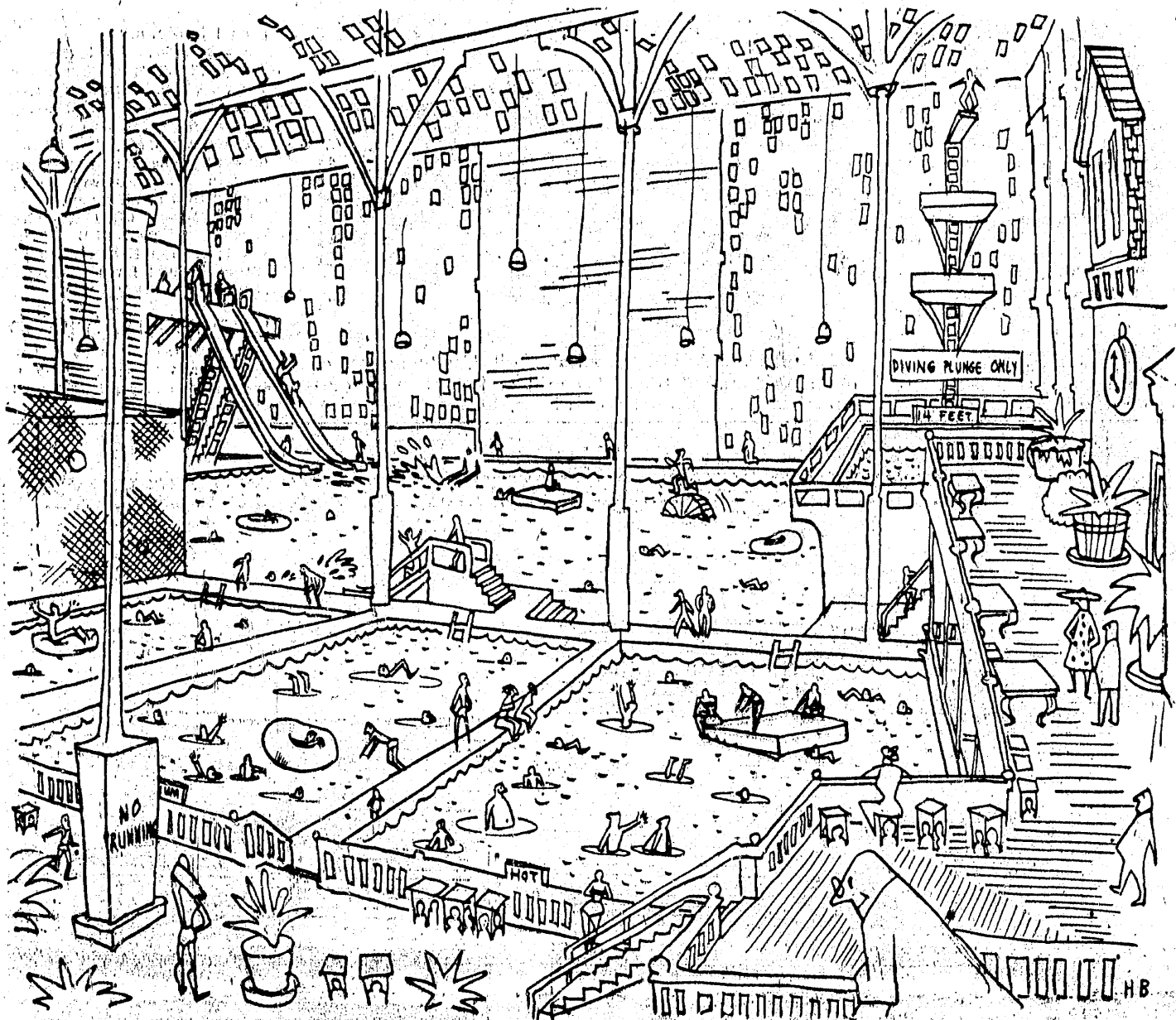
Lugubrious recorded organ music is piped from one end of the structure to the other. One walks enchanted down steps, past heavy Victorian plantings of broad-leaved foliage, potted palm trees, and, of course, a rubber tree from the Malay peninsula. Like every other rubber tree that has been taken indoors, this one, too, is pushing against the ceiling, begging to be let out.

The air is faintly scented with chlorine from the indoor plunges, and the organ music is broken by
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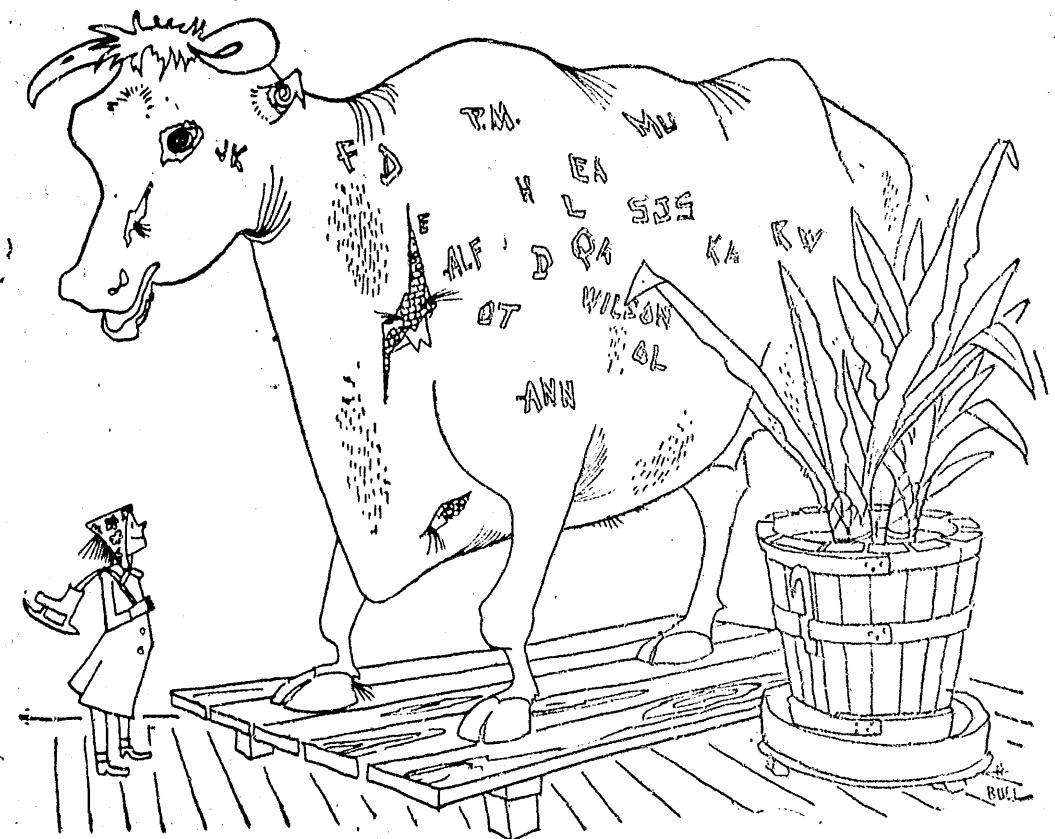


AFTER 54 YEARS, there's still no decision in the battle between Adolph Sutro's jaguar vs. anaconda. Stuffed dog-face baboon and black-handed spider monkey look on from their glass cages. The stuffings have not been carefully protected from moths. The cages still look like a wedding-cake maker's dream.

The ox in question is only one of the odd sights at the old Sutro Baths, now the Tropic Beach, or Sutro Baths and Skating Rink at 1000 Point Lobos avenue near the Cliff House. Built in 1896 by the California pioneer Adolph Sutro with part of the fortune he ac-

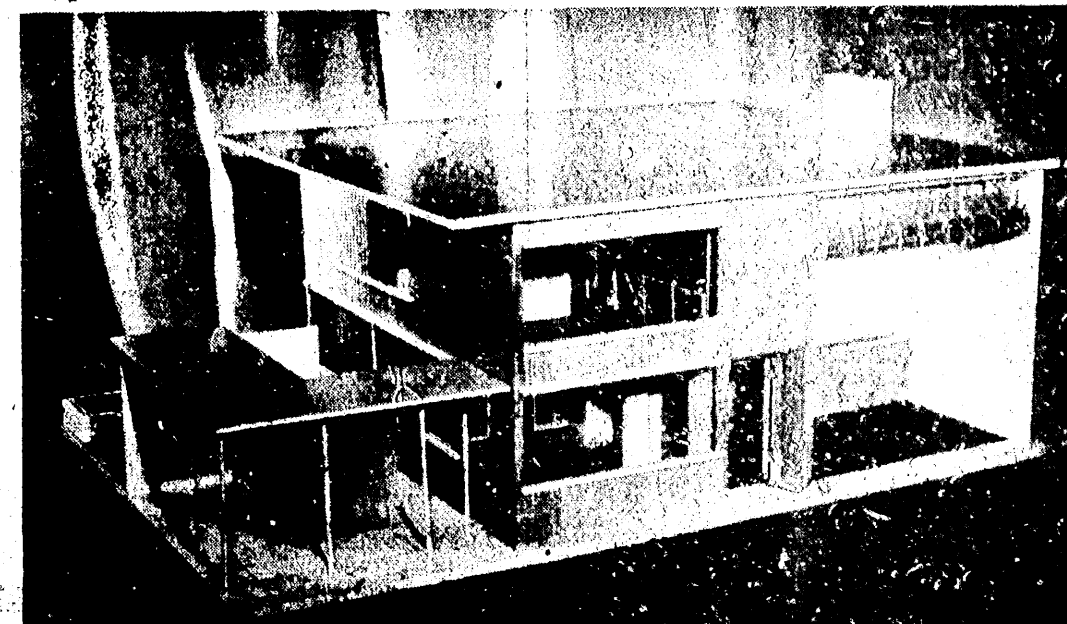


Sutro's is down to its last five pools—and ice rink, barrel roller, basketball court



"Son, that's the biggest thing of its breed that ever lived"

'Bay Area Modern' Finally Catches Up With the Neglected Doll House



Things Still Go Swimmingly at Sutro's

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bathers splashing in the plunges on one side of the building, or skaters sliding as they practice their school figures on the ice rink on the other side.

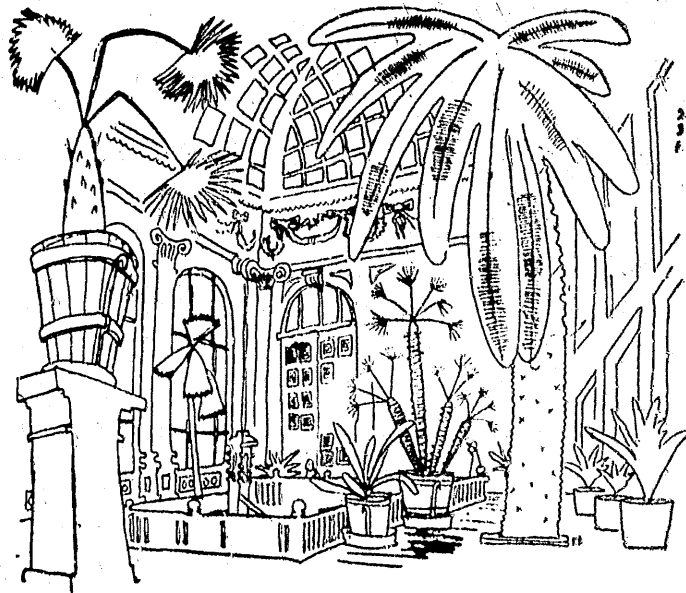
Turning to either right or left at the top of the broad viewing galleries one finds cases of stuffed animals, assembled by Adolph Sutro over half a century ago when collections of this kind were popular. Although this one has not been properly protected against moths, the collection is still impressive as a relic.

The cases might have been designed by a baker who makes Italian wedding cakes. Where the ink on the labels has not faded too badly, it is possible to see that the monkey collection includes a dog-faced baboon and a black handed spider monkey. Near by, a jaguar and an anaconda are poised, ready to engage in a death fight, just as they have been ever since Adolph Sutro had them mounted.

Birds Under Glass

Bird fanciers will find a sea owl, a skillian mantus, a weka rail and other feathered creatures pathetically huddled behind glass; ichthyologists will be delighted by the clouded fish, the smooth tetraodon, taken from the Gulf of California, and a porcupine fish.

The real sight among the stuffed animals, though—the one which



ALONG WITH stuffed fauna, Sutro's offers plenty of unstuffed flora. The traditional rubber tree from Malaya is trying its best to push out the roof.

attracted, the cattleman from Crescent City—is the ox. It was presented at a Mid-Winter Fair in Golden Gate Park in 1896, one of a pair brought from Holland for the show. They were said to be the heaviest draft team ever raised and were exhibited for their size.

Alive, the member of the team

at Sutro's weighed 4100 pounds. It stands nearly six feet at the shoulders. The years have been hard on the stuffed ox, for several hundred visitors have sought to immortalize themselves by carving their initials on his hide. One eye is missing, and here and there excelsior peeks through seams. Several times the management

has considered removing the ox, but each time the hue and cry from old timers have guaranteed him his place.

With this background, it is easy to forget that Sutro's is also in the swimming pool and ice rink business, employing 80 people on a seven-day-a-week schedule. It is impressive in other ways too, pumping over 1,000,000 gallons of water daily through its plunges.

A World of Pleasures

Each year the bathers rub 5000 towels to shreds after their swims. The skate shop boasts one of the most complete stocks on the Coast; and the plunges offer many other services besides a choice of water temperature. It is possible to rent a surplus inflated B-29 inner tube, have your picture taken and developed immediately for a quarter, get under a sun lamp for 10 cents, or enroll for a complete course of swimming lessons.

All this goes on under what is claimed to be the largest glass-roofed building in the world, laced together in an intricate network of steel spanners, the rods, and sash framing. The spectator who pays his 14 cents for a look around can expect to get the same feeling of nostalgia which comes from going up in the attic and poking through old trunks on a rainy day.