The Sunday Call

SAN FRANCISCO, SUNDAY MORNING, MAY 23, 1897.

SAN FRANCISCO AGAINST THE SKY.

Silhouettes of the City's Toplines at three Period's

No words could so vividly portray the changes which forty years have wrought in the material face of San Francisco as do the silhouette outlines which are presented on this page. The originals of these were taken from a point that threw the toplines of the City distinctly against the western sky. The first illustration is drawn from a picture somewhat similar to it which was made in 1857.

The second is reproduced from a photograph taken in 1887, thirty years later. The third is from a sketch made this week by a CALL artist on the ferry-boat from San Francisco to Oakland.

In the upper illustration appears little more than a range of sand hills. Looked at from a distance, say two miles, there was scarcely a mark or an object to distinguish them from any ordinary range of hills in California. The sky lines were unbroken and comparatively smooth from a removed view point.

Lower down there could be discerned several of the more prominent buildings of those early days—buildings long since permitted to crumble down in humble subjection to a loftier and more modern era of architecture and a greater commercial demand.

In the foreground, skirting the dull strip of earth, are scattered a cosmopolitan fleet of merchant vessels, which in those days had their noses pointed goldward and were as much miners of the sea as their human brother rovers of '49 were miners of the land.

In the middle view, representing a period three decades removed from that of the foregoing view, may be perceived evidences of modern development in somewhat spasmodic or extreme architectural attempts. The Palace Hotel was in those awakening times the cynosure of eyes with an awe of magnitude and a reverence for cost.

The Hopkins and a few neighboring mansions arose on Nob Hill and began to disturb the hitherto even lines of the City's silhouette.

The "new" City Hall, which ten years ago had outgrown the last human being who dared to predict that it would some day be finished, was then in the heyday of its newness, minus the tower and a few other incidental appurtenances. The shot tower was towering away then as hard as it has ever towered since, and the shot were dropping through it a good deal more thickly and to a much better purpose than shot ever fell in the Greek and Turkish war.

Wharves and docks had taken the place of a scraggly beach. Larger and better ships had sailed through the Golden Gate. International commerce had laid its hand upon San Francisco, and was beginning to raise it to the prominence which it to-day occupies as a seaport metropolis.

The third view, when suddenly compared with the first, produces the effect of magic. What a wonderful transformation! The even-topped hills have disappeared like the mists of morning before the summer sun, and in their places is a modern city of the first rank. And it is a beautiful city, with the grandest sky line in all the world. It is artistic in composition, and when seen against a glorious western sheet of clouds is sublime.

The valley which lay between the hills, the center of which is now Market street, fairly bristles with lofty structures. These all rise from about the same level, so that the various heights can be compared when seen from across the bay. The highest of these is, of course, THE CALL building, now rapidly nearing completion. It rises [illegible] a group of splendid structures, to about 4[illegible] bay, or 315 feet from the sidewalk where [illegible] ure forms the pyramid line of a grou[illegible]

Near by is the Palace Hotel, which was large once, but now appears to have shrunk by comparison. Just opposite is the tower of the Chronicle building, also looking less lofty now than it once did.

Right round this section of town tall buildings—commonly called "sky-scrapers"—stick up on all sides. There is the Crocker building, in reality wedge-shaped, but appearing as a huge block in spite of the fact that many people claim to see in its outlines a suggestion of the shape of a slice of wedding-cake.

Almost mingling with the Crocker building is the Hobart block, occupied by the offices of the Southern Pacific Company. A little further to the north can be seen the Mills building. This structure seems to stand by itself, so much taller is it than its neighbors. The Pacific Mutual and the Mutual Life buildings look like twins. They are not, of course, but such they must be conceded to be in the sky lines.

On the south the old shot-tower looks as it used to do a decade ago, but a change has come over that "new" City Hall—a greater change even than the architect designer ever dreamed his work would be evolved into. But it is there, and the big dome rises proudly heavenward, looking just as though it had been built to furnish a jumping-off place for the angel on the top.

The tall buildings are for the most part graceful in outline and make good silhouettes. They form into good composition and make the finest kind of a background for the many ships that come through the finest gateway of a great Nation.

Now that we know what San Francisco's sky line looks like, and how it has changed within the last half century, it might be well to compare it with the sky line of other big cities of the world. First, however, it must be borne in mind that the sky lines of the other large cities are not as easily seen as San Francisco's. San Francisco's shows to better advantage than any other city's.

The site occupied by the City at the Golden Gate has been conceded travelers to be the finest in the world, without exception. Of course, [illegible]re are finer sites occupied by smaller cities, such as Monaco, but they can hardly be considered in this list. The wonderful bay of San Francisco, surrounded by hills and dotted with islands, and with rivers emptying into it from all sides, provides a background, or setting, that no other city is blessed with.

The fact that one can go half way between San Francisco and Oakland and from that point get a view of all the City also gives its sky line a quality of its own. Most of the large cities of the world are so situated that their sky lines, such as they are, cannot be seen except at too short a range or too great a range. But they would not amount to much even if they could be seen.

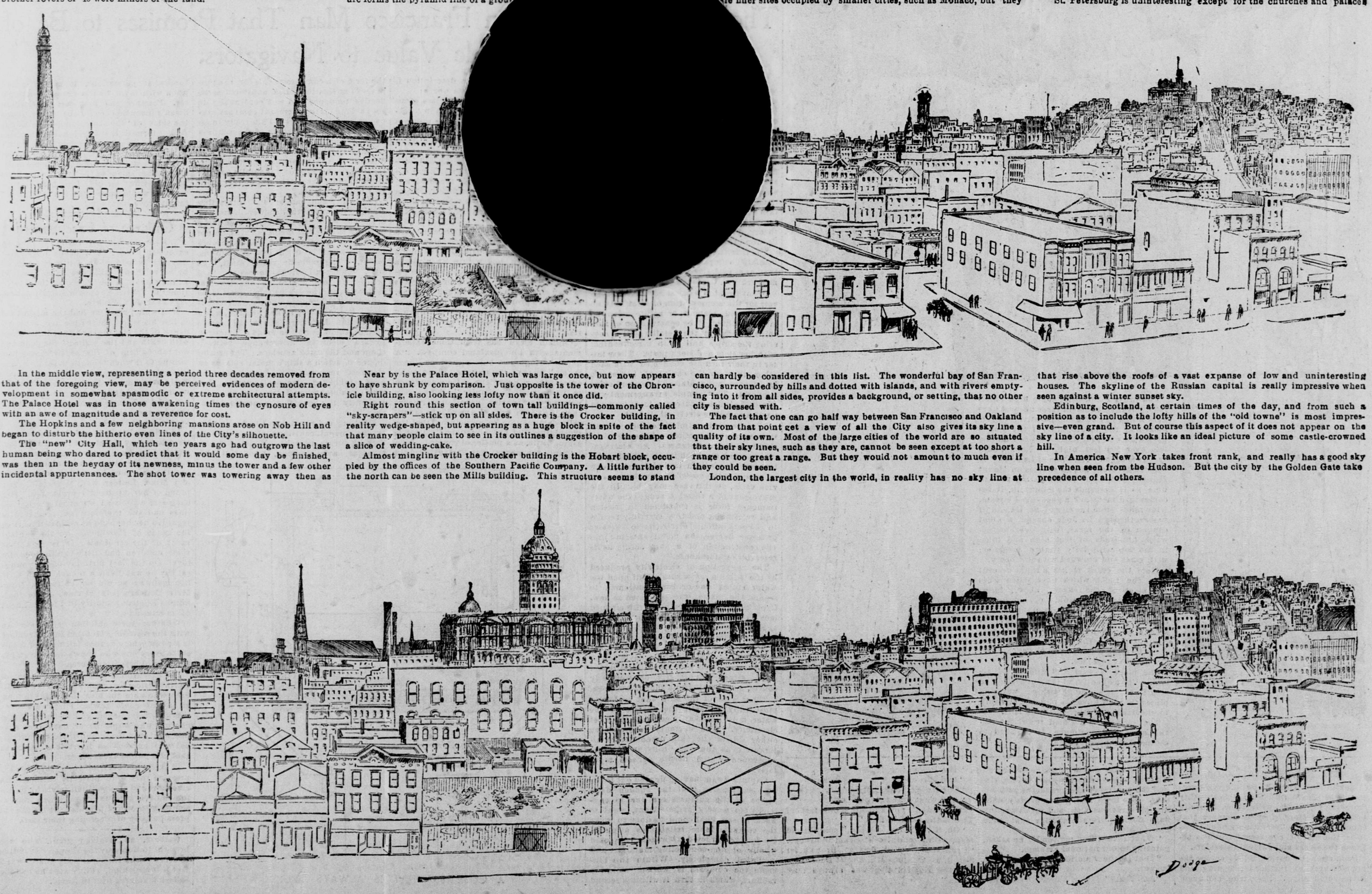
London, the largest city in the world, in reality has no sky line at all. Looking across the Thames on one of the clearest days of the year all that can be seen is a flat expanse of buildings with the towers of the Houses of Parliament, Tower of London, St. Paul's Cathedral and a few churches rising above the rest. The circumstance that the other buildings in the city are very high destroys much of the effect which might exist if such were not the case.

Paris, like London, is a flat wilderness of housetops, broken only by chimney-pots. Above this rise the Arch of Triumph, the towers of Notre Dame and other churches, the Opera, the Invalides, as well as the famous Eiffel tower. From some directions the tower of the Pantheon shows us part of the sky line, but from that view the other buildings cannot be seen. Compared to San Francisco's sky line it is nothing.

Rome's sky line might be good if it were possible to see it. But this cannot be done, because the Tiber is too narrow and the surrounding country is higher than the city. Certain portions of Rome, as can be seen from certain points, present beautiful silhouettes of an impressiveness not to be found in any other part of the world. But a complete view of the city cannot be obtained.

The German cities are nearly all flat and uninteresting. Constantinople presents a good view from certain points, but the really fine buildings cannot be seen in the sky line.

St. Petersburg is uninteresting except for the churches and palaces that rise above the roofs of a vast expanse of low and uninteresting houses. The skyline of the Russian capital is really impressive when seen against a winter sunset sky.

Edinburg, Scotland, at certain times of the day, and from such a position as to include the lofty hills of the "old towne" is most impressive—even grand. But of course this aspect of it does not appear on the sky line of a city. It looks like an ideal picture of some castle-crowned hill.

In America New York takes front rank, and really has a good sky line when seen from the Hudson. But the city by the Golden Gate take precedence of all others.