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STANFORD

M A G A Z I N E

How the West Was Done

Sunset magazine turns 100 this month. Launched to promote a railroad, it grew up to become the blueprint for a lifestyle.

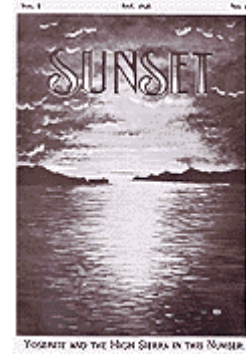
by Jackie Krentzman

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Mary Louise Livingston began subscribing to *Sunset* magazine in 1960, after she and her husband bought their first house. When the magazine arrived each month, she would pull out a marking pen and get busy. First came the recipes. She'd jot down on a file card the page number of those dishes that looked good, making separate categories for entrees, appetizers and desserts. Then she'd move on to gardening tips and travel suggestions. When she had made it through the whole issue, she'd put the cards in a filebox and the magazine itself in a special holder she'd ordered from *Sunset*. She stored the old issues in her basement for 10 years.



ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF PULCHRITUDE: Beautiful images graced *Sunset* covers even in the early days: a Native American from the July 1904 issue, and the Golden Gate (before the bridge) on the maiden cover in May 1898.

The fire following the April 1906 earthquake destroyed the magazine's offices, but the May issue still came out.

"My family would always refer back to those *Sunset* articles," says Livingston, now 77. Daughter Margaret, 46, has her own file of yellowing clips – articles on how to make wrapping paper, where to find the best bread bakeries in the West, how to grow blueberry bushes. Margaret still talks about family vacations to Big Basin and the Sonoma Coast in the '60s that her parents learned about in the magazine. "The great thing about *Sunset* is that it's timeless," she says. "An article could be two years old or 20, it doesn't matter. Most of what the magazine writes about never goes out of date."

To a publisher or editor trying to produce a trendy magazine, those words wouldn't offer much solace. But *Sunset*, which celebrates its 100th anniversary this spring, has endured precisely because it remains comfortable and familiar – and because it has long stayed true to its mission as a sort of users' guide to Western living.

Not sure what to plant in this land of seemingly endless summers? Turn to page 88. Perplexed about how to cook that strange vegetable you bought out of curiosity at the market yesterday? See page 43 for artichoke recipes. Looking for weekend getaways to

beaches, parks or spas? Check out this month's travel section.

"There were three magazines in my grandmother's house, on an island in Puget Sound," says Pat Dillon, an author and longtime Bay Area journalist. "Life, because it personified in pictures what people were thinking and feeling. The New Yorker, because it had a literary vibrancy and kept us in touch with the rest of the world. And *Sunset*, because it reaffirmed and celebrated something deeper than marketing. It sort of 'got it,' what the West was about. It was delivered in a not-so-terribly sophisticated manner, but it never talked down to you, either."

As it enters its second century, *Sunset* can be proud of its profile. It has strong reader loyalty and is a leader in the regional magazine category. Circulation is at an all-time high of 1.5 million



— about the same as Life and twice the New Yorker. A full-page ad sells for \$58,500. The average reader is a 46-year-old homeownership suburbanite with a mean household income of \$80,100.

How *Sunset* became an editorial and financial success is a story laced with Stanford connections. The magazine was created in 1898 as a promotional vehicle for Southern Pacific, the huge railroad company built by Leland Stanford. Charles Field, a graduate of the Pioneer Class of 1895, bought the title in 1914 and turned it into a Western literary magazine. Among the writers in the early years: two Stanford presidents and some prominent alumni, including Herbert Hoover, a classmate of Field's. In 1928, the magazine was purchased by Laurence Lane, whose two sons, Laurence Jr. (Bill) and Mel, later graduated from Stanford and ran the operation until 1990.

Alumnus Charles Field bought *Sunset* in 1914 and turned it into a Western literary magazine. Among the writers in the early years: Stanford presidents Jordan and Wilbur.

During their 62-year tenure, the Lanes forged ever-stronger ties between *Sunset* and Stanford. In the late '30s, they enlisted Stanford business school professors to help with a magazine marketing survey. In the '50s, Ann Sterling, wife of University

President Wally Sterling, posed with their two daughters for a *Sunset* testimonial ad that ran in the Wall Street Journal. ("Mrs. Sterling is a *Sunset* devotee," read the copy, which was accompanied by a photo of the three women packing the station wagon for a *Sunset*-inspired "weekend jaunt into the California countryside.") Over the years, the Lanes hired a parade of Stanford grads for top posts on both the business and editorial sides. To launch its gardening section in 1941, for example, *Sunset* turned to Elsa Uppman, '28, a former University lecturer in landscape gardening who was running the California School of Gardening for Women on the west side of campus. Uppman stayed with the magazine for more than 30 years, retiring as a senior editor.

As *Sunset* prospered, the Lanes became big Stanford supporters. Together, the brothers have endowed two academic chairs – one at the business school and the other in creative writing. Mel led the campaign to restore Memorial Church after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, and he and his wife, Joan, made major gifts toward repairing both the Church and Green Library. Bill spearheaded the drive to restore the Red Barn in the early '80s. He and his wife, Jean, made possible much of the post-earthquake restoration of the Inner Quad; in recognition of that gift, in January the History Corner was renamed Lane History Corner. The brothers have each sat on several Stanford boards, including Mel's decade (1981-91) as a University trustee.

To honor these ties, the University is helping *Sunset* celebrate its centennial. The Hoover Exhibit Pavilion will examine *Sunset*'s influence on Western lifestyles; that exhibit runs May 12 through August 15. Stanford Libraries is publishing an index of some 10,000 magazine articles – an ambitious project that will give historians easier access to *Sunset*'s archives. It's something that might make Mary Louise Livingston envious.

Eager to lure people West, Southern Pacific Railroad created a 16-page monthly publication in May 1898. It was named for the *Sunset* Limited, the Southern Pacific train that ran from New Orleans to Los Angeles. A forerunner of the modern airline magazine, the first issue sold for five cents and featured a drawing of the Golden Gate on the cover. Much of the issue was devoted to the splendors of Yosemite National Park. Subtitled "The Magazine of the Border," *Sunset* declared in a published mission statement that it would present information about seven Western states and territories – "a rich and inexhaustible field over which the dawn of future commercial and industrial importance is just breaking."

In the early years, *Sunset* was largely a travel magazine aimed at farmers ("Come to the San Joaquin Valley! The Nile of the West!") and businessmen. A September 1898 article promoted a burgeoning town: "The population of the city is about 105,000. The streets are remarkably fine, and the very extensive system of electric railways has served to prevent congestion." Los Angeles, of course.

Stanford writers showed up regularly in the magazine's pages. The University's first president, David Starr Jordan, wrote stories on the founding of Stanford; Mexican and Japanese history; camping in the Sierra; and the League of Nations. Its third president, Ray Lyman Wilbur, waxed philosophic about the region's virtues in April 1929: "The Pacific slope holds promise of a unique civilization, one with greater opportunity for the average man, one with a fuller life for his family. It calls for more from him, it gives more in return."

With the railroad business booming, Southern Pacific decided it no longer needed to spend its own money to promote the West. In 1914, the railroad sold the magazine to Field, who had been its editor for three years. Field and his staff transformed *Sunset* from a public relations vehicle to a Western version of the popular *Atlantic Monthly*, titling it "The West's Great National Magazine." Field attracted such poets and writers as James Thurber, Zane Grey, Sinclair Lewis, Dashiell Hammett, Hiram Johnson, Damon Runyon, John Muir, Mary Austin and Jack London.

'Martha Stewart is a powerful figure in our culture,' says California state librarian Kevin Starr. 'But she's just doing what *Sunset* began doing 70 years ago.'

Sunset also ventured into politics and muckraking, tackling problems such as organized crime, drug trafficking and the despoliation of the forests. In 1914, the magazine published a cover story worrying that the Panama Canal was vulnerable to air attack. Herbert Hoover, the first U.S. president from west of the Mississippi, wrote several pieces for the magazine, including a 1920 essay on America's duty to help children in postwar Europe. In 1929, the magazine excerpted Hoover's campaign speeches on the importance of the home.

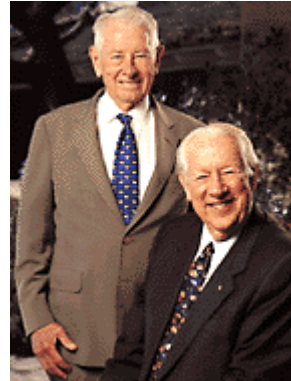
By the mid-'20s, *Sunset* had established itself as the most authoritative voice of the West. But without the backing of Southern Pacific, the magazine was foundering financially. Fields had no choice but to put it up for sale.

Laurence Lane, the advertising director for Iowa-based Meredith Publishing (flagship: *Better Homes and Gardens*), had always been captivated by the West. A rangy Kansan, Lane had spent time on a ranch in the Rockies after he was diagnosed with tb as a young man. In the mid-'20s, Lane set up sales offices for Meredith in California, Oregon and Washington. After a business trip, he'd bring fresh avocados, oranges and brussels sprouts back to his curious family in Des Moines. It was on one of these California tours that Lane discovered *Sunset*. In September 1928, he bought the magazine, with a

circulation then of 100,000, for \$60,000. At Christmas, the rest of the Lane family – including wife Ruth and sons Bill and Mel – climbed into a new Packard sedan and headed to California.

Lane quickly grasped how different the West was from the rest of the nation, and saw his opportunity. Westerners, he believed, had unique needs that were ignored by the Eastern magazines. For instance, an article on growing corn would need a different spin for the arid West than for the verdant Midwest. Home design features needed to account for the fact that Western houses didn't have basements or storm windows. Travel stories had to reflect a climate that permitted year-round outdoor recreation, from beaches to parks to mountains.

With this in mind, Lane remade *Sunset* from a literary magazine into a how-to publication. Unlike *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Sunset* would appeal to both men and women. He introduced four distinct sections – travel, garden, food and home. The four



THE LANE REIGN: Mel (standing) and Bill at *Sunset* headquarters today, and "The Boys" (Bill on left) with their dad, Laurence, in 1954.

Laurence Lane's first issue, with a painting of Lake Tahoe on the cover, came out in February 1929.



departments, which son Bill Lane likes to call the "wheels of the car," are still the core of the magazine. To reflect the new editorial mission, Lane changed the magazine's subtitle to "The Western Magazine of Homing and Roaming." (It changed again, to "The Magazine of Western Living," in 1943.)

"He made a brilliant decision not to align with *Atlantic Monthly*, but to create a distinctively Far Western product with its own lifestyle," says Kevin Starr, California state librarian. "Martha Stewart is a powerful figure in our culture. But she is just doing what *Sunset* began doing 70 years ago."

Lane's first priority was to turn operating losses into profit. That took 10 years, in part because the stock market crashed just nine months after his first issue came off the presses. Financial stability eventually came as the new *Sunset* steadily gained circulation and advertising. But Lane was picky about who could advertise in his pages. He turned away companies selling women's personal products for fear of alienating his male readership. A "non-acceptable advertising list" from a 1953 internal document includes: cigarettes, whiskey, beer, non-scheduled airlines, gambling devices, buy-back schemes and "advertisers whose integrity we cannot verify."

Lane tried to develop a bond with his readers. When an advertiser selling bookcases went bankrupt in 1950 before he could deliver goods ordered by *Sunset* readers, Lane sent refund checks to aggrieved readers. Likewise when his editors promoted a chemical formula for cleaning fish ponds without removing the fish. Turns out all the fish died. Lane invited complaining readers to put a cash value on their losses, and *Sunset* paid every claim.

Regional editions, started in 1932, were a logical extension of Lane's marketing savvy. He knew that readers in Seattle, San Francisco and Palm Springs had different interests and expectations. He also understood that it was easier to lure advertisers who wanted to target a smaller market. Today, *Sunset* has five regional editions covering 13 Western states, though 60 percent of its readers live in California.

In the 1930s, Lane began offering *Sunset* booklets as premiums to subscribers. The first title, *The Kitchen Cabinet Cook Book*, was printed by Stanford Press. Piggybacking on the magazine's editorial expertise, mailing lists and name recognition, the book division soon took off as a business in its own right. Sales exploded from \$4 million annually in the mid-'50s to \$50 million

in the late '60s. Over the years, some 400 different books have been published. The most popular title, the Western Garden Book, has sold an astounding 5.5 million copies.

By marrying the Westerner's hunger for new ideas with the basic human nesting instinct, Lane clearly struck a chord. The magazine took on a distinctive personality. "My father redefined *Sunset* as the time of the late afternoon commute, the time when one heard the call of home and concluded that *Sunset* meant home," says Bill Lane.

The postwar boom in suburban growth dovetailed nicely with *Sunset's* new niche as a how-to magazine for the home. In 1951, when circulation hit half a million, the magazine gave in to its own suburban boosterism and moved from a drab San Francisco office building to a 7-acre site in Menlo Park. (The offices are still there, and today feature carefully tended lawns, a 3,200-square-foot test garden and a new 1,000-square-foot test kitchen, where *Sunset* editors and guest chefs test up to 2,000 recipes a year.) Business Week marked the occasion with a three-page article declaring *Sunset* "belligerently dedicated to Western living" and showing photos of the staff enjoying twice-a-day coffee breaks on the patio.

Bill, '42, and Mel, '44, known around the office as "The Boys," had sold *Sunset* door-to-door as preteens during the Depression. In 1952, they took over *Sunset* operations from their father. They eventually divided duties – Bill focused on the magazine, Mel on the book division – but consulted on the big decisions. It was during the '50s that the magazine began to acquire a national reputation, outpacing other home-service magazines with articles on Western travel and a house-design contest sponsored by the American Institute of Architects. In 1953, Newsweek called *Sunset* "a specialist in sunny, free-style Western living" and heralded its "strong impact on designers, merchants, style leaders and other publications."

The magazine retained its special appeal to Easterners drawn West by inexpensive land, job opportunities and a temperate climate. More than simply reflecting the Western lifestyle, *Sunset* helped to create it. It popularized innovations in technology that quickly caught on in the West, from solar energy to steel-frame construction to microwave cooking.

"*Sunset's* role wasn't so much as the inventor of new products or ideas, but we encouraged and featured them," says Bill Lane. "We

didn't discover sliding-glass doors, but we were the ones to let the public know about them. We picked up on some of the early pioneers who used fresh produce in cooking, brought them to our test kitchens and had them work with our cooking editors. We also pioneered what is now called eco-tourism. We didn't just write articles on Waikiki. We wrote about areas of Hawaii that were off the beaten track, and we advocated leaving nature as you found it."

These ideas, conventional wisdom today, were novel in the '50s. The Lanes, says Michael McCone, director of the California Historical Society, were "especially prescient at spotting trends and presenting them to their readers first."

By the 1960s, the trends were changing – and *Sunset* tried to keep pace. Newcomers to the West were no longer simply Dust Bowl survivors or adventurous couples from Ohio looking to escape the snow. Increasingly, immigrants to California were coming from Mexico, Central America and Asia. The magazine began incorporating Asian and Hispanic influences into its editorial content, with articles on everything from Japanese architecture to Mexican cuisine.

But it didn't go fast enough or far enough for some. Critics in the late '60s and '70s dismissed the magazine as a throwback. In the era of Vietnam and Watergate, they said, *Sunset* was acting as if Ike were still in the White House. San Francisco Chronicle columnist Herb Caen wrote that *Sunset* glorified living in the West without looking hard enough at the region's problems. Indeed, while the nation was going through social upheaval, the magazine continued to write about food, gardening, home and travel. "It fell out of step with the times," says Clay Felker, former editor of *New York* and a professor at the UC-Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism.

But the critics were missing the point, says Michael Keller, director of libraries at Stanford. "*Sunset* never promised to present the complete story," he argues. "*Sunset* was a reflection of popular culture, a reflection of bourgeois life in the West. It's the magazine for Western living, not Western politicians or scholars."

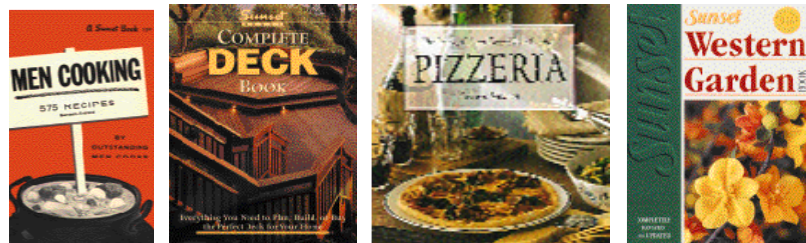
The magazine did get involved in some issues. It voiced concern about urban growth and the environment. It published editorials calling for the protection of wetlands and forests, and turned down advertising from companies that sold harmful pesticides.

"We changed by evolution, not revolution," says Bill Lane. "People say we became out of touch with the times, that it was 'my mother's magazine.' People can say that National Geographic was 'my great-grandfather's magazine,' but it's still being read today, and it is still relevant today. Just because your mother read *Sunset* doesn't mean we're cooking on the same old stove or making the same old recipes."

In the 1980s, Bill and Mel Lane were approached by several companies interested in purchasing the magazine. Time Inc. even sent an emissary to Australia, where Bill served as U.S. ambassador from 1985 to 1989. "We looked at our ages and the other things we were involved in, and neither of us wanted to carry on alone if something happened to the other," recalls Bill. So they invited a half-dozen companies to make proposals and, in 1990, they sold *Sunset* to Time-Warner for \$225 million.

The new regime hews to the time-proven "four wheels of the car" formula. "We celebrate the good things here in the West," says Rosalie Wright, a longtime newspaper and magazine journalist who took over as editor in 1996. Under Wright, *Sunset* has introduced a more sophisticated design and moved the content into the '90s, with new columns on quick cuisine, wine and home offices. Articles now have bylines, which had been omitted under the Lanes.

Some longtime readers worry that the new team is driven too much by market research and is less connected to the community. "Unfortunately, *Sunset* doesn't feel like a good neighbor anymore," says Pat Dillon. "The Lanes were avuncular, maybe the grandparents next door. But now the magazine seems more concerned with the bottom line. I think it's lost its soul."



THE BOOK BUSINESS: Sunset launched a division in 1946 and has since published some 400 titles – 900 if you include major revisions of existing books. The subjects reflect the "four wheels of the car": food, home, garden and travel

If that's the case, most readers don't seem to mind. Circulation is at an all-time high, and the magazine appears poised to benefit from

the increasing suburbanization of the West.

"*Sunset* is one of the most successful publications in American history," says Felker. "It captures the essence of Western living in a way that is useful – and it does so with great integrity. There really isn't another magazine like it."

Jackie Krentzman is the managing editor for the custom publishing division of Diablo Publications and a frequent contributor to Stanford.