

State of California — The Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION
PRIMARY RECORD

Primary # _____
HRI # _____
Trinomial _____
NRHP Status Code 3CS

Other Listings _____
Review Code _____ Reviewer _____ Date _____

Page 1 of 11

*Resource Name or #: (Assigned by recorder) 550-590 Van Ness Avenue

- P1. Historic name of building (if any): Standard Motor Car-Frank O. Renstrom-Don Gilmore auto showrooms
P2. Location: *a: County San Francisco ☐ Not for Publication ☒ Unrestricted
*b. USGS 7.5' Quad _____ Date _____ T _____; R _____; _____ ¼ of _____ ¼ of Sec _____; _____ B.M.
c. Address 550-590 Van Ness Avenue City San Francisco Zip 94102
d. UTM: Zone _____; _____ mE/ _____ mN *e. Assessor's parcel #: Block 766, lot 13

*P3a. Description: (Describe resource and its major elements. Include design, materials, condition, alterations, size, setting, and boundaries)

This is a two-story brick masonry building that fills its 80' by 100' lot at the southeast corner of Golden Gate and Van Ness avenues. The composition is asymmetrical, with narrow bays in each façade at the corner of Van Ness and Golden Gate, and much wider bays to the south and west, respectively. The surface of each façade is brick that has been painted, largely but not completely obscuring the ornamental paneling in the second story piers and friezes. Piers are brick, and impart a skeletal appearance to the composition.

At the top of the building is a paneled parapet with short, castellated caps above each pier. These caps are highly elaborated at the corners of the building. Below the parapet is a paneled cornice with diamonds between each panel. This cornice is supported visually by block modillions and a course of dentils.

(See Continuation Sheet, page 2.)

*P3b Resource Attributes: HP6 – commercial building; HP8 – industrial building



*P4. Resources Present:

☒ Building ☐ Structure ☐ Object
☐ Site ☐ District ☐ Element of District ☐ Other

P5b. Description of Photo:

(View, date, accession #)
Van Ness Avenue façade, view looking east. June 2009.

*P6. Date Constructed/Age and Source:

☒ Historic
☐ Prehistoric ☐ Both
1908-1909; building permits

*P7. Owner and Address:

GOLDEN VAN BUILDING LLC
180 REDWOOD ST
SAN FRANCISCO CA 94102

*P8. Recorded by: (Name, affiliation, and address)

William Kostura
P. O. Box 60211
Palo Alto, CA 94306

*P9. Date Recorded:

November 2009

*P10. Survey Type: (Describe)

intensive

P11. Report Citation*: (Cite survey report.) William Kostura. Van Ness Auto Row Support Structures. San Francisco Department of City Planning, 2010.

*Attachments: ☐ NONE ☐ Location Map ☐ Sketch Map ☒ Continuation Sheet ☒ Building, Structure and Object Record
☐ Archaeological Record ☐ District Record ☐ Linear Feature Record ☐ Milling Station Record ☐ Rock Art Record
☐ Artifact Record ☐ Photograph Record ☐ Other (List)

Page 2 of 11
Recorded by William Kostura

Resource Identifier: 550-590 Van Ness Avenue
*Date November 2009 ☒ Continuation ☐ Update

Description (continued):

In the upper story, window openings are set in brick casings, with keystones, that are slightly recessed from the wall plane. The original primary entrance to the building has become a window, but its original brick casing and transom are still evident in the middle bay of the Golden Gate Avenue facade. This casing is profiled with three layers and has brick voussoirs and a keystone in the flat arch. A brick transom with a central panel and diamond are immediately beneath the voussoirs.

Save for the original entrance casing and transom described above, all original windows, doors, and transoms have been removed and are replaced by modern aluminum windows and doors.



Perspective view, looking southeast. June 2009.

Page 3 of 11
Recorded by William Kostura

Resource Identifier: 550-590 Van Ness Avenue
*Date November 2009 ☒ Continuation ☐ Update



Cornice details on the Golden Gate Avenue and Van Ness Avenue sides. Original entrance on Golden Gate Avenue.

BUILDING, STRUCTURE, AND OBJECT RECORD

Page 4 of 11

*NRHP Status Code 3CS

*Resource Name or # (Assigned by recorder) 550-590 Van Ness Avenue

B1. Historic Name: Standard Motor Car-Frank O. Renstrom-Don Gilmore auto showrooms

B2. Common Name: _____

B3. Original Use: auto showroom

B4. Present Use: restaurant

*B5. Architectural Style: Classical Revival

*B6. Construction History: (Construction date, alterations, and date of alterations)

Built in 1908-1909. Window and door opening altered ca. 1996.

*B7. Moved? ☒ No ☐ Yes ☐ Unknown

Date: _____ Original Location: _____

*B8. Related Features:

none

B9a. Architect: Frederick H. Meyer

b. Builder: Kittle Construction Co.

*B10. Significance: Theme automobile industry Area San Francisco

Period of Significance 1909-1959

Property Type auto showroom

Applicable Criteria 1, 2

(Discuss importance in terms of historical or architectural context as defined by theme, period, and geographic scope. Also address integrity.)

History: Construction and architect

This building was built in 1908-1909 as an investment for the Sarah Coffin Estate to designs by architect Frederick H. Meyer. The architect, Meyer, is one of the most important in San Francisco's history. He apprenticed as a draftsman during the 1890s – first for his father, a cabinetmaker; then for architect John C. Pelton; for a building contractor; and finally for Samuel Newsom, before being admitted into junior partnership with Newsom in 1899. He opened his own office in 1900, quickly gained major commissions (e.g. the Rialto Building, 1901-1902), and played a major role in the reconstruction of downtown San Francisco after the earthquake and fire of 1906. He often worked in partnership (e.g. Meyer and O'Brien, Meyer and Johnson, Meyer and Evers, etc.), was extremely prolific, and designed for a wide variety of building types – tall office buildings, banks, factories and other industrial buildings, libraries, schools, firehouses, club buildings, a county courthouse, hospitals, retail stores, hotels, apartment buildings, and residences. He also collaborated on the Civic Auditorium in the Civic Center. Refined and often rich detailing, and well-considered compositions characterizes most of his work. He was honored with a retrospective of his career as early as 1909 (in *Architect and Engineer*) and continued to work more than a half century after that date, until his death in 1961.

B11. Additional Resource Attributes: (List attributes and codes) _____

***B12. References:**

Building permit #19651, filed under 595 Golden Gate (Oct. 3, 1908)

Architect and Engineer, October 1909, p. 67 (top photo)

Crocker-Langley and Polk's city directory, PT&T reverse directory,
and PT&T yellow pages listings for occupants of this building,
1910-1964

1912, 1913, 1929 and 1948 Sanborn insurance maps

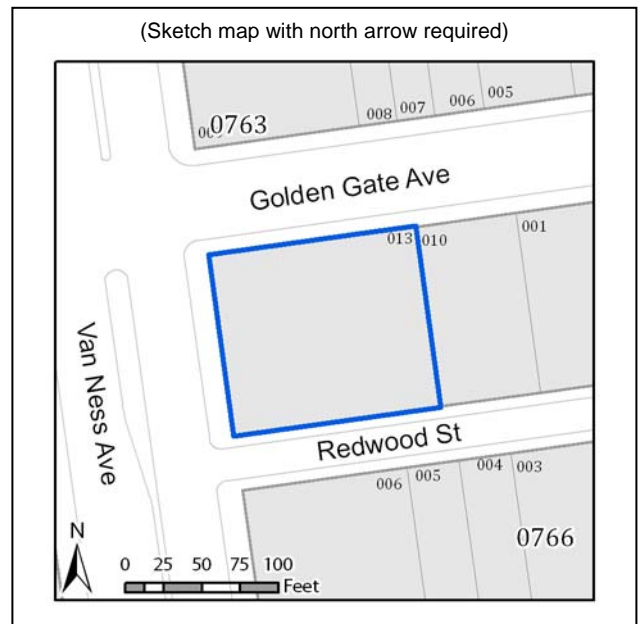
SF *Chronicle*, June 15, 1913, p. 62, display ad (Kissel Kar)

B13. Remarks:

*B14. Evaluator: William Kostura

Date of Evaluation: November 2009

(This space reserved for official comments.)



Page 5 of 11
Recorded by William Kostura

Resource Identifier: 550 Van Ness Avenue
*Date November 2009 ☒ Continuation ☐ Update

History – occupants of this building

This is the oldest automobile showroom left standing in San Francisco. It was occupied by auto dealers for fifty years, from the completion of its construction in 1909 through at least 1959. During its early years, the building was divided into four or five storefronts, most devoted to auto-related businesses. At the time, the building was considered to be more a part of the established auto row along Golden Gate Avenue than of the emerging auto row along Van Ness.

The principle storefront in this building was always an auto showroom in the northwest corner of the building, numbered 583 Golden Gate Avenue. The first floor of this showroom was devoted to auto display, mezzanine offices overlooked the showroom, and the entire second story was devoted to its parts and service departments. For a brief period (1912-1914) a second showroom simultaneously occupied a second storefront, facing Van Ness Avenue.

A summary of the occupants is as follows:

Automobile showrooms

1909-1913: The Standard Motor Car Co. This firm occupied the corner storefront in this building for four years. Its president was William L. Hughson, one of the first sellers of Ford automobiles in the United States, and often said to be the world's first Ford dealer. Of the eleven San Francisco buildings occupied by Hughson during his 64-year career in auto sales and service (from 1903-1967), six survive, and this is by far the earliest of them. (He occupied the other five survivors from 1944 onward.)

Newspaper ads reveal that Standard Motor Car moved into this building from its previous location (at 343-347 Golden Gate Avenue) some time between April 27th and May 4th, 1909. During the four years it was here, Standard sold Ford (during the entire period), Velie (during 1909-1910), Stoddard-Dayton (1911-1912), Baker Electric (1911-1913), and Kissel Kar (1913) autos; and Federal (1911-1913) and Mogul (1913) trucks. Standard also had an auto repair shop on the premises, run by Ivan L. de Jongh, who had previously owned his own shop.

Ford was the brand that Hughson stayed with for his entire 64 year career of auto sales. Velie was a popular mid-priced auto made in Moline, Illinois from 1908-1929. Stoddard-Dayton was a powerful, well-crafted, expensive car made in Dayton, Ohio from 1905-1913. Baker Electric (Cleveland, 1899-1914) was the nation's best-selling electric car until it was passed by Detroit Electric in 1913.

A 1913 article on the history of the Standard Motor Car Co. stated that its building at Golden Gate and Van Ness (the subject building) was, when it first opened, "the largest building in the city to be used exclusively for the housing of automobiles" (*S. F. Chronicle*, May 18, 1913, p. 54). This was a slight exaggeration, for the building did not at first house autos exclusively (it also housed two auto supplies stores), but this was clearly an important auto showroom when it was built. Much larger showrooms were built, however, in 1910 and 1911. In 1913, many large new showrooms were built, and Hughson moved his reorganized dealership into one of them.

(Continued on next page.)

Page 6 of 11
Recorded by William Kostura

Resource Identifier: 550 Van Ness Avenue
*Date November 2009 ☒ Continuation ☐ Update

History – occupants of this building (continued)

1913-1922: Frank O. Renstrom Co. Renstrom began selling automobiles at a store on Stanyan Street in 1906, and in 1910 moved to the southwest corner of Golden Gate And Van Ness, where he sold Kline and Regal autos. In December 1913, needing more room, he moved across the street into the storefront recently vacated by William Hughson, at 583 Golden Gate Avenue. Here he sold Regal autos (1913-1916), Kline autos (1913-1914), Grant Six autos (1916-1920), Jeffery autos (1916-1917), Premier autos (1918-1920), Briscoe autos (1919-1921); and, at various times, Grant, Jeffery, and Atterbury trucks. Except perhaps for Premier, these were all national brands that had their periods of success; except for Jeffery, however, none stayed in business for more than thirteen years.

Renstrom was a very aggressive salesman who fed newsy auto tips to the newspapers, decorated his showroom with splashy displays, held late-evening “open houses” to lure in customers, and always described his brands to reporters in the best possible light. In return for his efforts he was granted the northern California franchise first for Regal and then for Grant automobiles. By arrangement with these manufacturers, he contracted with auto dealers in the interior of the state to take on these brands while also selling them himself from 583 Golden Gate. Probably the most important brand that Renstrom sold was Jeffrey, formerly known as Rambler, and soon renamed as Nash, after the company’s new buyer.

It is not clear whether Renstrom changed brands so often because he jumped at offering popular brands as they became available to him, because he lost the rights to sell popular brands to more aggressive dealers, or because the brands he carried stopped selling well. By the end of 1918 he was selling used cars at 583 Golden Gate as well as new cars and trucks. The end of his business in 1922 coincided with the post-World War I national depression.

1912-1914: Oakland Motor Co. Oakland was the precursor to Pontiac, later part of General Motors. Its showroom was in the storefront numbered 542 Van Ness.

1925-1928: Flynn and Collins. This firm sold Ford autos from the storefront at 583 Golden Gate Ave.

1930-1934: James F. Waters. Like Hughson, Waters was one of the most important auto dealers in San Francisco’s history. Initially he sold used autos, but in 1930-1934 he began selling new DeSoto and Plymouth autos from this building, in the storefront numbered 590 Van Ness. He then moved to a much larger building at 1355 Van Ness, where he sold the same brands for the next 28 years (1935-1963). Late in his career he switched to selling Buicks.

1936-1954. Don Gilmore. From 1920-1933 Chevrolet was sold in San Francisco by one dealer, Robert A. Smith. He was replaced as a Chevrolet distributor in this city by three dealers, who each carried this brand for over thirty years. Of the three, Don Gilmore (in this building) had the smallest showroom; both Les Vogel (at 1535-1599 Market) and Ernest Ingold (at 999 Van Ness) had much larger buildings. Nevertheless, Gilmore was successful, selling Chevrolets in this building for 18 years, making him the longest-term occupant of this building.

1955-1959: Harvey Motors. This dealership sold and serviced Nash automobiles.

(Continued next page.)

Page 7 of 11
Recorded by William Kostura

Resource Identifier: 550 Van Ness Avenue
*Date November 2009 ☒ Continuation ☐ Update

History – occupants of this building (continued)

Except for Chevrolet, all of the brands listed above were sold here briefly, for six years or less. That fact is representative of the early automobile industry generally, when national brands flourished briefly and then failed, local dealers switched the brands they sold as opportunity or necessity dictated, and dealers jumped from smaller to larger buildings, or vice-versa, as their fortunes shifted.

550 Van Ness was a launching pad for two major auto dealers, William L. Hughson and James F. Waters, who went on to occupy much larger buildings. It was the final and longest-lasting home for another dealer of some importance, Don Gilmore.

It is also worth noting that 550 Van Ness is one of the very few buildings left standing that served as electric automobile showrooms. Electric autos were only sold here for two to three years, 1911-1913. Still, only one other building in the city has more importance for its association with electric autos, namely 2050 Van Ness/1675 Pacific.

Automobile parts and supplies

Auto parts and supplies stores shared this building with auto showrooms during the first four years after construction. The two auto parts dealers during these years were:

1909-1913: Hughson and Merton. The principle owner was William L. Hughson, who was also the president of Standard Motor Car Co. in this building. Hughson and Merton was founded in the 1890s as manufacturers' agents, selling buggies, bicycles, and their parts. It incorporated at the end of 1898 (S. F. *Chronicle*, Jan. 1, 1899, p. 51). Soon Hughson and Merton also began to represent makers of automobile parts. Newspaper ads reveal that they sold Ajax tires and Jones speedometers at 550 Van Ness; in all likelihood they sold many other products as well.

1909-1910: Moore Motor Supply Co. This firm sold general auto supplies.

After the 1950s this building became devoted to use as offices. Alterations to windows and doors occurred over time. The pivoting transom windows that stretched across both facades (visible in early photos) were removed at an unknown date. The building became rehabbed for use as a restaurant in the mid-1990s, which is most likely when the current window sash and doors were installed.

Integrity

All window and door opening have been altered. The rest of this building's exterior remains intact. As a result, this building retains integrity of location, design, and association. Integrity of materials, workmanship, and feeling are diminished but not lost. Regarding setting, many other old buildings in the vicinity still stand but have been heavily altered; others have been replaced. Integrity of setting, then, has been mostly lost.

(Continued next page.)

Page 8 of 11
Recorded by William Kostura

Resource Identifier: 550 Van Ness Avenue
*Date November 2009 ☒ Continuation ☐ Update

Evaluation

This is one of more than 100 buildings along the Van Ness Avenue corridor that have a history as automobile support structures, and that are being evaluated for possible historic significance according to the criteria of the California Register of Historical Resources. With a few exceptions, these buildings were auto showrooms, public garages, auto repair shops, auto parts and supplies stores, and auto painting shops. The time period that is being studied is from the initial years of the automobile industry in San Francisco through 1964. Among the factors that have been considered when evaluating a building are its date of construction, its longevity of auto-related use, the importance of its occupants in local auto industry history, integrity, and architectural quality. These factors, and how they apply to evaluations of buildings, are discussed in a cover report, *Van Ness Auto Row Support Structures, 1908-1964*.

Criterion 1

Completed in 1909, this the earliest example of an automobile showroom in San Francisco that retains fairly good integrity. With 50 years of such use in its history, it has excellent longevity in this use. These two factors by themselves lend the building a high degree of significance. In addition, certain specific aspects of its history are important. This is the earliest example of a Ford salesroom in the city. It is the earliest of three showrooms in the city that sold Velie. It is the only surviving showroom that sold Stoddard-Dayton, Regal, Kline, Grant Six, Premier, or Briscoe autos. It is the earliest surviving example of an Oakland or Pontiac showroom. It is the earlier and longer-lasting of two showrooms where Baker Electrics were sold. It is the less important of two surviving showrooms where Jeffery (the precursor to Nash and AMC) was sold. It is the earlier example of two surviving DeSoto and Plymouth showrooms. Of four buildings in the study area that have some importance as Chevrolet showrooms, this is perhaps the second most important (well after the Ernest Ingold showroom at 999 Van Ness). Finally, this is one of the few buildings left standing where electric autos were sold.

For these cumulative reasons, this building represents the very early automotive history of San Francisco better, perhaps, than does any other building. Despite the loss of the original windows and doors, which account for a large percentage of the total façade area, this building appears to be eligible for the California Register of Historical Resources under Criterion 1, at the local level, for its use as an automobile showroom. The Period of Significance under this criterion is 1909-1959, the years the building had this use.

Criterion 2

This is the earliest surviving showroom associated with William L. Hughson, who was probably the most important auto dealer in San Francisco's history. Hughson's other surviving auto showrooms were occupied by him much later in his career, from the 1940s-1960s. This building, then, appears to be eligible for the California Register under Criterion 2, as the only showroom associated with Hughson's early career. The Period of Significance under this criterion is 1909-1913, the years Hughson was here.

(Continued next page.)

Page 9 of 11
Recorded by William Kostura

Resource Identifier: 550 Van Ness Avenue
*Date November 2009 ☒ Continuation ☐ Update

Criterion 3

Architecturally, this building has some fine points, especially in the cornice area. However, due to the removal of the original windows and doors, which occupy a large area of the façade, this building does not appear to be eligible for the California Register under Criterion 3.

Character defining features

The character defining features of this building are its height and its width along both facades, the semi-castellated paneled parapet, the cornice with its modillions and dentils, the shape and dimensions of the window openings, the brick casings with keystones around the windows, and the brick casing, voussoirs, and transom around and over the former Golden Gate Avenue entrance.



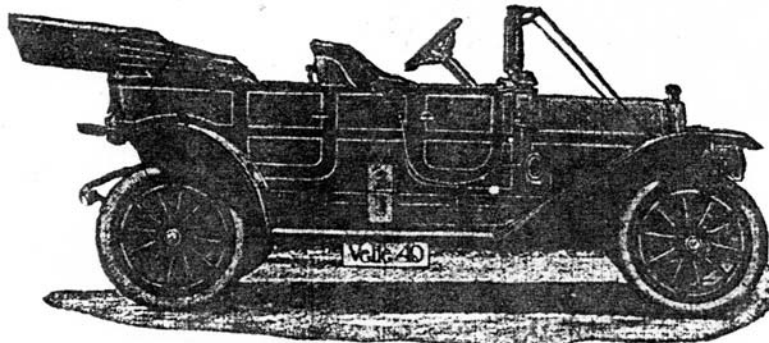
Photograph of 550 Van Ness Avenue soon after its completion in 1909, when it held (from left to right) William Hughson's Standard Motor Car Co., Hughson and Merton, and Moore Motor Supply Co.

Page 10 of 11
Recorded by William Kostura

Resource Identifier: 550 Van Ness Avenue
*Date November 2009 ☒ Continuation ☐ Update



THE STANDARD MOTOR CAR COMPANY OFFERS



THE VELIE 40

\$2,100 f. o. b., San Francisco. The Car That Runs as a Unit

When you drive the VELIE you are driving a machine that works as one piece.

Every part harmonizes with every other part. It is a symphony in motor construction.

The VELIE 40 has inherited the same strain of dogged stability that characterizes VELIE carriages and DEERE farm implements. For this car is their lineal and logical descendant.

Phone—Market 1200.

SPECIFICATIONS FOR 1911

Motor, 4½x5¼; 4 cylinders, cast in pairs.

Clutch, VELIE dry disc. With cork inserts.

Transmission, Brown-Lipe; selective sliding gear type.

Front axle, I beam section, forged from a solid ingot.

Rear axle, Timkin, full floating type, with Brown-Lipe bevel gear differential.

Bearings, Timkin roller bearings, exclusively on front axle, rear axle and transmission.

The VELIE 40 is an all around car. It has everything that distinguishes \$3,000 to \$5,000 cars. Compare its specifications point by point with any \$5,000 car. Whatever any of them has that really counts is in the VELIE 40.

The VELIE is not an assembled car. The only important adjuncts of the VELIE is not made in the Velie factory are the Brown-Lipe transmission, the Timkin roller bearing axles and Gemmer steering gears, all of which are standard.

VAN NESS AND GOLDEN GATE AVENUES

Los Angeles Branch,
1155 S. Olive St.

Standard Motor Company ads for sales of Ford (*Chronicle*, Dec. 26, 1909, p. 34) and Velie (*Call*, November 13, 1910, p. 54), at the building now numbered 550 Van Ness Avenue.

Page 11 of 11
Recorded by William Kostura

Resource Identifier: 550 Van Ness Avenue
***Date** November 2009 ☒ Continuation ☐ Update



Announcing the Greatest Leader in the History of the Automobile Industry

A Remarkable Combination
of High Quality, Large
Size and Low Price

THE NEW

(VALVE IN THE HEAD)

Compare This Car With
Any Other, Regardless
of Price

GRANT SIX

\$795

(FACTORY)

*The Grant Six is
Not Only a Leader,
But It Will Be Sold
only by Leaders*

\$795

(FACTORY)

*Attractive Propo-
sition for Res-
ponsible
Agents*

Leader in Size, Power, Construction and Price—Full Floating Axle—Full Cantilever Springs and Wonderful Riding Qualities.

The exceptional value of the New Grant Six is clear and unmistakable. The Absolute leader in motor car value. It gives the most for the money.

Six-Inch Longer Wheelbase—Larger, Roomier Body—Larger, Quieter Motor—Deeper, Softer Upholstery—Refined, Improved, Greater Value—More Complete Equipment.

LOOK AT THESE SPECIFICATIONS

The Grant Six has the largest body ever offered for the price of this class. It is a real motor car, with a full complement of accessories. It is a real motor car, with a full complement of accessories. It is a real motor car, with a full complement of accessories.

GRANT SIX has the largest body ever offered for the price of this class. It is a real motor car, with a full complement of accessories. It is a real motor car, with a full complement of accessories. It is a real motor car, with a full complement of accessories.

GRANT SIX has the largest body ever offered for the price of this class. It is a real motor car, with a full complement of accessories. It is a real motor car, with a full complement of accessories. It is a real motor car, with a full complement of accessories.

GRANT SIX has the largest body ever offered for the price of this class. It is a real motor car, with a full complement of accessories. It is a real motor car, with a full complement of accessories. It is a real motor car, with a full complement of accessories.

Side View of Grant Six Touring

Made in Touring Car, Roadster and Cabriolet Types
GRANT MOTOR CAR COMPANY, Flint, Mich.

FRANK O. RENSTROM CO.

Distributor

Van Ness and Golden Gate Avenue

Top: Three bays of the Van Ness Avenue façade, showing the storefront of the Oakland Motor Co. in 1913 (*San Francisco Newsletter*, Christmas issue, 1913).

Bottom: Ad for the Frank O. Renstrom Co. (*Chronicle*, April 30, 1916, p. 49).

Page 11A
Recorded by William Kostura

Resource Identifier: 550 Van Ness Avenue
*Date November 2009 ☒ Continuation ☐ Update



Looking east along Golden Gate Avenue from Van Ness in 1913. Today's 550-590 Van Ness is on the right. A sign states that the Pacific Kissel Kar Branch has succeeded the Standard Motor Car Company in this building. Both were owned primarily by William L. Hughson, who soon moved the firm from this building to 1101 Van Ness Avenue. (That building was replaced by the Jack Tar Hotel in the 1950s.) Photo: from the *San Francisco Newsletter*, Christmas 1913 issue.