Outside Lands

San Francisco History from Western Neighborhoods Project

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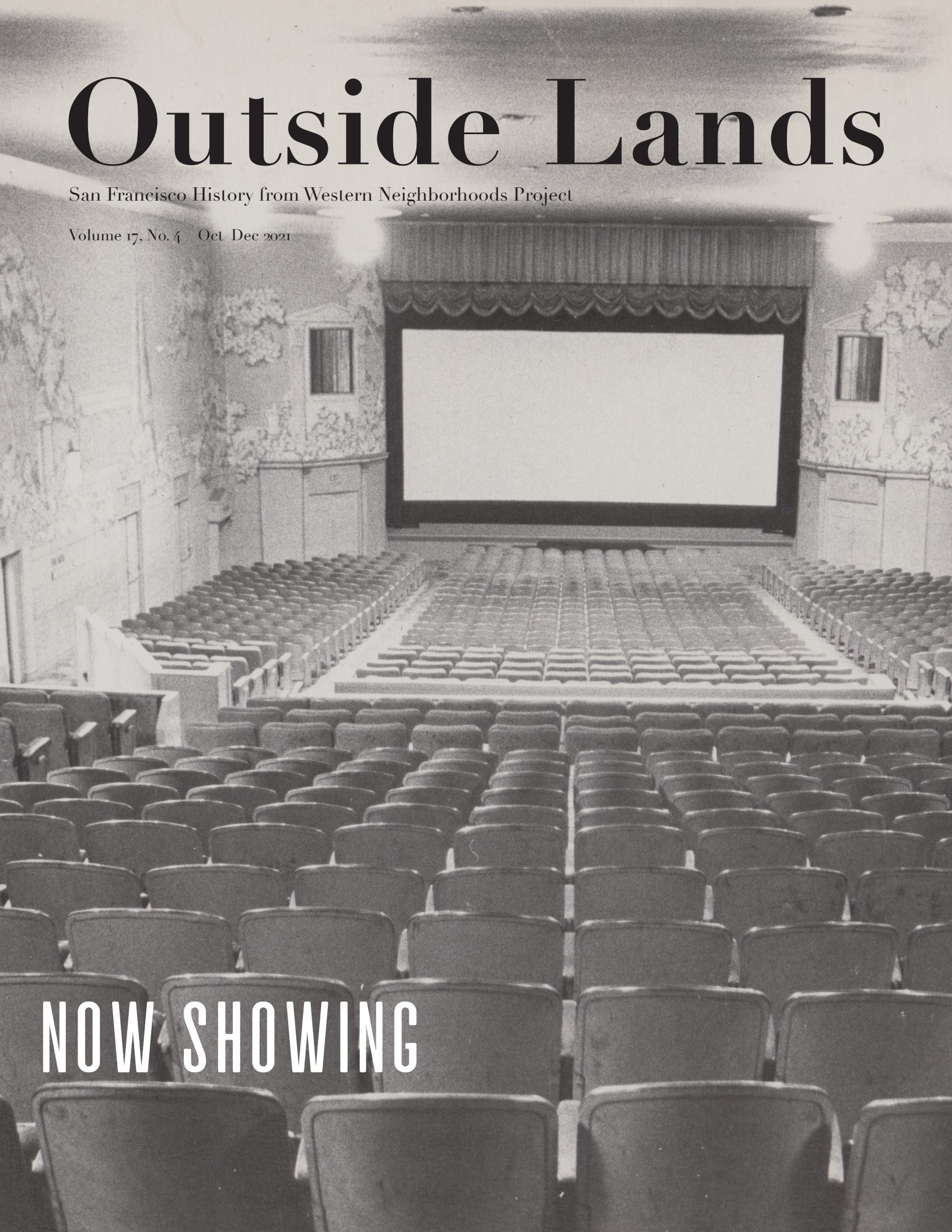

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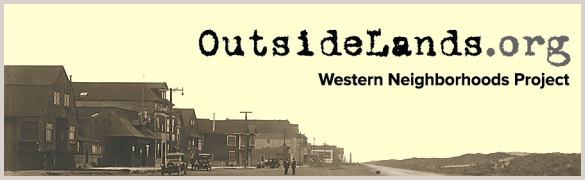

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History from Western Neighborhoods Project
(Previously issued as SF West History)

Oct-Dec 2021: Volume 17, Number 4

EDITOR: Chelsea Sellin

GRAPHIC DESIGNER: Laura Macias

CONTRIBUTORS: John Freeman, Frank Andre Guridy, Paul Judge, Fred Levin, Nicole Meldahl, Chelsea Sellin

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Western Neighborhoods Project
1617 Balboa Street
San Francisco, CA 94121
Tel: 415/661-1000
Email: nicole@outsidelands.org
Website: www.outsidelands.org
facebook.com/outsidelands
twitter.com/outsidelandz
instagram.com/outsidelandz

Cover: Empire Theater, 1969. (Photo by Steve Levin; courtesy of Jack Tillmany / wnp5.50226)

Right: Ocean Beach, circa early 1900s. (Photo by Balfe D. Johnson, Marilyn Blaisdell Collection; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp4/wnp4.0521)

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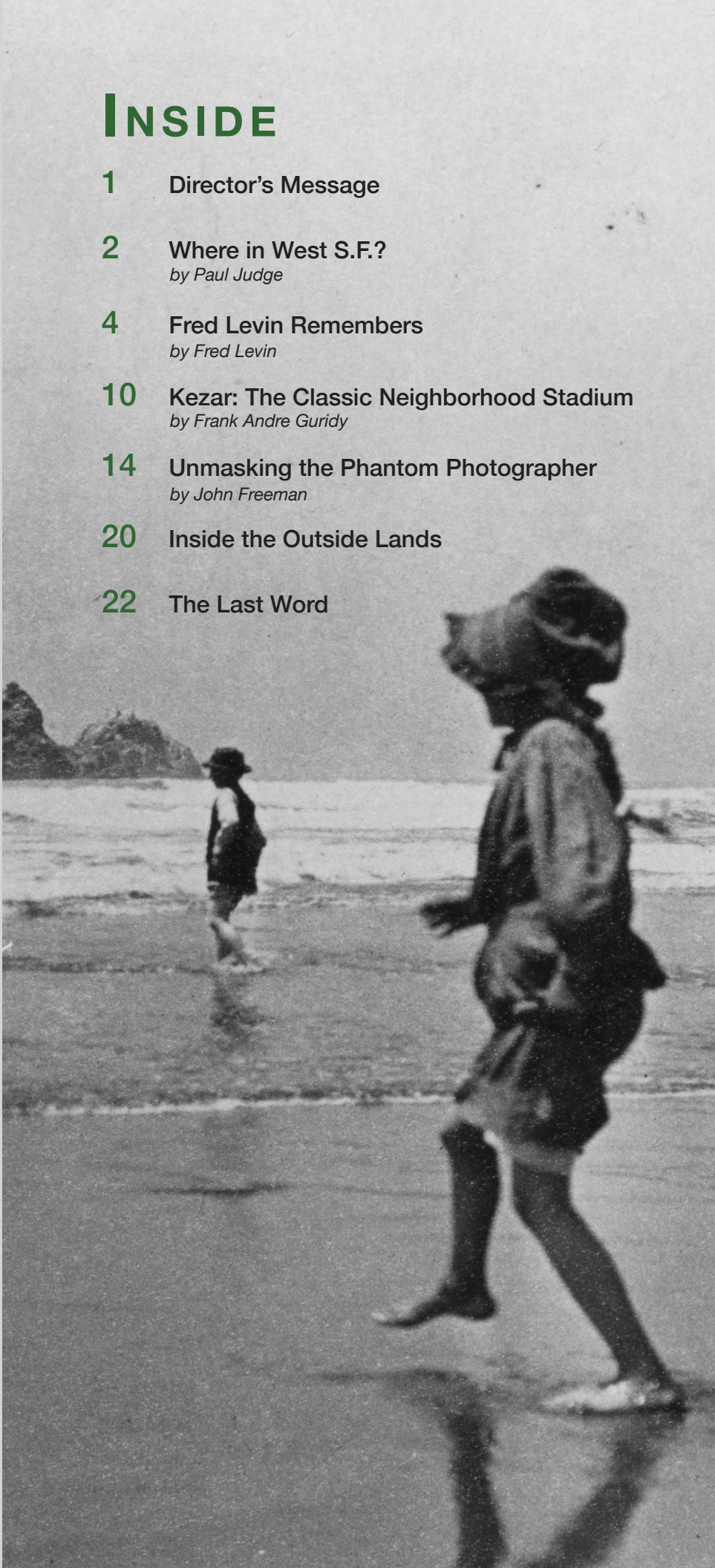






DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Over the last couple years, I've been reading up on our founding fathers to decide what they really meant when they launched the United States. As I'm sure you've heard, the county can't seem to agree on this. One of my favorite historians is Joseph Ellis because his scholarship is airtight and academic, but his writing is relaxed. He tells it like it is, and cuts through to the men behind the myths. In *American Sphynx*: *The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, Ellis notes how "the symbol, the lore, is infinitely more powerful than any set of historical facts."

We see this playing out as we delve deeper into Cliff House history as well. As I'm sure you've heard, WNP picked up a few historic artifacts this year from the now-closed iconic restaurant. I'm finding that the lore – what we remember – is just as important as the facts, so long as we call a spade a spade when we see it. In this issue, we sift through that fog of history as we learn who built our favorite neighborhood theaters with ***Fred Levin Remembers***. Fred sat down for an oral history with me last year and it was a joy to connect with someone whose family has done so much to shape the physical and cultural landscape of the western neighborhoods. We're also thrilled to have **Frank Andre Guridy**, Associate Professor of History at Columbia University, explore the larger impact of Kezar Stadium in ***Kezar: The Classic Neighborhood Stadium***. It's so much more than just a sporting venue; who knew one place could mean so much. Finally, in ***Unmasking the Phantom Photographer***, **John Freeman** puts a name and a story to a mystery man who chronicled the city in the early 20th century, while also bringing new context to some of our OpenSFHistory photos.

Facts found in these stories anchor us in time and space, but it's how these places fit into our lives and become part of our own individual histories that makes them everlasting, even if memory can be ephemeral. If there's one thing The Museum at The Cliff – our temporary exhibition in the former Cliff House gift shop – has taught me this year, it's that everything around us truly is temporary. It's striking to see how little of what Adolph Sutro built out at Lands End remains. Sutro Heights, the Baths, the steam train, the Victorian-era Cliff House: all of that is gone now. What endures is the land and the ocean – atmospheric, mysterious, and beautiful, with so much to give.

That's why people have always gravitated to our western slice of San Francisco, starting with the Ramaytush Ohlone. It's a special place, and those of you who choose to share your stories with us, who help us mine these lands for the facts that build our shared history, are unbelievably important to us. In gratitude, we've acknowledged some of the key WNP family members who helped us get the work done this year in the final ***Inside the Outside Lands*** of 2021.

Sometimes the currents of history swirl us around and it's hard to find your footing. I personally would not be standing without you all, and this organization has been my beacon in the fog. I hope we've been the same for you. In that spirit, I wish you all the best of holidays and look forward to making history with you in 2022.



WHERE IN WEST S.F.?

By Paul Judge

This "Where in West S.F." quiz speculates less about the setting of the image, but rather asks, what the heck is that small "Roman portico" structure on the left of the photograph? It remains a bit of a mystery awaiting further research!

The view is from A.S. Baldwin's 1910 appraisal of Adolph Sutro's estate, and the perspective has been erased by the sands of time. The camera points west from 45th Avenue near Point Lobos Avenue towards Sutro Heights. On the right is the Firth Wheel that Sutro purchased from the 1894 Midwinter Fair and moved to Merrie Way as the centerpiece to his outdoor amusement attractions. Panning left, barely poking above the tree line, is the observation tower atop Sutro's parapet that overlooked the Pacific. But curiosity draws speculation about what that classically-inspired colonnaded structure on the far left might be? Today it would be located on the west side of 48th Avenue between Geary and Anza. A few readers had this to say:

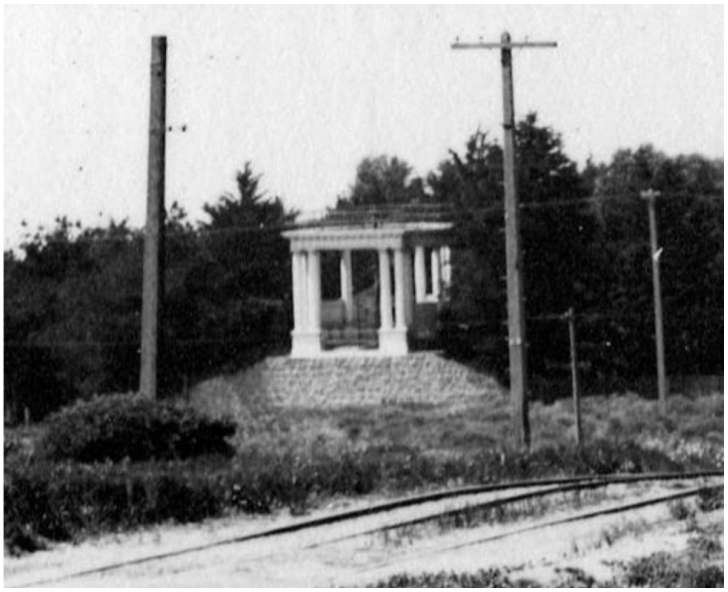
Harry Henderson shared, "OK, this one was a bit tricky. That's obviously the Firth Wheel on the right, but where's the rest of the Midwinter Fair?…Then I remember Sutro disassembled the thing after the Fair and it was moved out to near Sutro's. It's still pretty barren so I think old Adolph is gone along with much of his pleasure gardens. Maybe that little building on the left is part of the observatory?"

Regarding that small structure, **Ed Franklin** postulated, "My guess is that it is not far from Sutro's trolley tracks given the Ferris (?) wheel at right. So I am guessing a track switch house. If I get a second guess how about this is the beginning of the Point Lobos toll road so maybe the toll house?"

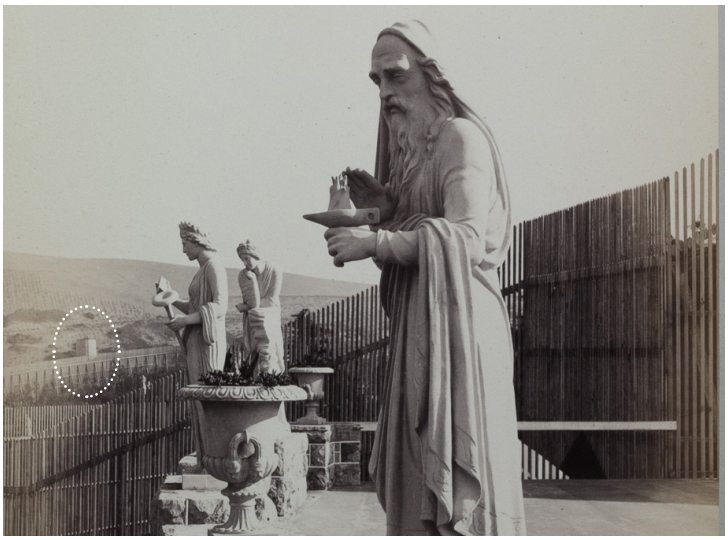
Margaret Ostermann wrote, "The Firth Wheel is a dead giveaway for the location of your latest Where in West SF selection. But what the heck is that structure on the left?!? I found reference to an Observation Tower in a 1913 Sanborn map… Which just begs the question: why is there an observation structure on the edge of a tree line? Did they really need a



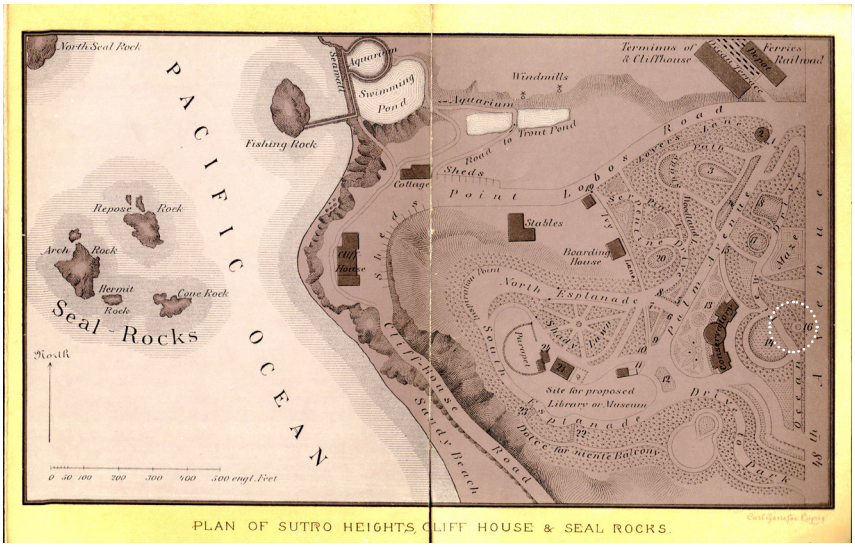
View west from 45th Avenue near Point Lobos Avenue, 1910. (Marilyn Blaisdell Collection; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp37.02991)



Enlarged view of the Roman portico. (Marilyn Blaisdell Collection; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp37.02991)







PLAN OF SUTRO HEIGHTS, CLIFF HOUSE & SEAL ROCKS.

Left: Plan of Sutro Heights, circa 1890s: the white circles outlines an object on the site of the water tank and, eventually, the Roman portico. (Golden Gate NRA, Park Archives, “Album of Sutro Heights” ca 1890, GOGA 34879)

Lower Left: Sutro Heights parapet, 1886: the white circle shows the water tank that preceded the Roman portico. (Photo by Isaiah West Taber; Golden Gate NRA, Park Archives, I.W. Taber Photo Collection, 1886, GOGA 13891)

tower to get up and look out at the sand?…Please tell me this was yet another random impulse purchase of Sutro’s that he picked up at auction and then didn’t know what to do with! I am on tenterhooks awaiting the next magazine’s reveal!”

Margaret asks a great question. Why build a tower that would look out on empty lots full of sand? Over the years, a number of WNP members have speculated on that point. After Sutro’s death in 1898, an inventory and appraisal revealed that the estate was land-rich but cash-poor. Sutro’s daughter and executor, Dr. Emma Merritt, began to sell off property. Perhaps she had the Roman portico built as a gimmicky real estate overlook to entice potential buyers for lots adjacent to Sutro Heights.

From landscape maps and photos of Sutro’s estate in the 1880s, we know the stone retaining wall below the colonnaded structure had previously supported a round water tank, possibly fed from a reservoir just east across 48th Avenue. That trapezoidal wall, now mostly covered by plants, is all that remains today.



Right: Mighty sleuth dog, Charlie, atop the trapezoidal wall. (Courtesy of Margaret Ostermann)

Let’s keep the sand theme going, and see what you make of this photo.

Send your guesses to nicole@outsidelands.org





FRED LEVIN REMEMBERS

Fred Levin recorded his oral history with our Executive Director, Nicole Meldahl, via Zoom from an office filled with mementoes. "When I walk around my home, my family is everywhere," he continued. When you come from a family with as much history as Fred's, it's understandable. His mother's side boasts an artful legacy of cultural philanthropy in San Francisco that started with a kosher butcher shop; his father's side, an enduring footprint of neighborhood theaters spanning the entire city that began with a vegetable cart. Some theaters are gone now, some have been repurposed, but one still owned by the Levins has become a community anchor even as movie palaces, in general, struggle to fit into 21st century society. If you've been to the Balboa Theater in the Richmond District, then you know what we're talking about.

Fred has boxes and boxes of memories – some he's already donated to Stanford University and some he still keeps close. His home's entryway greets you with an urn from the Alexandria Theater, and he thinks his coffee table was made using a piece of marble from the Coronet Theater, perhaps known best for screening Star Wars in 1977. But this is only the preview to the feature here, so without further ado, let's get rolling on what else Fred Levin Remembers, starting from the beginning.

Born on Balboa

Fred Levin was born on January 16, 1944, the son of Irving and Irma (Shenson) Levin. “They went to Lowell together and were part of the same group but they didn’t date,” Fred remembers. The pair were married in 1937 in the Shenson’s living room on Funston Avenue between Clement and Geary, “the day after my father’s 21st birthday and two weeks before my mother’s 21st birthday.”

For the first few years of his life, Fred grew up on Balboa Street between 12th Avenue and Fulton, and his memories of the neighborhood describe a San Francisco that’s hard to imagine. “Some of my earliest recollections were the streetcar that ran down Balboa Street, the milkman who came, the iceman who brought ice, the vegetable cart drawn by a horse, and a guy who went around yelling, ‘rags, bottles, and sacks.’” For five years or so, the family lived in San Anselmo, where his “father found an old house with a big piece of property” and hired a very young Lawrence Halprin to reimagine the landscaping. The Environmental Design Archives at UC Berkeley confirms: this was Halprin’s first professional job.

By the early 1950s, the family sold their property in Marin and resettled on Lake Street in San Francisco’s Sea Cliff neighborhood. When asked what the neighborhood was like as a kid, Fred laughed and said, “Just like today, hasn’t changed.” Except for the presence of an unkempt empty lot next door, which remained that way for about eight years until Vic Morabito, managing owner of the San Francisco 49ers, moved in.

“The city was less crowded and there wasn’t a lot of crime. I remember as a kid being told, ‘You can go any place you want in the city.’ We used to have a car ticket and it had numbers around the side. You’d get on the bus and they would punch your ticket. It was something like five cents a punch. We could go all over the city but you weren’t supposed to cross Market Street.” Fred continued, “There was a streetcar on Geary and I remember my grandmother would put me on the streetcar and maybe I was eight or nine – there were outside seats and inside seats, it was like a cable car only bigger – so she would put me on the streetcar and she would say ‘You just sit there and your grandfather will take you off.’ Now I used to ride all the way down to Grant Avenue and meet my grandfather. He’d be standing there and he’d say ‘Okay let’s go.’ I wouldn’t have done that with my kids.”

Fred has the Richmond District educational trifecta, attending Alamo School on 23rd Avenue between California and Clement, then Presidio Junior High School on 30th Avenue between Clement and Geary, and finally Washington High School on 32nd Avenue between Geary and Balboa. While at Presidio, he experienced the 1957 earthquake. “I was running out of the cafeteria and the chimney fell over. How it didn’t hit any kid I have no idea and I don’t remember where my parents were or what the occasion was, but that night a bunch of kids went ice skating at Sutro’s with the glass ceiling. My parents had a fit when they found out.”

Aside from ice skating at the Sutro Baths, Fred visited Playland-at-the-Beach with his grandparents and also on school trips. The slide was his favorite, but he also recalls “the saltwater taffy and the candy apples and the original It’s-It Ice Creams.” Other childhood memories include weekly lunches with his maternal grandfather, who had a special table at Tadich’s Restaurant, and many trips to Chinatown. “Oh, it was magical. It was amazing. The shops were all incredible and all the restaurants. You could buy firecrackers. I mean it was really fun.”



Above: Muni 31-Line streetcar on Balboa near Park Presidio, 1948. (Jack Tillmany Collection; courtesy of Jack Tillmany / wnp5.50938)

Left: Vogue Theater, Sacramento and Presidio, July 1948. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp27.4769)

As a teenager attending Washington High, Fred remembers “somebody would get a bottle of scotch, and we would fill the car up and we would go under the Golden Gate Bridge on the San Francisco side. Fort Point.” Every generation has its spot. “And then I used to go to Mel’s Drive-in on Geary. So visualize this: there’s no divider on Geary, it’s just a normal street and you drive into Mel’s head first and you could get three cars in. So, if somebody in front of you has to get out, everybody in front of you has to back out into the street and block the traffic.” Like most teens, he had a part-time job. “From the time I was 13, I worked in the theaters. I was an usher at the Balboa; that kept me out of trouble on the weekends. And during the week, you know, I had to do my homework. I was not into sports so that didn’t take any time. But we used to go, I think once a week, we would go to a preview.”

The Levin Family Theaters

Fred is referring to a movie preview because, unlike most teens who worked as an usher in high school, his family either owned or managed the theater. “My paternal grandfather, Sam Levin, built a chain of movie theaters in San Francisco in the Richmond District. In my lifetime that included the Balboa, the Alexandria, the Coliseum, the Coronet, the Metro, the Harding Theater, and the Vogue Theater. There were other theaters that he was involved with, but I don’t have a memory of those.”



Coronet Theater, Geary near Arguello, 1968. (Courtesy of Jack Tillmany / wnp5.50480)



Offices of Samuel and Irving Levin at Golden Gate and Leavenworth, 1951. (SF Assessors Office Negatives / wnp58.191)

"When I was a teenager, for me to go to a double bill would be to go to the Alexandria to see one movie and the Coliseum to see another movie and* I didn't have to wait in line*. It was very cool, but I didn't think of it at the time, and it did affect my life because* I won't stand in line for anything*."

Regarding his grandfather's motivation was for opening these theaters, Fred admitted that "the stories differ...depending who you talk to" but it starts in Eastern Europe. Interestingly, the Shenson side of Fred's family also connects back to the same region. One of 10 children, Samuel Levin came to the United States from a small town called Traby, in present-day Belarus. It's a particularly San Franciscan as well as a classically American immigration tale, right down to an earthquake and fire story. Samuel Levin was 20 years old in 1906. "He used to say he carried hundred-pound sacks of potatoes up Sacramento Street to the Fairmont Hotel. The story that he told me was that he had a vegetable cart, and then he had a little vegetable store, and then he turned the store into a movie theater of some kind around 1910." It was one of the first real movie theaters after the city began to rebuild on a large scale after the earthquake and fire.

The small empire that followed was built strategically. Samuel would find a location and then approach A.P. Giannini, founder of the Bank of Italy (predecessor of Bank of America) for a loan. For the Outside Lands lots, Giannini would say, "'You're crazy, there's nothing there but sand.' And my grandfather would say, 'And one day, you'll have a bank on this block.'" Although this was family lore, "the truth is, eventually there was a bank on the block of every movie theater."

When remembering his grandfather, Fred said "I guess he was a gambler, he was an amazing man. He would build a theater, sell the land, and use that money to start another project, which is how many of the theaters came to be located on land leases." He continually strove to improve the visitor experience with each new project. "My grandfather was bigger is better. He tried to make them as fancy as he could. They were all designed by the going architect at the time." Many of the theaters were designed by James and Merritt Reid, who also designed the third Cliff House and the Caretaker's Cottage near the Murphy Windmill in Golden Gate Park.

These theaters spurred residential and commercial development in the neighborhood. Often, the theaters were built with connected storefronts along the block – not dissimilar to the mixed-use development plans we see today. Samuel did well for himself and his family. By the time Fred's father, Irving, was born, the Levin family lived in Presidio Terrace off Arguello Boulevard and also had a small summer estate in Atherton.

The Second Generation

Irving Levin worked in the family theater business for his entire life, managing the Harding Theater on Divisadero when Fred was born. Irving took over management of the entire local chain, alongside partner Marshall Naify (of United Artists fame), shortly thereafter. "My father was wonderful at promotion and how to run theaters and how to keep them going in the 30s and 40s. There were lots of promotions theaters did to bring people in, and during The Depression, theaters did very well because everybody had ten cents to escape, and so it was a very lucrative time." The family got through this era with Samuel's foresight...or luck. "My grandfather would always say that he didn't lose a dime in The Depression. He



Balboa Theater, Balboa and 38th Avenue, July 1968. (Jack Tillmany Collection; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp67.0007)

knew times were tough and so he liquidated all of his stocks, and he had all of this money in a safety deposit box. Now, that's pretty amazing. And over the years, piecing the stories together, I would say he had an argument with a stock broker and to get even, he said, 'Liquidate everything and give me my money.'"

But Fred was keen to point out that "nobody does all these things on their own." This was a family business and, from history's point of view, the family had a remarkable ability to anticipate trends, whether it be where to build a theater or what films to show. "When there was a Levin family dinner, there was a lot of talk and arguments about the movies! Which film? You know, where are we gonna put it? Should we do this? Is the deal right?"

Perhaps Irving's most lasting legacy is the San Francisco International Film Festival, which he founded. Fred remembers, "In 1956, the Italian Consulate in San Francisco went to my father and said, 'We're gonna have Italian fashion week in San Francisco, and I. Magnin's and Sak's are all going to put Italian fashions in their windows. Will you run some Italian movies?' And my father said, 'Sure.' And the next year, I think my father went back to the Italian Consulate and said, 'Hey listen, let's do this internationally – get all the consulates involved.' And that's how it started in 1957. So he did very well, and then, in the 50s, the Vogue Theater was showing international films and was referred to as an Art House."

In hindsight, it was a cool way to grow up. "At that time, all of the film offices were in and around Golden Gate and Leavenworth and my father's office was at 172 Golden Gate Avenue. We used to go down to that area and we'd go to a preview. They had these plush little theaters, maybe 30, 40 seats, and you got to watch movies that hadn't been released yet. It was only when I look back that it was really special. When I was a teenager, for me to go to a double bill would be to go to the Alexandria to see one movie and the Coliseum to see another movie and I didn't have to wait in line. It was very cool, but I didn't think of it at the time, and it did affect my life because I won't stand in line for anything," Fred said, with a laugh.

Fred and the Family Business

Fred held various theater jobs from the age of 13 until he was 21 years old. But, as with all family businesses, he was pulling his weight long before he was officially employed. "As a little kid, popcorn boxes were not cups. They were four sided boxes, a slight slant down, you punched the pieces open, and it made a seal. Very often, my parents would drop my brother and I off at a movie theater as a babysitter. If I didn't like the movie, I'd go down to the candy counter and stand there and make boxes for hours. Stacks and stacks and stacks of boxes."

Fred would also "run the film from one theater to another. If you were playing the same picture, sometimes you'd have to move it by the reel. I only did it a couple of times. But in the Vogue Theater the booth is up a straight metal ladder, and



Alexandria Theater staff, June 1960. Fred Levin is third from right. (Jack Tillmany Collection; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp67.0001)

so you'd have to carry it and climb up the ladder. Old motion picture projectors were huge and they had carbon rods that gave the light. You'd often have to make an emergency run with carbons."

Movies at this time worked a bit differently than today. "First run theaters would be like the Golden Gate or the Orpheum or the Warfield downtown, or the Coronet Theater, and the Alexandria Theater. So when a movie first came out it would go there. Then you would have a second run and that would be after they took the cream off the top, then you could go to a theater like the Balboa or the Coliseum in the later years and they would be less expensive. They would play with a double bill."

Musicals, so popular at the time, would often have long runs in the neighborhoods. "*The Sound of Music* opened at the Coronet. It played maybe a month? Then it went to a second run at the Balboa and it was open-ended. They were just going to run it forever and they did. Forever." When the 1960 film *Can-Can* came to the Alexandria, the staff was involved in the spectacle. "All the usherettes, the candy girls, wore can-can uniforms. The woman in a uniform standing on the far left end [of the photo above] was the ladies' room attendant. She was there in case somebody needed help buttoning their dress or something. At the Coronet, I remember they had a gentleman for the men's room. That's when it was really something to go to a movie. There were sofas where you could sit and relax while you waited. It was a whole different experience. I remember, I was a doorman and then I was a spotter. The spotter was exactly like when you go to a play. They'd stand in the doorway, they'd look at your ticket, and they'd say, 'Four rows down, second seat in.' I mean, it was a big deal."

Asked to pick his favorite theater, Fred said "You know, they all had something going for them." His second official job was as an usher at the Alexandria, where he eventually became assistant manager. He "managed the Vogue one summer and was also the janitor. There was a strike. Double job." Fred was also assistant manager of the Coronet on Geary, which he remembered as special because it was the newest. "My grandfather in the 50s felt the television was going to kill the movies. The Coronet had a TV room which later became a big box office when they went to big movies but at the time it was built it was for TV to have the fights on the weekend. So that when the family went to the movies, the father could go watch the fights."



The Shenson Way

Uninterested in a lifestyle where he worked evenings and weekends, Fred stepped away from the Levin theaters. His career shift leaned into influences from the other side of his family tree. His maternal grandfather, Aaron Shenson, opened a kosher butcher shop on McAllister Street. "And then he went off and did some other things and got into importing art objects from China and when the war broke out with China that business closed, and he did some other kinds of art and antique auction-kind of transactions, and then he went into the jewelry business."

Fred was married and needed a job. "I went to work for a company that imported women's sweaters from Asia and I ended up being in charge of design and production. So I spent a tremendous amount of time in Asia and did that for my whole professional career. I went from knitwear to giftware to jewelry and I did some antiques. So everybody from my family has some sort of connection to Asia." He described the work and his ability to travel as "exciting," although he hadn't escaped the Levin footprint entirely.

In the 1960s, Fred operated two women's clothing stores in shops attached to the Balboa and Metro Theaters. "I went to my dad and said 'I have a lot of merchandise and you have a lot of empty stores, let's make a deal.'" The man who left the theater business because he didn't want to work weekends started a store named Susanne's, after his first wife, that was open Fridays through Sundays. At first, Fred staffed the shop with the assistance of his mother, until he was able to hire help. Susanne's was open for about five years, until his travels to Asia demanded more time and forced closure of the store for long periods. Yet while traveling far and wide for work, Fred stayed close to where he grew up, living on 28th Avenue in Sea Cliff. "I wanted my kids to go to the same schools I went to. I wanted them to be close to their grandparents. I loved the neighborhood."

Now Playing

For all the theatricality of his father's family and glamorous travels abroad, Fred is now investing in the philanthropic legacy of his mother's side. Joking that he was one of those kids who actually used his business and art degree from San Francisco State University, he now serves on one of the school's advisory boards. Honoring a multi-generational connection to Asia, he's currently chair of the dual governing boards for the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. And for the last 20 years, Fred has managed the Shenson Foundation – established by his mother's first cousins, Jess and Ben Shenson, whom he describes as "socially prominent guys around town" – which "supports visual and performing arts, Jewish social services, education, and sundry other kinds of things."

"You know, I've always had a love of the arts. I think it was the way I was brought up."

When asked why he cares about supporting arts and culture in San Francisco, Fred again points to his family. "You know, I've always had a love of the arts. I think it was the way I was brought up. My parents had Asian art of their own in addition to my grandparents' when they passed away. I took art classes at the de Young museum. I also had an amazing experience as an eight-year-old. My parents took me on a seven-month trip through Africa and Europe. It was my father's dream. He packed up the family and we went. Museums through Europe and all the sites. I don't know. I assume, it just intrigued me so, that I kept it up."

And the career change seems well advised in hindsight. Today, most of the Levin movie palaces have either been demolished or repurposed. The Levins "sold and they sold and they sold and there's very little left at this point. The Balboa is still owned by the family and leased by the Neighborhood Theater Foundation, and the Vogue is owned by the Foundation. None of the other theaters are operating."

Is Fred sad about the fate of his family's movie theaters? He remarked "I am really detached. People say they wanna go back to the theater, that means a very small theater in a complex, it's not like going to a movie palace. It's not the same experience. Of course the movies are a lot better but the group experience is gone." After serving on the board of the film society and witnessing tremendous changes over 20 years, he recently stepped off. "Time for me to not worry about it."

At one point in the interview, Fred brought up the Metro Theater on Union Street, which is now a gym. "When they converted it, the city insisted that they keep certain [architectural elements]. It's kind of a kick to see how they've integrated it, repurposed the building. I went in one day, it was too upsetting so I left," he said, laughing.

That's what happens when your family history is all around you: the curtain may have come down, but the show still goes on.



49ers vs. Cowboys, NFC Championship Game, January 3, 1971. (*San Francisco Examiner* negatives; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp28.4152)



KEZAR: THE CLASSIC NEIGHBORHOOD STADIUM

By Frank Andre Guridy

On January 3, 1971, the San Francisco 49ers played their last game at Kezar Stadium, which had been their home field for 25 years. On that day just over 50 years ago, 59,625 fans crammed into the old stadium to watch their team face the Dallas Cowboys in the NFC Championship Game. After the game, the 49ers moved to the then-modern Candlestick Park. Kezar was, and still is, a classic neighborhood stadium. In its heyday, it was a semi-oval 60,000-seat structure wedged into the southeast corner of Golden Gate Park. Half a century after the 49ers left, Kezar – unlike most facilities abandoned by professional teams – still survives, albeit in a downsized version, because it serves a larger constituency than a professional sports franchise.

Since the day Kezar opened its doors in 1925, the stadium has hosted all sorts of events: track and field competitions, boxing matches, World War II reenactments, high school and college sports, and pro football. It was a spartan structure that was a beloved and reviled San Francisco institution. Backless splintering bleachers, little legroom, unsightly restrooms, aggressive seagulls, and years of alcohol-induced rowdiness characterized the world of Kezar. And when the automobile age arrived after World War II, Kezar's lack of parking forced fans to try their luck in the surrounding neighborhood. Still, Kezar had character, and as a recent book illustrates, it held a special place in the hearts of generations of San Franciscans.[1]

Stadiums have the effect of both mobilizing the surrounding area and attracting others from outside the community. Never was this more evident than during 49ers game days. Fans descended on Kezar and performed the pre-parking-lot-era version of tailgating by eating and drinking in Golden Gate Park. As the team became more successful in the 1950s, fans cued up to buy tickets, as they did in the pouring rain before the team's first NFL playoff game in 1957. Kids made pennies by selling concessions and retrieving seat cushions. Oral testimonies and photographic evidence show that a cross-section of San Franciscans converged on Kezar, including the city's Black population. African Americans faced job discrimination



Crowd lined up outside Kezar Stadium on Frederick near Willard, December 21, 1957. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp28.1611)



Fans climbing over Kezar Stadium gate at the SNACK conce (Photo by Greg Gaar; courtesy of Greg Gaar / wnp73.0371b)

KEZAR SURVIVED BECAUSE IT WAS BUILT FOR T

and segregated housing throughout the city, but at Kezar they played on the field, spectated in the stands by buying a ticket or sneaking past security, and joined the hordes of young entrepreneurs who hustled to make money by selling items to fans.

During that final 49ers game in 1971, Kezar as a pro football venue went out in a blaze of glory. Fans cheered on the home team, as they always did, even though the Niners slumbered in mediocrity throughout most of their tenure at Kezar. The 1970 season turned out to be a magical campaign; the team won a division title and its first playoff game. But in the NFC Championship Game, the Niners came up short as the Dallas defense held the potent 49er offense in check. As the game ended, another Kezar ritual ensued. A brawl broke out among fans at the western end of the stadium. Fights were part of the show at Kezar and it was fitting that the last Niners game ended with fans making their presence felt as they always had at the old facility.

The game itself exemplified how the city and the world of sports was in the midst of monumental changes. The United States was in the middle of its 1960s and 70s stadium boom, and the 49ers, stuck in their antiquated stadium, were being left behind by other franchises playing in fancier sports facilities. This transition was evident right across the bay, where the Raiders and A's were playing in the state-of-the-art Oakland Coliseum. Meanwhile, San Francisco itself was in transition, as the city's popular culture shifted away from its immigrant working-class population (many of whom congregated at Kezar) to a new public culture created by hippies and radicals who inserted themselves into the city's political and social life. The halftime show during the 49ers-Cowboys game provides glimpses of these changes. Johnny Mathis, the hometown former star athlete turned celebrity, performed with Tony Bennett and O. C. Smith. Watching the performance on YouTube 50 years later, one is struck by the juxtaposition of the gay Mathis and crooning Bennett singing "San Francisco" before the raucous hyper-masculine crowd.[2]

Even as the stadium decayed in subsequent years, Kezar lived on as a community institution long after the 49ers left the neighborhood. In addition to its role as a venue for high school sports, it also became a public square of sorts, where massive rallies against Vietnam War took place in 1967 and 1972. The old stadium also found itself swept into the "stadium rock" trend of the 1970s. Bill Graham, the legendary San Francisco-based rock promoter, helped shepherd in this sea change in American entertainment. In 1973, Graham organized well-attended concerts by Led Zeppelin and the Grateful Dead. Even more memorable was the SNACK concert Graham put together in 1975. SNACK – San Francisco Students Need Athletics, Culture and Kicks – was a benefit concert envisaged by Graham to raise money for kids who were slated to suffer from proposed budget cuts that would eliminate arts and sports programs in the city's public



ert, March 23, 1975.



Golden Gate Park looking west, with Kezar Stadium in foreground, 1948. (Photo by Andrew Petrishin, *San Francisco Examiner* negatives; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp14.2450)

HE COMMUNITY, NOT FOR A PRO SPORTS TEAM.

schools. Over 55,000 spectators (plus others who, following a Kezar tradition, snuck into the stadium) packed the old facility to enjoy a stunning cast of performers, including the Doobie Brothers, Carlos Santana, Tower of Power, Jefferson Starship, the Grateful Dead, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan. San Francisco sports stars, including Willie Mays, Gene Washington, and John Brodie, served as MCs. No wonder the *San Francisco Examiner* hailed the event as "Kezar's finest hour."[3]

While ancient Kezar continued to serve the local community, Candlestick Park, that cold and windswept edifice built for the Giants in the Bayview, became the center of the city's pro sports scene. The 49ers had their glory years at Candlestick in the 1980s and 90s, showing that, contrary to what franchise owners profess, team success on the field has little to do with the attractiveness of their home stadium. Niners fans were understandably dismayed in 2006 when the team gave up on the plan to build a new stadium/shopping mall at Candlestick Point in favor of a new structure in Santa Clara. But from a financial and political standpoint, in retrospect, the city should consider itself lucky that it lost the battle to keep the team, even though it has built new downtown facilities for the Giants and the Warriors. By almost all accounts, Levi's Stadium has been a disaster, and the abundant evidence of stadiums as money pits shows that stadium construction is a losing proposition for cities today.[4] Few of them possess the organic connections and accessibility of a facility like Kezar. What seemed to be a loss was actually the city's gain.

Today, Kezar is still alive and well, revived by a thoughtful renovation that reduced the capacity and made it functional for recreational use and local sports teams. Kezar continues to serve its primary purpose as a recreational space for the neighborhood. It outlasted Candlestick Park and it might outlast the behemoth where the 49ers currently play in Santa Clara. Kezar survived because it was built for the community, not for a pro sports team. In this day and age of white elephants dotting the landscapes of cities all over the world, this is a feat that San Franciscans can be proud of.

1. Martin S. Jacobs, *Kezar Stadium: 49ers Fans Remember* (San Francisco, independently published, 2020).

2. "1970 NFC Championship Dallas Cowboys at San Francisco 49ers," YouTube video, posted by "Virgil Moody," July 7, 2018, https://youtu.be/Rb3sCWLe3ug?t=5112.

3. "SNACK considered Kezar's finest hour," *San Francisco Examiner*, March 24, 1975.

4. Rodger Sherman, "San Francisco's – Er, Santa Clara's Billion-Dollar Blunder," *The Ringer*, December 2, 2016, https://www.theringer.com/2016/12/2/16042904/san-francisco-49ers-levis-stadium-santa-clara-c29a140a1726.

Unmasking the Phantom Photographer

By John Freeman



The catastrophic 1906 earthquake, fire, and subsequent rebuilding of San Francisco was extensively documented by many local photographers, amateur and professional alike. Some traveled from elsewhere to record the intense scenes. Locals had the advantage of being here from the first tremor and knowing the landscape and from where to seek the best perspective. The names of many of these photographers are well known, but one of the most prolific stayed behind the camera and cherished his anonymity. The time is well overdue to reveal not only his name, but tell the story of this remarkable contributor to a dynamic and dramatic moment in the history of San Francisco.

Those who research San Francisco's history in the first decade of the 20th century will recognize many of this man's photos, because they are found in numerous books that cover this time period. Yet it is extremely rare to note his name, and if it is noted, know who he was and the breadth of his photographic images. 240 of his negatives are found in the Walter Muhlmann Collection at the San Francisco Maritime Research Center, with 128 prints of those negatives at the California Historical Society. The History Center of the San Francisco Public Library has an album of real photo postcards without attribution except for the letter "J" and a number sequenced from 1 to 331. Some numbers are missing, and many images are not from the Muhlmann original negative cache. The California State Library in Sacramento has four scrapbooks of his photos, annotated in his unusual script, but filed under the name of the antique dealer, not the photographer. Since so many photo examples appear in public archival collections, it hints that our mystery photographer's life's work was much more extensive than what has been found so far.

The Summer 1976 issue of the *California Historical Quarterly* includes an article entitled "The City That Was: A Glimpse Just Before April 18, 1906, and Another Just After," by Roger Olmsted. In the text, Olmsted describes all the photos he used as from a "Brown Bag Phantom," implying a person who worked another job but took photos on their lunch break. Olmsted also notes that the article is a photographic essay developed from the forthcoming history of San Francisco by T. H. Watkins and R. R. Olmsted titled *Mirror of the Dream*. Indeed, the same titling for the photographer was used in the book that same year. All the photos used in both publications came from the Muhlmann Collection, which identifies the photographer as Balfe D. Johnson. Indeed, Balfe Johnson is



Balfe D. Johnson on Market Street, west from Davis, circa May 1906. (Courtesy of Glenn Koch)

the phantom, but why wasn't he identified by name in these two publications?

I do not fault the authors, because at the time, historical research was tedious work that involved searching microfilms and visiting numerous institutions. Even San Francisco city directories only reveal that Johnson lived in the city and worked for Western Union Telegraph Company. Today, with the digitization of a wide variety of old newspapers and all manner of public records, tracing our ancestors or most historic persons has been revolutionized. Internet searches can reveal, in minutes, information that was previously very hard, if not impossible, to find.

Balfe Devore Johnson had a fabulous story to tell, yet he was very shy about telling it. He was born in Oregon City, Oregon in 1869, into a family of missionary preachers who were sent west in the 1840s to serve in the Oregon Territory. Johnson was accepted into the new Stanford University in 1891 and graduated as part of the Pioneer Class of 1895. He was a better scholar than his later acclaimed classmate, Herbert Hoover, majoring in history and using his self-taught telegraphy skills to supplement his family allowance by sending updates of campus news to the *San Francisco Chronicle*. When Stanford's newspaper did a brief writeup on the 1895 graduates, Johnson declined the notoriety.

With his BA diploma from Stanford, Johnson returned to Oregon and was hired as a "Morse man" with Western Union. He was soon promoted to station manager for the coastal town of Astoria, where he was also compensated by the U.S. Weather Bureau for providing valuable maritime data from this important navigational site. In December 1895 he married Grace Mitchell, but the marriage ended in divorce likely



Market Street, looking north up Kearny, circa 1905. (Bill Kostura Collection; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp26.1410)

"I didn't sleep for a couple of days, but I sure got pictures!"

by July 1903, when Johnson secured a transfer from Western Union to San Francisco. At some point in 1904 (based on the 1910 census), he remarried to Lillian Staats from Astoria; they lived together in San Francisco for the rest of their lives. Johnson got a plumb promotion from Western Union as a newspaper wire man, assigned as a night telegrapher at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. This job would be pivotal for Johnson because it placed him in a stimulating newspaper environment and allowed him the daylight hours to pursue his interest in photography. One of the most iconic of Johnson's early photos, taken in 1905, is of a police officer chatting with a girl wearing a straw hat near Lotta's Fountain, in front of the Chronicle building.

Fortuitously, at the beginning of the week of April 16, 1906, Johnson purchased a new camera and stocked up on film for his spring photo escapades. He and Lillian were shaken out of their bed that Wednesday morning in their apartment at Jones and O'Farrell, and he began recording the unfolding tragedy. In an interview with the Chronicle, when he retired in 1940, Johnson said "I beat it right down to The Chronicle… And boy, were they glad to see me! They didn't have any equipment, and their only photographer had gotten scared and run away to Oakland. I didn't sleep for a couple of days, but I sure got pictures!"[1]

Johnson had an unusual relationship with the Chronicle. He was employed by Western Union to maintain their "wire," yet provided earthquake and fire images for the newspaper while also freelancing some of his photos. It is a challenge to trace his work, not only because it was unsigned, but because negatives might have been sold or published widely without regard for copyright. Johnson's photos have been colorized by postcard distributers, and show up in a variety of publications worldwide, with no attribution to the photographer. One particular group of photos were clearly a side contract for him. The Marsh-Girvin Stationary Company on Market Street, a half block from the Chronicle building, contracted with Johnson to use his negatives to produce a series of postcards. The Marsh-Girvin cards carried photos of the main tourist attractions, with numerous views skirting Lands End, attractions in Golden Gate Park, and the most compre-



Ironworkers placing steel beams in place, Humboldt Bank Building, Market Street, fall 1906. (Courtesy of San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park)



View north from about Balboa and Funston of Camp Richmond, 1906 earthquake and fire refugee camp. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp27.7987)



Eggs being distributed to a crowd by U.S. Navy sailors on the 3000 block of Van Ness Avenue near Bay Street, 1906. (Zelinsky Collection; courtesy of Dan Zelinsky / wnp59.00076)



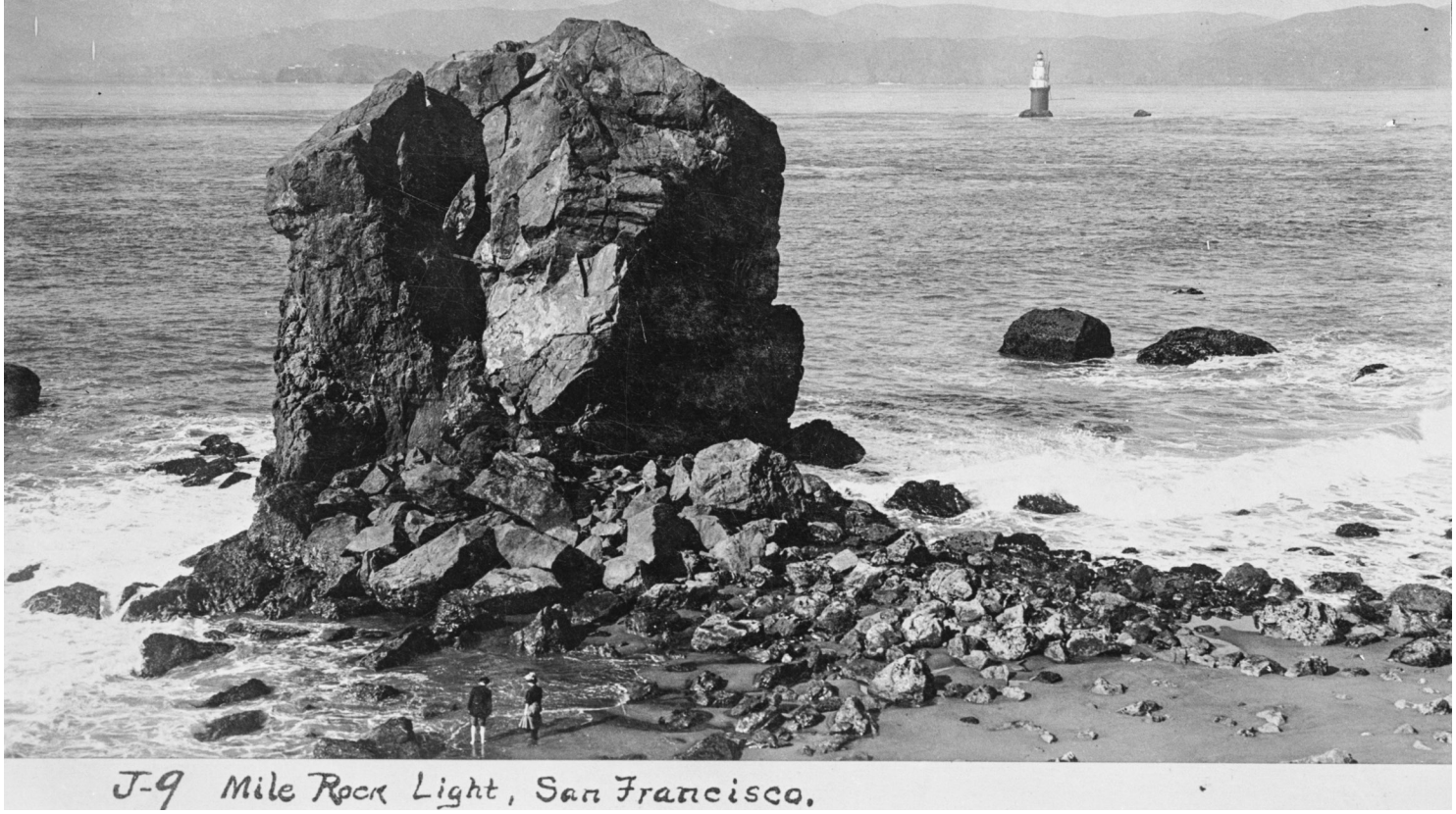
1906 earthquake and fire refugee camp no. 5 at Big Rec, Golden Gate Park. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp27.7988)

hensive series of photos from the fire through rebuilding the city. What is most evocative of the quake-aftermath cards are the numerous views of the workers actively engaged in rebuilding jobs. Johnson also revealed his affection for his college days with two cards from the 1908 Cal-Stanford football game played in Berkeley, and a series of views of both campuses.

Balfe Johnson's photographic work with the *San Francisco Chronicle* extended beyond the initial earthquake and fire images. By 1909, he became a lead photographer for their sports department. This was a time when newspapers were starting to devote more space to the sports of the day. Charles de Young, the son of Chronicle founder M. H. de Young, particularly admired Johnson's ability to quickly send or transcribe a sports story on the ticker, but also his photographic skills. The department nicknamed him "Ban" to match the bold sports entrepreneur Byron Bancroft "Ban" Johnson, who was shaking up professional baseball by organizing a second league to rival the National League: the "American League." The Chronicle's "Ban" photographed horse racing and boxing matches. When assigned to capture baseball games, Ban experimented with a telephoto lens to capture action shots from afar, since photographers were forbidden on the field.

When the sensational "Fight of the Century" in 1910 between heavyweight title challenger Jack Johnson and over-aged champ James J. Jefferies was moved out of the Bay Area to Reno, Charles de Young was determined to "scoop" the nation with both written and photographic coverage. In the promotion prior to the Fourth of July match, the coverage team for the Chronicle was written up, featuring their lead photographer, B. D. Johnson. Charles de Young's secret scheme was to procure a steam engine with a mail car, and remodel the car into a dark room. Johnson positioned himself among the army of photographers at ringside and snapped photos of the action in the over 100-degree sun. As the outcome became more and more obvious, with Jefferies outmatched even before a series of knockdowns in the 15th round, Johnson slipped away to get a head start in the special train. The race down the west slides of the Sierra was on, with Johnson doing the photo processing himself as they highballed it to the Bay Area to scoop the world on this historic, controversial match.

Johnson's last photographic Chronicle assignment was on January 18, 1911, when he covered the famous flight of Eugene Ely from Tanforan infield to the specially-outfitted cruiser USS Pennsylvania, anchored in the bay across from San Mateo. The next morning, the Chronicle captioned the photo of the biplane's touchdown, "Remarkable Photograph Taken by B. D. Johnson of the 'Chronicle' Art Staff." As enigmatic as his appearance as a photographer, his exit was just as consistently baffling. This historic photo would be the last known by Balfe Johnson.







Clockwise: Helmet Rock and Mile Rocks Lighthouse, circa 1910. (Marilyn Blaisdell Collection; courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp37.01902); Stow Lake, Golden Gate Park. (Courtesy of Glenn Koch); Earthquake-damaged Sharon Building, Golden Gate Park, 1906. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp26.1983)

His photographic side-work must have been profitable, because Johnson's and his wife Lillian's names appeared in the purchase and sale of at least eight lots in the Richmond District from 1911 to 1915. In 1915, they had a home built at 664 45th Avenue, which still stands. Today, there are taller buildings on the west side of the street which mar the view, but when built, the home had a sweeping vista of the ocean from the hill above Seal Rocks.

When Johnson announced he would retire from Western Union's position at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, his friends at the sports desk wrote a glowing account of his life and accomplishments, published in the Sunday edition, April 28, 1940, entitled "Ban Johnson's Ticker Days End Tuesday." When Balfe Johnson died a little over eight months later, on January 13, 1941, the Chronicle noted his passing with a eulogy article. Both of these articles are lovely tributes to this accomplished man of mystery, but add no insight into his eight years of taking iconic Bay Area photos, or explain why he seems to have ceased producing any more photos after early 1911. Balfe and Lillian Johnson had no children, and lived over 26 years in the Richmond District, cherishing their ocean view. Lillian remained in the house on 45th Avenue until she died in 1945. Balfe Devore Johnson was not a phantom, but he did cherish his anonymity. It is long overdue to give credit to his accomplishments, and add his name to his fabulous legacy of iconic images captured over a brief, dynamic time in San Francisco's history.

1. "Ban Johnson's Ticker Days End Tuesday," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 28, 1940.

Inside the Outside Lands

The holidays are a time to give thanks for those we hold dear. In this spirit, we're so grateful for everyone in the WNP family, but we'd like to highlight those who went above-and-beyond to donate their time and expertise to the cause in 2021.

First and foremost, we mark the end of this year as the end of an era at WNP. In September, our cofounder, **David Gallagher**, retired from the organization he built with his friend, **Woody LaBounty**. It's impossible to list all of the things David has done over the last 22 years in one article but, simply put, we are what we are because of him. From building and perfecting our websites, to stewarding our OpenSFHistory program, to mentoring our current executive director (and everything in between), David has quietly been the backbone. He's more than earned a respite from the administrative minutia of running a nonprofit, and we look forward to keeping him close for all the fun parts of local history.

It's been an absolute pleasure to see the WNP family grow this year. We try to keep community history fun, and a key part of that is working with people you love. That's why we asked our dear friend **Michael Lange** to join the podcast team, which is anchored by the sound engineering prowess of our longtime friend, **Ian Hadley**. Our Board of Directors doubled in size in 2021! **Ed Franklin**, **Eva Laflamme**, **Dion Roberts**, **Karim Salgado**, **Vivian Tong**, and **Carissa Tonner** jumped in to support veteran members **Ed Anderson**, **David Chang**, **Denise LaPointe**, **Matt Nichols**, **Kyrie Whitsett**, and **Arnold Woods** in providing us with stalwart strategic guidance as we dramatically expanded how we fulfill our nonprofit mission.

And we use the word "dramatic" with intention. We opened not one, but two exhibitions within (just shy of) six months, which showcase Cliff House artifacts we saved at auction. We jumped into this at the invitation of **John Lindsey** and **Alexandra Mitchell**, now our forever besties, and it was the best thing we've ever done. Normally, exhibitions take years to develop because the conservation, curation, fabrication, and installation of historical art and artifacts is harder than it seems. We couldn't have done this without the folks at **Minnesota Street Project** and **Lawrence Fine Arts**; **Marcus Koenen**, **John Omega**, and **Amanda Williford** of the **Golden Gate National Recreation Area**; **Gina Caprari** and the entire **Global Museum** team at SF State; and **Rick Bellamy**, **Ryan Butterfield**, **Jenny Love**, **Harvey Newman**, and **Morgan Schlesinger.**

As a one-employee operation, we count on volunteers for so much, including the staffing of these exhibitions. We rely heavily on **Nicole Smahlik** to coordinate this workforce, and she's been invaluable in overseeing **Jan** and **Harold Brandt**, **Erik Butterfield**, **Barbara Cannella**, **Joseph Grossblatt**, **Anne Hitz**, **Judi Leff**, **Gail McGowan**, **Lauren O'Leary**, **Peter Peacock**, **Ken Spielman**, and **Pam Wright** as they hold down the front at The Museum at The Cliff. We're inspired by your dedication, as well as that of the interns and other volunteers who have been essential to our work. It's been a privilege working with **Christina Gazi**, **Judy Hitzeman**, **Gillian Murdoch**, **Arlo Novicoff**, **Jackie Rosas**, **Andrew Roth**, **Isabel Scanlon**, **Art Siegel**, and **Cecilia Zhang** this year.

This membership magazine would be impossible without the leadership of our Editor-in-Chief, **Chelsea Sellin**; the design wizardry of **Laura Macias**; and **Paul Judge** as our new "Where In West S.F.?" maestro. It's our pleasure to highlight the work of our contributors in print and we're so grateful they're willing to share





Golden Gate Park Band at The Museum at The Cliff. (Courtesy of Drew Altizer)

their art and incomparable knowledge with us. Thank you to **Richard Brandi**, **John Freeman**, **Greg Gaar**, **Frank Andre Guridy**, **Chrissy Huhn**, **Fred Levin**, **John Martini**, **Margaret Osterman** and **Charlie the History Poodle**, **Coleman Roberts**, **Walt Stevenson**, **Arnold Woods**, and **Lydia Zaverukha**.

We'd also like to thank all our oral history interviewees, program guests, and regular attendees; our "Chinese in the Richmond" partners at the **Chinese Historical Society of America** – **Steve Haines**, **Palma You**, and **Pam Wong**; artists **Doug Gorney**, **Thorsten Sideboard**, and **Yameen**; and District Supervisors **Connie Chan** and **Gordon Mar**, who worked with us to make some incredible history this year.

Last but certainly not least, a special shoutout for two people who are involved in just about everything at WNP: **John Martini** and **Arnold Woods**. John has stepped up to help whenever asked, from leading history walks, to joining our rotating cast of podcast hosts, to researching Cliff House artifacts, and more. And Arnold, as the longest-serving member of our Board of Directors, has a hand in everything we do.

From the bottom of our history hearts, thank you for being with us this year.

THE LAST WORD

Part of being a historian is accepting that your work is never complete. Inevitably, after completing an article or book, a new piece of information emerges to add more detail or even change your original perspective. In our last issue, John Martini's article walked us through the winding history of the Sutro Baths swimsuits. He remembered reading – somewhere – that at the turn of the 20th century, the suits were boiled in seawater and then dried in a cabinet heated to 212 degrees. Since publication, John re-discovered the source material: a September 23, 1900, *San Francisco Examiner* article that dives further into the sanitary practices at several San Francisco bathhouses. Sutro Baths, it turns out, rinsed their suits in *cold* water and washed towels in boiling water; both were then placed in the 212-degree drying room for 15 minutes. After inspecting the methods at Sutro Baths and similar institutions, the Board of Health prepared a new ordinance to regulate sanitation at public bath houses and ensure that towels and suits were "scientifically disinfected." The article provides a bonus detail: daily average attendance at Sutro Baths "ranged from 500 to 8,000, the latter on Sundays and holidays."

Sutro Baths, circa 1900. (Courtesy of a Private Collector / wnp4/wnp4.0298)



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