

Accidents, Happenstance, Serendipity
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Three Princes of Serendip

An accident happens by chance, often with ill effect; happenstance is a product of probability, and serendipity – well, who can say what produces it? The meaning of the word ‘serendipity’ – coined in the 18th century by Horace Walpole -- derives from a Persian tale: “The Three Princes of Serendip.” These were men who kept making auspicious discoveries, of things they were not even looking for. Yet, the three princes were thoughtful and inquiring, so their minds were always prepared for encountering something new.

Sometimes I think these three words describe the phenomenon of San Francisco as well as anything: it is a place where chance has influenced human activity for more than two centuries, more perhaps than in other cities.

What follows is a brief look at a few serendipitous – and accidental! -- aspects of San Francisco history. As you can imagine, much is left out!

A Place of the Imagination

During the age of exploration in the 1500s and 1600s, California was hidden from the view of Europeans, particularly the Spanish and Portuguese, who were sending their master mariners to search for new lands – and a shorter route to the Indies. California was imagined as a land of myth. It appeared in a novel published in Seville in 1510 by Garcia de Montalvo, called “The Adventures of Esplandian.” A passage from the novel read: “Know that on the right hand of the Indies, near the edge of the terrestrial paradise, is an island called California, peopled by black women without men, for they live in the style of the Amazons.” The fictional California of de Montalvo had a fearsome queen, known as Calafia, who brought an army of women, by sea, to Constantinople to join in a siege against the Turks. She ended up marrying one of Esplandian’s lieutenants, and converting – with all her followers – to Christianity.

So, California, for much of Spanish society, was a place of the imagination before their explorers even located a land that seemed to match its fictional description!

De Montalvo's novel was a hit in Spain and was known to Hernando Cortes, conqueror of Mexico. In 1539 Cortes commissioned Francisco de Ulloa to explore the Gulf of California and to determine whether the long peninsula of Baja California was in fact an island, or attached to Alta California. Ulloa proved that it was not an island, but the idea of California as surrounded by sea persisted. Maps showing California in that form continued to be produced, well into the 18th century. The map shown here was published in Paris in 1705, more than a century and a half after Ulloa's voyage surveying the Gulf. Even after land expeditions to upper California began in the late 18th century, contemporary maps showed place names in their proper order ascending from Cabo San Lucas north, but land forms getting more conjectural, and surrounded by more water, as one moved north.

Why was this? One answer lay in the California Current, which moves the waters of the Pacific south along the coast, and the wind from the northwest, which was almost constant. It was said that it could take longer to ascend the coast of California than to sail to Europe from Veracruz. Expeditions, by land or by sea, were infrequent, and maps, particularly if published by non-Hispanics, continued to be inaccurate for decades.

Earthly Paradise

Northern California before contact with Europeans was a benign place. Native Americans on the San Francisco peninsula, now known as the Ohlone peoples, lived in perfect balance between a bountiful nature and their community life. There seemed to be no need for them to do agriculture, though cultivation of plants was known to them. The Ohlone did manage their landscape, however, using fire to clear brush and make room for grass and bulbs to grow. Time was cyclical, not linear. Why should one year be different from the next? Seasonal hunting of animals occurred, and there was semi-nomadic movement to accommodate this. The Ohlone lived in small communities of 100 to 250 people, known to the Spanish and Mexicans as 'rancherias' and described as tribelets today. Population on the peninsula before contact with Europeans was

estimated at 10,000 (today's Bay Area has a population of more than 7 million). This native population would be severely reduced over a 60-year period between the 1770s and 1830s.

Contact with Europeans

Significant contact with Europeans happened beginning with the Spanish land expeditions into Alta California of Gaspar de Portola in 1769 and Juan Bautista de Anza, in 1774 and 1775-6. Franciscan fathers accompanied these expeditions, establishing missions beginning with San Diego de Alcalá in 1769 and ending with San Francisco Solano, at Sonoma, in 1823, after Mexico gained independence from Spain. The fathers considered it their sacred duty to impart to California natives a new religion, Christianity, a new language, Spanish, and a new way of making the land fruitful through planting of crops and managing their growth. The interaction between the native population and the newcomers proved disastrous, as chronicled by modern anthropologists. Native Americans, considered little more than children in need of instruction by the fathers, were gathered into mission compounds, forbidden to return to their villages, exposed to diseases against which they had no immunity, and put to work. Once the missions were disestablished by the Mexican Republic in the early 1830s, the native people who were left, their numbers hugely reduced by illness and despair, mostly wandered back to their old villages – if they still existed - sometimes taking mission livestock with them.

During the Mission period, however, native life beyond the missions was of great interest to the Spanish fathers, and to European naturalists, particularly visitors from Russia, France, and Great Britain. Ritual customs, costume, and dances were particularly fascinating, and some of our best sketches of California Indian life have been made by naturalists and expedition artists during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Life of the Californios

For a brief period between Spanish rule and the entry of the United States, California was Mexican. Large land grants, some formerly owned by the missions, were granted to Spanish-Mexican settlers. Labor was supplied by native Americans. The economy was dominated by the sale of hides from longhorn cattle, richly described by Richard Henry Dana, Jr. in "Two Years Before the Mast." For the fortunate few, this was a time of restful luxury, to be wistfully recalled later in the century. Yankee, British, and other north Europeans arrived, but in small numbers. Those who were most successful sought marriage with Spanish and Mexican families and took their place in 'Californio' society.

Well after this period, the novelist Helen Hunt Jackson published "Ramona" in 1884. It pictures the social upheaval in Mexican life after the Yankees have arrived. Ramona, half native American and half Mexican, is portrayed as someone whose world is shattered by newcomers. Jackson, poet and early activist on behalf of native Americans, had turned to fiction in an effort to build emotional bonds between her readers and the plight of the Mission Indians. Instead, most of her readers became fascinated with her description of places and characters, and she may not have accomplished what she set out to do. The novel was popular among visitors to California in the late 19th century, and was one of the influences of the Mission Revival style.

The U.S. Arrives

The United States national election of 1844 was won by James K. Polk, who had campaigned on a policy of Manifest Destiny and western expansion. Central to this policy were the Oregon Country, where the U.S. and Great Britain were at odds over boundaries; the fate of Texas, which had declared independence from Mexico in the 1830s and was annexed by the U.S. in 1845; and other Mexican lands, including California.

American expansion was inevitable: the 1840s and 1850s were the only decades during which U.S. population exceeded a 35% rise over the ten years. Meanwhile, the Mexican Republic was not administering its northern states effectively. War occurred, beginning with skirmishes near the Rio Grande, after diplomacy and offers to purchase broke down. In California, U.S. forces under Commodores Sloat and Stockton, Captain

Fremont, and Colonel Kearny were able to exert control without much opposition. The sloop *Portsmouth* entered San Francisco bay in July of 1846. The U. S. Navy controlled the village of Yerba Buena, renamed San Francisco in 1847, for the duration of the Mexican-American War, which ended in 1848.

Land acquired by the U.S. in the first half of the 1800s produced a map into which what became known as the 'lower 48 states' fitted comfortably.

Gold

Continued and increasing settlement by Americans could only expand after the War. But inevitably, the discovery of gold in the streams descending from the Sierra in 1848 produced thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of hopeful 'miners' rushing to San Francisco in 1848 and 1849 and thereafter. The miners may have visualized acquiring a fortune with nothing but a single pan, but industrial applications weren't far behind. Panning gave way to team mining with sluice boxes, which gave way to hydraulic mining and industrial digging, dredging and hard rock mining, all of which posed environmental harm. Today's cyanide and chemical processes are even more dangerous. Very few of the miners of '48 and '49 ended up rich; those who did returned to San Francisco, went into business, speculated in real estate, or gambled on one of two local stock exchanges.

Money, Movement, Industry

So in 1850, with sails in its harbor, statehood in hand, and immigrants continuing to arrive, all was ready for the booms and busts of the second half of the 19th century. The view shown, painted after the fact in 1878 but meticulously researched, shows young San Francisco, looking down Clay Street toward the Bay.

Civil War and the coming of the Railroad, stories of the 1860s, are sagas of their own, and deserve lectures of their own!

By 1874, when a new United States Mint building opened at 5th and Mission Streets, San Francisco was equipped to produce coinage for all the western states and territories. By

1906, some \$300 million in gold was on reserve in the San Francisco Mint, representing 1/3 of all the reserves available to the U.S. Government. San Francisco had maintained its role as banking and commercial center of the west, with its two dominant stock exchanges established in 1862 (Mining Exchange) and 1882 (Stock and Bond Exchange). Mining interests, controlled from San Francisco, extended into the Nevada and Oregon territories as far as the Canadian border. The age of sail gave way to the age of steam, with the Pacific Mail steamship line established in 1849 – its future initially assured by the passenger traffic of the Gold Rush. Heavy industry was expanding, with labor forces descending from the mountains and requiring jobs. The Union Iron Works was established in 1849 and by 1892 had 1,500 employees and \$3 million in output per year. This doubled again by 1900.

Movement within the city, first characterized by wagons and later horsecars, was aided by the invention of the cable car, whose first line, on Clay Street, started in 1873. Invention of the cable car is credited to Andrew Hallidie, a manufacturer of steel cable, master mechanic, and energetic entrepreneur. Actually, the cable car was a group effort, with Benjamin Brooks proposing the first line for the city, but failing to obtain financing. A number of engineers were involved, and the system eventually covered the entire city, with 23 separate lines. The basic design - in which continuous, or nearly continuous, cables moved beneath the street and cars attached themselves with shoe clamps to begin movement -- derived from industrial cable tramways, which would have been well known to Hallidie. There was least one example of a 'rope-car line' in England that used continuous hemp (not steel) ropes in the same way.

The city experienced panics, booms and busts, but continued to expand, decade by decade. The city put on its own fair, the California Midwinter International Exposition, in 1894. The fair was promoted by Michael DeYoung, who had served as a commissioner of Chicago's World Columbian Exposition in 1893, and saw a chance to publicize San Francisco's winter weather, and to boost its economy.

In 1904, former mayor of SF James Phelan hired the great Daniel Burnham, architect and chief planner of the Chicago exposition, to prepare an ambitious new master plan for San Francisco, which was delivered to Mayor Eugene Schmitz in September, 1905. In the drawing on the right side of this image, new proposed boulevards are shown in red, and

new parks in dark green. Burnham and his assistant, Edward Bennett, occupied a cabin, designed for them by Willis Polk, on the eastern slope of Twin Peaks while making their plan. The grandest gesture they proposed was for a park to extend up to and behind their cabin, all the way to the Pacific. Within the park would be an Athenaeum, an Academy, and amphitheater overlooking San Francisco, and a cascade of reservoirs descending to the sea. Capping the composition would be a 300-foot statue of San Francisco. You can see the proposed park surrounding Lake Merced, dwarfing Golden Gate Park. Burnham's great interest was in parks, which he proposed for 1/3 of the city's area, and in boulevards, though he didn't give a lot of thought to property rights that would be affected in pushing the roads through.

But because of the disaster of April 1906, most of what Burnham proposed was not built. Park Presidio Boulevard appears in the plan, as well as the Civic Center.

Disaster & Rebuilding

On the morning of April 19, 1906 San Francisco and its region were shaken by multiple shocks from a major earthquake. The compounding disaster that followed the temblor was caused by the rupturing of gas mains, which fed a city-wide fire that raged for three days. The fire zone encompassed the entire downtown, as well as the Civic Center.

Reconstruction began immediately. The city's business community understood that buildings built with steel frames and 'fireproof' construction fared far better than those of masonry and wood. Owners of businesses demanded taller, better built, and more protected buildings when they reinvested. If only repair was required, buildings could continue in use or be put back into service by 1907. Where a building was entirely lost, as with the Palace Hotel, entirely new designs were prepared and rebuilding occurred, all by late 1909 or 1910.

As a means of celebrating the success of reconstruction, San Francisco became one of several U.S. cities that competed to host a world exposition honoring projected completion of the Panama Canal in 1914. San Francisco won. (That is, a vote in Congress made San Francisco the "official" exposition site. This didn't prevent San Diego from mounting its own exhibition. And New Orleans competed as well.) Incredibly, the

Panama Pacific International Exposition was built in only two years at a cost of about \$50 million, opening on time in February, 1915. Nearly 19 million people visited the exposition, which closed in December of that year, having made a lasting impression on visitors, and a profit!

City Hall was designed and almost completed in time for the fair in 1915. Known as perhaps the finest example in the nation of the City Beautiful movement, the style set by Arthur Brown, Jr. (Bakewell & Brown) at the City Hall guided the designers of buildings generations later, once the City Hall District was on the National Register of Historic Places, and newer buildings like the New Main Library, remodeled Asian Art Museum, California State Building and others were taking their cue from the classical forms of the City Beautiful movement.

Skyscrapers and Bridges

After World War I, San Francisco remained the most populous – and prosperous – city in California. The inventor of the cable car was honored by the regents of the University of California with the Hallidie Building, designed by Willis Polk and completed in 1918 -- one of the earliest ‘glass curtain-wall’ buildings. Downtown, headquarters were built for corporations such as the Matson Lines, Pacific Gas and Electric Company, Shell Oil, and Pacific Telephone & Telegraph. Prominent architects of these new ‘skyscrapers’ included George Kelham, Arthur Brown, Jr., Bliss and Faville, and Timothy Pflueger. Pflueger’s Telephone Building at 140 New Montgomery, completed in 1926, dominated the skyline south of Market Street. Clad in architectural terra cotta, its decorative scheme was abstractly designed referencing telephones, bells and American eagles.

The Depression set in, but it was the period of two of San Francisco’s defining landmarks, with construction of both the Golden Gate (1937) and the SF-Oakland Bay (1936) Bridges. To us, having seen the delays and cost overruns attending the recent rebuilding of the eastern leg of the Bay Bridge, the time spent actually building the two bridges – three and four years – seems unbelievable, though both spans were being projected all during the 1920s. They were engineering triumphs, with Joseph Strauss designing the Golden Gate bridge, and Charles Purcell stepping down from running the

state department of highways to lead the SF-Oakland Bay Bridge program. Strauss appointed architect Irving Morrow to aid in design of the Golden Gate Bridge. Timothy Pflueger was appointed, rather late, to adjust the design of the Bay Bridge; he grumbled that he didn't have much say in the process.

War and Growth

World War 2 caused commerce and shipping to become government-dominated. Facilities of peacetime San Francisco were supplemented with air bases, artillery, an embarkation center at Fort Mason, and an Army supply depot in Oakland. Treasure Island became the Naval Training Station. Shipbuilding boomed; Edgar J. Kaiser established multiple factories in Richmond, where hundreds of Liberty and Victory ships were built. Bethlehem Shipbuilding, owner of the former Union Iron Works at Pier 70 in San Francisco and a major shipbuilder nationwide, continued to expand during World War II, and was a center for Naval shipbuilding, repair and refitting.

Most demobilized servicemen and women returned home after World War II expecting to get a job, to marry and have children, buy a home and drive their own car. After the dangers survived in wartime, the crowding and concentration of inner cities was far less desirable than the prospect of new housing, built on the edges of the old cities and served by new roads and highways. Property developers were eager to provide these options. Mortgages, insured by the Federal Housing Administration, helped support a housing boom.

The Federal Highway Aid Act of 1956 provided a key funding mechanism for 'urban renewal.' Pushed by President Eisenhower, the highway act was seen not only as providing an interstate system, but as a way of connecting military bases in time of war.

In practice, the new highway systems often pushed through districts occupied by the poor or disadvantaged. The 1948 Transportation Plan for San Francisco was essentially a freeway overlay of the existing city that projected new ring roads, a new southern crossing of the Bay, and the Embarcadero Freeway (much of which was built).

By the 1950s, the national assumption was that crowded, substandard housing needed to be removed and replaced, not repaired. This led to demolition and rebuilding of whole neighborhoods (such as the Fillmore district, the site of Yerba Buena center, and parts of the Western Addition), in which removal of old housing, existing connections, existing churches and institutions all occurred, to the detriment of residents.

Today's City

By the mid-20th century, the stage was set for a sustained period of growth that, recessions notwithstanding, continues in the tech-fueled city of today. The optimism of San Francisco in the 1940s was felt by the servicemen and women who experienced the city during World War II. Many returned to participate in the urban growth of San Francisco and its region. Yet to come were tensions between tradition and renewal, regulation and development, “Manhattanization” and social progress that still define contemporary discourse.

Today, as in 1849, innovation and risk define the region. A “second Gold Rush” may have overtaken San Francisco yet again. But I like best the words of Frank Bruni, writing in the New York Times: “My version of history is a history of caprice, a history of unintended consequences...” Of accidents, perhaps, or serendipity.