

Confessions of a historic re-enactor



George Webber, a 19th century kind of guy.

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George Webber has long been known to Sonomans as the history-lovin' actor who takes on the personalities of such locally renowned characters as pueblo founder Gen. Mariano Vallejo, Buena Vista Winery legend Count Agoston Haraszthy and the lesser-known, but equally tantalizing Luigi, the singing Italian chef.

But not everyone is aware this scenery-devouring thespian was originally a floor trader on the Pacific Stock Exchange. After 20 years at the epicenter of the "greed/fear matrix," as Webber puts it, he reinvented himself in the historic-walking-tour business – and has never looked back. We definitely recommend visiting him at Buena Vista (check out buenavistawinery.com) and chatting about 19th century viticulture over a glass of the Count's Selection Pinot Meunier. But, until then, we asked Webber to share with us tales of loves lost, and the over/under on an apocryphal bout between the Count and the General.

Name something about Sonoma that completely blows your mind.

While hunting in the Mayacamas Mountains in 1851 (future Civil War commander) Joseph Hooker and his Indian guide came across two small grizzly Bear cubs in a thicket of brush. The Indian guide signaled Hooker to leave, and upon Hooker's refusal to go quietly slipped away. Seconds later, the enraged mother grizzly attacked. Unable to reach his rifle leaning against a nearby tree, Hooker skillfully evaded her sharp teeth, and claws, and pulling a Bowie knife out of its scabbard dispatched the bear with a deadly thrust to its heart.

Wow, I can't believe this guy got walloped by Lee at Chancellorville.

Amazingly, Hooker avoided serious injury, and had a cobbler make the bear's feet were into a huge pair of boots. In 1852, this same pair of bear boots was worn by Ulysses S. Grant at a costume party in San Francisco; they are now on display in a glass case at the Depot Park Museum in Sonoma.

If you could have been a figure from the past who would it be?

How about THIS question: "In what year of American History would you most prefer to be born?"

I do the questions here, George...

(Ignoring the interviewer, Webber continues...) I would like to be born in 1870, thus coming of age in the 1890s – in my view the most pleasant decade in American history. I could enjoy the remarkable advances of the 19th Century: electricity, photography, steam engines, trains, automobiles, telephones, modern plumbing and sanitation. I would be able to participate in the great political flowering of the Progressive Era, as common-folk battled the oil, railroad and banking oligopolies at the end of the "Gilded Age." Socialism was not yet a bad word, and a belief in the basic goodness of man suffused political discourse.

Surely there were some hardships back then – what about war and pestilence?

I would not have to participate in wars; although there was a draft instituted for the Spanish-American War of 1898 they never actually drafted anyone, and I would be too old in 1917 when American entered the Great War.

But wouldn't you have missed the pleasures of modern-day Sonoma?

San Francisco was one of the great bohemian enclaves in the world, and just a ferry boat ride across the bay was "the crookedest railroad in the world" on Mount Tamalpais. From 1896 to 1929 I could ride to the top, enjoy a fine lager in the German style beerhouse at the top, and then take the "gravity car" all the way to Mill Valley. It was a hopeful, glorious time – before the 20th Century took full force, and nihilism and destruction arrived with World War One, and the Great Depression – and I would probably have passed on before the horrors of World War Two.

Tell us about the girl who broke your heart.

A dark-haired girl took me into the woods at a co-ed church camp near Boone, Iowa in 1969, and kissed me in a way I had never been kissed before. I was 15, and my girlfriend for two weeks was 17. We returned to Des Moines after the camp, and enjoyed many private walks in Greenwood Park. On the first day of Roosevelt High School I recall complete happiness; I had a senior girlfriend, and I but a sophomore!

How did it end?

I can still recall the matter-of-fact tone she used as we walked home after school; she explained there was simply no way she could commit social suicide and continue going out with me. That these particular two years of age formed a gaping chasm across which no bridge may cross. It would be fully 10 years later when I finally dated a friend of my older sister; by then the two-year gap had subsided to a manageable difference.

Who would win a mud-wrestling match between Count Haraszthy and Gen. Vallejo?

This would be a close match, as both men were known as seriously efficient and brave hunters and fighters. The General would have around 15 pounds advantage; in a mud-wrestling match that would make the difference. The General would win, but it's most likely they would settle their differences over a glass of wine. The General had been making wine commercially since 1839, and his Lachyrma Montis brand was of legendary quality.