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The Normal Excellence of Long Accomplishment

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# The Normal Excellence of Long Accomplishment

A Brief History of *California History*

THE DAY that the California Historical Society and its journal were born, almost nobody noticed. It was Monday morning, March 27, 1922, and all eyes were on Fatty. Silent-screen legend Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle folded his three-hundred-pound frame into the back of a car waiting outside San Francisco’s Hall of Justice. Pulling out of Portsmouth Square, Arbuckle’s car led a motorcade holding passengers Judge Harold Louderback, attorneys for both sides, and the jury in this third trial of Arbuckle for the killing of actress Virginia Rappe during a booze-soaked party at the St. Francis Hotel a year earlier. The jury would visit the hotel room where Rappe died—allegedly crushed to death under Arbuckle’s weight. Not even the fact that Arbuckle had escaped conviction in two previous mistrials and that his attorneys were clearly winning this trial could have given him much comfort that morning: the prosecution would rest its case in the afternoon, banking on the image of that room at the St. Francis, of Virginia Rappe dying on the very bed they observed, to swing the jury its way.<sup>1</sup>

The spectacle at the St. Francis that morning was a minor inconvenience for Charles Templeton Crocker, the thirty-eight-year-old dilettante grandson of transcontinental railway magnate Charles Crocker. Heir to a \$5 million inheritance (about \$69 million in 2013 dollars), Crocker was not accustomed to inconveniences. But that same morning, he was to host the first official meeting of the newly resurrected California Historical Society, in which a board of directors was to be elected. He generally held meetings of such importance at the St. Francis, which his family owned, but it would have been indecorous in the extreme to meet there while Arbuckle, his attorneys, and newspapermen jostled about, so he chose one of his favorite restaurants, Café Marquard, a block away from the St. Francis at Geary and Mason.<sup>2</sup> Not that decorum mattered much to Crocker, to hear his wife tell it.

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In 1911, not long after graduating from Yale, Crocker fulfilled society-page expectations by marrying Helene Irwin, heiress to the California and Hawaiian Sugar Company fortune, in a union the *San Francisco Call* presciently described as a “Twenty-Eight Million Dollar Merger.”<sup>3</sup> Crocker made an honorable go of it, hiring friend and famed San Francisco architect and bohemian hang-about, Willis Polk, to design a \$1.6 million, 35,000-square-foot Italianate mansion for his wife in Hillsborough, about fifteen miles south of San Francisco on the peninsula.<sup>4</sup> The newlyweds threw lavish costume balls at the St. Francis, the first of which the *San Francisco Chronicle* described as the “most magnificent affair in the social records of the city.”<sup>5</sup> But his heart, it appears, was never in the marriage. Crocker kept an elaborately decorated, two-story rooftop penthouse in the Russian Hill neighborhood of San Francisco, where he hosted off-color affairs in which he “was generous”—according to famed San Francisco gossip columnist, Herb Caen—“to Bohemians of all sizes, sexes and colors.”<sup>6</sup> He wrote and performed a Chinese-themed play called “Land of Happiness” at the Bohemian Grove, and he later penned the libretto for an operatic adaptation of the play called “Fay-Yen-Fah.” Co-produced with confidante and Southern Pacific Railway attorney Joseph D. Redding, the opera debuted in Monte Carlo, Monaco.

Crocker kept his wife in the dark about his precise whereabouts, and she tolerated the arrangement for a remarkable sixteen years before filing for divorce. But when she did, she filed on the grounds of “cruelty,” declaring, according to the *Los Angeles Times*: “her happiness had been wrecked by her husband’s love for and pursuit of drama.” She had been forced from society affairs, she alleged, because of his habitual absence from their Hillsborough estate.<sup>7</sup> Crocker conceded without comment. But if Charles Templeton Crocker’s love of theater and pageantry was disastrous for his marriage, it was a boon for California. For it took a man of Crocker’s eccentric tastes, fabulous wealth, and limitless leisure to resurrect the California Historical Society, to put it on its modern footing, and to publish the first issue of *California History* in July of 1922. Dressing up as a Spanish don at society affairs and writing amateur plays about ancient China were not typical activities for professional historians. But it turns out that Crocker and regional history buffs in other parts of the nation were doing precisely what we today regard as “good history,” while the professional historians of the day, generally absorbed in esoteric discussions about our nation’s founding, had lost ground with the general reading public.<sup>8</sup> In short, Crocker was the right man at the right time to launch *California History*.

As was the case for many high-society Californians of that era, Crocker’s entrée to the world of historical inquiry began with his involvement in the preservation of the Spanish missions. He and other educated elites stepped forward in the 1920s as self-conscious defenders and preservationists of California history, just as that history appeared to be waning, trampled underfoot by the greatest migration in the state’s history: in no decade of the twentieth or twenty-first centuries did the population of California increase as rapidly as it did in the 1920s, when more than 2.2 million newcomers made the state their home.<sup>9</sup> Four years before that initial meeting at the Café Marquard, Crocker had joined a committee to fund the restoration of Mission Dolores in San Francisco in April 1918, and he co-founded the statewide California Mission Restoration Association in January 1921.<sup>10</sup> The latter association included famed horticulturalist Luther Burbank, *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harry Chandler, suffragist and Republican Party activist Mrs. Florence

Porter, Ventura philanthropist Juan Camarillo, and Herbert Hoover, then United States Secretary of Commerce under President Warren G. Harding.<sup>11</sup>

In truth, Crocker and his esteemed peers were latecomers to the mission preservation movement in California. Charles Fletcher Lummis, editor of the booster magazine *Land of Sunshine* from 1895 to 1909, had spearheaded that cause, and promoted the celebration of the missions as what Kevin Starr has called a “sustaining ideology” for rootless Southern Californians.<sup>12</sup> That ideology was crystallized in John Steven McGroarty’s wildly popular *Mission Play*, which drew an estimated 2.5 million spectators to Los Angeles between 1912 and 1929. So revered was the play that the Pope and the King of Spain bestowed knighthood upon McGroarty, and California made him its poet laureate.<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, the town of Hemet in the San Jacinto Valley began annual performances of *Ramona*, based on the 1884 novel of the same title by Helen Hunt Jackson. Designated by the California Senate as the official “California State Outdoor Play,” *Ramona* is a melodramatic, four-hour exercise in agitprop. Yet, the fact that *Ramona*, the *Mission Play*, or any of the other “Spanish fantasy past” projects were historically inaccurate troubled almost nobody because they were wildly entertaining. Or, as Phoebe Kropp has argued, they were palliative: Anglo Americans “embraced the Spanish era’s apparent romantic chivalry, preindustrial innocence, and harmonious hierarchy as a respite from the ugliness of modern times.”<sup>14</sup>

If many Southern Californians enjoyed this brand of “histotainment” a century before the History Channel, a handful of earnest and sober-minded men were determined to accurately record Southern California’s past. It took a midwestern transplant named Noah Levering to unite those men under the banner of a new organization, the Historical Society of Southern California, in 1883. Having enjoyed an eclectic career as a lawyer, teacher, merchant, postmaster, and budding historian with the Iowa Historical Society, Levering arrived in Los Angeles in 1875 with a wealth of experience. But he was immediately underwhelmed by Southern Californians’ affection for local history and he was surprised that the region lacked an historical society. He attributed both to the shortsighted greed of the populace, the bulk of whom could not be distracted from their quest for wealth to consider the past.<sup>15</sup> It did not take him long, however, to befriend enough influential Angelenos with colorful stories to become, in his words, “thoroughly convinced that this was a grand field for historical work and that steps should be taken at once to gather up and preserve the unwritten history which would be prolific with interest to those who should come after us.”<sup>16</sup>

One of those men he gathered around him was Juan José Warner, elected first president of the Society. Jonathan Trumbull Warner, born in Connecticut in 1807, set the mold. Warner, a cattle driver, beaver trapper, and later, shopkeeper in Los Angeles, had become a naturalized Mexican citizen, changed his name, and was quickly rewarded for his patriotism with a massive land grant near San Diego known as Agua Caliente. Warner stayed in San Diego until the outbreak of the Mexican War, at which time he returned to Los Angeles as a confidential agent for American Consul Thomas O. Larkin. After the war, he published a local newspaper and became active in local political affairs. Although Warner had been a participant in many a swashbuckling affair—nearly losing his life to gun-wielding Californios and rebellious natives earlier in his life—he was not interested

in sensationalism, and he soon sought out the company of other gentlemen interested in careful reflection on the recent past. Root out “the apocrypha of history,” he urged in his first presidential address, and his own work reflected this penchant for precision. His tiny (4.75” x 3.5”) *History of San Pedro Port* (1883) briefly, but carefully, detailed the construction of a schooner for otter hunting in Baja California. His much more substantial *An Historical Sketch of Los Angeles County* (1876), co-authored by Benjamin Hayes and Joseph Pomeroy Widney, reflected on the methodology of history writing: “Drawing out information from many sources, some of it recorded, but much unrecorded, narratives and personal reminiscences falling directly from the lips of survivors of that older generation, now rapidly passing away[,] ... we have sifted and compared reports and dates, until we believe the narrative will be found in the main correct.”<sup>17</sup>

Warner’s vice presidents were similarly impressive, and included Los Angeles School Superintendent Henry Dwight Barrows, educator and politician Antonio Franco Coronel, Farmers and Merchants Bank co-founder and former California governor John Gately Downey, and Civil War veteran and former lieutenant governor General John Mansfield.<sup>18</sup> The caliber of these gentlemen was imposing, but they were not saints, nor were they free from the prejudices of their era. In Warner, Hayes, and Widney’s *Historical Sketch of Los Angeles County*, for example, the authors were unapologetically contemptuous of Indians: “The orange orchard of San Gabriel, and a fragment of the vineyard and olive grove of San Fernando, still remain, as living witnesses of the energy and untiring industry of those zealous friars who, coming into a country full to overflowing with ignorant, savage barbarians, changed them into patient, docile laborers, and in less than fifty years filled the country with fruitfulness.”<sup>19</sup> In both their hostility to Indians, and their valorization of the padres, the authors ignored the central tenet of what we today regard as good historical research: objectivity. It is worth noting, however, that these biases were not unique to “amateurs”: very few professional practitioners of American history yet regarded scientific “objectivity” as the gold standard of the profession.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile in Northern California, gentlemen historians had much less success organizing their interests.<sup>21</sup> An organization called the Historical Society of the State of California was incorporated in 1852, and its illustrious founders included journalist Jacob Bailey Moore, Union officer and legal scholar Henry Wager Halleck, and historian Robert Greenhow. Records of that organization indicate that it was short-lived, and not revived until 1866 by John W. Dwinelle, the lawyer and California state assemblyman credited for establishing the University of California (appropriately, UC Berkeley’s celebrated history department is today located in Dwinelle Hall). But after a meeting or two, that iteration of the California Historical Society—then named the Ethno-Historical Society of San Francisco—again collapsed.<sup>22</sup> And there were several more before Dwinelle made his final attempt in 1877 with the support of attorney John T. Doyle. Together, they first published the “Noticias de la Nueva California” of Father Palou, one of the foundational documents in California history. Significantly, the publication circulated among members of the Historical Society of Southern California, and also later found its way to the desk of Berkeley professor Herbert Eugene Bolton, regarded as the pioneer of Borderlands history. Bolton would go on to translate and edit Palou’s writings in 1926.<sup>23</sup>

How could it be that such capable and intelligent scholars in Northern California were incapable of maintaining an historical society for so long? Disinterest? Entropy? Horse-and-buggy traffic jams during meeting hours? Actually, it was Hubert Howe Bancroft's fault. At least, this was the view of Adolphus Skinner Hubbard, the secretary for the last failed iteration of the California Historical Society in the 1880s.<sup>24</sup> "This Association," he wrote of the society, "left no important record save of the fact of its organization and incorporation."

The knowledge of the efforts of individual citizens, particularly Bancroft, in collecting and preserving the early records of the inhabitants of this region, has doubtless operated to make associated effort seem unnecessary. A private collection, however, although freely accessible to scholars, does not meet the demand which every civilized community ought to make for a complete and permanent record or its origin and history. It is subject to the vicissitudes of private fortune, and is always liable to be broken up and scattered through the market.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, it seems quite plausible that the frenetic efforts of Bancroft and his team to "save the world a mass of valuable human experiences," as he put it—ultimately publishing seven volumes (more than 5,600 pages) of *History of California* between 1884 and 1890—was rather discouraging.<sup>26</sup> But Hubbard's chief contribution to our understanding of the evolution of the California Historical Society comes not from his explanation of its early failures, but rather in his entreaty for public ownership and access to the historical record of the region. *This* was the germ that would connect these early efforts with the successful one of Charles Templeton Crocker in 1922.

Shortly after Crocker's March 1922 meeting at Café Marquard, he secured office space for the Society at 2nd and Mission Street in the Wells Fargo Bank building. There he and the first elected leaders of the Society declared that the Society's mission would be to "collect, preserve, and diffuse information relating to the history of California." Central to that mission, and consistent with Hubbard's earlier entreaty, the new *California Historical Society Quarterly* would feature some original articles, but would focus chiefly on printing primary documents, "hitherto unpublished, or that may have been published previously in whole or in part in some form usually inaccessible to the general reader."<sup>27</sup> It is difficult to overstate the value of this proposition in the era before jet travel to archives, before microfilmed manuscript collections, before online databases and digital archives. The goal of Crocker and his cohort was nothing less than democratizing access to the records of a civilization. And for that purpose, he not only gave freely from his personal collection of Californiana, but also secured agreements from the Bancroft Library—then primarily a repository for Bancroft's personal collection, the California State Library, and the personal collection of Henry E. Huntington, much of which was still closed to the public. The first issues of the *Quarterly* featured excerpts from the journals of Charles Cardinell, a member of Captain Parker H. French's California express train of 1849; documents from the Bear Flag Revolt, most notably William B. Ide's proclamations in Sonoma; the journal of John McHenry Hollingsworth; and the correspondence of General José Castro of the Mexican army.

But in 1922 all eyes were on Fatty. Newspapers took no notice of Crocker's project, captivated instead by the simultaneous acquittal of Arbuckle. Jurors felt Arbuckle's

travails so unfair, that they wrote a remarkable statement of apology. The damage to his career, however, was already done: six days after the acquittal, the newly appointed president of the Motion Picture Association of America, Will H. Hays—hired to “clean up the pictures”—announced that Arbuckle was henceforth banned from appearing in any Hollywood pictures. Hays would eventually lift the ban, but Arbuckle’s career would never recover, largely because of the lurid, year-long newspaper reportage on the case. In a private conversation at his San Simeon castle, newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst later bragged to actor Buster Keaton that the Arbuckle trial sold more newspapers than his issue on the sinking of the *Lusitania*, widely credited for drumming up public support for America’s entry into World War I.<sup>28</sup>

That Crocker and his colleagues eluded fame for their contributions to California society was likely of little concern to them. He and the others around him were wildly successful in their business affairs, and they saw something honorable, even sacred, in the preservation of the state’s past. For them, *California History*’s excellence would be, to borrow from American poet Jack Gilbert, “the normal excellence, of long accomplishment.”<sup>29</sup> Crocker retained the presidency through his 1927 divorce, but soon stepped down as his interests took him in yet another direction. Having established secure footing for the journal, Crocker turned to his life-long interest in sailing, and commissioned a Sausalito builder to construct the *Zaca*, a schooner—christened in 1930 by Academy Award winner and close friend Marie Dressler—on which he would circumnavigate the globe. At sea, too, Crocker was a collector, and quickly secured commissions from the California Academy of Sciences, the American Museum of Natural History, and the New York Zoological Society to collect marine life and samples of flora and fauna from remote islands.<sup>30</sup>

Without diminishing the great accomplishment of Crocker and his board, it is clear that from the beginning, *California History* suffered from a kind of identity confusion. Would it emulate scholarly standards of the professional journals that emerged in that era, including, for example, the *International Journal of American Linguistics* (1917), *Journal of Roman Studies* (1911), *American Economic Review* (1911), or *Annals of the Association for American Geographers* (1911)? Or would it publish work by amateurs, work that—while possibly valuable—did not conform to the rigors of professional scholarship or break new interpretive ground? The answer was, generally, the latter, and a reflection of the paucity of scholars who wrote professionally about the history of California. Herbert Eugene Bolton did not see his first graduate student, Charles E. Chapman, matriculate at Berkeley until 1915. Chapman stayed on at Berkeley while, in Southern California, Robert G. Cleland began teaching at Occidental College in 1912. Both Cleland and Chapman firmly believed, as Gerald Nash has explained, “that California history should be viewed in a national and even international context rather than in a strictly local setting.”<sup>31</sup> These men all contributed to *California History*, suggesting that they did not regard it as a parochial publication. Quite to the contrary, they saw it as a vehicle for disseminating scholarly work about California in a global context. But there were very few like Bolton, Chapman, and Cleland, and so *California History*, by necessity, remained inclusive of the work of amateur historians.

It would not be until the 1970s that a broad field of professional California historians would emerge. That development was most likely the function of a natural increase

in the number of Ph.D. advisors trained in California history in the 1940s and 1950s, including Andrew F. Rolle, John Walton Caughey, Walton Elbert Bean, and others, as well as changes in the California education code. The Teacher Preparation and Licensing Law of 1970, known as the Ryan Act after its sponsoring state assemblyman, Leo Ryan (later killed during his failed humanitarian mission to Jonestown in Guyana), included the history of California in its core curriculum for K-12 teachers. This created increased demand, particularly in the California State University system, for professors of California history and the history of the American West. In the 1970s, Kevin Starr returned to his home state of California to begin what continues to be an indomitable career of regional illumination. And a young, new batch of historians, mostly trained as United States historians, took appointments in California during the 1960s and 1970s and then gravitated toward the field. They included, among others, Bill Bullough, Al Camarillo, Robert Cherny, Richard Griswold del Castillo, Norris Hundley, William Issel, Gloria Lothrop, Glenna Matthews, Richard J. Orsi, Ken Owns, Leonard Pitt, James Rawls, Jules Tygiel, and Charles Wollenberg. These scholars helped move California history to the very center of new social history concerns about race, class, gender, and labor.

Beginning in the 1980s, the history of California emerged as a known subfield in the history of the United States. It is for the collective good, however, that it remained *only* a subfield for Ph.D.'s in the history of the United States, because an advanced degree in the history of California would not only contribute to the unemployment rolls but produce a batch of scholars ill-prepared to teach, research, and write about California with the sophistication the region deserves. One cannot understand California without understanding the history of the nation that gave it statehood, and the broader world that gave it meaning. And under the leadership of its two longest serving editors—Richard Orsi (1989–2000) and Janet Fireman (2001–2012)—*California History* increasingly reflected this more sophisticated approach. Under Orsi's editorship, for example, *California History* published papers from the first Envisioning California Conference, hosted by the Center for California Studies at Sacramento State University in 1989. Directed by Jeff Lustig, the Conference produced papers that revealed a surprisingly rich array of California historical themes and topics. And under Fireman's editorship, *California History* featured several special-subject issues revealing the depth of historiography on Gold Rush California, the history of the transcontinental railroad, and the history of U.S.-Mexican relations.

It was this growing engagement with historiography—careful reflection on the evolution of historical scholarship and ideas—which most clearly distinguished recent issues of *California History* from the *California Historical Society Quarterly* of Crocker's day. Today's *California History* must intensify this distinction to remain relevant among scholars, and there is no time like the present to begin. Having just been acquired by the largest university press in the American West, *California History* is at a milestone. To acknowledge that milestone, this issue of *California History* features some of the leading scholars of California history reflecting on essays from the early and middle years of the journal. In these exchanges, readers will not only learn where the history of California has been, but also where *California History* is headed.

## NOTES

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2. "California Historical Society 1852-1922," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 1 (July 1922): 19.
3. "Twenty-Eight Million Dollar Merger Effected by Dan Cupid," *San Francisco Call* (hereafter: *SFC*), February 28, 1911, 15.
4. For photograph of the Crocker estates, see Philip Alexander and Charles Hamm, *History of San Mateo County from the Earliest Times* (Burlingame, CA: Press of Burlingame Publishing Company, 1916), 97; on Polk's side ventures, see Sarah A. Fedrika, "Toward a Locational Modernism: Little Magazines and the Modernist Geographical Imagination" (Ph.D. dissertation, Arizona State University, 2008), 120.
5. Lady Teazle, "Society Chat," *SFC*, January 3, 1912, 7; "Success of Oriental Ball to Be Given by the Charles Templeton Crockers Lies with the Men," January 21, 1912, 47.
6. Herb Caen, "Friday's Fresha Fisha," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 13, 1991, E1.
7. "Crockers Divorced," *Los Angeles Times*, May 15, 1927, 15.
8. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1988.
9. U. S. Census Bureau.
10. "Restoration of Old Mission to Begin in a Month," *SFC*, April 13, 1918, 12; "Missions to be Restored," *SFC*, January 9, 1921, A10.
11. On Florence Collins Porter, see Florence Collins Porter and Helen Brown Trask, eds. *Maine Men and Women in Southern California* (Los Angeles: Kingsley, Mason & Collins Company, 1913), 77.
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13. *Ibid*, 88.
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16. Noah Levering, "Origin of the Historical Society of Southern California," *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 3 (January 1895): 9.
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18. "Constitution, Standing Rules, and List of Officers and Members of the Historical Society of Southern California," *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 1 (1884): 1.
19. J.J. Warner, Benjamin Hayes, J.P. Widney, *An Historical Sketch of Los Angeles County, California* (Los Angeles: L. Lewin & Co., 1876), n.p.
20. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 31-34.
21. "California Historical Society 1852-1922," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 1 (July 1922): 10.
22. Significantly, during this period, Dwinelle authored *The Colonial History of the City of San Francisco* (San Francisco: Towne & Bacon, 1867).
23. Herbert E. Bolton, ed. *Historical Memoirs of New California* (translated into English from the manuscripts of Fray Francisco Palou) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1926).
24. For a biographical account of Hubbard, see Leigh H. Irvine, ed. *A History of the New California, Volume II* (New York and Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1905), 818-822.
25. "California Historical Society 1852-1922," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 1 (July 1922): 10.
26. See Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California*, volumes 18-24 (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft & Company, Publishers, 1884). Quote from volume 39, p. 2.
27. "Front matter," *Quarterly of the California Historical Society* 1 (July 1922), n.p.
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