



## A close look at Oakland’s extraordinary terra cotta buildings

By Riley Doty

Oakland has a fascinating collection of buildings whose decorative façades are made of fired clay. Ceramic surfaces offer certain effects not duplicated by other materials. During a remarkable period of 24 years (1908–1931) terra cotta adorned most of the large important buildings in the city’s downtown districts, replete with a full range of finishes from bright glossy surfaces to reserved matte glazes to the unglazed color tones of the clay itself. The evolution of design styles over time can be read by observing these buildings, all of which contribute to the city’s richly layered architectural heritage. In particular, Oakland possesses an outstanding collection of Art Deco buildings that represent the final phase of the terra cotta era. A group of colorful survivors in Uptown dating from 1928 to 1931 is of particular national importance and will be the focus of Part 2, which will run in the next issue.

During its heyday, the presence of terra cotta was ubiquitous in America’s urban centers. Cutting edge trends developed in large cities for large buildings and reflected back to

small- and medium-sized cities and buildings. Terra cotta’s era of dominance began with the appearance of the Chicago skyscraper. The pivotal initiating factor was the introduction of a steel framework to carry the building’s entire load. Previously, thick exterior masonry walls had been required to support the weight of the interior floors and walls. Exterior surfaces now became known as “curtain walls,” which were hung onto the building’s skeletal structure (see photo in article below). Questions of what materials to use and in what style became matters for debate. Soon after the closing of the Columbian Exposition in 1893, the dominant architectural paradigm became consolidated. Modern technology had developed innovations that made this new type of building possible, but the design template, while grand, was aesthetically conservative. Rather than emphasizing the lightness of being—which the steel structure made possible—the impetus was to make the buildings appear to be heavy masonry structures. Under the broad heading of the City Beautiful Movement, the chosen style was Beaux Arts-influ-



OAKLAND HISTORY CENTER

**OAKLAND’S CATHEDRAL BUILDING**, initially known as the Federal Realty Building, uses terra cotta beautifully.

enced, following the principles of French neoclassical architecture popular in the 19th century. That style drew from the whole European songbook, from Greek, Roman, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque sources. Training in this style emphasized knowledge of historic architectural orders but allowed for eclectic reordering. One constant was an affinity for sculptural ornament and grand architectural flourishes.

Terra cotta became the material of choice for exterior façades mainly because it provided the steel members with superior protection against fire, and it offered an inexpensive means of producing ornamentation that imitated Beaux Arts carved stone. Beginning in the 1890s, terra cotta became the preeminent material for façades of large buildings. This material was destined to spend the next three decades mostly masquerading as carved stone, imitating granite, limestone or marble.

See **TERRA COTTA** on page 2

## What is terra cotta? Here’s an explanation

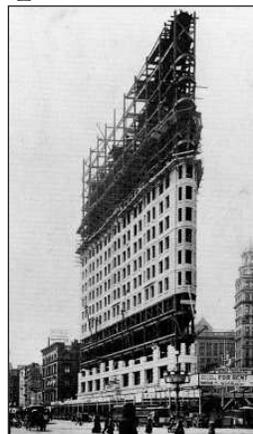
By Riley Doty

The name terra cotta was taken from the Italian term for “baked earth.” The architectural use of this material has an episodic history dating back to the classic Greek and Roman eras. It reappeared at times over the centuries, notably during the Renaissance in Northern Italy. Its modern era of ascendancy was launched suddenly towards the end of the 19th century. In the preceding decades, terra cotta and cast iron had done a sort of dance, competing for the role of reproducing low-relief architectural details by means of casting multiples from a mold. In Old Oakland, from the days of the Transcontinental Railroad building boom, we see cast iron details on doorway surrounds of commercial buildings. But by the 1890s, terra cotta emerged dominant.

A great deal of handwork was involved in manufacturing terra cotta. Highly skilled artists modeled (sculpted) each unit. When the master copy was finished, plaster production molds were made from it.

Formulating the specific mixes of high-grade clays

See **PRIMER** on page 6



**A CURTAIN WALL** of terra cotta is being fastened to the steel structure of New York’s Flatiron Building, 1902.

FRIENDS OF TERRA COTTA COLLECTION



# Terra cotta

*Continued from page 1*

Though ceramic glazes have an inherent capacity to display a wide range of luminous unfading colors, that potential remained largely untapped. Things would begin to change towards the end of the 1920s. Beaux Arts continued to exert an influence but with increasing explorations of new elements of style. Overall, architectural design evolved towards using flatter surfaces and emphasizing more economical building materials and methods. Terra cotta manufacturers developed an extruded product called ceramic veneer which enabled them to continue to compete, especially during the Depression. Immediately before and after 1930, ceramic color suddenly appeared on the facades of a number of buildings. This use of vivid color represented a liberation of sorts in the realm of architectural ceramics. Oakland is fortunate in having several surviving examples from that brief but fascinating period.

In this article, I'll highlight eight buildings that provide good examples of various glaze finishes, arranged by geography so you may set out on a self-guided walking tour. These eight buildings range in age from 90 to 115 years old. Almost without exception, ceramic colors remain unchanged over time, an extraordinary hallmark of fired ceramics. The colors you see here appear exactly as they did the day they were removed from the kiln, 96 years ago in this instance. The buildings themselves and the attachment systems are more vulnerable to deterioration, but the glaze colors endure.

❖ **Howden Building**, 337 17th St. 1925: McWethy & Greenleaf, architects. The entrance to upper floor offices at 337 17th St. is framed by an elaborate formal sur-

round where units of terra cotta and tile seamlessly blend together to display bright shiny glazes. All units which have projecting decorative relief are terra cotta, while those with flat surfaces are tiles.

Robert Howden tiled the exterior to advertise his company, which sold and installed tiles. Inside the entrance at 1628 Webster St. is California's only surviving showroom from the Golden Age of tile, the 1920s. The walls and columns around the recessed showroom entry are elaborately decorated with colorful tiles. Tile installations throughout the 1920s were bursting with color, while terra cotta continued to use colored glazes sparingly.

❖ **YWCA**, 1315 Webster St. 1914: Julia Morgan, architect. Terra cotta by N. Clark & Sons

This is a relatively rare early example of color being used on a ceramic façade. Because the architect based this building on an Italian Renaissance Palazzo, the inclusion of Della Robbia-style polychrome terra cotta was thematically appropriate. The presence of color softens the austere formality which historically characterized this type of building. The reserved, harmonious colors offer a fine example of matte-glazed terra cotta.



RILEY DOTY

**THE HOWDEN BUILDING** has a high gloss finish. For more on this archway feature, see page 6.

Some buildings are entirely surfaced in terra cotta while others incorporate it in conjunction with brick, stone, tile, or other materials. The base section of this building is



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**THE YWCA BUILDING**, built by Julia Morgan, provides an early example of color used on a ceramic façade. It's also a good example of the use of a matte glaze finish.

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faced with bricks made by N. Clark & Sons, the same company that supplied the terra cotta. In the middle section, the three stories above the base, the façade is finished in stucco with windows framed by terra cotta or brick surrounds projecting forward from the wall. The topmost section has attic windows framed entirely in brick and terra cotta. The tall two-story arched windows on the main façade have a defining presence, spectacular yet refined. During her career Julia Morgan designed 17 YWCAs in the Western states, of which this was the first.

Incidentally, the cornices here were formed from sheet metal. That was a fairly common practice due to the cost and challenges of safely anchoring heavy overhanging blocks of terra cotta above a sidewalk. (This use of pressed sheet metal will later be seen in its most elaborate form at the Cathedral Building, below.)

❖ **Oakland Title building**, 1447 Franklin St. 1922: Maury Diggs, architect. Terra cotta by N. Clark & Sons

Maury Diggs designed this lavishly decorated building as if it were an oversized jewelry box. He was a flamboyant figure whose commissions included racetracks and movie palaces. The building's considerable use of color is unusual for its date. Colors are



CREATIVE COMMONS: GENE ANDERSON

**OAKLAND TITLE** boasts a good semi-gloss finish on its muted glazes. Below is a detail of some of its terra cotta work.

muted; their role is to highlight classical forms rather than stand out as a primary focus. Ornamentation derives from Italian Renaissance sources. A god and goddess lounge on either side of the portico's sloping roof. The terra cotta cornice is extraordinarily elaborate.

The base glaze imitates granite. It was sprayed on, using techniques the industry had developed to produce a grainy stipple mimicking natural stone. Additional glaze colors were applied afterwards with a brush.

This site provides an especially good opportunity to closely examine terra cotta at street level. First, small chips reveal the buff clay body beneath the glaze. In examining a building and trying to decide whether the surface material is terra cotta it is helpful to search for chipped spots, just as we can see at home on a chipped ceramic cup or bowl. The glaze layer is less than 1/16" thick. Secondly, the complexity of some individual pieces of terra cotta can be appreciated close up here. In particular, the decorative units resting on the top ledge of each plinth (about 4' above the sidewalk) are worth studying (see detail photo above). One can trace the grout joint around the perimeter of each of two terra cotta units 16" high. Together they span the 36" width of the plinth. A vertical joint in the middle separates the mirror-image left and right units. The intricacy of each piece is star-



RILEY DOTY

ting, being highly sculptural and incorporating many different forms and colors. Along the bottom, intricately modeled leaves are bundled, bound together with blue straps. Above this is a recessed panel where a festoon of leaves and berries is draped upon three yellow pegs. Heavy moldings above and below the panel connect on either side to stubby fluted columns. Each piece is an extraordinary block of terra cotta, and this job required ten pairs of these units.

❖ **Financial Building**, 405 14th St. 1929: Reed & Corlett, architects. Terra Cotta by Gladding, McBean

The Financial Center Building dates from the same period in which colorful ceramic buildings started to appear Uptown. This speculative office building satisfied conflicting demands by being stylishly modern while striving to be a suitable companion to its

See **TERRA COTTA** on page 4

OAKLAND HISTORY CENTER



**FINANCIAL CENTER BUILDING**



# Terra cotta

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Beaux Arts neighbors. Since the mid-1890s, city leaders had taken pride in the “march of skyscrapers” which stretched up Broadway from 11th to 17th Street and spilled onto some adjacent streets. The overall color and presence of this building is restrained. The brickwork and terra cotta surfaces are earthy but also warm and bright. Its ornamentation is mainly derived from classic sources but with Art Deco stylization. The exterior conveys a sense of an upward flow of energy. Shunning the finality of a traditional cornice, it finishes at the top with open forms pointing skyward.

Unfortunately, the surface of the terra cotta on the lower exterior section was ruined by sandblasting and is now painted. However, everything inside the entry foyer at 405 14th St. is intact with all its original elements on display. Its terra cotta—including lovely, stylized carvings of grape vines—exhibits “slip glaze.” A liquified clay of one color (the slip) is sprayed onto unglazed terra cotta of a different color. The result is a finish which is even more matte than the glazes seen at the YWCA. The spraying in this instance was carefully controlled to produce a fine, even-grained spatter. The clay body here is a yellowish tan, and the slip is a light buff. The

variegated effect gives a subtle complexity to the finish. The terra cotta units have been molded to show fine striations that mimic the look of stone carved with a toothed chisel. Altogether, this is an exceptionally delicate and refined finish.

This building shares the block along 14th St. with an International Style office building (1330 Broadway) built in 1958. The juxtaposition of these buildings demonstrates the dual processes of evolutionary vs. revolutionary changes in architectural design. The Financial Center Building’s style shows an evolution of design over time, conforming to many precepts of Beaux Arts office buildings which were codified 35 years earlier. It expresses its modernity by means of clever modifications. 1330 Broadway was built 29 years later, and it follows an entirely different set of rules. It shows absolutely no conformance or reference to the template for early American skyscrapers.



OAKLAND CULTURAL HERITAGE SURVEY

**THE CENTRAL BUILDING’S** massive upward thrust.

❖ **Central Building**, 1400 Broadway 1926: George Kelham & Walter Mathews, architects. Terra cotta by Gladding, McBean. The original façade of this imposing building is intact on all frontages above the second story. The exterior surfaces of the bottom two stories are not original and are quite muddled, except for the monumental Romanesque arched entryway at 436 14th St. (Terra cotta at street level was torn out in 1959 to update the appearance of the retail tenant’s business.) The terra cotta elements at that magnificent doorway and also the facing bricks on the upper façade are finished with Gladding, McBean’s patented Granitex glaze. The Central building has a defining presence at the city’s “100 percent corner.”

❖ **Lionel J. Wilson Building**, 1400 Broadway. Original name: First National Bank of Oakland. 1908: Llewellyn Dutton, architect. Terra cotta by Gladding, McBean. Oakland’s first important terra cotta building



RILEY DOTY

**GRAPE LEAVES** detail on the Financial Building, an example of a slip-glazed finish.



NAOMI SCHIFF

**THE LIONEL J. WILSON BUILDING** has seen some significant changes over the years.

perfectly exemplifies the “White City” aesthetic which had its roots in the 1893

Columbian Exposition. A design principle of Beaux Arts dictated that the façade of a building should correspond to a classic column in having a base, shaft, and capital. That form, manifested here in a subtle way, was seen repeatedly in nearly all multi-story buildings up until the late 1920s.

The ground floor was originally faced with granite which was torn out in a 1960s-era modernization and has now been replaced by cast concrete. However, the carved statuary surrounding the clock at the building's prow and the doorway at the north end both retain original granite. Above the base the façade is entirely terra cotta, including the statuary on the roof.

Dutton was an architect sent out from Daniel Burnham's Chicago office in 1904 to establish a San Francisco branch of the firm. Burnham's 1902 Flatiron Building, which had quickly become a national icon, surely influenced this design.

❖ **Oakland City Hall**, 1 Frank Ogawa Plaza

1914: Palmer & Hombostel, architects. Terra cotta by Gladding, McBean  
Oakland hosted a national competition for this building's design, chosen from 25 architects' proposals. The winning firm was one of only two who submitted plans that incorporated the shaft of a modern office building. When completed, City Hall was the nation's first example of adopting that form for such a government building. Perhaps to placate critics who would be shocked by such a starkly utilitarian feature, the architects capped the tower with a neo-baroque cupola and adorned the parapet walls with lacy perforated terra cotta at the upper and lower setbacks.

The exterior is faced with granite, trimmed out with 960 tons of cream-colored terra cotta. Terra cotta panels portray California motifs, including olives, grapes and figs. Lighting around the exterior is provided by globes resting on elaborate terra cotta bases.

❖ **Cathedral Building**, 1605 Broadway. Original name: First Federal Realty  
1914: Benjamin Greer McDougall, architect. Terra cotta by N. Clark & Sons  
This iconic neo-Gothic building (see image on page 1) is prominently sited for visibility. Tall and slender, it asserts a unique identity in several ways, in being a flatiron building with a blunt front facet instead of a rounded

nose, having a "notch" in the form of a step-back at the upper half of its leading edge, and terminating with an elaborate two-story crown.

Historically, Gothic architecture was rooted in the attempt to create buildings, especially ecclesiastical, that conveyed a sense of a soaring upward motion. The Cathedral Building channels that aspiration effectively, while enjoying the advantages of steel frame construction instead of masonry. Interest in Gothic revival architecture had been heightened by the impact of New York's Woolworth Building, which was then the country's tallest and most publicized building. Construction of the Cathedral Building began within six months of that building's completion.

Calculating the cost of this vast expanse of terra cotta divided by the income from rentable floor space would not seem to have been "penciled out" from a business standpoint. Apparently First Federal Realty chose to bear the construction costs for the sake of establishing its brand, resulting in a wonderful gift to Oakland. In order to eke out a little extra footage, nine continuous vertical banks of bays angle outward along each side, cantilevered over the sidewalk. The slanting sides of these bays create deep vertical channels which emphasize the building's upward thrust. The elaborate topmost section of the building—flanked by spires and crowned by a steeply sloped roof—is formed from pressed sheet metal.

The base of the building was altered long ago, and subsequently an attempt was made to replicate the original look. Facsimile units which mimic the forms of the original terra cotta were installed and painted. Unfortunately,



**CITY HALL** is the nation's first designed as a skyscraper.

ly, they are not holding up well. Therefore, please note that the real terra cotta is found only from the second floor and above.

This building offers a good place to observe a certain distinctive quality of ceramic surfaces, namely its "organic" lack of uniformity. Individual units on the bay windows display variations in color, similar to what would be seen if they were actual quarried stone. Such variation inevitably occurs in the firing of terra cotta. The result is that expansive building surfaces such as these appear less sterile or monotonous.

Part 2 of this article will appear in the next issue, focusing on Oakland's treasure trove of colorful ceramic buildings. ■

*Riley Doty is a tile setter and member of Artistic License, a guild of Bay Area period revival artisans. He serves on the board of the Tile Heritage Foundation and has been an OHA member since the late 1980s. He has occasionally led an OHA summer walking tour of Uptown's terra cotta buildings.*



# Primer

Continued from page 1

required diligent attention from ceramic engineers.

Workers methodically packed clay into the molds. Within a few hours, plaster absorbed sufficient moisture from the clay. The resulting slight shrinkage of the clay allowed the unit to release cleanly from the mold. (For complicated pieces, multiple-section molds were needed, strapped together with metal bands.)

When each unit was removed from the mold, the clay was "leather hard." Mold marks could then be scraped and rubbed away and similar touchups done in the finishing shop. After sufficient drying, the pieces were glazed, mainly by spraying but with handwork as needed. Then wares were loaded into a kiln for an exacting firing cycle which lasted for several days.

Finished units of terra cotta units are hollow clay blocks. Once installed, only the front face is visible. The back side is always open, and the side walls have holes to accommodate fasteners, as seen in the acanthus leaf detail from the Howden Building, below. ■



FRIENDS OF TERRA COTTA COLLECTION

**IN 1915**, artists at the O. W. Ketcham Terra Cotta Works modeling shop sculpted the clay master copies of each piece. Plaster working molds were made from these, with allowances for clay shrinkage.

**A WORKER** removes the sections of a multi-part mold after the clay has sufficiently hardened, at right.



FRIENDS OF TERRA COTTA COLLECTION



ALL: RILEY DOTY



**EIGHT ACANTHUS** leaf units on the Howden Building are just below the center line on the facing of the circular balcony (see page 2). At left, a single piece of a leaf unit, left over from construction in 1925. At right, the hollow cavity is visible at the leaf unit's back. Holes in the side walls were designed to accommodate the metal rod for attachment to the building.



KEITH GOLDSTEIN, EVEREST WATERPROOFING

**RESTORATION UNDERWAY** on a terra cotta cornice. The century old original units were salvaged and are being reattached using stainless steel rods.



# Get an inside peek into what's going on at the Auditorium

By Naomi Schiff

On Feb. 3, OHA boardmembers and James Vann of the Coalition of Advocates for Lake Merritt toured the Henry J. Kaiser Auditorium project, with lots of scaffolding and the sounds of jackhammering.

The Orton Company team anticipates opening the facility in early 2023.

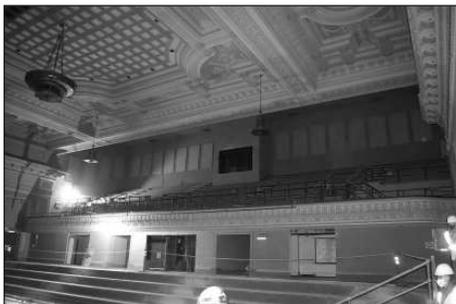
Seismic work includes a large new shear wall between the old arena and the Calvin Simmons Theater. In the theater, workers discovered reusable original wood, tile, and marble floors under worn carpeting.

The State Historic Preservation Office is monitoring the project to ensure that changes are compatible, and new features reversible. ■



ALL: NAOMI SCHIFF

**SCAFFOLDING** rises in the old arena (left). Above, the State Historic Preservation Office requires original access corridors be visible.



**THE THEATER'S** original details will remain. Modern stagelighting, sound equipment, and seating are being installed but historic theater decor will be restored.

## We thank our recent donors

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### ANNUAL APPEAL

Annalee Allen, Archaeological/Historical Consultants, Suzanne Baker, Jerry Barclay & Caryn Combis, Dr. Fari Barzegar, Phil Bellman & Betsy Yost, Mary Ann Benson, Sandra Biasotti, John Bliss, Bonnie Burt & Mark Liss, Colin Busby, Andrew Carpentier, Eunice Childs, Edmund Clausen, Sam Cohen, Sandra Cook, Diane Daley-Smith & Barry Bennett, Rory Darrach, Tom Debley, Ann Del Simone, Kathleen DiGiovanni, Mary Catherine Dino, Riley Doty, Doug Dove, Toni Ellis, Emeryville Historical Society (Nancy Smith), Jane Erwin, Karen Fiene, Sandra Fini, Margitta Gardner, Jeannie Graham, Janice Grau & Harold Borkowski, Jessea Greenman & Darlene Ceremello, Kathryn & Bob Gustafson, Tim Hallahan, Mary Harper, Jon Hartung, Thomas Haw, Jamin Hawks, Pieter Hazewindus & Mark Roberts, Mike Healy, Lorraine Heinemann, Heinold's First and Last Chance Saloon, Joyce Hendy, C.J. Hirschfield, Jerri Holan, Don Holmgren, Sandra & James Holst, Kathryn Hughes, Laura Ingram, Mary Kanemoto, Helena Katz, Daniel Keller, Bruce Kerns & Candis Cousins, Gary Knecht, Marcia Larsson, Lynn & Bill Lazarus, Maureen Lenahan, Brooke Levin, Daniel Levy & Jinhee Ha, Peter Lomhoff, Sally Lum, Mary E. MacDonald, Pamela Magnuson-Peddle, Erika Mailman, Richard Marcus, Christopher Marshall, Henry Massie & Bridget Connelly, Jean Matthews, Christie McCarthy, Patricia McGowan & Daniel Bain, Margaret & Denis McGuirk, Jon Merkle, Karen Merritt, Bonnie Meyer, Ellen Michael, Adrienne Morgan, Janet Mulshine, Theresa Nelson & Barney Smits, Gerry & Ortrun Niesar, Albert Norman, Roberta O'Grady, Chris Pattillo, Jacqueline Persons, Patricia & Robert Raburn, John & Nancy Randolph, Diane Resek, William Riess, Rhonda Righter, Kristil & Jeff Robarts, Phoebe Rossiter, Louise Rothman-Riemer, Susan Schacher, Ben Schiff & June Goodwin, Christine Shields, Harlan Simon, Ron & Joan Sipherd, Judith Stonefield, William Sturm, Alexander Teran, Sandy Threlfall, Tile Heritage Foundation, Dave Weinstein, Jane Wellman, Susan Wester, Tom Willging, Hilary Winslow, Jan Wolfe, Elaine Yamaguchi, Alyson Yarus, anonymous donors

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### IN HONOR OF NAOMI SCHIFF

Aileen Frankel

## Welcome to our new members!

OHA is pleased to welcome these newest members through mid-January 2022:

Brian Aldrich, Donald Alter, David Berlin, Barbara Cardoza, Kathryn Carroll, Janet Clark, Nicole Diaconoff, Evelyn & Earl Dolven, Robin Freeman, Julie Fry, Lisa Haage, Catherine Howard, Jeff Hull, John Kapetanic, Peter Merholz, Allen Michaan, Ellen Michael, Richard Miller, Georgio Molinaro, Enid Pollack, Catherine Saunders, Susan Schacher, Christine Shields, Mark Wiederanders, Hilary Winslow, Benjamin Yates

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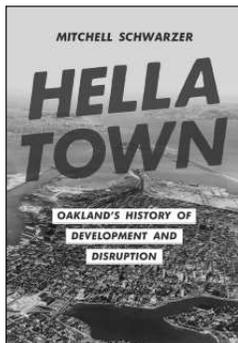
Welcome to new member Diane Scarritt, with thanks to Marlene & Steve Wilson for the gift



## OHA hosts *Hella Town* author

By Daniel Levy

Ya know, they say something is either a good experience or a good story. I like to think there is more nuance to this statement, but through Oakland's upswings and declines, its births and decays, author Mitchell Schwarzer sure does tell a good story that all cities can learn from. His book *Hella Town* taught me that Oakland's most valuable resources are already here. They are our existing neighborhoods, buildings, and people. Here's my review of the book; read further to learn about a chance to hear the author speak.



Part I takes place between 1890 and 1945 and begins with Oakland's rise as an industrial power. It discusses how the advent of the streetcar enabled a rising downtown and an outward urban expansion. Office towers overtook church spires. Linear strips of commercial activity washed down Oakland's main streetcar arteries. Industry flourished with canning, car assembly, electronics manufacturing, and railroads. Oakland's electronics industries even helped to "set the stage for the later development of Silicon Valley."

Transportation infrastructure deeply influenced Oakland during its meteoric growth. As a transit nerd, I found it fascinating to learn that Oakland's strong reliance on streetcars prevented it from developing a second downtown. Heavy railed systems like subways, with greater distances between stops, "concentrat[ed] traffic at specific points." Streetcars had stops closer together, which "favored strips of predominantly low-rise buildings." Because there were more stops, each with less intensity, it was hard for second centers to emerge. Fruitvale and Grand Lake came the closest.

In Part II, we learn about how the automobile disrupted the region, just as the streetcar had done decades before. Oakland had grown up around streetcars and walking. Automobiles shocked this "geographical equation." A person was no longer confined

to their neighborhood and downtown, but could expand their reach to the entire region via new roads and bridges.

Today, we see this "infrastructural equation" change again with the rise of the internet. Amazon brings toilet paper to our front doors. Waste Management takes the empty cardboard tubes away. We are physically isolated, yet at the same time more globally connected. Just as automobiles released us from our neighborhoods, the internet has freed us from even depending on the regions in which we live.

Part III delves into post-World War II and up to the 2000s. We learn deindustrialization and suburbanization caused Oakland's leaders to bring the suburbs to the city. As jobs and people left neighborhoods for the suburbs, the city cut highways through its urban fabric to maintain "economic competitiveness." However, instead of enlivening the city, freeways diverted traffic away from neighborhoods and hurt business. Traffic began to pass through Oakland, rather than stop in it. I used to abhor traffic at places like the Trader Joe's parking lot in Grand Lake, but now appreciate congestion as an indicator of the health of our beloved districts.

*Hella Town* also points out the creation of cities-within-cities in Oakland as a way to bring in the suburbs. City Center is a notable example downtown. Its construction demol-

ished over 40 acres to create a suburban style complex. Rather than being built within the existing grid, it created superblocks that consumed and blocked the flow of many streets. The new complex, rather than "being able to lure profit-making department stores," instead "drove out those businesses serving the working class," writes Schwarzer.

Perhaps it would have succeeded if the city had aided existing businesses and preserved historic buildings. Old Oakland, Chinatown, and Uptown contrast with City Center as more dynamic and interesting urban ecosystems. My only interaction with City Center these days is trying to find a way around it.

Schwarzer also discusses parks, major league sports venues, housing injustice, and immigration trends. I found his discussion of immigration insightful: immigrants, with less access to cars, capital, and language barriers, kept parts of Oakland active due to their focus on neighborhood versus region. Now city government has finally caught up a bit in realizing the value of the neighborhood.

Even for a well-versed Oaklander like myself, *Hella Town* is worth the read. It weaves a cohesive, complex narrative about Oakland in the 20th century and makes us more enlightened citizens. Buy it locally at Walden Pond, Spectator, Pegasus, or Builders Booksource. Join OHA March 3 at 7 p.m. for Schwarzer's talk, "Oakland: The Good, The Could Have Been Good, The Sort of Bad, and The Very Bad": <https://bit.ly/3IYZiga> ■

### Thank you, volunteers!

#### ZOOM LECTURE PRESENTERS/SPEAKERS

Allen Michaan: "Tales of the Grand Lake"  
Iris Jamahl Dunkle: "Charmian Kittredge London"

Thanks to Daniel Levy for introducing the speakers, conducting the Q&A with Allen Michaan and fielding audience questions. Special thanks to administrative director Amelia Cass for facilitating zoom connections, editing the presentations, and uploading them to our website.

#### WALKING TOUR LEADERS MID/LATE SEPTEMBER 2021

Dale Ridsen: "Historic Sites in Joaquin Miller Park"  
Dennis Evanosky: "Butters Canyon Hike"

#### WALKING TOUR VOLUNTEERS

Charles Bucher, Alison Finlay, Mary Harper, Neil Heyden, Kitty Hughes, Amelia Marshall

#### MOSS COTTAGE CLEAN-UP December 11 (OHA Contingent)

Bob Brokl & Al Crofts, Charles Bucher, Alison Finlay, Mary Harper, Joyce HENDY, Darlene Johnson, Dorothy Lazard, Jean Quirk, Naomi Schiff, Ben Schiff & June Goodwin, Linda Taylor and the many other volunteers whose masked faces we didn't recognize.

Also special thanks to Terri Westbrook, Recreation Center Director (and event organizer), and Oakland City Councilmembers Carroll Fife and Dan Kalb who came by.



# Taking the go out of gondola? We hope!

By Naomi Schiff

Our Preservation Action Committee has been busy despite the pandemic. Here are some projects we have been monitoring.

■ **Howard Terminal:** The Planning Commission voted to recommend acceptance of a final EIR on the much-discussed large development with baseball stadium. Our most pressing historic preservation concerns were mostly addressed in two "variants"—one having to do with partial demolition of a wing of a historic brick power plant at Martin Luther King and Embarcadero, and the other suggesting an aerial gondola line above Washington Street from the 12th Street BART station to the stadium at the waterfront. OHA spokespeople and neighbors of the project have expressed serious concern about the amusement-park-like impact of stringing a gondola line above historic Old Oakland.

To add insult to injury, a gondola would likely not relieve the traffic impacts very much, because it could not move many people. Because there are other much more prominent issues, OHA is making sure to comment loudly, so that we can ensure this gondola will never be built.

## PIP nominations are now open!

Do you know of a great preservation project, group, person, business, or development effort? Our Partners in Preservation Awards are emerging from hibernation, and we hope you will help by nominating deserving recipients, whom we'll honor in October 2022 in a pandemic-safe environment.

Categories are: Legacy Businesses, Adaptive use/Rehabilitation, Education, New Construction, Restoration, Stewardship, Advocacy/Leadership, and Lifetime Achievement. PIP Awards celebrate those who contribute to Oakland's historic preservation, its sense of place, and its heritage, culture, and architecture. You can find the application at <http://oaklandheritage.org/oha-partners-in-preservation.html>. The deadline for nominations is May 1. For more information, contact OHA at [info@oaklandheritage.org](mailto:info@oaklandheritage.org). ■

■ **More on Oak Knoll:** A lot of dirt is moving around at the former naval hospital, and we await news about the Officers' Club. We hope to be there to witness the placing of the tower atop the newly moved building, probably in April. In the meantime, the Planning Commission will review development plans in phases, with an ultimate goal of more than 900 residential units in various formats. Some of the earthmoving and bridge-building is associated with the restoration of Rifle Creek.

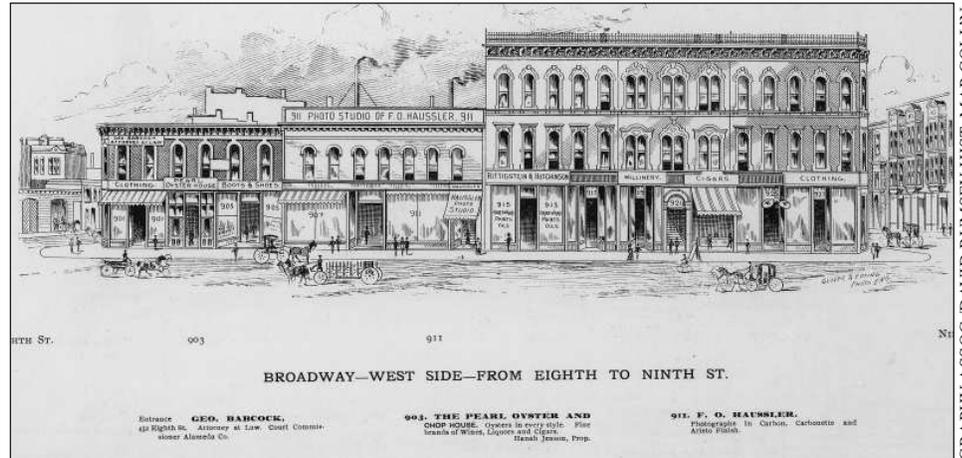
■ **Estuary Park Plan:** Lawrence Halprin's 1976 trellis is a prominent 20th century feature of the waterfront park just southeast of Jack London Square that has been subjected to years of deferred maintenance. Now the



NAOMI SCHIFF

**DAYLIGHTING RIFLE CREEK** requires moving oaks and a lot of earth, and building bridges.

Public Works Department is working on a plan to restore the park and improve it. To sign up for notifications, go to <https://www.oaklandca.gov/projects/estuary-park> or email project manager Christine Reed, [CReed2@oaklandca.gov](mailto:CReed2@oaklandca.gov)! ■



CARTOGRAPHY ASSOC./DAVID RUMSEY HIST. MAP COLL'N

**RUN A GONDOLA OVER THIS?** It would be a tragedy. This 1896 *Illustrated Directory* image shows the west side of Washington Street, from 8th to 9th Street.

## Fanfare for a little thing that can sometimes be big

By Naomi Schiff

After years of requesting, querying, letter writing, and pushing, a little phrase has been added to the city's website that may make a big difference to some projects. The California State Historical Building Code ([https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=21410](https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=21410)) recognizes "the unique construction issues inherent in maintaining and adaptively reusing historic buildings." The CHBC provides alternative building regulations for permitting repairs, alterations and additions necessary for the preservation, rehabilitation, relocation, related construction, change of use, or continued use of a "qualified historical building or structure." You can find refer-

ences to the CHBC at <https://www.oaklandca.gov/topics/historical-and-architectural-rating-systems>. Here it is made clear that all Potential Designated Historic Properties, as well as designated properties, are eligible to use this special approach. Please pass the word to anyone you think might find it useful! Many thanks to OHA's advisor on technical historic preservation matters Christopher Buckley, City of Oakland acting building official Tim Low, several successive OHA presidents, State Historical Building Safety Board member Alan Dreyfuss, Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey director Betty Marvin, and Director of Planning and Building William Gilchrist. ■



## Big changes, big bridges, and small apes at the Oakland History Center

By Emily Foster

You may have heard that Dorothy Lazard, head of the Oakland History Center for the past 12 years, celebrated her retirement in late December 2021. We will greatly miss her leadership, expertise, and presence. But we're carrying on without Dorothy, taking comfort in knowing that she's going to have to stop by to research the many books she's already writing.

I will be taking over her regular column here in the *OHA News* to keep you up to date on what's happening in OHC.

So, with a changing of the guard, introductions are in order. My name is Emily Foster, and I'm currently acting as head of the Oakland History Center. I've been working in the OHC full-time since 2019, but I actually started here as a volunteer in 2009 and have worked here on and off since the Oakland Public Library hired me as a part-time librarian in 2011.

I can't imagine a better place to work. We get to help people research the most interesting questions, work with the most interesting materials, and learn so many new things every day. It's truly an honor and a huge responsibility to be at the forefront of collecting, preserving, and providing access to our collections to anyone who is interested in local history.

Erin Sanders will be taking the reins as head of the Oakland History Center sometime soon. She has been at OPL for seven years and is currently the manager of the Golden Gate branch. Before coming to Oakland she worked in archives and special collections at the Chicago Public Library, the Newberry Library, the Shel Silverstein Archives, and the Charles M. Schulz Museum. She's looking forward to continuing Dorothy's legacy of making local history fun and elevating the profile of OHC. She and I will be working together to plan interesting programs, safeguard our collections by continuing to digitize materials, and absorb Oakland history with researchers who come to the center. Although neither Erin nor I will ever be Dorothy, we'll both do our best to live up to the standard that she has set.

Aside from staffing changes, there are many other things happening here. One is a new exhibit called "Willis O'Brien: The Oak-



OAKLAND HISTORY CENTER

**THE BAY BRIDGE** under construction, part of a recent donation of photographs by Clyde Erskine "Scottie" Gray.

lander Who Brought King Kong to Life," which is scheduled to go up in our display cases on Feb. 28. Oaklander O'Brien was responsible for the miniature 3D model animation in *The Lost World* (1925), *King Kong* (1933), and *Mighty Joe Young* (1949). The exhibit will include photographs, posters, models, articles, and more telling the story of his life and work.

Another bit of news: we recently received an incredible donation of 15 aerial photographs showing the Bay Bridge under construction, taken by Clyde Erskine "Scottie" Gray. He took photographs of the Bay Bridge as well as other locations around the state before going on to a career as a chauffeur to the stars in Hollywood. When he died in 1965, the photographs went to his daughter. After her death, realtor Gloria Mellon was tasked with clearing out her home in Washington before it was sold. Mellon didn't recognize the locations depicted in the photographs at first, but she did realize that they likely had historical value. So, with the family's permission, she set out on a mission to find new homes for these photographs, researching where they were taken and deliv-

ering them by hand to libraries throughout the state. We're extremely grateful to her for taking the time to find appropriate homes for these photographs and for bringing some of them to us. If this story is making you remember things that you'd like to donate to OHC, please get in touch with us by phone or email to tell us about what you have.

Come see the Willis O'Brien exhibit, drop off your donations, or ask us your questions. We continue to be open for walk-in assistance, but we encourage you to make an appointment to help us gather relevant resources before you arrive. Find out how to contact us or make an appointment at <https://oaklandlibrary.org/ohc/ohc-services/>. Hope to see you soon! ■

*Emily Foster is the acting head of the Oakland History Center.*

**OHA News welcomes writerly contributions: research projects large or small, historic photos, and reports on preservation issues or events. Submissions may be sent to [news@oaklandheritage.org](mailto:news@oaklandheritage.org).**



# Clean-up day for Mosswood!

By Mary Harper, President

Green is good. Green parks and open space have been, since at least the mid-1800s, advocated for by urban planners. Parks provide space to socialize, hold events, exercise and play, and build a sense of community. During the last two years of COVID restrictions, parks have been a lifeline for those who needed to get out of the house. Green urban spaces are important to emotional and physical well-being. It has been shown that time spent outdoors can improve cognitive skills, attention, and emotional well-being.

In the early 1900s, some Oakland city leaders recognized the need for open space. In 1907, the city purchased a portion of the Mosswood Estate, which included the Carpenter mansion, built in 1864 in Gothic style and designated Oakland Landmark 6. Mosswood combines the names of 19th century Oaklanders J. Mora Moss and Julia Wood. Between 1909 and 1911, the estate was established as a park. In 1912, the house opened as a social center. Over the years, the park was augmented with two amphitheatres and a decorative pergola. The Mosswood Children's Theatre Teen Troupe put on children's plays in one of the amphitheatres every week in the 1950s. Mosswood Park is

an iconic Oakland institution rich with history and culture, and the mansion still stands at the center of the site.

It's standing, but barely. The elements and lack of upkeep have not been kind to the house. There have been intruders both animal and human, interior fires, mangled doors, and leaks in the roof. OHA and other groups have urged the city to make repairs and bring the house back to its former splendor as a social center with other uses.

In an effort to get the process moving, the city organized a clean-up day last December. The outpouring was stupendous. More than 60 people volunteered. There were sweepers, organizers, movers, and just plain helpers. It was amazing what was accomplished that morning. Volunteers filled two dumpsters to the brim with trash. Oakland Parks and Rec files were retrieved; lots of metal file cabinets were recycled, as well as lots of paper.

The crowd and enthusiasm spoke to the commitment of Oaklanders, from councilmembers and city employees to neighbors, neighborhood groups, and, of course, OHA members. It also demonstrated the importance of volunteering to help make Oakland a better place. ■



NAOMI SCHIFF

**NEIGHBORS** worked together on a clean-up day at the Mosswood mansion. More than 60 volunteers showed up and got a lot done.

### Welcome new *News* folks!

We extend our hearty thanks to **Dorothy Lazard** for so many years writing the wonderful column of news from the Oakland History Room, now the Oakland History Center. And now, big thanks to **Emily Foster** for taking on that duty!

We also want to thank OHA member **Gloria Cohen** for volunteering to read and edit some of the *OHA News* stories before they hit the page. Welcome!

### CONTRIBUTORS:

Gene Anderson, Gloria Cohen, Riley Doty, Kathleen DiGiovanni, Emily Foster, Keith Goldstein, Mary Harper, Daniel Levy, Naomi Schiff

PRODUCTION: Erika Mailman

**MISSION STATEMENT:** OHA is a nonprofit membership organization which advocates the protection, preservation and revitalization of Oakland's architectural, historic, cultural and natural resources through publications, education, and direct action.

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## The little bait shop that could

By Kathleen Leles DiGiovanni

In 1922, Temescal man Bill Traverse cobbled together a bait shack in the backyard of his mother's Telegraph Avenue home, just in from the gore with Claremont Avenue. He set up shop there to sell bait to his neighbors who fished in the bay after work or who trekked out to the Delta on the Sacramento Northern. Traverse named his establishment The Kingfish, after the abundant local sport fish. Later, Traverse began packing lunches to sell to those same fishermen. After the repeal of Prohibition he applied for a liquor license, adding beer—and a few stools to sip them from—turning the Kingfish into a combination bait shop/lunch counter/tavern. The little shack grew in size as well, piece by improvised piece. Advertisements show that he also contributed prizes, fishing tackle, to the *Oakland Tribune's* Striped Bass Derby in the 1930s.

But by 1938 Bill Traverse was through with the Kingfish. A classified ad in the Aug. 8 *Tribune*, under Business Opportunities, reads, "My bait business, fully equipped, cheap." He must have sold it to someone who didn't fish because by the early 1940s, directory entries list the Kingfish as a "cafe" instead of a "bait shop." Sometime in the 1940s, the Kingfish's famous shuffleboard table entered the joint, with an annex to house it.

At first a working class neighborhood hangout, the Kingfish became a magnet for Berkeley students and alumni. Why? In the old days, the city of Berkeley had an ordi-

nance on the books prohibiting the sale of alcohol within a mile radius of the campus, an ordinance not fully rescinded until 1963. Because the Kingfish lay beyond that mile, it was a convenient spot for a beer for thirsty undergraduates and post-game Old Bears, rubbing shoulders over a brew with Temescal regulars.

The business changed hands a number of times over the decades, notably in the late 1950s to Bobby Jones, a minor-league baseball player, who began adding the sports memorabilia that layers the place. In the early 2000s, the Kingfish business became separated from the land beneath it, when a developer bought the site with the aim of putting up a mixed-use development there. Project delays kept the Kingfish in business, but it closed in 2008 for licensing violations. After that, Kingfish regular Emil Peinert and a group of partners approached the owners about reopening the pub, which they did in 2009. By 2014 obstacles to development were gone and the developers were ready to move forward. They offered Peinert and his partners space in the ground floor of the building for a "new" Kingfish, but Kingfish ownership declined. In a 2014 interview with *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Chip Johnson, Peinert said, "I worry that if we attempted to re-create it, it would feel phony." Instead, Peinert and his partners moved the Kingfish,



OUR NICE CENTENARIAN, KINGFISH

lock, stock, and shuffleboard table, 35 yards across the street, to Telegraph Avenue, tucking it in between an apartment block and the Temescal branch library. The move itself was an undertaking, requiring city approval for the non-compliant little building, demolition of the existing building on the site, a new foundation, and finally, cutting the building into thirds and rolling it across the street. That move took place on Jan. 11, 2015.

The Kingfish reopened that spring, just the same, but with a few new bits. Peinert had collected a bunch of Cal athletic history, which he incorporated into the new old Kingfish. Pieces of the floor of the old Newell gym basketball court are now on the floor and you can sit on benches from the pre-remodel Memorial Stadium.

And there's now a patio in the back, a feature that has enabled the Kingfish to weather the Covid pandemic.

Happy 100th birthday, Kingfish, and here's to your next hundred years! ■