

# THE INSTITUTE FOR HISTORICAL STUDY

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# NEWSLETTER

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## **The Independent Historian and the Question of “Academic” Rigor** – Neil Bernard Dukas

*Below is an excerpt of a much longer paper given at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association at a roundtable session, “From Surviving to Thriving: The Challenges and Rewards of Practicing History as an Independent Scholar.”*

. . . I’d like to begin by expressing my gratitude to the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS) and the Institute for Historical Study (IHS). Together, these organizations have made possible my participation in today’s session through generous travel grants. It is an example, apropos of today’s theme, of the many practical benefits of membership in a community of independent scholars.

Without further ado, I have been asked to comment from personal experience on the Independent Historian and the question of “Academic” Rigor. In keeping with our theme, my intent is to draw a connection between *thriving* as an Independent Historian and academic rigor. . . . As an Independent Historian you’ve got your work cut out for you. Before you break into a cold sweat and start thinking your career is doomed from the start, let me assure you there is no need to panic. I’m happy to say there are plenty of success stories to gladden the heart: Karl Marx . . . Barbara Tuchman . . . David McCullough . . . Fernand Braudel.

What is it, you may well ask, that enabled these and other independent scholars to become successful historians? I would argue, *rigor*. As a stand-alone word, rigor merely connotes harshness or severity, but tack on the word “academic” and it suddenly takes on a whole new meaning. *Academic* rigor is all about depth, critical thinking, and *relevance*. . . .

Below is my personal recipe for rigor and for achieving some measure of success. The headings could apply to virtually any discipline, but I have tailored the remarks on this occasion to suit the Independent Historian.

**Do your research.** Accuracy and thoroughness are the hallmarks of good scholarship. If you are going to proclaim your “otherness” then you had better be prepared for challenge.

**Read.** Search out, especially, books that will help develop your grasp of historical thinking. Kenneth Pomeranz, past president of the AHA, emphasizes the unheralded metaskills or “habits of mind” that are the veritable hallmark of historians.<sup>1</sup> One technique that I use to remind myself just how important it is to think critically is to read the “Reviews of Books” published in *The American Historical Review*. Openly published peer reviews can be the most searing, but also the most edifying.

**Attend conferences.** Observe how other practitioners present their findings, how they are questioned, and moreover, respond for better or worse. It will help you to define your own style and expand your horizons.

**Present.** The old saw, “practice makes perfect,” was never truer. Nothing like being in the hot seat for honing one’s skills.

*Continued on back page  
(End notes are on page 10)*

# PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

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I’m not sure the membership needs a message from me as we head into the lazy days of summer. But I have been thinking about the benefits of being connected. I don’t mean the internet, smart phones, or the connections we enjoy with our fellow members at various meetings, active sub-groups, and works-in-progress sessions. I was also thinking about groups in the Bay Area that are concerned with local history and with broader historical issues as well.

On May 7, Kathy O’Connor and I represented the Institute at “Our Story: A Bay Area Heritage Open House” hosted by the Mechanics’ Institute. It was a great event, and I was delighted to be reminded just how many historically-oriented organizations we have in the region and the variety of interests they represent. Many of their interests touch on those of our members, yet I am not sure that we as an institution are doing enough to connect with these groups and develop programs to our mutual advantage.

At the Mechanics’ Institute open house I made a brief pitch for our organization that I called “An Institute for All Reasons.” I sought to suggest that the IHS might be useful to other history-oriented groups by serving in some kind of coordinating role. Nobody jumped at the prospect, but is it an entirely fanciful (or even stupid) idea? Many of us belong to several historical organizations. Could we be doing more to bring them together for joint ventures?

Think about this as you sit by the pool, with your cell phone turned off, sipping your favorite beverage, and dipping into a thrilling monograph.

Have a great summer!

– *Rob Robbins*

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## ADDRESS:

P. O. Box 5743  
Berkeley, CA 94705

[www.instituteforhistoricalstudy.org](http://www.instituteforhistoricalstudy.org)

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## WORKS IN PROGRESS

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### Crime in San Francisco

**Paul Drexler**, a crime historian and new member of the Institute, presented a talk on April 26 at the home of Georgia Wright. Paul, who writes a twice-monthly column on notorious crooks for the *San Francisco Examiner*, is director of Crooks Tour San Francisco. Paul's planned four books on crooks will cover most of the city. The first book concerns the what was known in the nineteenth century as the "outside lands"—western districts including the Richmond, West of Twin Peaks, Oceanside, Lake Merced, and the Sunset.

Six crooks of the Sunset and Richmond districts were his lurid focus, in a presentation running from the 1850s to the 1970s. So outrageous as to seem incredible, their exploits were all extensively documented, catnip for journalists.

Paul's first subject, Cornelius Stagg, son of an old New York family, came to San Francisco in 1851. Over the next three decades, he prospered greatly through a variety of partly legitimate and partly shady enterprises (race tracks and hotels frequented by San Francisco's makers, shakers, and gamblers), lucrative public employment, and employment no one knew about (as a secret agent for government entities in San Francisco and New York). From great wealth, he fell to near bankruptcy through a series of misfortunes. Just as his fortunes were about to take a favorable turn, he was murdered by robbers—who took \$4.

Unlike Stagg, Paul's next subject, Andrew John Gibson, was not celebrated when he died. Gibson "cut a swath of larceny on four continents, leaving a trail of counterfeit checks and at least ten swindled wives." With a vast array of pseudonyms suggesting an aristocratic pedigree or special expertise, Gibson was often caught and served a total of forty years in prison. Posing as a doctor in London, he killed a patient, apparently through inexpertise.

Paul moved on to a celebrity who "invented a new disease." Dorothy Ellingson, unlike Gibson, spent her disreputable life entirely in San Francisco. At sixteen, chafing at her mother's attempts to control her, she shot her mother in the back—the first instance in American history of matricide. The defense cited a novel cause: she was insane, having contracted "jazzmania" as a result of frequenting jazz clubs. She was sent to Napa State Hospital, where psychiatrists, even without the DSM, determined that she was sane. At her trial, all her attempts to feign insanity failed, and she was convicted of manslaughter. Her life after her release was more tame, just a couple of arrests for thievery.

Juanita "Duchess" Spinelli, Paul proposed, might be included in commemorations during Women's History Month as "the first woman to be executed in California's gas chamber." She roamed the country, adopting various guises and bearing two children, one of whom fled to San Francisco. The Duchess pursued her and settled in the city. She established a crime school, teaching her students "how to steal cars, roll drunks, and hold up gas stations." When one of the students committed murder, the gang was held responsible, and the Duchess paid the highest price, going to her own death in 1941.

Two murders committed on the same day ten years later, both of them involving infidelity, led to Paul's next subjects, Alex Craig, Albert Friedman, and Ray Belote. Craig suspected that his wife was two-timing him, so he killed her, but lacked the courage to follow through on his plan to commit suicide. Friedman knew that Ray Belote was two-timing his estranged wife, but he did not expect Belote to shoot him through a keyhole when he peeked out. Belote got life in prison. Paul did not say how Craig's trial ended.

Paul's last case, Joe Barboza, was not a San Franciscan until late in his life. He was a New England killer for the Mafia. When he agreed to

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cooperate, he was put in the Witness Protection Program and sent to Santa Rosa, but he soon returned to his customary profession and was convicted of manslaughter. Two months after his release in 1976, a fellow Boston criminal took revenge by murdering him.

During the discussion, Paul gave more details (we learned that fingerprints came into use in the early 1900s) and responded to questions. One person wanted to know what ties the stories together. Paul sees his work as part of the history of neighborhoods; he cited Herbert Asbury's book *The Gangs of New York* as a model. Another question concerned his sources. A major source, and his inspiration, was a trove of material collected by his friend, the late retired SFPD Deputy Police Chief and historian, Kevin Mullen. He also relied on newspapers and neighborhood historians. One person observed that most of the crimes he discussed in his talk were violent and wondered whether that would be his focus. No, he intends to write about less sensational crimes, cases that are less well known. An additional question concerned the reputation of San Francisco for crime. Compared to other major American cities, San Francisco had little organized crime; the police were the gang in control, but organized corruption in the form of payoffs to the police largely ended in the 1940s. Several people offered suggestions for further development by contextualizing the material in terms of the history of the police and the overall crime picture in San Francisco.

– *Carol Sicherman*

### **How the International Women's Organizations and their Allied Affiliates "Entered" the War, 1914-15**

On May 31st at the home of Sue Bessmer, **Karen Offen** read and discussed a draft of a paper that will be published in the proceedings

of "From the Balkans to the World: Going to War, 1914-18, a Global Perspective," a conference held last year in Paris. The paper, titled "How the International Women's Organizations and their Allied Affiliates 'Entered' the War, 1914-15," is based on a chapter of Karen's forthcoming book, *Debating the Woman Question: Six Centuries of Public Controversy over the Relations between Women and Men in France and Francophone Europe*, under review by a university press.

Karen noted that the Great War was the first in which women played a prominent, albeit unofficial, role. Prior to the war, international women's organizations—notably the International Council of Women (ICW) and the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA)—were united in the pursuit of world peace and suffrage, along with other issues that affected women, such as reform of the marriage laws and equal pay for equal work. But after the German invasion of neutral Belgium and of France, in September 1914, unity on the matter of peace was no longer possible for the international organizations. In December 1914, Jane Misme, a prominent French feminist (and editor of the weekly *La Française*), declared: "Today, the soul of the most pacifist French women combats the enemy at the side of our soldiers. As long as the war lasts, the women of our enemy will also be our enemy." Diplomacy, she added, "can do nothing; only arms and the flow of blood can decide the outcome."

For the majority of French-speaking feminists, patriotism trumped pacifism. Their leaders refused to participate in the International Congress of Women (also known as the Women's Peace Conference) held at The Hague in April/May of 1915 and attended by more than 1,000 delegates from twelve countries (the American delegation was led by Jane Addams, who presided over the conference). Much

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scholarly attention has been paid to the conference, Karen told us, but her study is the first to examine the character of the opposition by Francophone feminists and the consequences of that opposition: painful “fractures” among feminists in France and a breach between French and German feminists that continued after the end of the war.

The story is not altogether one of failure. Karen noted in conclusion that although feminists in France lacked formal political power (they would not achieve suffrage until 1944), as journalists and as organizers of countless social services they nevertheless “entered” the war effort, highlighting the concerns of women and bringing their views on the conflict to public attention.

The animated discussion that followed indicated the importance of this perspective on women in World War I for Karen’s listeners. There were also some questions about the audience for the published article and a few suggestions for clarifying unfamiliar details.

We also learned that Karen has a women’s history blog, “Clio Talks Back” (imowblog.blogspot.com), which is highly recommended. She has just published her 94th blog, “May Wright Sewall Organizes the International Conference of Women Workers to Promote Permanent Peace, 1915, in San Francisco, California.”

– *Joanne Lafler*

### Medieval Studies

At the January meeting, **Ellen Huppert** reported on Medieval Spain under Islamic Rule. Muslims from North Africa conquered Spain between 711 and 718. Christian efforts to reconquer Spain by force began almost at once. The last holdout—Granada—did not fall until 1492. At

that point, the monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella moved to make Spain entirely Catholic by demanding that all Muslims and Jews either convert or leave the country.

During the more than 800 years that a succession of Islamic dynasties ruled Spain, there was a great flourishing of culture and the arts. Many of the results are still highly visible, as Moorish style architecture was built even after the Christian conquest of all of Spain. Other continuities are less visible, but nonetheless important. Los Reyes Catolicos formally took possession of the Alhambra in Granada and even promulgated the edict of expulsion while wearing Islamic style dress. The tomb of Ferdinand in Seville is inscribed in Latin, Castilian, Arabic, and Hebrew.

Maria Rosa Menocal’s *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* stresses the collaborative nature of that culture. For example, works originally written in Greek and even Hindu had been translated into Arabic, primarily in Baghdad. When they reached Spain, a Jewish Arabic speaker translated the Arabic texts into Castilian. A Christian partner then wrote down the Latin translation. Thus many of the important works of antiquity were made available to the Latin West.

There were two golden ages in medieval Spain: the tenth century centered in Cordoba, and the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as well. Spain was the center of a thriving international trade; important mosques and palaces as well as libraries were constructed. Secular and religious life existed side by side, with Christians, Jews, and Muslims living together. Jewish poets wrote secular verse in Arabic and religious poetry in Hebrew. The “culture of toleration” praised by Menocal was never ideal or complete. For example, Maimonides (1135-1204) was born in Cordoba, which today is eager to claim him as a native son. But his entire family left Spain for

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Morocco and finally Egypt, where they felt more secure. Probably a better term for the culture of sharing is “Convivencia,” living together, sharing some things, yet still always conscious of the limits of brotherhood.

In June, **Lyn Reese** presented a talk on Charlemagne, King of the Franks, and Harun al Rachid, ruler of the Abbasid Caliphate. Both men were contemporaries who ruled empires at the height of their expansion and influence. Lyn first described the rise of the Abbasids and creation of their magnificent capital, Baghdad. By Harun’s reign, the city had become the largest in the world, known for its suburbs, parks, pleasure haunts, thriving merchant class, effective administration and prosperous salaried middle class. Notable was the fact that Baghdad contained bookstores, a result of the use of paper and new technologies from China, which reflected the intellectual and cultural influence of the Abbasid court. Within the palace walls poetry, oratory, grammar, and the history of the non-Islamic and pre-Islamic world was studied. An institution called the *House of Wisdom* brought scholars from across the empire to translate and advance the fragmented literary and scientific knowledge of ancient Greece, Persia, and India.

Charlemagne spent the first thirty years of his long reign conquering territories in a relatively successful effort to create a united kingdom under Christianity. In contrast to the Caliphate’s relative tolerance for its diverse populations of Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and polytheists, Charlemagne’s forced conversion of the peoples he conquered was, as his teacher Alcuin, assured him, his way of doing “holy work.” Like Harun, however, Charlemagne promoted scholarship. Among other efforts, he subsidized the copying of manuscripts in monasteries, thus recovering texts from the Classical World. Novel for the time was his insistence that learning should be made

available even to the lowliest of his subjects, even to the sons of serfs. To him, Christianity required the teaching of ethics to instill a concept of individual responsibility. “Every man must seek to serve God to the best of his strength and ability and to walk in the way of His laws, for the lord emperor cannot watch over every man in the personal conduct of his life.”

Although the two leaders never met, they communicated through envoys and gifts. The geopolitical tension of the time tended to align Charlemagne with the Abbasids against the Byzantines and Umayyads of Spain, and when Charlemagne asked to become the official, non-military protector of Christian pilgrims in Jerusalem, this was allowed. Why not? In the process of this grant, the Muslims perceived that Charlemagne had made himself subordinate to the Abbasid rule. In the fashion of Persian monarchs, Harun regarded himself as King of Kings with all others as vassals. Given the vastness of his empire and its wealth, the distant, small kingdom of the Franks was insignificant indeed.

Lyn enlivened her accounts with anecdotes taken from her main source, *The Caliph’s Splendor: Islam and the West in the Golden Age of Baghdad* by Benson Bobrick. She also referred to notes from the Humanities West February lectures on Charlemagne, and to an earlier series on Baghdad in its Golden Age (762-1300).

– **Lorrie O’Dell**

### Play Readers

We were unable to meet until later in June when we began reading *The Weavers*, a play written by Gerhardt Hauptmann in 1892, in which the views expressed were also very controversial. The play sympathetically portrays a group of Silesian weavers who staged an uprising in the 1840s.

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Silesia, now part of Poland, was then ruled by Prussia. The readers learned, by virtue of careful research by Joanne Lafler, that the play was originally banned by the Berlin police after Hauptmann had submitted it. (NB: In the U.K. the Lord Chamberlain had the power to ban plays in public theaters until quite recently—1968.) A public performance was finally agreed to in 1894, albeit it was because the theater imposed high admission prices to exclude the masses who might be susceptible to the negative influence of the drama. Kaiser Wilhelm, in protest of the play, cancelled his box at the Deutsches Theater, where it was performed.

*The Weavers* is an epic tale of misery. It tells the story of the home industry weaving district in Silesia. It is poignant and gruesome, people working their utmost with almost no compensation, families close to starvation. Early in the play we are in the office of the manufacturer where weavers bring their finished pieces. The amounts promised for the work are absurdly low and become even lower, but the weavers, near starvation, remain docile. Only one man, Becker, speaks up in protest. We then meet a family, the Baumerts, who live in one room in the house of an old weaver who has been reduced to weaving baskets. The mother is crippled, the children largely disabled, the father desperate, having just had their pet dog killed to provide a family meal, which he then is too weak to digest. Jaeger, a soldier, has returned with some money as well as reports from newspapers about someone having been sent to investigate the condition of the weavers, a report which denied the tragic details of their suffering. Jaeger then reads to the assembled despairing group a marching song that addresses, strongly and eloquently, their woes.

We shall continue our reading July 21 and welcome new readers. Please contact Joanne (jwlafler@gmail.com).

—*Edith Piness*

### Writers' Group

Eleven members met at the home of Rob and Cathy Robbins on June 12 to discuss practical questions such as the development of a publishable manuscript and new issues in publishing, in particular self-publishing. First we made organizational changes: Cathy Robbins volunteered to send out notices of meetings and prepare a report for the newsletters; we agreed to share the duties of moderator of meetings.

Several members presented what they had learned from panels at the Bay Area Book Festival (June 6-7). Panelists discussing “The Self-Made Author” pointed to Ingram Spark (a distributor with a print-on-demand service) and to Amazon’s CreateSpace as mediums for putting out the completed work. Prior to that, authors must obtain an ISBN number through either Create Space or Bowker Identifier Services (\$99; free ISBN numbers are ill-advised). Although self-publishing still has a stigma, it is increasingly common; one way to avoid that is to register as a small business (for \$60) under a plausible name, such as Paper Mill Publishers. Whether self-publishing or publishing through a traditional publisher (except the giants and academic presses), authors can expect to do their own editing and be responsible for marketing, primarily through social media. The authors on the panels had done well using these and related strategies.

During discussion, group members pointed to scribd.com, a subscription service for readers and writers similar to Netflix; to storiestotell books.com, offering a variety of services including development, editing, and publishing; and to our own Rose Marie Cleese (cleesecreative.com). [NB: Member Georgia Wright’s daughter, Beth Wright, gave an Institute publishing workshop a few years ago. See her services at: triobookworks.com. —Ed.] Some self-published books are picked up by traditional publishers. During the wide-ranging

discussion of related matters, members pointed to many online research resources, such as Questia.com and the California Digital Newspaper Collection, most of which are available free to cardholders of local public libraries.

We also discussed expanding our scope beyond our customary purpose of discussing members' writing in progress: creating occasional panels similar to this one—for example inviting local publishers to speak—that might interest Institute members not in the writers' group. The question also arose of the value of attending writers' conferences such as the San Francisco Writers Conference. Those with knowledge said that particular conference was full of wannabees and not worth the cost (starting at \$675 for four days), but that the website has useful ancillary information. Three members who had attended Book Expo America found it very helpful (next year it is in Chicago in May for two and a half days).

– *Carol Sicherman*

### California and the West

A special meeting to help newest Institute member **Lori Hart Beninger** with “her specific challenge” in her next two novels is scheduled for Saturday, August 15, at 11 a.m., followed by lunch. She wrote, “I want to maintain a strong California tie among all of the books in my tetralogy. While that was easy in the first two novels, the next two books (which have yet to be written) will find my protagonists elsewhere (specifically, Boston from 1855 through the end of the American Civil War). I have already identified some historical events that will tie back to California (such as State Senator Broderick becoming a U.S. Senator and contributing a few notable speeches on the Senate Floor, as well as California's unrealized attempt to split itself along North/South political

lines). However, I don't think these are enough and would like to “pick the brains” of others to flesh out this bond. I also need some help understanding the restrictions civilians residing in the Northeast and South may have had during the Civil War itself as they tried to travel from Northern to Southern states (and vice versa)—what was the safest way to travel, what identification they may have needed, how they may have been treated, etc.”

Convener of the meeting, **Jody Offer**, writes, “Many of us might find some information for our own projects in a discussion of the important connections between the East Coast and West Coast just before and during the Civil War. You may have ideas for important figures—Thomas Starr King comes to mind—but maybe you have names/books/stories about lesser-known figures or events in maritime industries, weapons-making, arts, farming, or any other field. Please come and give us a little talk, show off books, or suggest research locations.”

### Welcome to new members **Monika Trobits** and **Lori Hart Beninger**.

**Monika Trobits** has lived in San Francisco for over 30 years and is a long-time walking tour docent, writer, and historian. She established her tour company, San Francisco Journeys, in 2011 (see her website of the same name) and developed a walking tour in conjunction with her book: *Antebellum and Civil War San Francisco: A Western Theater for Northern & Southern Politics* (History Press, 2014). Her article, “Dashiell Hammett's San Francisco in the 1920s” was published in *The Argonaut* (Winter 2011). Monika earned a B.A. in political science/history from San Francisco State University. She describes herself as “an avid reader, film buff, and very interested in local arts and culture.”



## MEMBER NEWS

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**Lori Hart Beninger** is the author of two historical novels about two young adults growing up during the California Gold Rush era: *Embracing the Elephant* (On Track Publishing, 2012) and *A Veil of Fog and Flames* (On Track Publishing, 2015). Lori writes, “I’m a second-generation native Californian, and proud of (most of) my home-state’s history and strive to accurately present it to readers in a manner both engaging and informative. I pride myself on the depth of research that goes into building my fiction on a strong historical (accurate and plausible) foundation.” More information about both the writer and her books can be found at her website, [OnTrackPublishing.com](http://OnTrackPublishing.com).

In May, **Patricia Bracewell** attended the 50th Annual Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. There she took part in “The Bayeux Tapestry: The Stitches Speak,” a play written by Daisy Black, PhD, University of Hull, and performed by a group of enthusiastic academics. This readers’ theater event brought the Tapestry to life using commentary by the embroiderers, the main characters, and the often enigmatic figures in the tapestry borders. As the Master Embroiderer explained, the Tapestry “tells a little more than a simple story of a broken oath and a conquered kingdom.” Patricia’s role was that of William the Conqueror, the great-nephew of the central character of her novels, Emma of Normandy.

Former member **Katherine Sibley** was back in the Bay Area for a visit and gave a talk at member Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada’s Merced Branch, San Francisco Public Library, on July 8, “First Lady Florence Harding: Behind the Tragedy and Controversy.”

Two items to report from our farflung member **Steve Levi** in Alaska: work on his fifth book in his series Real World Creative Thinking for Young Adults and a novel newly available on Kindle. In his series, Levi uses historical events

to illustrate how students can learn to “think outside of the box.” His novel *Santa Zanni* “is exactly the kind of supplemental reading book that California history classes should be using,” Steve writes. “It is written in a light, breezy style. It is entertaining and humorous. It shows how national and California history are woven into the social and economic fabric of the city [Santa Zanni] and, most important, students can see how events, national and statewide, affected everyone in the city.”

**Autumn Stanley** has self-published a new book, a children’s book (paperback, with many illustrations), perhaps of interest for members’ children or grandchildren. “The Princess with the Purple Hair” is available from Amazon, where it has garnered two five-star reviews, including comments such as “This book deserves a wide audience” and “I enjoyed every word of this one.”

Forthcoming is a community reading of **Judith Offer’s** “Scenes from the Life of Julia Morgan,” at the Pardee Home Museum, Sunday, August 9, at 4:30, with hors d’oeuvres and champagne to follow. The house is at 672 - 11th Street, across from Preservation Park and only a couple of blocks from where Julia grew up.

**Monika Trobits** was interviewed (“and reasonably accurately quoted”) for a late June article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “Confederate flag in Benicia Hotel’s Stained Glass a Nod to History.” “It’s not that surprising to hear there is a Confederate flag in a window depicting California’s history,” she said. “Northerners and Southerners came to San Francisco in droves looking to get rich, and they brought their politics with them. About 20 percent of the city’s population in the 1850s did not advocate the abolition of slavery.”

**Edward Van der Porten** is the next **work-in-progress** speaker: “Ghost Ship: The Manila

Galleon *San Felipe* of 1576,” Sunday, July 19, at 2 p.m. at Ellen Huppert’s home.

**Dot Brovarney** reports that her research for the Dakin family into Reeves Canyon, the location of Mendocino County’s largest natural lake and Mill Creek, the westernmost source of the Russian River, is revealing untold stories. “Embedded in more than a century of canyon history is a classic story of environmental conflict—between those who embraced canyon life for the beauty of its wild nature and those who viewed it and its abundant redwood and Douglas fir as an economic resource. Small-scale family logging occurred in and around the canyon over the years, although not on the 400-acre lake property currently owned by the Dakins. However, logging and its watershed damage increased dramatically with corporate logging in the mid-20th century. This led to disputes and lawsuits over the years. A dramatic confrontation involving California history biographer Susanna Bryant Dakin\* occurred shortly after she and her family bought the property. One day, loggers from a large nearby operation approached a huge redwood under Dakin’s watchful eye. She marched up to the cutters, claimed the tree to be on her property, and threatened to sue if they proceeded. They left, and the next day Dakin purchased the property!”

\*author of *The Lives of William Hartnell* and *A Scotch Paisano in Old Los Angeles: Hugo Reid’s Life in California*

### End Notes from the Front Page

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz, “Recalling What We Do: Some Habits of Mind Historians Keep Hidden,” *Perspectives on History*, Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association (Dec 2013): 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Goldstein, “Precocious Professionalism: An Academic Epidemic?” *Perspectives on History*, Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association (Apr 2014): 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Bridget Maria Chesterton, “Historians Writing Collaboratively,” *Perspectives on History*, Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association (Oct 2014): 34-35.

### The Film *Fire Ruin Renewal* by Margaretta K. Mitchell

The Oakland/Berkeley firestorm of 1991 was the beginning of an intensely personal journey for me and my family. My story is part of the community that is forever affected by this unprecedented event that brought us not only pain and loss, but also resilience and triumph.

Our house on the edge of Oakland and Berkeley was one of only 15% that did not burn to the ground. However, it was severely damaged and took over 2 and 1/2 years to restore. *Fire Ruin Renewal* is my film that tells the story of the fight to save the house. It documents the intricate task of tearing it apart to restore it to its former beauty.

The film premiered in time for the 20th anniversary of the fire on October 20, 2011 and has been screened for many groups in the East Bay since then. What began as a \$4,999 grant from the Oakland Cultural Arts Program grew into a community-supported project. The Institute, fiscal agent for the Phoenix Firestorm Project, received generous donations that went directly to pay production costs. Many of us also donated our time and services to the project.

Making a documentary film, even a short one, is not for the faint-hearted. It is a tough challenge all the way. My film is a personal story about a major American disaster. It was a risk emotionally to go back and relive the disaster and renewal, but it was a necessary part of my own personal process of closure. Let’s just say it was necessary to bear witness to this event both historically and individually.

I am a photographer with skills to create and to manage a project, but I am not a film maker. However, I had to make a film because I was given the unique opportunity to use the extraordinary film footage of the late Ray Gatchlian, who was a documentary filmmaker

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and firefighter here in Oakland. He not only filmed in places where no one else could go, but he came to my house and his documentation of the destruction and salvation of the house is in “real time.”

I risked much of my free-lance photography career for a year to do this project, which was all-consuming. While the film itself was completed for the 20th anniversary, I had intense problems meeting the budget, despite the many, many donations of time, talent, service and funds that made it possible at all. The whole project has been nonprofit from start to finish. Because the initial grant came a year late, I had less than a year to make the film, which did not allow time to publicize it. Despite that fact, many local screenings were great community events and demonstrated the success of the film as a story well told.

The Oakland Museum of California screened this 23-minute film from October 2011 through January 2012 as part of the 20th anniversary events. Oakland Heritage Alliance also screened the film as did Mrs Dalloway’s bookstore. Since then, I have screened the film with many different local groups and am still committed to sharing it with people as a way to open the discussion about fire and disaster prevention.

It is always wonderful when old friends and colleagues share their work. The film opens with iconic images of the Golden Gate by photographic artist Richard Misrach, which he donated for use in the project. Photographer Paul Herzoff took pictures of the house after the fire and many of them will startle you with what they say about being a ruin. Photographer Raphael Shevelev shared black and white images of the hillside devastation; the color images are the gift of fellow photographer Nicholas Pavloff. Composer John Adams generously contributed his music for the film. Singer Francesca Genco lent her voice to a section of black and white images of the

devastated house. Stu Sweetow videotaped the interview. Mitch Silver and Tom Bullock edited the film. Lory Poulson of Poulson Gluck Design designed the CD package.

We recorded the script at Coventry Studio under the direction of Jon Herbst. Actor Earll Kingston came to read the narrator role and the words of my late husband, Frederick, who wrote them originally for our first-ever Christmas letter to friends in 1991. Indeed, it was *the* news of that year (and was published in *The Fire in the Hills*). Actor Julia Mitchell (my daughter) also read some of the narration and the part of Sally Edwards, who grew up in the house.

A delightful facet of the story are the words of Sally Edwards, who was 5 years old when her parents moved into the newly built house in 1925. In 2011 she was 91 years old, living in Honolulu. We enjoyed an ongoing conversation on the phone about her years here, and I had taped an interview with her after the fire, when she came to see us on a visit to Berkeley. She was fascinated with the way the house was being restored and contributed a unique image of the house with her grandparents’ house next door (no longer standing), as well as many other images from the early days of the house in the 1920-30s.

News of the project can be found at my website: [margarettamitchell.com](http://margarettamitchell.com); click on “The Phoenix Firestorm Project.” There you will find news and some responses to the film. As members of The Institute, your comments are especially welcome.

Respectfully and gratefully submitted,  
Margaretta K. Mitchell

*From the front page –*

**Associate.** Make use of your peers in organizations like the AHA, IHS and NCIS. They can help review your work prior to presentation or publication by pointing out gaps or weaknesses and even suggest helpful improvements to organization.

**Stay curious and intrepid.** Jan Goldstein, another past president of the AHA, despairs of “precocious professionalism” amongst graduate students—those who fear to venture beyond their comfort zone and settle for a “marketable niche” despite their true inclinations.<sup>2</sup> “Exploration, risk-taking, and learning from mistakes” are indeed desirable attributes.

**Collaborate.** Root out colleagues in academia with similar interests and look for opportunities to work together, be it research, papers, or lectures. Your counterpart will surely benefit from your fresh approach and independence of thought, while you, in turn, can draw upon their experience to develop your own skills. Think of it as a form of cross-pollination. It takes a great deal of trust and understanding to collaborate at this level, but the rewards are well worth the effort. International collaboration, moreover, opens doors to other archives and research in other languages that allow us to see connections that might otherwise never surface. <sup>3</sup>

And lastly, **always seek to add value.** There’s nothing quite so dull as research for research sake. If you really want to be heard, you’d best have something meaningful to say.

Without rigor, there is little hope of attaining professional status. It is the bedrock of reputation, and reputation is the price of admission. Admittedly rigor doesn’t come without cost, a cost which you will have to bear, alone, somehow. That is the nature of being independent. I can’t make you any promises of course, but from personal experience I would have to say that passion, well focused, *tends* to reward. As I indicated at the start of my talk, I’m here today with the financial backing of two organizations, NCIS and IHS. I think if you were to ask the awards committees at either organization to sum up in just a few words why they opted to support me, they would answer with something along the lines of, “he’s a professional.”

**The Institute for Historical Study**

**P.O. Box 5743**

**Berkeley, CA 94705**