THE INSTITUTE FOR HISTORICAL STUDY

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The Unruly City: A Trio of Shrewd Women of Color Who Helped Build Early San Francisco

By Steven Sodokoff

An American myth clings to the West like California coastal fog: rugged white men tamed the frontier through grit and individualism on barren land. San Francisco was never that story. Born of audacity, it was a muddy, riotous port where fortunes appeared overnight and identities swapped as fast as a pair of boots in a boarding house. The 1848 gold discovery on the American River blew San Francisco wide open. In less than two years, the dusty port leaped from a few hundred residents to 25,000. The Barbary Coast became its lawless, beating heart. In a word: unruly. Sailors rubbed shoulders with miners, freed Black men played cards with Latin gamblers, and European immigrants fought, worked, and drank next to one another. This was no harmonious melting pot but a crucible of competing cultures and ambitions.

Despite segregationist laws on the books, San Francisco's polyglot streets forced daily interactions between races and nationalities. Nobody had time to sort out a caste system when there was gold to find, cargo to unload, and rent to pay. The result was a city that integrated in practice long before it would have dreamed of doing so in principle.

Among those who wagered big were three women of color whose official histories took a while to emerge from that boisterous era. To fully understand San Francisco's origins, go beyond the lone prospector. Follow these bold women who embodied the city's uncharted spirit.



Juana Briones, a mestiza of Native, Spanish, and African descent, wasn't just a survivor, she was a builder. After bearing 11 children with her husband, Apolinario Miranda, and managing their farm in the Presidio and their home in North Beach, she divorced him, dropping his surname. Already a farmer, trader, and healer, she began amassing thousands of acres of land in Santa Clara County and defending the purchases in court against men who assumed she wouldn't fight back. She employed Indigenous workers and runaway sailors, modeling a multicultural workforce long before San Francisco claimed the title of cosmopolitan. Today, she stands as a pioneer of women's independence, cross-cultural medicine, and early entrepreneurship.



Ah Toy, a born entrepreneur, arrived from China in 1849 and saw what the city's men failed to act on: a town starved of women and flush with gold. She spotted a market and was the first to move on it. She understood early that curiosity could be turned into capital. She charged miners a pinch of gold dust for a "lookee" through a peephole, and the line wrapped around the block. She priced shrewdly, reinvested fast, and built that novelty into a brothel business empire that drew inquiring customers across color lines. When clients tried to pay in brass filings rather than gold, she took them to court, becoming one of the first Chinese women in America to sue in a US courtroom.

Continued on outside back cover . . .

A Note from the Editor…

This is your newsletter. I'd like your input! Every three months, another issue of the IHS newsletter arrives in your mailbox. To make sure you're getting the most out of this quarterly, retro print publication, I have a few questions to ask you. Do you read any of the content? If so, what do you read every issue? What are your favorite sections? Do you view the monthly programs online or do you prefer to read the recaps in the newsletter? Do you find the study group reports interesting and useful? What topics would you like to see addressed in the main cover articles? What would you like to see eliminated? And most importantly, what would you like to see added to the newsletter? There are all sorts of possibilities: a list of coming events relevant to our interests; a Letters to the Editor section; a quarterly "topic corner" that includes comments from members gathered from an email query; a column devoted to the ins and outs of getting published, including helpful hints and resources. There are many Institute members we rarely hear from. I'm hoping, in this instance, to hear from ALL OF YOU! Please email me with your answers to the above questions and any other thoughts you may have; my email address is rcleese@earthlink.net. Thank you so much.

Upcoming Monthly Programs, Saturdays at 10 AM

11/21/26 – Peter Crane, "Victor Serge: Revolutionary and Author"
December – No program this month
1/16/27 – Dan Kohanski, "Early Christianity and the Jews"
2/20/27 – David Mostardi, "Morgan Shepard: Author, Artist, Publisher, Children's Advocate"
3/20/27 – Pat Southard and Liz Thacker-Estrada, "First Ladies and Women's Rights: Mary Lincoln to Mary McElroy, 1861–1885"

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THE INSTITUTE is affiliated with the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS) and the American Historical Association (AHA).

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear Institute members,

The Institute's Annual Potluck, held on September 26, 2026, took place at the beautiful and tranquil home of Peter Stansky in Hillsborough. Attendees gathered in his backyard, with one member availing himself of the enticing swimming pool and everyone admiring the view overlooking the Peninsula towards the Bay. The event enabled members who only knew each other by name to meet in person. Many members brought delectable homemade dishes. All enjoyed good fellowship in the pleasant and serene surroundings.

Those attending the potluck were Ted Atlas, Rose Marie Cleese, Leslie Friedman and Jonathan Clark, Jim Gasperini, David Goldberg, John Graham, David Hirzel, Dan Kohanski and Jean Marcucci, Katya Miller and John Freedom, Karen Offen, Jody Offer, Pam Peirce, David Rosen and Eileen Consorti, Liz Schott, Michael Several, Margaret Simmons, Steven Sodokoff, Peter Stansky, and me. Additionally, Henry, David Rosen's puppy, adorably greeted all those present at the event.

In October I sent a message to all Institute members that advocated for enhanced member recruitment. The email included a message to prospective members, the updated Institute brochure, the Institute flyer, and an updated membership application that can be filled out online and attached to a message sent to the Institute's email address or printed and mailed to the administrative secretary's address. With the passing of five members this year, promoting the Institute to prospective members becomes even more crucial to ensure the ongoing strength and diversity of the organization. My thanks to IHS webmaster Jim Gasperini for updating the documents and to Bert Gordon of the Membership Committee for collaborating with me on the recruiting message.

The National Coalition of Independent Scholars Conference is scheduled for April 15–17, 2027. The Institute, a Partner Group of NCIS, is planning to host a hybrid presentation—both in-person for local NCIS and IHS members and on Zoom for a global audience. The presentation by popular and respected San Francisco historian Woody LaBounty will double as the Institute's Monthly Program. More details will follow.

The Institute provides opportunities to attend events, programs, and study groups and to present your works in progress and your published works. I urge you to avail yourself of these and numerous other benefits and to invite others to join the Institute to benefit from them as well.

—Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada

MONTHLY PROGRAMS

George Orwell Today
Presented by Peter D.L. Stansky
July 18, 2026

Professor Peter Stansky began his talk by describing his own introduction to George Orwell: as a high school senior, reading *1984* shortly after its publication in 1949. At Yale, he wrote his senior thesis on four Englishmen who went to Spain during the Civil War: Julian Bell, John Cornford, Stephen Spender, and Orwell. He and his collaborator, William Abrahams, had originally intended to write on all four, but later decided to limit themselves to Bell and Cornford, both of whom were killed in Spain. Their book, *Journey to the Frontier*, was published in 1966 and was followed by *The Unknown Orwell* (1972) and *Orwell: The Transformation* (1979), dealing with the author's early life and his evolution into a politically committed writer.

It is a wonderful irony, Professor Stansky observed, that George Orwell has never been so influential, nor have his books sold so well, as at present, with the word "Orwellian" in constant use, while at the same time, his reputation as a person has never been lower. When *1984* and *Animal Farm* came out, they were seen as anti-Russian documents, and they were used as such during the Cold War. Today, Orwell's popularity owes a great deal to Donald Trump, with his alternate facts and his Big Brotherism. Orwell was "wonderfully prescient on the power of corruption," he said, noting that Winston Smith's job in *1984* is to rewrite the past.

The decline in Orwell's personal reputation is in part because he was overblown in the past, as when Lionel Trilling described him a "man of virtue." A brilliant writer, surely, but also an "ordinary English bloke," with the prejudices common to the English middle and upper classes, including anti-Semitism, homophobia, and misogyny. How deeply these ran is hard to say. He had Jewish friends and associates, and though he had derided the "pansy poets," including Spender, he and Spender later became friends.

A recent book by Anna Funder, *Wifedom*, claims that Orwell mistreated his first wife, Eileen Blair, and attacks Peter Stansky and other male biographers as "members of the patriarchy." She accuses Orwell, wrongly, of ignoring Eileen, when in fact, a whole section of *Orwell: The Transformation* is devoted to her. She was extremely important to George Orwell. They had an open marriage; Orwell had flings, and in Marrakech, wanted to go to a brothel. Eileen may have had an affair with Georges Kopp, Orwell's commanding officer in Spain.

In sum, Orwell was a man of genius and importance, and a great writer, but "a man of virtue" is perhaps not the right phrase. Professor Stansky posed the question of how significant the vices of anti-Semitism, homophobia, and misogyny are in judging him, and concluded: "Would that he were living at this hour!"

During a question period that followed, Professor Stansky was asked about the list that Orwell compiled, and supplied to a friend in the Foreign Office, of persons whom he considered unsuitable, on political grounds, to be employed in producing anti-Communist propaganda. The list was both "fundamentally a bad thing" and totally unnecessary, Stansky said, as virtually none of those on it would have been asked to produce anti-Soviet writing. Calling it a "serious mistake in judgment," he said that it remains a "problem for Orwell's supporters and a boon for his detractors."

Stansky observed that until *Animal Farm*, Orwell was a moderately successful and moderately well-known writer, but hardly famous. It was in one sense "nefarious" that the CIA paid for it to be translated and distributed in Communist-bloc countries, but in an "Orwellian paradox," also wonderful, in that it exposed so many people to this marvelous book. To another questioner, Stansky described his most recent book, *The Socialist Patriot: Orwell and War*, in which he discusses four wars: the First World War, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, and the "Cold War," a term Orwell invented. The first of these was crucial in shaping his patriotism. He participated in the military training corps at both the schools he attended. Orwell differentiated between patriotism and nationalism, of which he disapproved. He did not seek the destruction of the Soviet Union but rather objected to its efforts to impose its principles on others.

Professor Stansky's recommendation to those interested in Orwell is to read more of his works. Orwell was a great stylist, and a "great and good policeman of the English language," as exemplified by his essay, "Politics and the English Language." He combined, wonderfully, "language as politics" and "language as art," and he inspires us to write "honestly and accurately."

—Peter Crane

Women Artists in Berkeley, 1900–1920
Presented by Ann Harlow
August 15, 2026

Ann presented biographies and commentary on the artistic contributions of 18 female artists active in Berkeley early in the 20th century, including Louise Carpenter, Eleanor Carlisle, Sally Dangerfield, Florence Lundborg, and Anne Bremer. Ann is writing a dual biography of Bremer and her cousin and life partner Albert Bender, a generous patron of the arts.

She started off with Isabel Percy West, who taught at Frederick Meyer's school in Berkeley from 1920 to 1941 and was honored with a gallery named after her. Next, she followed Jennie Vennerstrom Cannon's journey from Minnesota to California, where she cofounded the Carmel Art Association, and Alice Best, who with her husband Arthur ran the Best School of Art in San Francisco for over two decades and lived in Berkeley from 1908 to 1925.

Four pioneering women photographers spent time in Berkeley. Pictorialist Anne Brigman, a friend of Jack London and Charles Keeler, produced work recognized by Alfred Stieglitz.

Ann gave period context by discussing art institutions in Berkeley and San Francisco, including the Hillside Club and the California School of Design, and noting the challenges women artists faced during that period. Several of the artists spent time in Paris, where some joined the American Women's Art Club. While they were able to study there with such notable artists as Whistler, they were not fully accepted into the male-dominated art scene.

During the Q&A session, participants discussed how these artists influenced each other and why they mostly focused on landscapes and garden scenes rather than domestic or interior subjects. The group also discussed the relative obscurity most of them fell into despite their artistic achievements. In a few cases Ann has been unable to find reproductions of any of an artist's work, although from newspaper accounts and other sources these females artists were clearly active and well-regarded at the time.

—Jim Gasperini & Dan Kohanski

Adventures in Translation
Presented by Karen Offen
September 19, 2026

On September 19th, Institute members gathered online to hear a presentation, "Adventures in Translation," by Karen Offen, a well-known specialist in women's history and the history of feminism and affiliated with the Clayman Institute for Gender Research at Stanford University. Her works, including *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford University Press, 1999), have been translated into many languages.

The focus of her talk was on the kinds of changes that can happen to the meanings of the work of an author when the original is translated into another language. During the publication process, the author may lose control over the resulting version. The translation process, she learned at a translation conference in Eastern Europe several years ago, can become complex because of the multiplicity of languages and the differing ways in which even the comparable word in another language can have an entirely different meaning. For example, the word "trickster," in English, refers to a person using illusion, often to deceive, but when translated into Czech, it means "lewd guys." The phrase "our bodies ourselves," is familiar to English-language speakers as the title of a best-selling book published in the 1970s promoting the freedom of women to control their own bodies and be, in essence, who they wished to be. However, attempting to translate the phrase into Romanian is impossible due to the fact that in Romanian, the words, "we" and "our" are gendered only in masculine. A "secretary" in Romanian, in the masculine form, implies a high-ranking official, whereas in its feminine form, it designates a low-ranking office worker, generally female. Margaret Thatcher, Offen noted, who served as the British prime minister during the 1980s and was the longest-serving holder of that office during the 20th century, was addressed as masculine in Romanian during her tenure and in the feminine thereafter.

Regarding a book being translated into a foreign language, Offen went into detail about the importance of who does the translation and the reality that authors often lose control over their work when it is rendered into another language. The author may not be able to control the translated version even if fluent in the translated language; this was not the case for translations of Offen's work into French, as she worked closely with the translator. But authors have far less control when they don't speak or read the language into which the work is being translated, as was her case, into Chinese.

There is also a wide range of possible scenarios involving translation. She recalled, for example, that her article "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," published in the journal *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* in 1988, was subsequently published in an Italian version with no consultation with her, the author; the publisher also failed to get permission to translate the article from the original journal publisher. *European Feminisms* was published in a Spanish-language edition in 2015 with the translator having been chosen by the publisher. Chinese censors viewed the word "feminism" as politically incorrect for use on the cover, but when she received copies of the book in 2024, the word was there, in English!

The bottom line in Karen's talk was that authors have limited control over the translation process of their books or articles, though cases can vary widely. As many Institute members are authors, her observations could well serve as a launching point for future Institute dialogues about the issues that arise in the translating of books.

—Bert Gordon

Jewish History Study Group Report

On Sunday, August 9th, Leslie Friedman offered a fascinating and richly illustrated presentation titled "Marc Chagall's World: In Color and in Love" to IHS's Jewish History Study Group. Tracing Chagall's career from his childhood in a Jewish neighborhood in Vitebsk, a city now in Belarus, through his active life as an artist, Leslie told us that Chagall (1887–1985) had "tried to stay on the edge of trendy styles," but that he had also sought to retain his individuality by avoiding established artistic groups.

Growing up in late 19th-century Russia, where anti-Jewish pogroms were common, was a challenge for the young Chagall. After his school years, Chagall moved first to Saint Petersburg and then to Paris in 1910, where many of his early paintings focused on the Eiffel Tower. In Paris, he met Bella Rosenfeld, also Russian-Jewish and a writer, whom he married in 1915. They subsequently returned to Saint Petersburg, where their only child, Ida, was born in 1916. With invitations to show his work in local galleries, Chagall became increasingly well-known there and in Moscow.

In Russia, Chagall created images of Jesus Christ, as well as of burning synagogues, highlighting "suffering and destruction," to create, in his words, "from the heart, not from the head," all based ultimately on love. As Leslie pointed out, there were Jewish elements in his work, but his art "approached the universal." In 1918, after World War I, Chagall moved back to Paris. With Nazi Germany's occupation of France in 1940, his daughter urged her parents to leave, telling him that "you must go now." He and Bella crossed the border into Spain and then to Portugal, where Varian Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee, which rescued many artists and literary figures, made arrangements for the Chagalls to sail to the United States in May of 1941.

Once in the US, Chagall never learned English, possibly expressing himself better through his paintings. Leslie, discussing his painting "The Juggler," explained that his work invariably showed someone making music, in this case, a fiddler. His costume designs for the 1942 ballet *Aleko* received a strongly favorable critique from dance critic Edwin Denby. Leslie then addressed his 1920s series of 96 black-and-white etchings that appeared in Nikolai Gogol's renowned 1948 satire, "Dead Souls." Working to "humanize" Biblical scenes, Chagall saw the Old Testament as a human story, with its emphasis on the creation of man.

Leslie noted that in Chagall's later years, he criticized Christian artists for not having spoken up to defend Jews during the Nazi years and that Jews would always be grateful to the Soviet Union for its resistance to Nazi Germany following its invasion of the USSR in 1941. She concluded this most interesting presentation by showing attendees an illustration of "Circus Horse," a vividly colored painting by Chagall from 1964, describing it as a "wonderful moment." In short, Leslie offered the group many wonderful moments in a presentation that opened broad new vistas on an artist who lived through turbulent and often difficult times but managed to keep producing and enriching the world with his artistic creations.

—Bert Gordon

On October 5th, David Rosen, the historian for the US Coast Guard Pacific Area, delivered a presentation to the Jewish History Study Group about the cabal that put Adolf Hitler in power.

The main player was Baron Franz von Papen, assisted by General Kurt von Schleicher. Many others were involved. Von Papen thought he

could build up Hitler and then control "the screaming Austrian mutt." Alfred Hugenberg, who began backing the Nazis in the 1920s, controlled the national and local press and campaigned for years to bring Hitler to power.

Post–World War I, the Nazis' strength came from heavy industry, banking, insurance, the gentry, and Hohenzollern monarchs. President Hindenburg was being undermined by big business even before the Great Depression. They selected Heinrich Bruning, a right-wing Catholic politician, as dictator to rule by decree, and he received the approval of the senile Hindenburg. Donors came from every industry in Germany, Swiss billionaires, Henry Ford, and 15 British billionaires who provided the funds for Nazi thugs to rule the streets. The cabal persuaded Bruning to get rid of the leftists who were in power and to restore the monarchy. Bruning became the chancellor in 1930.

In 1930, the Nazis won 100 seats in the Reichstag and started acquiring power through coalitions with the right. They were given control of the Interior Ministry and with it, the police. The Nazis lost seats in the Reichstag in the November 1932 election but remained the largest party. Von Papen, the outgoing Chancellor, had Hitler agree to get Hindenburg to appoint him as Chancellor if Von Papen could be Vice-Chancellor. Hitler had cobbled together support from industrialists and others and became Chancellor in 1933. Those industrialists who backed Hitler burned their records in 1945.

Frequently during his presentation David pointed out comparisons to what is currently taking place in this country.

—Ted Atlas

Women's History Study Group Report

The topic of the July 22nd meeting was Jane Addams' work at Hull House, which she founded in Chicago, Illinois, in 1889, one of the first settlement houses in the United States. Liz Schott had recently visited Hull House, and she showed slides of the photographs she had taken and also shared information about current conditions and usage of the House.

Group members contributed information gleaned from Addams' memoir, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, specifically the four chapters recommended by Jody Offer that dealt with the creation and operation of the institution. They discussed, for example, the agreement signed by residents—sometimes 20 or 30 at any one time—who rented rooms in the house, some for as long as 20 years. Addams was just as interested in giving well-educated women meaningful service projects as she was in cleaning up the neighborhood. The residents taught classes such as cooking, English, and dance; became acquainted with locals; and engaged them in neighborhood improvement projects, for instance, improving road conditions and utilities. Some of the residents made legislative or mayoral contacts, wrote to newspapers, or drafted legislation.

Jody noted that Jane, in founding Hull House with her partner Ellen Gates Starr, purposely selected a beautiful local building, as well as well-made, attractive furniture and decorations for Hull House, to add dignity and worth to neighborhood gatherings. The House hosted dances, weddings, and other celebrations, and the residents made a point of inviting locals to join them for dinner. One of the most successful and popular projects was a crafts museum, the idea of Miss Starr, an artist, featuring crafts made by local citizens.

Several members mentioned ways in which their own subjects of study had been influenced by Hull House. The subject of Pam Peirce's book, Katharine Gibson, thought of working at a settlement house before pursuing a different career. Liz Schott's subject, Dorothy Liebes,

studied weaving there. Jody knew that Frances Perkins, the first woman cabinet member; Susan B. Anthony, a women's rights advocate; and labor organizer Rose Schneiderman all stayed there when in Chicago because they found encouragement and ideas for their own work.

On August 24th, WHSG members observed the 106th anniversary of the 19th Amendment with a discussion on women's suffrage and equality, including their first or most meaningful voting experiences, their support for women candidates, and their participation in political campaigns. Liz Thacker-Estrada mentioned campaigning and voting for the first woman nominated for Vice President on a major party ticket, Geraldine Ferraro, in 1984.

Karen Offen presented an excerpt from suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt's detailed account of the battle for woman suffrage, which began in 1848. After the Civil War, the 15th Amendment to the US Constitution enfranchised Negro men but not women (Black or white). For over 50 years, suffragists fought for women's voting rights by leading hundreds of campaigns in Congress, and at the state legislatures, state constitutional conventions, and political party conventions, supporting referenda, spending millions of dollars, and devoting thousands of hours to finally ratify the federal women's suffrage amendment. Lyn Reese reflected on notable suffragists, specifically mentioning Alice Paul. Although women gained the right to vote nationally in 1920, Patricia Southard emphasized that Paul recognized that suffrage alone was insufficient and advocated for the Equal Rights Amendment, which aimed to guarantee women equal legal rights rather than relying on protective laws that treated women as a special class.

The group discussed the ongoing challenges in achieving gender parity in politics, particularly regarding women's representation in Congress and the presidency, reflecting on the 2016 election when Hillary Clinton won the popular vote but lost the electoral college. Liz Thacker-Estrada provided statistics showing that 66.9% of eligible women voted in the 2024 general election, with more women than men participating.

Exploring the question of whether women have achieved full and equal citizenship, participants noted ongoing challenges, including workplace discrimination, reproductive rights, sexual harassment, and the need for women to balance caregiving responsibilities with professional careers. Pat highlighted how women, and particularly women of color, bear a "double and triple burden" due to societal expectations. Jody Offer mentioned being judged for staying home with children and the societal pressure women face regarding work and family roles. Leslie Friedman told of a professor who made a sexist comment to her.

The group also discussed the importance of continuing political activism beyond just voting. Members agreed that focusing on specific issues —such as environmental protection—and supporting women candidates whose platforms address women's needs are effective ways to make a difference.

The group denounced the lack of federal recognition for women's contributions, e.g., the history of proposed women's holidays, the status of Women's Equality Day, ongoing efforts to recognize women's history, and the current administration's attempts to remove historical information from national parks and institutions like the Smithsonian—all of which makes it even more urgent to document women's history.

Topics of upcoming WHSG meetings will include Gloria Steinem, Mary Chesnut's diary, civil rights, and Black suffragists.

—Jody Offer and Liz Thacker-Estrada

Writers' Group Report

At its July meeting the Writers Group discussed Steve Barton's excellent piece on the Bay Area Community Land Trust (BACLT). The trust is a democratic membership organization designed to create permanently affordable resident-controlled housing. He traces the development of the Land Trust from its origins in the early 2000s to the present day, following the many twists and turns and ups and downs in the course of its development. The group found Steve's piece to be excellent, clear, and well-written. Like the earlier segments of his work, it is both solid and academic. Some in the group thought that his section could be reworked to give more room to the personalities and the conflicts that occurred as BACLT developed and worked through its difficulties.

In August Pam Peirce presented two short articles relating to her biography of Katharine Gibson. Pam plans to submit them to historical journals in Indiana and the Midwest. The first essay concerned the life and tragic death of Katharine's father, Louis Gibson, a gifted architect in Indianapolis who over time descended into alcoholism and took his own life. The second essay focused on Katharine herself, presenting her as an important but neglected Indiana writer and cultural figure. The group felt that the essay on Louis was solid, focused, and well-written. The second piece on Katharine needed more work. Some suggested that Pam concentrate on following her own path of discovery about the remarkable life and achievements of her adoptive grandmother.

At its September session, the Writers' Group discussed the fifth chapter of Liz Thacker-Estrada's biography of Abigail Fillmore. This segment covered Abigail's life in Buffalo and New York State in the 1840s. It was a time where the Fillmores had a respite from national politics, and this chapter gave a detailed and engaging account of Abigail's activity as a leading figure in Buffalo society but also gave much attention to her role as both mother and educator of her children. The chapter provided a charming picture of the Fillmores as bibliophiles and readers; many discussants felt that Liz could have devoted more attention to the contents of the books that so greatly engaged them. The group agreed that this was an excellent segment and promised more in the installments to come.

—Rob Robbins

(Note: the European History Study Group did not meet during this time frame.)

Announcing Our Latest New Member!

The latest person to join our ranks is **Kenneth Bernstein**, a nationally known blogger and writer. He has extensive experience as a secondary school teacher in various fields of history: general history, religious history, music history, and environmental history. He is also interested in political and economic history. He earned a BA in music at Haverford College in Haverford, Pennsylvania; an MA in religious studies from St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia; and an MA in teaching from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. He says, "During the school year, I am a consumer rather than a producer per se of history. I do a fair amount of research and that informs my teaching and some of what I write online."

MEMBER NEWS

Bert Gordon gave a pair of lectures at the annual reunion of the Mills College Alumnae Association in September. The first presentation he gave was titled "History of Tourism: From the Grand Tour to the Present." Tourism, he noted, is much more encompassing than merely the organized tourist industry. The word "tour" came into popularity with the 17th-century "Grand Tour," when affluent northern Europeans, generally male, visited the sites of classical antiquity as part of their education. Most international tourists were European and, later, American. Yet Chinese admiral and diplomat Zheng He made seven voyages from China to North Africa and the Middle East between 1405 and 1433, building trade networks. However, his travels did not result in Chinese colonization such as occurred in the case of European explorers, beginning with Columbus, in the Western Hemisphere.
His second talk concerned one of the Western Hemisphere's most beloved foods: cacao. Used by Meso-American peoples from around 1400 BCE, it became part of the "Columbian Exchange" in which products such as potatoes and tomatoes were also introduced into Europe. Originally a beverage, chocolate was viewed as a medication for the affluent. This changed in the mid-19th century when companies such as Fry's and Cadbury's developed the techniques for making hard chocolate. Chocolate bars became popular bearing names such as Ghirardelli in San Francisco and Hershey in Pennsylvania. Today, chocolate is consumed around the world, Chocolate Week takes place late March–early April 2027 in San Francisco.

On September 22nd, **Peter Meyerhof** gave a presentation, "The Legacy of 1776, Part 2: Sonoma and Statehood" to the Sonoma Valley Historical Society. Then on October 7th, he presented "Two Pivotal Native Americans from the Sonoma Valley" to the Mill Valley Historical Society. His upcoming lecture, "Mapping the Northern End of El Camino Real," will be given to the Sonoma Petaluma Parks Association on November 19th. All of these presentations incorporate some of Peter's research as an independent historian over the past few years.

Laure Latham spent the summer breaking records! On August 20th, she became the first French woman to swim Catalina Channel as well as the first French woman to complete the Triple Crown of Open Water Swimming, which consists of the English Channel (2023: 21 miles; 19 hours and 16 minutes), Round Manhattan (2025: 30 miles; 10 hours and 48 minutes) and Catalina Channel (2026: 20 miles; 11 hours and 57 minutes). She recalls, "I swam Catalina Channel in a straight line between Catalina Island and San Pedro, south of Long Beach. I started right after midnight and the night was as dark as it gets, making it difficult not to swallow sea water during breathing as I couldn't see the swells coming my way. Sharks were a concern, for sure, but as we couldn't see anything, I focused on the wonderful bioluminescent plankton that fired up green specks on every stroke. Night became day and I was lucky to be visited by three big Mola Mola (sunfish) on my way to Smugglers Cove, the sea kelp cove where I finished." Could there be a book in the offing about all of this?!

Liz Schott was busy in the month of October, presenting her biographical research on Dorothy Liebes to three different audiences: docents of San Francisco Bay Area museums (October 15th), the Institute for Historical Study (October 17th), and the Weaving History Conference (October 21st).

—Rose Marie Cleese

BOOK REVIEW

A Western Publisher: Paul Elder & Company, 1898–1968 • By David P. Mostardi (IHS member)
Book Club of California, 2026, 215 pages

This handsome book pays tribute to an enterprise and the man who ran it; a man who loved beauty and sought to present it to the city he loved.

Although Paul Elder is at the center of this book, it's not a biography in the usual sense of the word. Mostardi admits that Elder the man is an elusive subject; little is known of his personal nature. But Mostardi shows that Elder left a large imprint on the culture of San Francisco and California.

Elder never realized his great ambition: to create a *Western* publishing house that could be the equal of those in the East. Yet he brought out more than 400 titles over the course of two decades, a feat he accomplished in the face of natural disasters and financial reversals. In addition, and perhaps of almost equal importance, were the bookstores Elder established and managed. These were the outlets for his publications but much more than that. The stores themselves were works of art and served as cultural gathering places where, in addition to books, other artistic pieces were on view and for sale. The "Arts and Crafts" bookshop was a new kind of venture, one that lifted the cultural level of life in San Francisco and earned Elder and his company a national reputation.

Elder printed and published a wide range of things: catalogs, magazines, journals, calendars, and greeting cards. But books were the center of it all, books of a wide variety: literature, poetry, drama, criticism, children's books, art books, cookbooks, joke books, collections of aphorisms and sayings. Content was important; but for Elder THE BOOK was more than that. He approached it as a total work, an *objet d'art.* Everything mattered: the paper, the print, the binding, the lettering on the cover, the dust jacket, the presentation box.
His books were meant to be read, of course, but perhaps not in every case. They were also intended to be examined, viewed, fondled, caressed, sniffed. They were often designed to be presented: gifts to mark holidays or special occasions, signs of friendship, tokens of love. Today, as books pour from presses at top speeds and in large volume, we forget to view the book as a work of art in and for itself, and publishers blithely tear off elegant hard covers to slap on paper ones in hopes of better sales. David Mostardi lets Paul Elder & Company remind us of a more elegant, less frenzied time.

Mostardi divides his book into eight parts. The first is biographical, covering the lives of Elder and his son, Paul Jr., and describing the stores they operated in San Francisco, Santa Barbara, and New York. The second section details Elder's printing, marketing, and production operations. A third part treats Elder's in-house magazine *Impressions* (1899–1905). The longest and most important part of the book (Part IV) is a survey of selected publications arranged by topic. Part V sums up Elder's accomplishments, and the final three sections provide a chronology, a complete list of Elder's publications, and a bibliography.

Readers will find Part IV to be the most valuable and interesting. It is much more than a topically organized listing. Mostardi frequently provides annotations that describe a book's contents, physical attributes, and the way it was received and reviewed. In one entry we learn that in 1909 Elder issued Omar Kayyam's *Rubáiyát* in five different bindings, including a "Tentmaker's Edition" on hand-made paper, bound with flexible hand-printed boards. *The Dial's* reviewer was not impressed with this fine workmanship, noting dryly that there had been four other recently published editions of Kayyam's poems.

In addition to its excellent and informative text, Mostardi's work is lavishly illustrated. It is published by the Book Club of California in a limited standard edition of 250 copies and a deluxe edition of 25 "presented in a slipcase with a selection of giclée prints." This splendid book is clearly a labor of love for Mostardi and a fitting accolade for its subject and his achievements.

—Rob Robbins

A TRIBUTE TO BONDA LEWIS

It's been nearly a year since the passing of long-time IHS member Bonda Lewis on December 1, 2025, and there was a short obituary in a subsequent IHS newsletter. As promised, here is a longer account of her fascinating and full life, prepared by Elizabeth Thacker-Estrada, who says of Bonda, "She was an expressive and talented actor, an excellent and passionate teacher, an active and supportive Institute member, and a wonderful and loving friend."

Bonda was born on May 23,1941, in Beaver City, Nebraska. Her higher education pursuits brought her to the Bay Area, where she received BA and MA degrees in theater at San Jose State University and trained in the professional program at the prestigious American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco.

Over the course of her career, Bonda performed and directed both her work and the work of others in theaters, schools, hospitals, libraries, universities, military installations, and clubs throughout the United States and Northern Europe. She taught theater and wrote shows, plays, short stories, and poetry; she also cofounded an improvisational group, Penny Plain Theatre, in San Jose.

Through her company, Performances Off the Shelf, Bonda portrayed several outstanding women of history in one-woman shows. These women included authors Jane Austen and Louisa May Alcott, explorer Isabella Bird, and women's rights advocate Amelia Jenks Bloomer.



Recalls Thacker-Estrada, "I first saw Bonda on August 26, 1995, when she performed as suffragist Sara Bard Field at an event sponsored by the San Francisco Women's Heritage Museum to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the ratification of the women's suffrage amendment to the US Constitution in 1920. The occasion also observed the 80th anniversary of Field's cross-country automobile trip in 1915 from the Panama-Pacific International Exhibition in San Francisco to Washington, DC, to deliver a massive women's suffrage petition to President Woodrow Wilson."

In 2011, in observance of the centennial of California women's suffrage, Bonda performed as Sara Bard Field at several branches of the San Francisco Public Library. Cosponsored by the Institute, her programs included "Stories from the Road" at both the Excelsior Branch and the Merced Branch, where Thacker-Estrada was the manager, and "We Cannot Fail" at the Main Library in San Francico's Civic Center.

Bonda shared with the Biography Writers Group (now the Writers Group) her writings on a historical fiction series for young readers that takes place during both the Orphan Train movement and the women's suffrage movement. From 1854 to 1929, orphan trains transported thousands of orphaned, abandoned, and poor children from crowded Eastern US cities to foster homes in the rural Midwest and other states. When Oliver Pollak told Bonda that a friend's mother had been an Orphan Train Child after seeing her perform in a play about the trains, she observed that "our work bumps a number of the same subjects and places." She added, "The IHS audience [at former "Works in Progress" gatherings] helped me enormously with editing and shaping my material." She was the recipient of two IHS grants that aided her in her research.

. . . continued from outside front cover



Mary Ellen Pleasant arrived in San Francisco in 1852, worked as a cook and housekeeper in a wealthy household, and became the city's shrewdest hostess. Behind her pots simmered intelligence: powerful men confided over supper, and she banked every whisper. Boarding houses became her salons, eateries her listening posts. Thomas Bell, her silent partner, held the titles while the Bank of California held its tongue. Her enemies' smear campaign was merely tribute. She invested in businesses, ran Underground Railroad routes westward, and financed lawsuits that chipped away at racist laws, including a desegregation case that helped open San Francisco's streetcars to Black riders decades before the civil rights movement had a name. Moving between the parlors of the elite and the pews of Black churches, she became known as the "Mother of Civil Rights in California," a woman who turned secrecy into strategy and money into freedom for others.

So much for the myth of the lone prospector. San Francisco's formative years are rooted in the endeavors of the women who dared to bet on themselves in a city that offered them nothing but a chance. Their stories, half-buried, wholly remarkable, are the real inheritance. San Francisco still trades on reinvention, but its true legacy belongs to the unruly, the resourceful, and the forgotten women who helped turn a lawless boomtown into America's most integrated city of its day.

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