



San Francisco History Association

A Profile of Ron Ross, Founder of the San Francisco History Association And Lover of San Francisco History

By Lorri Ungaretti

On January 23, 2022, Ron Ross and I met to sit in the sun and share a pizza. The idea was for me to write a profile of him for the SFHA newsletter. Both of us knew he would die soon from cancer, but neither of us knew it would be a matter of days. Ron wasn't someone who loved talking about himself—he was more interested in the world around him. And, of course, he loved his adopted home (San Francisco) and its fascinating history.

Life in New York

Ron was born in The Bronx on December 30, 1936. He had seven siblings, and his family lived in a six-room flat. The children slept three to a bed. He said he knew at a young age, "I needed my independence."



The Ross Family, 1956

He attended William Howard Taft High School, graduating in 1954. As an adult, he lived in Brooklyn for six months and moved around the New York boroughs for several years. He sounded proud when he said, "I've lived in four of the five New York boroughs."

Leaving New York

Fast-forward to July 1964: Ron wasn't happy in New York and had a friend, John Fusco, who had moved to San Francisco and liked it. "I came here just for a weekend," Ron told me. "Fusco and his roommate took me on a tour of San Francisco, and I fell in love with the city." He moved to Baghdad by the Bay in 1968.



Ron at the Golden Gate Bridge and the Portals of the Past, Golden Gate Park, 1968

Back in New York, "I felt as if I was living three lives," Ron explained. "One was work, one was with my family and friends, and one was in the gay world. I lived three separate lives and had to make sure they didn't spill over into each other. I had to hide that I was gay. I even had girlfriends. I never felt I had to live that way here."

Once he moved to San Francisco, Ron's life changed. "Once I went into a gay bar here, I never looked back." His life in the gay community was as full as his life with San Francisco history. In 1974 he was elected Mr. Gay San Francisco by the Imperial Council of San Francisco and in 1976 they named him Imperial Czar of The Golden Gate Empire of San Francisco.



Ron, Imperial Czar of The Golden Gate Empire of San Francisco, 1976

In 1981 Ron collected photographs of the era he loved the most about San Francisco and published a small, 60-page booklet to commemorate the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire. The dedication read, "This book is dedicated to the survivors of 1906 and to those that keep this historical past alive today." He sold the books for \$4 each. He was stunned in January when he learned that the book was on eBay for \$89. "Can you believe that?" he asked. In 2006, Ron republished his book for the 100th anniversary of the earthquake and fire.



Starting the San Francisco History Association

“I was never interested in New York history when I lived there,” Ron said. Things changed when he came to San Francisco. “I knew about the 1906 earthquake—everybody did. I found a book in a used bookstore with views of San Francisco. I remember that it was five dollars. I covered each page of this book with acetate to protect it. Then I put it on my coffee table.”

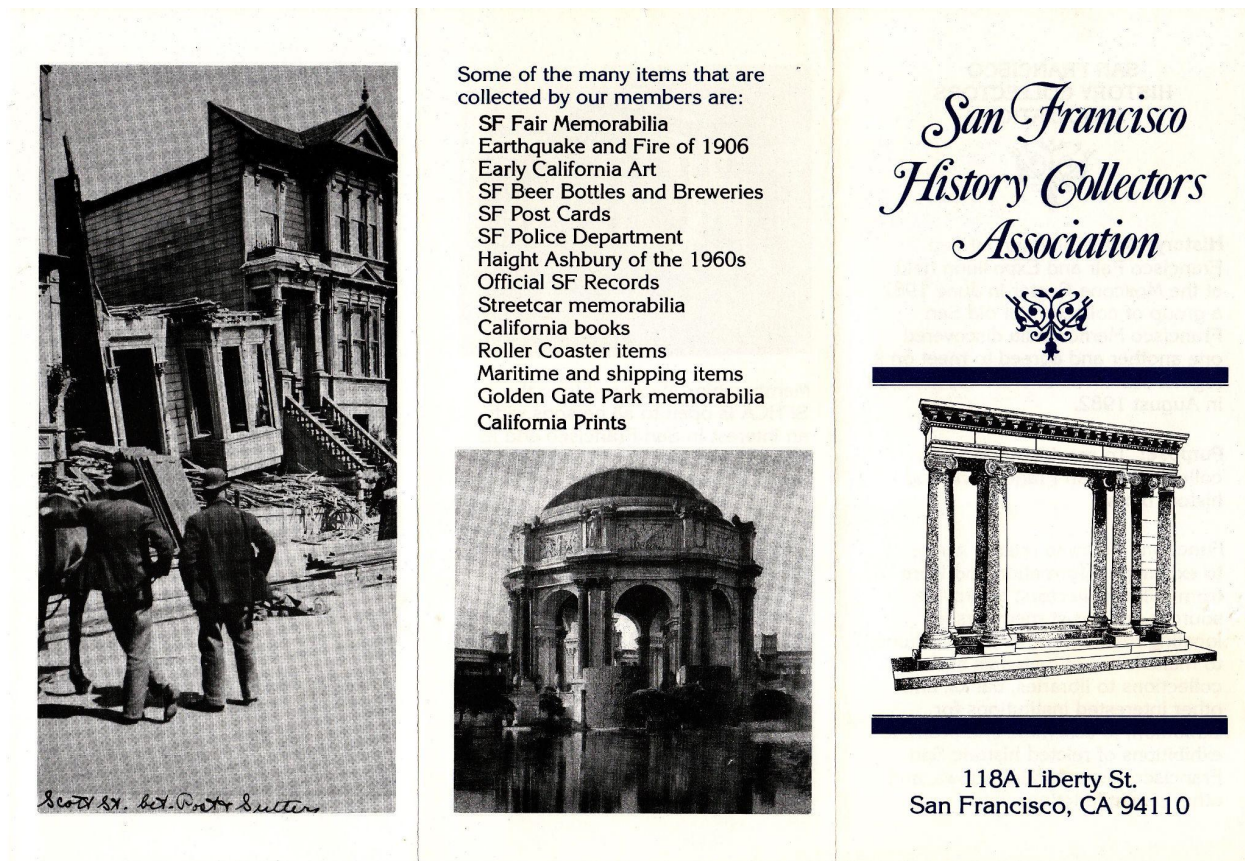
He frequently studied photographs of old San Francisco, “and then I would go to see if it was the same, if things were still there,” he said. At a library sale he bought old photos for \$2 each. He went to flea markets, garage sales and wherever he might find San Francisco ephemera, which he began collecting. In the early 1980s, Ron attended the San Francisco Fair at Moscone Center and met other people who collected artifacts from the city’s past.



Ron - Brooks Hall, Civic Center Plaza, 1987

“I was fascinated that there was no San Francisco history group,” Ron recalls, “so, in 1982, I decided to start one.” The first meeting of Ron’s group was August 1, 1982, “in a room next to a bathroom at the old Main Library. “Walter Jebe [author of *San Francisco’s Excelsior District*] was one of the first members. He was also a library commissioner, and soon after the first meeting, he got us a better room,” Ron chuckled.

Ron named the group the *San Francisco History Collectors Association*.



San Francisco History Collectors Association pamphlet, 1982

The new group held meetings regularly. There was always a speaker to explore one aspect of San Francisco history, but the social hour after the talk was the exciting part. Members brought items to sell or trade—"Collectors were learning about each other, what people were interested in and what they were collecting," says Kathleen Manning, a charter member of the group. "People expanded what they knew about San Francisco history."

Before long, other local history buffs who weren't collectors, wanted to join Ron's group. Ron changed the name, removing the word *collectors*, and opened the organization to all people who were interested in San Francisco history.



SFHA Board of Directors, 1982

Allen Dunn, Ron Ross, Michael Lucas, Walt Jebe, Marilyn Lucas, Mae Silver

The San Francisco History Association (SFHA) began meeting monthly. At first, Ron recruited the speakers, usually choosing people who had recently published a book. Soon after, Kit Haskell took on the role of finding speakers on varying aspects of San Francisco history, which she has continued to do for more than 25 years. The SFHA sponsored annual ephemera shows and donated 100% of proceeds to San Francisco educators to encourage them to teach students about the city's history.



SFHA Ephemera Show - Golden Gate Park, 2002

Kit Haskell, Ron Ross, Ed Baumgarten and Sandy Baumgarten

The SFHA membership meetings were hosted in various locations during the past 40 years. They started in the old Main Library and have met in the California State Building, the Fort Mason Gatehouse, the Unitarian Church, the San Francisco Museum at the Cannery (Gladys Hansen's project), the Goddess Church on Portola Drive, the Mission Dolores School auditorium, St. Phillips Church, and now the Congregation Sherith Israel on California Street. Ron often joked, "We've almost been every religion!"

Under Ron's leadership, the SFHA hosted special event tours of historical locations and parties to celebrate historical events like the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition and the end of World War II. He also started the annual awards dinner to honor local historians and for the membership to celebrate together. For SFHA's 30th anniversary in 2012, Ron encouraged members to dress in costumes related to San Francisco history.



SFHA 30th Anniversary Dinner, 2012

Ed Baumgarten (hippie), Sandy Cavallaro (Doggie Diner), Lorri Ungaretti (Laughin' Sal), Kit Haskell (the flapper), Vicki Walker (Bummer and Lazaus), Ron Ross (Enrico Caruso), Kathleen Manning (as herself)

1906 Earthquake and Fire Commemorations

For more than 40 years, Ron helped produce the annual April 18, 1906 Earthquake and Fire commemoration at Lotta's Fountain. After the event downtown, the painting of the fire hydrant "that saved the Mission" at 20th and Church Streets followed, which Ron spearheaded in partnership with the Guardians of the City. In the pre-dawn hours of the 2012 event, attendees, in keeping with the yearly custom, spray-painted the fire hydrant gold—or so they thought. As board member Sandy Cavallaro was taking photographs with a flash, she noticed the paint was actually *silver*. She alerted Ron, who was mortified. They checked the extra cans, all of which had gold caps and silver paint. As the sun rose, everyone could see the hydrant was painted silver. A fast-acting history lover darted off to a nearby hardware store to retrieve gold paint. Within hours, the hydrant was returned to its usual bright gold. For years afterward, people loved to tease Ron about the silver fire hydrant.



Gold cap silver hydrant - 20th and Church Streets, April 18, 2012



*Ron unhappy with the hydrant being silver, April 18, 2012
(or annoyed at a laughing Sandy Cavallaro for trying to take his picture with it)*



GOLD hydrant, April 18, 2012

Ron was known for his curt New York personality and his thick Bronx accent. But he will be most remembered for his love of San Francisco history and for finding ways to share that with everyone.

Thanks for everything, Ron. We'll miss you.

Lorri Ungaretti,
with special thanks to Sandy Cavallaro



Ron, SFHA retirement dinner, October 20, 2019

Awards

Here are the awards that Ron Ross received over the past 45+ years:

- San Francisco Imperial Court: Mr. Gay San Francisco, 1974
- San Francisco Imperial Court: Imperial Czar of The Golden Gate Empire of San Francisco, 1976
- San Francisco History Association: The Ron Ross Founders Award, 1997
- San Francisco Historical Society Award of Merit, 1998
- San Francisco Board of Supervisors Certificate of Honor, 2004
- Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition (for his contribution as a 1906 earthquake commemoration volunteer), 2006
- San Francisco Fire Department Historical Society Participation Award, Great Earthquake & Fire 100th Anniversary, 2006
- California Legislature Assembly Certificate of Recognition, July 2010
- The Imperial Court of San Francisco Recognition of Work, 2016
- San Francisco Board of Supervisors Certificate of Honor, 2019
- City and County of San Francisco Mayoral Certificate of Honor, 2021