President’s Report

As editor, Carol Provenzano has declared that I must meet the deadline for inclusion in this issue. Yet, she has not told me where to get the time to write the article. In the short time I have been here, I have been overwhelmed by the amount of activity in this organization at this time.

Negotiations with the City are proceeding positively and at break-neck speed towards turning over all management responsibilities for the museums by March first. In addition, the City is requesting bids for creating a parking lot in the lower level east of the Museum in Kelley Park. And, I am happy to report that work on converting a portion of the former Beechmore Building for collections storage is progressing towards a September 1998 occupancy.

The School House has been moved, with restoration work and program planning progressing now. The Victorian Preservation Society has received approval from the Department of Public Works to proceed on digging the basement and implementing Phase I of this important project.

The Full has been filled with implementing the exciting activities around Founders Week and planning Victorian Christmas. We are now beginning the planning for the Civil War, Chinese, and Portuguese projects scheduled for this summer. And I promise you an exciting membership Annual Meeting in April.

In the mean time, we are creating the infrastructure necessary, strategic plan, and stuff needed to succeed in San Jose’s highly competitive cultural market place. This spring, we will ask you to help us evaluate, redefine, and rebuff all of our membership programs.

So, Carol, why am I supposed to write this article for the membership? On the other hand, isn’t it exciting that so much is going on? Another promise: “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

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Welcome New Staff

It is with great pleasure that John Lassemi has become Senior Vice President of the History Museums of San Jose. Mr. Lassemi will be responsible for all business operations, budget and financial management, institutional planning and development, contract management, and public/private partnerships.

Mr. Lassemi spent ten years with the City of San Jose, as Senior Planner and City Historic Preservation Officer, and most recently is Downtown Development and Program Coordinator for the Redevelopment Agency. Most recently he has served as the Redevelopment Manager for the City of Santa Cruz Redevelopment Agency.

We are fortunate to attract Mr. Lassemi as the first new member of the Senior Management Team.

President/CEO David Croson and his wife Natalie Hula enjoy the party.

Special Events

Members Holiday Party

Volunteer Council President Carolyn Sinclair points out the lovely doll and toys to Darly Brichtmeier.

Board member Dean Helms, Pat Magee and Jerome Munday join Joan Helms, Joan Barrett, and the lifesized statue of A.P. Giannini in the Bank of Italy.

Craig Minnaster, Keith Cablebread and Steve Cac enjoy the evening at the Members Holiday Party.

Donations

Grant Awarded to HMSJ

Thank you, San Jose Rotary Club, for your recent donation of $10,000 to the History Museums of San Jose. Your generous grant will be used to upgrade appliances in O'Brien.

Past Mayors' Reception

To kick-off 1997 Founders Month activities, Mayor Susan Hammer hosted a reception of past mayors, elected officials and dignitaries at the Fallon House on November 5, 1997. This was the first time that former mayors have been brought together in one place. Those in attendance included past Mayor Robert Dorsey, Mayor Ronald James, Mayor Tim McCarthy, Mayor Albert Ruffino and Mrs. George Starbird escorted by her son, Tim Starbird.

The History Museums of San Jose extend sincere gratitude to Annie & Fred Cline of FSS Technologies for their donation to sponsor this truly special event. Thank you for your support. The Fairmont Hotel added prestige to the evening event with delicious delicacies and beverages.

Victorian Christmas Doll Drawing

Another year and another successful Victorian Christmas Doll Drawing event. Thank you all for joining us in this delightful occasion. The success is definitely due to all of you who donated your time, effort and your generous contributions of toys and dolls. Thank you all for your help.

The generous donors were: Across the Bridge, Adopt-A-Doll, Avery's, Bear in the Wood, California Interiors, Cottage Creek, Country Creek Mercantile, Flor Collectibles & Fine Gifts, the Garden Club, Lixix Toy Cupboard, Los Gatos Porth, Nice Twice Doll Shop, Frank & Marilyn Doros/Classic Car Wash, Steele Luggage, The Granary, The Wooden Horse, Yemere's Antiques & Collectibles, Helen Back, Joan & Dean Helms, Gwen McGreggor, Gall Moffett, Jane Montgomery, Debbie Olson, Nancy Peters, Carolyn Sinclair, Barbara Stefflin, Elinor Terris, Rose-Marie Twu, Evelyn Uerich, Edith Walter, St. Irene Hernandez, Mr. & Mrs. Keith Cablebread, Stella & Don Ostrander, Heather Gold GM, Vintage Reflections, and finally the WHOA Education Program. Again, our heartiest thanks to all of you who participated and congratulations to those of you who were lucky enough to receive one of the toys or dolls!
Historical Highlights of Santa Clara Valley

Santa Cruz Mountain Writers, Part 1

by Jack Douglas

Charles and Kathleen Norris

Since the 1870s the Santa Cruz Mountains above Los Gatos and Saratoga have held a fascination for artists. Writers such as Ambrose Bierce and John Steinbeck found solitude there. Easy access by train and automobile made it a favorite location for writers seeking quiet and serenity.

This series will examine the lives of a number of noted writers, in some cases husband and wife combinations, who made their homes in the hills overlooking our valley. To paraphrase that popular song, "The hills were alive with the sound of typewriters."

Charles and Kathleen Norris, once leading literary lights, are but fading memories today, but between 1920 and 1940 these two writers produced a prodigious number of novels, articles and plays.

Charles, the third son of B.F. and Gerrude Nlixir, was born in Chicago in 1881. His brother Frank was destined to become the more acclaimed of the two Norris brothers. The family moved to San Francisco in 1883. After graduating from U.C. Berkeley Charles entered the literary world of magazine writing and editing.

It was while working for San Francisco Call that he met Kathleen Thompson, daughter of a San Francisco banker who, after moving his family to Mill Valley, died and left his wife and six children penniless. Kathleen, the eldest, went to work at nineteen as a bookkeeper, then later as a settlement house worker, a librarian and a newspaper society editor. She was working as a reporter for the San Francisco Call when she covered the story of the great earthquake and fire in 1906. Charles and Kathleen met in 1908 and married the following year. They moved to New York City where they became involved in the exciting literary milieu.

Family Life

Their son Frank Norris II was born in 1910. After a second attempt at parenthood ended tragically with the early deaths of their twin daughters they adopted a second son. Their family responsibilities were doubled when they took on the upbringing of Kathleen's sister Theresa's three children. Teresa, wife of the writer/photographer William Rose Benét, died in the 1918 flu epidemic.

Charles rushed to enlist when the U.S. entered the First World War. Given a commission, he was put in charge of training troops at Fort Dix. Discharged as a major after the Armistice, he always regretted not having experienced combat. Proud of his short military career, he was not averse to being called major or "mage" by his friends.

Early Success

Kathleen experienced immediate acclaim when Charles engineered the publication of her first novel Mother in the American Magazine. A popular success, the book so touched Theodore Roosevelt that he climbed three flights of stairs to the Norris apartment to shake the author's hand. This was the beginning of a lucrative writing career that would span fifty years and 88 novels.

Before he began his own career as a novelist, Charles worked to further the reputation of his older brother Frank. Frank Norris (1870-1902), who died at the age of 32, occupies a revered place in American literature for his hard-boiled railroad-smuggling novels McTeague, The Octopus and The Pit. It is somewhat ironic that Frank Norris's reputation was due, in large part, to the uninitiating efforts of his younger brother who dedicated writing and edited unfinished works and acted as agent for the dead author's wife and daughter.

After seeing his brother's last novels in print, Charles set out on his own writing career with his first novel The Author. This was followed by the critically acclaimed Salt in the Education of Griffin Adams (1918). These were succeeded by a number of novels with morose labile titles: Burn (1921), Blood (1923), Soul (1930), Zest (1933) and Vint (1944). Unlike his wife's memoirs, which always ended happily, Charles' novels, like his brother Frank's, dissected social problems and dealt openly with taboo subjects such as divorce, abortion and prostitution. A number of his novels were bought by Hollywood and made into films.

At Home in Santa Clara County

The years in New York did not quench the Norris' longing to return to California. In 1919 they purchased a 250 acre estate outside of Saratoga on Big Basin Highway. They named their mountain retreat "La Estancia," and built a sprawling craftsman style bungalow to accommodate the growing family. A number of cottages were built to house the many guests they entertained during the summer. Swimming in their large pool and playing croquet were popular entertainments. Kathleen tended Charles in the latter.

Charles needed the solitude of a distant cabin for the laborious creation of his novels, while Kathleen, on the other hand, could sit down in the middle of a party or of a children's squabble and dash off pages of manuscript, leaving them scattered about for her secretary to gather and organize.

In the summer of 1934 a guest cabin caught fire and everyone pitched in to save it. It was erroneously reported in the paper that Kathleen had beamed danger to save a child. During a break in the confusion Kathleen calmly wrote five pages of her next novel.

Palo Alto Home

In 1927 Charles hired the, now legendary, architect Borge M. Clark to design his family's dream home in Palo Alto. The magnificent Spanish Colonial style home on the corner of Coopervale and Melville Street was christened "La Casa Abierta." This still lovely building has an enclosed courtyard with a fountain and numerous art installations by San Jose's Albert Soson. The large living room, with its generous fireplace was a place where many famous people were entertained. Literary, political and entertainment people such as Noel Coward, Edna Ferber, Alexander Woollcott, Harpo Marx, Charles Lindberg and Herbert Hoover were frequent guests at both of the Norris' homes.

Politics and Play

Even with both their literary careers in high gear, the Norris still found time to become involved in local affairs. Kathleen participated in the book fairs and other Pen Women activities in San Jose. She wrote and acted in her own play "La Casa Abierta" - the Norris Home in Palo Alto.

Whittengin's Car in Los Gatos in 1947, and she played the lead role in the Palo Alto Players production of Lula Vollmer's San Cup in 1934. A passionate advocate of family values, women's rights, prohibition and isolationism, she traveled about the country speaking on these issues.

In 1934 Kathleen was invited to meet Adolph Hitler. She returned to report that Hitler was the only one who could bring Germany out of economic chaos, but she also feared that another war was approaching and that the U.S. would again be required to sacrifice its sons. She campaigned for Herbert Hoover in 1932 and Wendell Willkie in 1940. Charles differed from his wife on political matters and as an old soldier supported President Roosevelt's war preparations.

Besides successfully looking after his own, his wife's and his deceased brother's literary efforts, Charles enjoyed an extravagant social life. One of his favorite haunts was San Francisco's Bohemian Grove. He authored several of the Bohemian Grove plays including: Rose of the Philistines and A Guest of Robin Hood. It was his fondness with which to become President of this prestigious club as Kathleen's father and brother had been, but it was not to be, for he was blackballed after inviting Harry Bridges, the radical longshoreman's union leader, to a club event. (Charles' last novel was about the longshoreman's inspired general strike which closed down San Francisco for several days in July 1934.)

Charles' party days ended when he suffered a stroke while boisterously.toasting the singer Hildegard in one of New York City's posh night clubs. He was taken home to Palo Alto where he died a year later of another stroke on July 25, 1945.

Kathleen continued writing and lecturing until 1959. Her last book, Family Gathering was an autobiographical memoir. She died at the age of 85 on January 18, 1966.

Although Charles' and Kathleen's novels may seem formulaic or dated now, in their day they were best-sellers—a number are still in print. Also surviving are their two unique homes (see note) which should serve as reminders of these two noted literary figures and the time and style in which they lived.

Note: The Saratoga estate was sold in 1952 to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Now called Camp Swig, it serves as a retreat for Jewish families. The beautiful home in Palo Alto currently serves as Stanford University's Catholic Newman Center. Both of these residences should be listed on City, County and State historic inventories, both for their architectural significance and their association with two of the Nation's outstanding literary personalities.
Members’ News

Endowment Fund Donations
The Endowment Fund of the History Museums of San Jose gratefully acknowledges the receipt of the following donations:

In Memoriam:
- Henry Gerds
- Helen Howes
- Juanita Minium
- Florence Minnewaser
- Bill Roth

In Honor Of:
- Betty Brown
- Myron Gibson
- O’Brian’s Volunteers
- The Clients and Friends of Mieger, Minnewaser & Associates, Architects

Gifts to the History Museums of San Jose to honor someone on a special occasion, or as a memorial, may be sent to the History Museums of San Jose Endowment Fund, 1650 Senter Road, San Jose, CA 95112-2599. A letter of acknowledgement will be sent to the person being honored or the family of the deceased.

Membership Premium Available Soon
The History Museums of San Jose is proud to announce the 1998 Membership Premium. Two prints originally painted by Michael Kutoski, a local railroad artist, are featured. They are entitled Horseshoe at Agnew 1878 and The Alum Rock Park Trolley 1910. Membership premiums will be available in January.

City Store Announces Big Sale
There will be a substantial savings on selected books published by the San Jose Historical Museum Association and publications from our wide range of topics. Also included in this sale will be other holiday and decorative items. This is a perfect opportunity to collect those books which have been used as membership premiums recently.

Happy New Year!

History Museums of San Jose

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Membership Classification:

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- $250 Tower Circle
- $100 Century Circle
- $45 Family/Grandparents
- $35 Individual
- $35 Senior Citizens (1 or 2)

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- I pick up my premium at the Historical Museum
- NOT obtaining my premium

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