

Moments in Time

SAUSALITO HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER SUMMER 2014

A TASTE OF AL SYBRIAN 1924–2007

The most recent Sausalito Historical Society exhibit displays eclectic works of Al Sybrian, a local sculptor best known for his Sea Lion, a realistic representation of the one of the Bay Area's free-spirited marine mammals. The bronze statue "lives" in the tidal waters off South Bridgeway where its naturalistic profile is included in scenic photographs of the San Francisco skyline and enjoyed by regular waterfront walkers.

The exhibit, which will be on display until March 2015, opened in April immediately following a presentation at the library of the newly published book, *The Sea Lion and the Sculptor—The Tale of a Vagabond Bohemian Artist* (2013). The hardback, limited-edition book (approximately 8 ½ by 11 inches) was designed by Barbara Geisler of Sausalito and written by Terence Clarke of San Francisco under the guidance of Executive Editor and Publisher Bill Kirsch of Sausalito.

At the time of Sybrian's death in 2007, his estate consisted of 12 large boxes of his writings, drawings, photographs and correspondence. Before he died, he entrusted two of his closest friends, Michael Rice and Bill Kirsch, with the task of going through the materials and deciding if there was anything there of value. The exhibit and the book are the result of many years of dedicated work by Bill and Felicity Kirsch and writer Terence Clarke to organize the contents of those boxes into a coherent collection for Al's friends, many of whom live out of California, and for free-spirited artists everywhere.

Active fund raising under the umbrella of the Sausalito Arts Association (founded in 1966 to benefit art projects in Sausalito) accompanied every phase of the book project. A

community of Sausalito merchants, restaurateurs, artists and friends gave generously to insure publication of the high-quality first printing.

Al himself had given little thought to his legacy beyond not throwing things away. "He spent his artistic life with absolutely no desire for fame or money," Bill Kirsch writes.

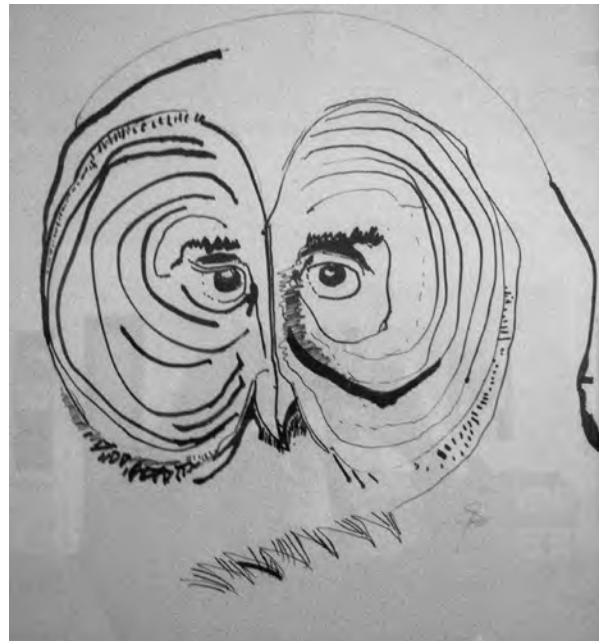
"To my knowledge, Al's work was never shown in galleries or museums. He gave most of his art to his friends, many of whom have passed away or moved. For this reason, little is known about some of the pieces shown in the book. Sometimes only a photograph exists."

Sybrian earned the title "vagabond bohemian artist" by virtue of his nonmaterialistic lifestyle (he never owned a car, a television or a house) and the priority he gave—above all else—to his creative process. "One must be prepared for creativity because in the making of a vegetable garden the pleasure is more in the preparation and nurturing than in the mature carrot," he wrote. "In sculpture, it is the same thing."

He was a profoundly serious artist concerned about what he should do with his talent. "What spirituality I have," he wrote in a 1994 letter, "is concentrated in the meditative process called carving, which is of course also an act of love."

Insistent on working in his own way, Sybrian once responded to an ad in the *San Francisco Chronicle* for a monumental sculptor with the admonition: "... you had better be quite certain of your theme or themes because once set, the sculpture must not be tampered with. You must also determine whether or not you want strong, singing work or weak-kneed, uncontroversial, decorative stuff."

Sybrian's Art (Continued on Page 5)



Al's nickname was Owl, delightfully conveyed in this self-portrait.

IMAGE: SHS COLLECTION

HOW THE SEAL FOUND ITS PLACE

A long-standing complaint about the unsightliness of a manhole cover seldom leads to the placement of an iconic sculpture, but here in Sausalito in 1957 such an unlikely event occurred.

Sculptor Al Sybrian had been sketching sea lions from his cottage below the old Hearst wall for years and in 1957 finally approached his neighbor, Mr. Gratama, with his wish to create a sculpture of a sea lion to place on the waterfront. Mr. Gratama and other neighbors agreed it was a great idea and pulled together \$100 for materials. Sybrian set immediately to work on his vision. After three months, his benefactors stood in amazement at the flow of natural energy emanating from the concrete sea lion in his studio. All agreed it was a fine creation; now they just needed to find a permanent home for it.



PHOTO: BY ANN CHRISTIANSEN

While working to create the Sea Lion sculpture, Sybrian was also in conversation with his uphill neighbor who lived where William Randolph Hearst had once planned to build a mansion. The view from Dr. Wiper's home rivaled any in the Bay Area and included Belvedere, Angel Island and San Francisco Bay. But a single eyesore intruded into the perfect panorama: a five-foot tall (at low tide), full-size sewer inspection pipe capped with a manhole cover. Both Wiper and Sybrian decided some beautification was needed.

After completing his sculpture, a friend recalled how Sybrian contrived, "that several of his friends should cause a raucous scene at the far northern end of Sausalito, to divert the police from their normal rounds in the Old Town southern neighborhood. This would give Al and another group of friends enough time to park his Sea Lion sculpture on top of the manhole cover, and to escape without detection."

That was a good story, one Sybrian loved to tell, but it didn't happen. It appears that Mr. Gratama, the original benefactor, finally prevailed on the City Council to prop-

erly locate the Sea Lion on the designated manhole cover. There the sculpture endured decades buffeted by wind, tides and sea until finally the worn cement version was replaced with a bronze casting in 1967. Stable for another 38 years, the Sea Lion suddenly took a tumble into the brine during a powerful winter storm in 2003. Bea Seidler of the Sausalito Foundation recounts that "spontaneous donations of \$100–\$500 poured in from the community" to pay for remounting the Sea Lion. Now, 11 years later, the well-known form remains firmly attached to a rebuilt concrete base and lives on as first envisioned back in 1957 in Al Sybrian's paper notebook.

AL SYBRIAN at the NO NAME

In the 1960s and '70s in Sausalito the No Name bar, popularly known as "everyone's living room," was the preferred gathering place for an artistic community of writers, poets, artists, philosophers, musicians and others who enjoyed sharing a drink and conversation in a congenial environment. Neil Davis had bought the place in stages and, when it finally became all his, he transformed the ambience from the tastes of the swinger crowd to a more intellectual atmosphere with classical music, where creative people could meet and share ideas and visions.

Some of its clientele over the years included novelist Evan S. Connell Jr., and poets Lew Welch, Gary Snyder and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. In his more bohemian days, linguist S. I. Hayakawa was a regular. Zen philosopher Alan Watts frequented the No Name as did Lenny Bruce and jazz bassist Charles Mingus. Sterling Hayden, Geraldine Page, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, the Smothers Brothers, Allen Ginsberg, Clint Eastwood were all customers. Eventually, it became a famous place because of all the well-known people who hung out there.

Al Sybrian was a regular at No Name, but not always on his best behavior. "We all knew Al Sybrian was a sweetheart," said Davis, "but I repeatedly had to ask him to leave the bar for drunkenness." Davis' friendship with Sybrian survived this setting of limits, however, and they remained correspondents for years after Sybrian moved from Sausalito.

Articles in this Newsletter were written by Margaret Badger

SAUSALITO HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWS

FROM THE NEW PRESIDENT JERRY TAYLOR

My name is Jerry Taylor, and in mid-May I was honored and humbled to be elected president of your Sausalito Historical Society. Meeting with members, docents and directors in the last month, I'm so impressed by what I'm walking into: the wealth of knowledge, the curiosity, the willingness to share, the acquisitions lovingly maintained, the organization, the roll-up-your-sleeves-and-do-it mentality. Sausalito, you've got a good thing here.

In my first few weeks as President:

- I joined the SHS volunteers who help bring history alive to the 3rd graders in our public schools, when they presented achievement awards to the children for their research into the people, the historic buildings and World War II Marinship in our town.
- I participated in the SHS information booth at the Caledonia Street Fair, and explained how the street got its name. We invited men in kilts to help us tell the story!
- I've learned plenty about one of our most popular landmarks, the Al Sybrian Sea Lion sculpture along Bridgeway, through a book, a slide show presentation in the Library, and a display about the artist at the SHS exhibit room.
- I participated in the 126th Espirito Santo Festa parade, carrying a banner that proclaimed "Sausalito

Historical Society partners with I.D.E.S.S.T." (I think it's been 55 years since I participated in the parade, as a Little Leaguer or a Boy Scout.)

- I've gotten to know more of the volunteers who have made your Society something to be proud of, the docents in the Society rooms, in the Ice House Historical Display and Information Center, and at the Volunteer Appreciation Party held at 333 Caledonia.

My interest in all things Sausalito has ratcheted up a notch.

- I bought *California: The Irish Dream* at the Friends of the Library sale (next to the SHS on the top floor of City Hall). There is a chapter about Dan O'Connell—that's Sausalito's Dan O'Connell, as in Poet's Corner!
- I read that William Matson Roth had passed away. I learned in the obit that he owned a house in Sausalito. I wonder if that's in the SHS files.
- A friend said she remembers Maya Angelou from the docks. Did she live in town?
- Carl Nolte, writing in the *Chronicle*, celebrated history continuing to be made in Sausalito's boatyards with a feature on *Freda*.

If you've read this far, you are a member of the Sausalito Historical Society community. You're interested, you care. Come visit our facilities. Do some research. Support the activities. Become a member of the Sausalito Historical Society (or renew). It's money and time well spent.

And, get out there and make some history yourself.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF LARRY CLINTON

New Historical Society Board members Steefenie Wicks, Jerry Taylor, Jim Muldoon and Mary Ann Griller (l. to r.) being introduced at the annual meeting by Roland Ojeda of the Society's nominating committee.

SAUSALITO HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWS

VOLUNTEER RECOGNITION EVENING, JUNE 19, 2014

The first annual Volunteer Recognition event was held at Christopher Holbrook's lovely venue at 333 Caledonia St. on the warm summer evening of June 19, 2014. With members, non-members and volunteers in attendance, the jolly group bid farewell to retiring Board members and to the *Newsletter* staff.

After sipping local wines, devouring delicious appetizers donated by Angelino, Cibo, Saylor's and Venice Gourmet, retiring President Larry Clinton presented the Volunteer of the Year Award to Jeanne Fidler. Jeanne has been a regular volunteer at SHS since 1991 and is well-known for her undying support of the Society's undertakings, her lovely period costumes featured at SHS events and her regular service as a docent. She received an historic, framed photograph of herself, Phil Frank and Shelby Van Meter as they appeared in the 1990s at the Caledonia Street Fair.

New President Jerry Taylor praised Larry Clinton for his six years of dedicated service to the Historical Society. He cited the first Volunteer Recognition Event and other SHS functions he has attended since becoming President as evidence that Larry's tenure has left SHS with strong leadership, creative ideas and enthusiastic volunteers.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF MARGARET BADGER

Jeanne Fidler, Volunteer of the Year, holds the framed photograph award presented to her by retiring President Larry Clinton.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF STEEFENIE WICKS

Volunteer Eric Torney of Kentfield, Jerry Taylor, newly elected President of the Sausalito Historical Society and Jessica Brainard, a valued consultant for the Sausalito Sets Sail Exhibit, posed for a photo at the Volunteer Recognition Event.

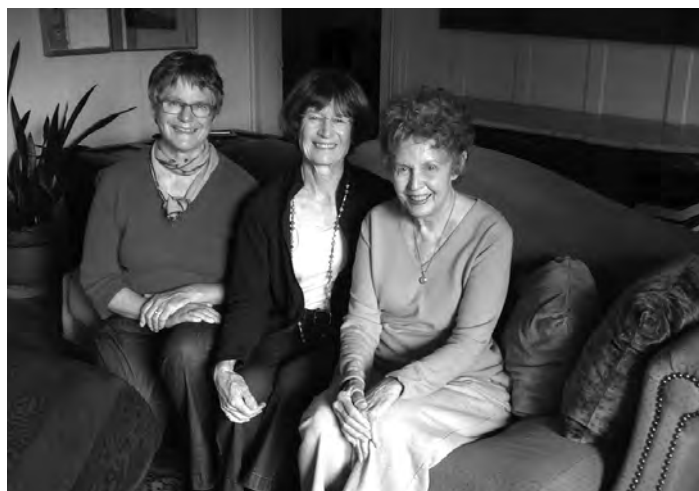


PHOTO: COURTESY OF AUDREY BERDAHL

Retiring Newsletter staff Alice Merrill, Margaret Badger, and Doris Berdahl have been a writing, editing and graphic design team for seven-and-a half years.

SCHOOL'S PROGRAM EXPANDS



PHOTO: JIM MULDOON

Bayside School teacher Jim Scullion (l.) joins his pupils and SHS volunteers at the history awards ceremony.

Every year we report on the developments in the Historical Society's Schools Program. Our pilot program in local history began in 2010 in the third grade classrooms of Willow Creek Academy and Bayside Elementary. The program is now well established in both schools and has grown from 45 to 65 students and from one curriculum unit to three.

The goal of the program is to encourage teachers and students to explore Sausalito's interesting past. The first unit introduces Sausalito's historic downtown buildings and businesses. The second portrays colorful personalities and families from Sausalito's past and the most recent unit, introduced this Spring, explains and documents the history of the World War II shipyard, Marinship.

For each unit, several docents appear once in the class-

room to present the topic-related workbook and once to lead a class field trip in Sausalito. Each workbook has been researched and designed by SHS volunteers in conjunction with teachers and administrators of the Sausalito Public School District. It is comprised of historic pictures, maps, facts and a glossary as well as space for student notes and sketches. To further encourage students in their study, SHS provides each classroom with a set of *Sausalito* history books (Arcadia Press) and a copy of Jack Tracy's *Moments in Time* history.

In the course of the year, the students write about a specific topic such as an individual building, a person or a Marinship job and have their pictures taken in a theme related photo. At the end of the year, they receive a framed document that includes the photo and their own writing.

Al Sybrian's Art (Continued from Page 1)

The lasting manifestations of Sybrian's work in Sausalito are the Sea Lion and many beautifully laid stonewalls throughout town. He may have gained his stoneworking skills in an engineering battalion in World War II rebuilding damaged structures in Italy and France. Bea Seidler noted, "He would build walls for people here in Sausalito without any grout or other substances to hold them together. I think most of the walls that go along Bridgeway south of downtown were done by Al Sybrian."

The body of work most wonderfully presented in the Sybrian book is his collection of illustrated letters and cards. As Susan Shea conveys in her review of the book, "The real gems, what makes the book



IMAGE: ESTATE OF AL SYBRIAN

One of many humorous greeting cards sent by Al Sybrian to his friends.

sparkle and pop, what brings Sybrian alive and kicking, smiling and disarming the reader again and again, are the illustrated letters and cards from the artist. He transferred his exuberant visions into the written words, his passion and sense of humor into anecdotes and cartoons. . . ."

For readers who would like an intimate look into the rough-hewn texture of a creative maverick, a taste of Sybrian is now available in the book *The Sea Lion and the Sculptor* for sale at the Sausalito Visitors' Center Ice House and in the Sausalito Historical Society Gallery. For the observant walker, the Sea Lion and the stone walls are perpetual reminders of this versatile, dedicated Sausalito artist.

LETTER FROM THE PAST PRESIDENT

Well, after six years on the Historical Society Board, I'm now history myself, at least as far as the Board goes. Looking back on all that the Society has accomplished in the past six years, I feel profound gratitude for all the Board members, volunteers, donors, partners and other supporters who've helped us bring the Society into the 21st century, and to leave it in sound financial condition for the decades to come. But mostly I'm grateful for the loyal members who renew every year, attend our functions, and express enthusiasm and suggestions for future activities. I intend to stay active as a volunteer and look forward to seeing everyone at upcoming Society functions. Thanks for helping keep Sausalito history alive.

—Larry Clinton

SAUSALITO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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