

## African Americans & the Transcontinental Railroad

By Dorothy Lazard

This year marks the sesquicentennial of the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad. In the various celebrations that will mark that engineering achievement, you will hear any number of stories about surveyor Theodore Judah and the Big Four (Mark Hopkins, Charles Crocker, Collis Huntington and Leland Stanford) who funded, marketed, and staffed the rail line. The story of the Union Pacific, the line moving from Nebraska to Utah, will also be commemorated.

For me, the story that holds the most interest is the one we don't often hear, the "story before the story."

I'd guess most Oaklanders associate the railroad with African American Pullman porters. The image that usually springs to mind is that of a mid-20th century African American man dressed in a dark uniform with shining buttons and a smart cap, or else in chef's whites. They have a deservedly honored place in our local history. But African Americans' involvement with the national railroad industry began much earlier than the 20th century. That story is one of bondage, escape, industry, violence, service, and opportunity.

In 1830, there were only 23 miles of tracks in the U.S., running only as far west as St. Joseph, Missouri, on the Kansas border. In the South, rail companies built their lines using slave labor. Slave owners, working as regional rail contractors, leased their slaves to rail companies, especially during slack planting seasons. Even Northern slave owners, including some rail engineers and surveyors, brought their slaves south to work on new rail lines. By the mid-1800s, the railroad industry had become a fast-growing, lucrative enterprise.

Before the American rail lines, slaves were marched to markets or transported in wagons. There's no small amount of cruel irony in the fact that by the 1840s, slaves who helped build the railways were being transported by boxcars to slave markets and plantations.



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**BROTHERHOOD OF** Sleeping Car Porters co-founder C.L. Dellums at the 16th and Wood Street Southern Pacific Depot, early 1990s.

Rail companies deployed slaves to clear timbers, cook for work crews, haul water for drinking and cooking, shoe horses, drive supply carts, and load and unload freight. They would build bridge trestles, grade roads, lay tracks, and refuel locomotives. The more skilled slaves worked as blacksmiths, carpenters, and stone masons. Even enslaved women and children were contracted out to rail companies where, in this mostly male environment, they had to perform many of the same duties as their male counterparts.

Railroad companies also purchased slaves in large lots, 50 or more at a time, becoming some of the country's largest slaveholders. For example, South Carolina Railroad listed in its 1857 annual report 57 slaves on its personnel rolls. While railroad companies hired whites (Irish in particular), slaves were the most readily available and economical source of labor as they could demand nothing in terms of fair pay, adequate food, safe and clean lodging, or medical care. They had no rights that whites were bound to honor. They

did not have the option to pick up and leave if they found work too arduous or abusive. Like the tools they had to work with, slaves were seen as property, ideally suited for hard labor.

In researching early decades of American railroading, I found advertisements calling specifically for "able bodied negro men." As slaves were prohibited from reading, I assume these ads were directed at slave owners. Slave leasing became a lucrative business that helped build the railroad systems across the Southeast.

Dry-goods merchant Asa Whitney first promoted the idea for a transcontinental rail line in 1845. He had successfully conducted business in China and came back to America, inspired to shorten the route Americans had to take to get to the Orient. A transcontinental train ride followed by a ship voyage directly east would significantly cut the time a ship's voyage around South America necessitated. Whitney spent six years running promotional

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# Railroad

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ads, petitioning congressmen, and writing editorials about the commercial benefits of a transcontinental rail line.

It was not until 1849, when the Gold Rush began, that widespread interest in a cross-country rail line really ignited. The next year, California joined the Union as the 30th—and free—state. By 1850, there were 9,000 miles of railroad tracks in America.

By 1860, the number jumped to 30,000 miles.

Once the Civil War began in 1861, America's dependence on the speed and capacity of trains was unquestioned. Congressmen believed that besides transporting troops, munitions, and supplies in great numbers, trains could also facilitate trade in Asia, develop the Great Plains, assure California's loyalty to the Union, and quell the Native populations in the West

After much vigorous debate, the Pacific Railroad Act was signed into law in May 1862, authorizing federal subsidies of land and loans to finance construction of a transcontinental railroad. It authorized the Central Pacific Company, moving east from Sacramento, and the Union Pacific Company, moving west from Omaha, to build the lines. A point of connection was not initially determined.

Between 1863 and 1869, these two companies raced to a yet-to-be determined midpoint, encouraged by federal subsidies, inspired by Manifest Destiny—the popular notion that by divine providence, white Christians had a right to spread their form of religion, democracy, and capitalism across the continent—and tempted by money. In the



OAKLAND HISTORY ROOM

**THE SUMPTUOUS INTERIOR** of a Pullman car, circa 1920.

meantime, rail lines were knitting the southern landscape during the turbulence of the Civil War. Grenville Dodge, a skilled railroad engineer and Union Army officer, was directed by General U.S. Grant to build and repair rail lines into the deep South.

Dodge was productive but unconventional. He was quoted in the *NY Tribune* as saying, "I believe the negroes should be freed. They are the mainstay of the South, raising its crops and doing its work while its able-bodied men are fighting the government."

Dodge not only supported emancipation of the slaves, but he put the nearly 1,000 runaway slaves who had gathered in his camp to work on his construction team. He went a step further and armed the former slaves, saying "there is nothing that so weakens the South as to take its negroes."

This caused no small amount of worry among white soldiers because the Civil War was not being fought to free the slaves; the disruption of the slave system and eventual emancipation of slaves were military strategies, not moral imperatives of the Union Army. Nor did whites want African Americans bearing arms for the Union cause, according to historian Stephen Ambrose.

The preservation and sovereignty of the Union was a job for its citizens; at the time

slaves were not only not citizens but considered only three-fifths human!

President Abraham Lincoln called Dodge to Washington to discuss possible locations for the eastern terminus of the transcontinental railroad. Several villages on either side of the Missouri River vied for the privilege. Dodge felt strongly that Omaha, Nebraska, would be an advantageous site for the Union Pacific line given its position in the Platte Valley with 600 miles of open country. Lincoln was convinced.

When the South surrendered in April 1865, ending the Civil War, the transcontinental railroad construction was well underway. According to Ambrose, in his classic work, *Nothing Like It In the World: the Men who Built the Transcontinental Railroad, 1863–1869*, the Union Pacific employed about 300 freed slaves.

## GOVERNMENT INCENTIVES

The Homestead Act encouraged a mass migration of people by providing settlers 160 acres of public land. Homesteaders paid a small filing fee and had to live on the land for five consecutive years to claim ownership. After six months, they could purchase the land from the government for \$1.25 per acre.

By 1900, 80 million acres of public land had been distributed.

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The federal government promised the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific rail companies 640 acres of adjoining land for each mile of track they laid, encouraging each company to work as fast as possible. The rail lines could spread the homesteading settlers. The settlers could, in turn, sustain the railroad as towns cropped up by the tracks.

In 1863, the same year work began on the Transcontinental Railroad, President Lincoln signed into law the 13th Amendment, the Emancipation Proclamation, that provisionally freed the slaves in rebel states. This executive order was an attempt to end the Civil War and to discourage the secession of border states (Missouri, Kentucky and Tennessee).

At the Civil War's end in 1865, all slaves were legally free, and thousands joined the retreating Union military units as they returned north, rebuilding rails as they went. Having been charged with varying degrees of rail construction during their enslavement, many African Americans were literally building the road to freedom. They faced a number of challenges as they moved through unfamiliar territory— illiteracy, homelessness, racial intolerance, and unchecked violence. It became vitally important for them to share information, to create or join communi-

ties with fellow freed people, and to take advantages of the services and training offered by the Freedmen's Bureau, a federal settlement program. This post-war period was very volatile; not only were vast portions of the population migrating, but long-held social mores were being challenged.

As we've seen so many times in American history, one man's "public land" is another man's ancestral home. The American West was not devoid of people, cultures, economies, or religions when the railroad builders bore through the territory. The Indian Wars on the Great Plains, confrontations between the union Army and Native tribes, began in the 1840s and lasted until the 1880s. White settlers were lured west by Manifest Destiny, with the goal of building an American empire. As the Union Pacific line extended westward, Native American populations and lands were overtaken by force, capitalist schemes, and broken treaties. Resistance was met with violence.

Native societies did not yield passively. Sioux, Arapaho, and Cheyenne robbed Union Pacific work crews, attacked military forts, derailed trains, and killed soldiers and workers. Their lives depended on their resistance to this trespass. Native removal was unabashedly aggressive, with numerous mas-

sacres of men, women, children and the elderly. The Army was commissioned to protect the railroad construction at whatever cost, including destroying Native food supplies, shelters, and livestock. General William Tecumseh Sherman was posted on the Plains after the Civil War. He wrote to President Ulysses S. Grant in 1867, "We are not going to let thieving, ragged Indians check and stop the progress" of the railroads.

Buffalo, which had roamed the plains for thousands of years, and had moved in massive herds of tens of thousands, were used for food and pelts by Native tribes. Never overhunted, the animals coexisted with the tribes. Once the heavy traffic of homesteaders flooded into the region, buffalo were killed to feed the rail workers and settlers, but mostly for sport, according to reports from the 1860s. Rail companies advertised "hunting by rail" excursions where a train would slow down so men could shoot rifles from the windows!

The environmental impact was profound. Murdered buffalo lay rotting on the open plains. Native tribes were pushed onto reservations, land that was not suitable for agriculture, while white settlers took the most fertile land. Railroad construction and the towns that sprang up to support and house the rail workers destroyed natural habitats and farming customs, access to livestock and grazing land.

As the Union Pacific line extended west, African American military troops, many of them former slaves, were called into service to guard train construction from vandalism, attacks, and sabotage. They also protected settlers and mail delivery. This tightly-knit, disciplined unit helped make the westward expansion possible.

The Buffalo Soldiers of the Tenth Cavalry, based in Leavenworth, Kansas, fought on two fronts: with the Native Americans, and with white townspeople, rail workers, and military personnel who resented their presence as armed protectors.

Legend has it that they were named "Buffalo Soldiers" by the Native Americans who thought their thick hair resembled the tuft on a buffalo's forehead, but whatever the reason for the name, these men helped "open up" the west. That duty came at a heavy price.



SOUTHERN PACIFIC train pulling into depot at 14th and Franklin streets, circa 1910

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# Railroad

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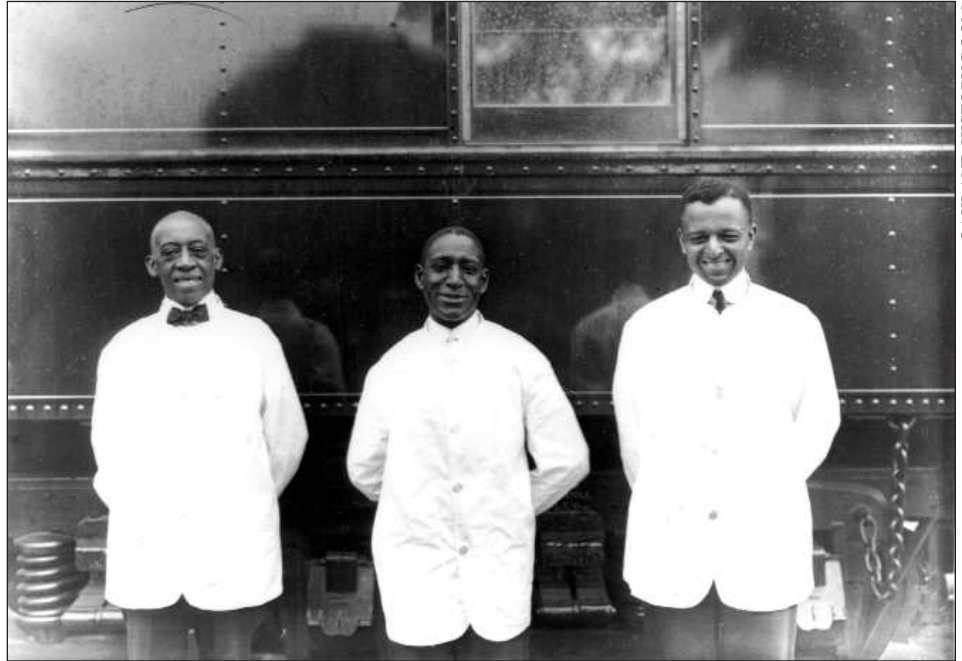
Chinese contributions to this engineering feat is well-documented and significant. At the height of construction, the Central Pacific employed over 12,000 Chinese workers, 90% of its workforce. Chinese lived in derelict, racially segregated quarters, were tasked with the most dangerous, back-breaking jobs like digging tunnels, yet were paid far less than their white counterparts. All along the Central Pacific line, Chinese were attacked, robbed, and sometimes lynched. When whites left the rail line for the gold mines or agricultural jobs, Chinese filled their ranks. Recognizing their unfair treatment and their importance to the operation, the Chinese called a strike in 1867 to demand more pay (they were earning \$30–\$35 per month).

Charles Crocker, head of the Central Pacific, forced their hand by withholding pay and reducing food. Mark Hopkins and E. B. Crocker threatened to break the strike by approaching the Freedmen's Bureau to replace the Chinese with African American strikebreakers who would be hungry for the work. The Chinese grudgingly went back to work.

In 1868, the 14th Amendment granted citizenship to any person born or naturalized in the United States. For African Americans that meant they could be afforded the rights of citizenship—though racial discrimination was and would remain widespread in many parts of the country.

That same year, Congress passed the Burlingame-Seward treaty, increasing Chinese immigration to America for the expressed purpose of building a transcontinental railroad. The Chinese population increased dramatically. In just the first year after its passage, the Chinese population increased by 4,000.

Once the Transcontinental Railroad was completed, Chinese found work on other rail lines like the Western Pacific, while others retreated to cities like San Francisco and Sacramento. Many returned to China. Chinese railroad workers found work in the town of Brooklyn at the Oakland Cotton Manufacturing Company (later the Oakland Jute Manufacturing Company) that made burlap, or gunny, sacks. Few Black rail workers were



**A TRIO** of Pullman porters, seen here in 1890.

on hand for this company, having already scattered for job opportunities elsewhere. The Buffalo Soldiers were transferred to new assignments such as the San Francisco Presidio, Sequoia National Park, and Yosemite.

The first transcontinental railroad was inaugurated May 10, 1869, initiating one of the biggest, quickest population shifts the country had experienced up until that time. The Central Pacific chose Oakland as its Western terminus as it is ideally situated on the western edge of the North American continent. Oakland's first station was at 7th and Broadway.

## THE PULLMAN COMPANY AND ITS PORTERS

In 1859, a few years before construction on the Transcontinental Railroad began, George M. Pullman, a white Chicago-based industrialist, convinced the owners of the Chicago, Alton, St. Louis Railroad to let him convert some of their rail cars into luxury sleeper cars, revolutionizing an industry. The Pullman Sleeping Cars were like moving hotels, allowing passengers to experience fine dining, to board at night and arrive at their destinations, rested and refreshed, in the morning. Knowing that he could pay African Americans less and recognizing the societal norm of African Americans in service positions, Pullman mandated that his porters be African

American, working as cooks, maids, barbers and hairdressers. Initially, they earned no salary, working only for tips. In 1872, a porter could earn only 50 cents a day and work up to 400 hours a month, according to Lawrence Crouchett's *Visions toward Tomorrow: the history of the East Bay Afro-American community, 1852–1977*. The Pullman club car attendants supplemented their incomes by performing more personal valet services such as pressing suits and delivering telegrams to passengers.

Locating the railroad terminal in Oakland drew hundreds of thousands of people to the East Bay in the early years of the 20th century. To be on-call for unscheduled duty, porters were required to live west of Adeline Street, in the area nearest the Wood Street station (built in 1912 by Southern Pacific). While West Oakland was ethnically mixed, the concentration of African Americans there gave the district a distinct identity. For African Americans, West Oakland was the hub, where 3,000 African Americans lived, according to the 1910 census.

To African Americans, trains have been symbols of escape and agency. The African American migration from 1919 to 1940 was a mass movement of people leaving the South for better job and educational opportunities and a more racially tolerant climate in the industrial North and the West. During the

1920s and 1930s, hundreds of thousands of people migrated to California from the South. Most of the Bay Area's African American population came from Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas and Oklahoma.

OAKLAND HISTORY ROOM



**WILLIAM TOWNS**, who was an Oakland resident and Pullman porter, spoke fluent Chinese and Spanish.

Trains in African American culture play a significant role in music, poetry, drama, and the visual arts. Oakland's rich blues heritage is deeply influenced by trains and migration. They run heavily through African American lore and literature, too.

By the 1920s, the Pullman Company was the largest single employer of African American men in the country. In 1925, A. Philip Randolph and C.L. Dellums (uncle to the late Oakland congressman Ron Dellums) founded the country's first Black labor union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. They worked to secure labor rights for men who, a generation earlier, could not expect any employment rights. This union fought for a standard work week, pay equal to that of other unionized workers, work benefits, and a right to collective bargaining. A 1926 study of the porters' working conditions reported that a porter's annual salary, including tips, averaged only about \$1,400 a year. According to the federal government at the time, a family needed to earn \$2,000 annually to remain above the poverty line.

The Pullman Company refused to recognize the porters' union as a bargaining agent. In 1929, to destabilize porter's efforts to be recognized as a union, the Pullman Company

cut their Oakland personnel. What's the significance? Sixty percent of the income earned by Blacks in Oakland came from the rail companies, according to the 1930 edition of the *East Bay Colored Business Directory*. More than half of that income came from the Pullman Company alone, so it held enormous economic sway in town.

It took 12 years for the porters to reach a contract with the Pullman Company. But in 1937, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters were formally recognized as a union. As a result, the Pullman Company increased the wages of porters by 12 percent and reduced the standard monthly schedule to 240 hours, down from 400 hours.

More than any other group of workers, the Sleeping Car Porters developed the Black middle class in Oakland. Compared to the common day laborer, agricultural worker, or domestic help, they earned good wages. With their wages and tips they could afford to buy property and invest in the community. They helped create a merchant class by establishing grocery stores, social clubs, shoe repair shops, beauty parlors, real estate offices, and mortuaries. They became leaders in the community, in social clubs, and churches.

With the steady influx of people and ready availability of jobs, particularly during World War II, the area around the Wood Street terminal had a vibrant energy. National Park Service ranger Betty Reid Soskin recalls in her memoir *Sign My Name to Freedom* that Oakland teemed with people during and after the war. In 1940, the African American population of Oakland was at 8,462. By 1950, it was 47,562. Soskin writes: "When we were growing up, the social levels were not based upon money or degrees. Our fathers were the barbers and redcaps and carpenters, laborers,

waiters—service workers, all—and we were together because of the fact that we were all colored, and that was it. But now, following the migration of lots and lots of other people, there was a professional class that also came in. There were suddenly a lot more professional blacks who were also living here. Suddenly there were doctors and dentists, pharmacists, attorneys, and people to service the incoming black community, and our group became somewhat irrelevant and buried under this new class of people."

The Pullman porters could earn a comparatively good living, but they enjoyed other advantages, too. Their travels brought them in touch with a variety of people, places, and ideas. They were exposed to businessmen, foreign travelers, celebrities (good tippers), and educated people. What they learned they brought back to Oakland. African American papers like the *Amsterdam News*, the *Chicago Defender*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported news of political activism and social and cultural events in other parts of the country. This information fed our local African American community with messages of self-determination, economic opportunities, and cultural achievements.

Their successful labor activism also helped encourage other African Americans to fight for fair pay and better working conditions.

Thomas and Wilma Tramble write in their pictorial history, *The Pullman Porters and West Oakland*, "The porters picked up stock tips and listened to conversations—not meant for them—about how to invest in the stock market. They picked up newspapers and books that passengers left behind. Though working for low wages they learned lessons

See **RAILROAD** on page 10

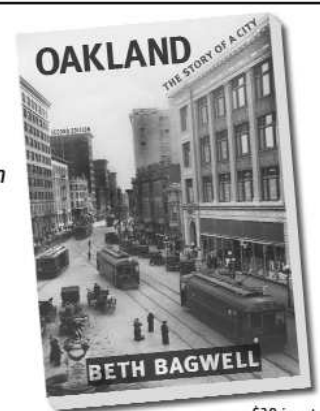
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## Oaklander recorded early Yosemite days in his diary

By Dennis Evanosky

In his valuable diary, Oaklander Robert Eccleston recorded news of the first Europeans setting foot in Yosemite Valley. He was born March 4, 1830, in New York City, and came west for the Gold Rush. He and his brother Edward had signed on to the "Fremont Association," which departed New York on April 3, 1849, for Galveston, Texas, aboard the bark *B. R. Milan*. When they arrived, the "Fremonters" purchased wagons for an overland journey with a U. S. Army expedition assigned to establish a military road from San Antonio to El Paso. They trekked along a less-traveled southern route to California through Texas and New Mexico, which later became "The Lower-Emigrant Road."

The association joined Mountain View resident and future San Francisco Sheriff John Coffee Hays and his experienced party of frontiersmen for the journey from El Paso to California. Eccleston kept a diary of his experiences from the time the "Fremonters" sailed from New York, to December 27, 1849, when they reached California at Fort

Yuma on the western bank of the Colorado River. He then put down his journal for almost ten months.

He picked up his pen again on October 20, 1850, and began recording his experiences at the mines at Agua Fria, about two miles west of Mariposa. His diary reported that when he arrived at Agua Fria, he ventured into Mariposa, where he discovered that "gambling was in full blast" with "more than one victim losing the last cent he possessed."

After prospecting for a week with some success, Eccleston and his friends decided that they would settle in at Agua Fria. He wrote that they were finding about \$200 a day in gold, describing the takings as "crumbs for those unfortunate enough to call themselves miners in 1850." He left an interesting description of two towns that called themselves Agua Fria, both abandoned today.

"The lower or principal town is situated about a quarter mile above the springs on a large flat," Eccleston wrote. Lower Agua Fria had a courthouse and a scattering of stores. Like Mariposa, the town had "amusements" that included monte banks, a billiard table,



UC PRESS

**ROBERT ECCLESTON**

and even a bowling alley. The upper town stood just over a mile away. It contained fewer stores, which, Robert told his diary, "in the way of business are doing nothing."

Things changed a week before Christmas in 1850 when some 300 Native Americans showed up at James D. Savage's trading post at the confluence of the Agua Fria and Mari-

See **ECCLESTON** on page 9

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### Welcome to our new members!

OHA is pleased to welcome these newest members through April 2019:

Michele Argelo, Jim Cook, Faith Darling, John Davis & Family, Bruce Fodiman, Carole Howard, Wendy & Peter Jung, Christie McCarthy, Sheila McCormick & Paul Herzmark, Fred Porta, Taylor Samuelson & Dick Smith, Rasheed Shabazz, Sarah Shaver, Charles Spiegel, Deborah Taylor, Eric Weg & Tatiana Trono, Jane Wellman

### Many thanks to our presenters

For their wonderful presentations, we are enormously grateful to Dennis Evanosky (Gold Rush/150th anniversary of the Transcontinental Railroad program) and to Rasheed Shabazz (Black Panthers program).



## When an Oakland taxi driver “reminded” America

By Tom Debley

Born in the late 19th century in Utah, Henry C. James, Jr. made his way to California, where he was a taxi cab driver in Carmel when the Great Depression hit. A punctual and entrepreneurial man, he invented a clock-driven timer in 1933 that would remind him when he had to pick up his loyal customers. It worked for him, so he figured it might work for others. Thus was born the James Remind-O-Clock, one of which today sits in the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History.

The Remind-O-Clock’s story begins when James moved to Oakland, where, in 1934, he rented “1,500 feet of floor space at 4800 E. 14th Street . . . (to be) occupied by the Remind-O-Clock company for the manufacture of an electric clock designed to produce an alarm or signal at any desired time or interval,” reported the *Oakland Tribune*. The company later moved to 5307 E. 14th St., and still later to 1241 High St.

Despite the Great Depression, James made a success of the business. Within a few decades, Remind-O-Clock was selling devices to taxi companies, motels, hotels and many other businesses around the world.

Indeed—harking back to when small towns still had telephone operators—there is even a record of a model called the Remind-O-Timer that an operator used to give wake-up calls to Fort Lauderdale residents, according to the *South Florida Sun Sentinel*.

And Manhattan-based Belles Receptionists and Answering Service—serving movie stars and other notables—had an antique Remind-O-Timer in its office as recently as 2016. It represented a relic of the days when the company opened 60 years earlier to serve the rich

and famous, according to the *New York Times*.

In fact, a newspaper account almost 40 years after Remind-O-Clock’s founding described it as a “unique product of value to housewife and military commander alike.” The latter reference was to the fact that Remind-O-Clocks even were in use at Strategic Air Command underground air force bases, according to a 1972 item in the *Reno Evening Gazette*.

The Remind-O-Clock perhaps became most famous, however, for its use in the Napa Valley wine industry. That is what landed it in the National Museum of American History.

“The electric clock’s unique feature,” the Museum’s website says, “is its mechanism for allowing multiple alarms for a single event, such as a lab experiment that requires the timing of various steps. The 48 small keys located around the face of the clock could be set to ring a maximum of 48 alarms or ‘reminders’ at one setting.”

In 1937, Georges de Latour of Napa Valley’s Beaulieu Vineyard (BV) was looking for “a highly qualified wine chemist to help improve the stability and quality of BV’s premium wines, which had recently suffered the disastrous effects of microbiological spoilage and volatile acidity,” according to the website. He found his man in enologist Andre Tchelistcheff. Tchelistcheff went on to help “many winemakers improve their operations



TOM DEBLEY

**FACE OF A JAMES “REMIND-O-TIMER,”** a television model owned by the author, from the 1950s. It was made with a socket in the back to plug in a TV, with the clock turning it on and off when the owner desired.

by adopting the practices of sterile filtration, cold fermentation, and attention to yeasts.” And one of his tools? The 1938 Bakelite-housed Remind-O-Clock which he used to time experiments, now in the National Museum of American History’s collection.

Tchelistcheff, according to his 1994 obituary in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, created the first world-class California cabernets at BV after Prohibition and was considered the dean of American winemakers.

So perhaps the next time you sip a good Napa Valley Cabernet, you might tip your glass to Oakland cabbie Henry James, in addition to Andre Tchelistcheff. ■

## Walking tours start July 6!

By Neil Heyden

Experience the best of historic Oakland architecture and culture every Saturday and Sunday throughout July and August on our fun and informative walking tours.

**Old favorites:** Don’t miss Phil Bellman’s Borax Smith; Dennis Evanosky’s Mountain View Cemetery; and Betty Marvin and Pamela Magnuson-Peddle’s Fruitvale.

### Familiar folks bringing us to new places:

Jon Rusch on downtown mid-20th century gems and Richard Orlando’s Mills College botanical treasure hunt.

**And new views from new faces:** Liam O’Donoghue’s Long Lost Oakland and a sports tour of North Oakland by Paul Brekke-Miesner.

We’ll have complete listings at the end of May at [www.oaklandheritage.org](http://www.oaklandheritage.org). Sign up for a bunch and see you there! ■



OAKLAND HISTORY ROOM

**LEARN** about Brooklyn neighborhood on our walking tour this summer.



## A supportive neighbor, an awakening auditorium, an athletic waterfront

By Naomi Schiff

OHA welcomes your participation in discussions and advocacy about preservation in Oakland. Here are some recent updates.

■ **Key System Building gets a neighbor and new support:** The structural steel is up, and 1100 Broadway is shrouded with scaffolding. After almost 30 years, this important historic building in the Downtown National Register District is edging away from seismic damage incurred in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, and toward restoration. The project reuses and strengthens the historic building. About a third of the space in the new project will be leased to the University of California Office of the President, which has adjacent headquarters on Franklin Street.

■ **Uncertainty at Oakland Auditorium:** After selection of its proposal to reuse the Henry J. Kaiser Convention Center and Calvin Simmons Theater, Orton Development entered into an 18-month Exclusive Negotiating Agreement with the city, and went through extensive rounds of revision and discussion with the State Historic Preservation Office and National Park Service. How extensive could repurposing in the arena be, and how best to handle the building's exterior? Those discussions resulted in a plan to reuse the arena's floor area, create a floor of usable space in the basement, and not to interpose any new floors or tall structures in the interior, but to reopen some long-shut skylights. The plans reuse the Calvin Simmons Theater without major change, other than to furnish it with some-

what fewer seats and greater flexibility for audience sizes, and to improve backstage areas, accessibility, and public circulation. The plan also puts a long platform outside, along the building at the foot of the niches, to be used as an informal public seating area with views of Lake Merritt as well as the Stirling Calder-sculpted niches. However, at a recent public meeting, some arts advocates expressed doubts that the Orton project would adequately serve the arts community, and suggested reopening the Request for Proposals. A Planning Commission hearing on April 3 and subsequent action will provide the next chapter. OHA is commenting that the historic preservation aspects are satisfactorily resolved, and that discussion of community benefits and arts leasing should be pursued as a separate discussion item.

■ **Oakland A's explore retaining historic PG&E building near Howard Terminal:** Following discussions with OHA, the Ath-



NAOMI SCHIFF

**KEY SYSTEM BUILDING**, at right, completed in 1911 as Security Bank and Trust, is shrouded in scaffolding as it undergoes restoration. The x-braced new highrise provides new support and seismic resistance to its elderly neighbor.

letics have come up with an alternative to be studied as part of the environmental impact report, which would reuse an historic power-generating facility near their proposed stadium site.

Perhaps the attractive brick structure could be home to a brewpub, restaurant, outdoor seating, or the like, and serve baseball fans along with taste of waterfront history?

In the meantime, questions have arisen about an aerial gondola system proposed to get fans from 12th Street BART station to the stadium; could a terminus and support tower be built that would avoid intrusion upon historic Old Oakland, Washington Street and Swan's?

One possibility could be to place such a structure at the Oakland Convention Center rather than on 10th Street. ■

### Nominate someone for a Partners in Preservation award!

Have you seen a wonderful house rehabilitation? An interesting re-use of a commercial building? A transformation of an industrial building? Each year, the Oakland Heritage Alliance honors individuals, organizations, projects, and programs whose work demonstrates a commitment to excellence in historic preservation. In doing so, we hope to inspire others to take action to preserve, protect, and promote Oakland's historic, natural, and cultural resources.

To be eligible, projects must have been completed within the last five years and be within the geographical boundaries of Oak-

ELLIOTT MYLES



**OWNERS OF** historic Heinold's at Jack London Square won a PIP award recently.

land. Application deadline is July 1, 2019. You can find the application form at our website, [oaklandheritage.org](http://oaklandheritage.org). ■





## Eccleston

*Continued from page 6*

posa creeks. Eccleston noticed that all the Native Americans working with the miners had suddenly disappeared. When the Native Americans left the trading post, Savage assembled a party of men to track them.

The search party found the Native Americans' camp, abandoned but for two women with a dead child. When Savage came upon the Native Americans the next day, their chief, whom Eccleston called "Baptiste" in his diary, told Savage from a distance that the tribes had assembled to make war.

Historians Warren A. Beck and Ynez D. Hasse called the ensuing struggle "the most famed Indian encounter with miners in the southern Sierra region." They tell us that "to a certain extent, the story of this clash between Indian and white is the saga of James D. Savage, one of the most remarkable of the many characters of the Gold Rush era," and describe him as "a tall blue-eyed blonde who always wore red shirts to better



ARTHUR CLARENCE PILLSBURY

**THIS 1925 PHOTOGRAPH** of "Old Inspiration Point" shows the view the first Europeans had of Yosemite Valley. That day, however, it was filled with snow.

impress the Indians." Savage had participated in the Bear Flag Revolt and worked for a time for John Sutter. One story is that Savage once "excited San Franciscans by hauling a barrel of gold dust through a hotel lobby."

On March 19, 1851, six tribes agreed to stop fighting. However, the Ahwahneechee and Chowchillas absented themselves from the negotiations. Savage's men, now organized as the Mariposa Battalion, moved against the Ahwahneechee (called

"Yosemites" by battalion members) and "discovered" the valley on March 27. Scholars rely on Eccleston's diary to ascertain this date. However, he was not with the soldiers.

We do know that Lafayette H. Bunnell was among the party. Bunnell later described what he saw in *Discovery of the Yosemite and the Indian War of 1851 Which Led to That Event*. "A short time after we left the Indians we suddenly came in full view of the valley in which was the village, or rather the encampments, of the Yosemites," Bunnell wrote. "The immensity of rock I had seen in my vision on the Old Bear Valley trail was here presented to my astonished gaze. My awe was increased by this nearer view. The face of the immense cliff was shadowed by the declining sun; its outlines only had been seen at a distance." That "immense cliff" is today's El Capitan. The battalion captured the Ahwahneechee at Tenaija Lake on May 22, forcing them to accept reservation life.

After the war, Eccleston continued to mine for gold at Agua Fria. He next settled in Forbestown, just west of Chico, and raised cattle. There he married Emily Josephine Young, who had come west with her family at the age of nine.

In 1900, the Ecclestons moved to Rio Vista Avenue in Oakland, where Robert died Feb. 1, 1911. His four sons James, Edward, Charles, and Louis carried his casket to its final resting place on the hill in Mountain View Cemetery's Plot 48. James later served as president of Oakland Bank. After her husband's death, Emily moved to Napa, where she died on June 3, 1924. She rests next to Robert at Mountain View. ■

## Piedmont Avenue's Yosemite connection

*By Dennis Evanosky*

Robert Eccleston was not the only person connected to Yosemite who lived in today's Piedmont Avenue neighborhood (see article above). He and his family lived on Rio Vista Avenue, while Thomas Hill, famous for his Yosemite paintings, lived just up the street at Entrada Way.

England-born Hill kept an artist's studio on the grounds of Yosemite's Wawona Hotel, which now holds exhibits on Hill and other Yosemite painters. His painting "View of the Yosemite Valley" was chosen by President Barack Obama to be the backdrop at the head table for his inaugural luncheon in 2009. If you've visited the train museum in Sacramento, the enormous 8x12 foot painting "The Driving of the Last Spike" on display there is Hill's work.

With these two connections to the famed valley, it is likely no accident that developers named the street just one block from the Eccleston home, "Yosemite Avenue."

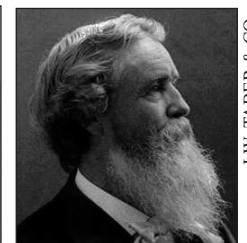
Eccleston and Hill have something else in common: they both rest just up Piedmont Avenue in Mountain View Cemetery. ■

HILL FAMILY



**THOMAS HILL** lived in this house near today's Entrada Way off Piedmont Avenue.

COURTESY, SIERRA NEVADA CHRONICLES



I.W. TABER & CO.

**THOMAS HILL**, above, painted this oil painting named "Piute Indians in Yosemite Valley" in 1867. It is held in a private collection.



# Historically-rated homes demolished and gutted without permits

By Daniel Levy

As an Oakland native who grew up in a historic home, I learned to appreciate the architecture that helps define Oakland. I understand the quirks of non-level floors, closet doors that take extra effort to shut, and a “closed floor plan.” Though there is a lot of necessary construction taking place in Oakland, the boom has caused some developers to focus on quickly flipping homes instead of respecting them and following the approved plans they submitted to the planning department. In February, one homeowner illegally demolished a home in Eastlake and another gutted a Victorian without permission.

While OHA reviews most projects affecting historic properties, it is difficult for us to track how these projects progress in the field. This is where we need your help, to let us know if you see illegal demolition in your neighborhood. We have had some successes, like 1812 10th Avenue where historic windows were removed and then required to be restored, but others inevitably slip by. In all of these cases, the plans looked inert, but they went off the rails after that.

I wanted to share with you the story behind the two projects I mentioned above. While some may call my work to reorient these projects NIMBYism, I disagree because the developers deceived the public. The developers submitted plans which were reviewed and signed off on by the public and the city: we had a project that everyone agreed should be built. The developers then ignored those plans and did something different. If developers ignore the city process, they ignore the voices of Oaklanders. I want this to stop, and I want you all to let us know if you see this happening.

## Case Study #1: 254 Athol

In early January, I was taking my dog Lulu for a walk and strolled by 254 Athol Ave. in the Eastlake Neighborhood, where I live. This home is a contributing structure to the Cleveland Heights Area of Secondary Importance, making it a historic properly with an information file at the Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey. The home was up on stilts in what looked like a foundation replacement. I was happy to see the old house getting some love to preserve it for the next 100 years. However, as I continued walking by on different days, I noticed something strange. The house was disappearing. One week, the back half was gone, and the next, the entire house had disappeared. It was shocking. Why would someone demolish a house this way?

I called the Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey and we found that the permit description could not account for the activities happening at 254 Athol. The language of the permits mentioned wanting to “convert” the duplex into a single family home, perform an “interior remodel,” and “re-roofing.” There was no mention of demolition.

After I shared the photos above with city staff and called zoning compliance, the city issued a stop work order. Thanks to city staff, the project has now been re-noticed with new plans on which OHA has commented. We aren’t sure what will happen, but we were happy to send the message to the developer that demolishing a historic home without full disclosure is not acceptable.

**Case Study #2: 863 Willow:** Just after I thought the dust had settled around 254 Athol, I opened up SFGate.com and saw an article, “Before and after: The dramatic transformation of a dilapidated West Oakland Victorian.” It described the renovation of an 1890s Victorian in the Oakland Point Area of Primary Importance. The article seemed to contradict itself by mentioning “a complete gut job” in one sentence and the owner wanting “to do this house justice” in another. I



BOTH: DANIEL LEVY

**254 ATHOL:** A nightview on Jan. 8, 2019, showing the house with the entire rear demolished, leaving just a shell in front, at left, and a photo from Feb. 1, showing the original structure demolished (and rebuilt anew) with only one small piece remaining attached to the power lines.

contacted the city, who had also received many phone calls regarding this project.

Similar to 254 Athol, the permits stated: “existing historic trim, moldings, and historic design elements shall be retained.” The city, as a result, has not completed its final sign off on the permits leaving the project in limbo, but nonetheless, the house has been sold for a whopping \$1.18M. It was purchased for \$460K just over a year earlier. The new owners will have to work with the city to resolve the permitting issues. Hopefully they will restore the exterior.

At OHA we always try to keep our eyes on what goes on in the city and to represent our members’ voices. By standing up to illegal practices we see, we can discourage future occurrences. If you see something suspicious happening to a historic structure, let us know at (510)763-9218 or info@oaklandheritage.org. Please also call Code Enforcement, (510) 238-3381. *We need you!* ■

## Railroad

*Continued from page 5*

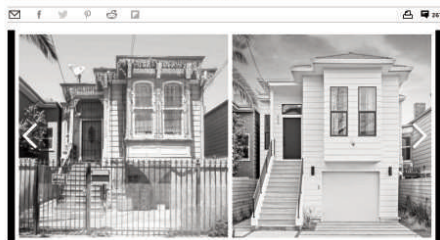
of how whites became successful. Most important, they realized the value of combining the principles of acquiring education and saving money.”

The Transcontinental Railroad mobilized the American population quicker than any other means of transportation available at the time. And while its construction was contentious, back-breaking, and genocidal, it did expand the country and change the fortunes of countless people in America and in Oakland. ■

SF GATE

### Before and after: The dramatic transformation of a dilapidated West Oakland Victorian

By Amy Grant, SFGATE Updated 2:28 pm PST, Monday, February 11, 2019



**AN ARTICLE** that raised a lot of hackles, from *SF Gate* on Feb. 11, 2019.



## More city leadership is needed for preservation

By Tom Debley, *President*

In early April, the Oakland Planning Commission approved redevelopment plans for the Oakland Civic, the historic Oakland Municipal Auditorium most recently called the Henry J. Kaiser Convention Center. This is a major step forward in hoped-for reuse of this grand public space, a historic landmark dedicated in 1915 and shuttered in 2006 when the city deemed it too expensive to operate. Now, as the city negotiates with a private developer, hope remains alive. OHA most recently recommended approval of the project, satisfied that the architectural and construction plan meets the requirements of historic preservation.

Yet, of course, approval still must be voted by the City Council, and there is important dialogue continuing over how to best meet the needs of Oakland arts groups and nonprofits that are intended users for some of the space. As one speaker told the planning commission, their aspirations are embodied on the original words carved in the façade: “AUDITORIUM OF THE CITY OF OAKLAND DEDICATED BY THE CITIZENS TO THE INTELLECTUAL AND INDUSTRIAL PROGRESS OF THE PEOPLE.”

Meanwhile, I think it is time to be thinking about OHA’s continuing role in efforts to

reopen spaces like the Oakland Civic—both in celebrating progress and rededicating ourselves to the work needing to be done.

One reason for messages we delivered to the planning commission was the need to get moving so reconstruction can be completed before the structure deteriorates any further.

As we said in our letter to the commission, “It is time to remedy the decades of deferred maintenance. Bringing it back to life as soon as possible will benefit the whole city. We note that there has already been some deterioration and damage to the facility.”

We emphasized also that it is time the city begins to demonstrate it can better protect our city-owned historic assets, saying, “Oakland does not have proven ability to secure vacant facilities. During its period of under-use, the Fox Oakland Theater suffered from leaks and from fires. The Miller Library burned down entirely.” The Fox is a historic landmark, as was the Miller Library, one of our glorious Carnegie libraries dating from the early 20th century. It is now lost forever.

Now, as we have pointed out previously, two other important city-owned historic landmarks are threatened—with no city leaders stepping up to protect them in any significant way. One is the J. Mora Moss Cottage in

Mosswood Park. The other is our beloved Dunsmuir Hellman House.

The 1864 designed Moss Cottage, by architect Stephen H. Miller, was described by Paul Duchscherer in his 2001 book *Victorian Glory in San Francisco and the Bay Area* as possibly the finest example of a Gothic Revival house still standing in California. Yet today, despite decades of public park use through most of the 20th century, the city has all but abandoned it for use as a graffitied storage shed with shattered windows that looks more like a dumping ground than a historic landmark on the National Register of Historic Places. It is at extreme risk.

Likewise, while still in public use, the Dunsmuir Hellman House in the foothills is falling into disrepair. Again, it is a significant embarrassment to city leadership. In the early 1960s, the city bought the entire estate. In 1971, a nonprofit organization was created to raise money and oversee the preservation and beautiful restoration of the house, which was designated a National Historic Site by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

In 2010, however, the city became the sole proprietor of the estate and a poor steward of this landmark. It has significantly deteriorated since, with obvious rotting wood and fading and cracking paint.

Civic leaders must do more to protect historic assets, following through on the original public effort that preserved these buildings and their long history of community use. ■

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 PRODUCTION: Erika Mailman

MISSION STATEMENT: OHA is a nonprofit membership organization which advocates the protection, preservation and revitalization of Oakland’s architectural, historic, cultural and natural resources through publications, education, and direct action.

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## The Lake Merritt Monster Got A Bake Sale

By Kathleen Leles DiGiovanni

Readers of this space will recall that in the Summer 2012 newsletter I wrote about Oakland's beloved Lake Merritt Monster, its history, its sadly deteriorated condition, and the prospect that it might be broken up and carted away. Seriously, the Monster needed a bake sale. And that's what has happened.

Yes, the Lake Merritt Monster is being restored. Work began over the winter and will be complete by the time you read this. A Grand Re-Opening is in the works, in conjunction with an Oakland Municipal Band concert, to be held Sunday, July 28.

For a full picture, see our Summer 2012 issue. But here's a little background to the story. The Lake Merritt Monster has been at home in Lakeside Park since the early 1950s. It is the work of Bob Winston, who was not a playground designer at all, but was instead a jewelry designer and artist.

Around 1950, Oakland Parks Superintendent William Penn Mott saw a piece of Winston's free-form jewelry and was intrigued by the design. He approached Winston and asked if he could make something like that, only bigger. Much bigger. Mott commissioned Winston to create something that would evoke for urban children the experience of climbing on an old tree or on eroded rocks. The caption of a Jan. 19, 1958, *Oakland Tribune* photo of the Monster described it as "modern play equipment for modern children" and the "only one of its kind in the USA, and probably in the Universe."

By 2012 the Monster was marred with tags and sections of broken concrete. At that time Oakland Public Works staff noted that its coating and the sand below it contained considerably more than the allowable amount of lead, complicating any effort at restoration.

Not much happened for a couple of years. But in early 2015 Lake Merritt residents and Breakfast Club members Susan Casentini and Kyle Milligan decided to make the Monster their project. They started with a Facebook page, the Mid-Century Monster Fan Club. It quickly attracted a slew of likes and followers, 1,500 in the first month alone. OHA and the Lake Merritt Breakfast Club have supported the restoration from the start. Planning, fundraising, and organizing the project took until 2018.

The Monster's restoration has a price tag of about \$50,000, not including the \$35,000 or so that the city kicked in for lead abatement at the site. Funders for the project include developer Phil Tagami, the Lake Merritt Breakfast Club Charitable Foundation, and individual donors. In-kind services were provided by Peter Birkholz of Page & Turnbull, who donated his work to write the rehabilitation specifications, and Western Specialty Contractors.

What has been involved? At a February meeting of the Lake Merritt Breakfast Club, Peter Birkholz, who is also president of the Oakland Landmarks Advisory Board, detailed the restoration process. First the exposed steel rebar had to be cleaned and



KATHLEEN DIGIOVANNI

### THE LAKE MERRITT MONSTER

coated with a non-corrosive primer. Then the missing sections of wire mesh were replaced, keeping as much of the original material as possible, and after that fresh concrete was applied to the patched spots, making sure the repaired areas look exactly the same as the original. The original chartreuse color was integrated into the Monster's plaster coat but because that kind of finish is prone to crack and admit water, the New, Improved Monster has been painted with an elastomeric paint that expands and contracts with the weather. The color is "Sour Face," a shade that duplicates the original. Once restoration is complete, the old, lead-infused sand will be carted away and replaced with fresh beach sand.

Birkholz has also proposed Oakland landmark status for the Monster. He suggested that it merits nomination to the National Register of Historic places, too, based on William Penn Mott's significance in the parks movement, locally, statewide, and nationally; on Bob Winston's importance to the field of mid-century design; and for the Monster itself as an iconic example of design in the modern parks movement. ■