



LEFT: AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, SAN FRANCISCO'S BARBARY COAST WAS HOME TO BARROOMS, BROTHELS, AND BAD BEHAVIOR. RIGHT: DANCE HALLS, LIKE SPIDER KELLY'S, RAGED ALL NIGHT LONG.

## SAN FRANCISCO SCANDALS

The city's unseemly (but interesting) history.

BY TALIA SALEM AND LORRAINE SANDERS

Today's San Francisco conjures up images of picture-perfect Victorians, steamed Dungeness crab sampled along the Wharf, glittering views of the Bay, and buttoned-up tech executives; but behind the glossy facade and cosmopolitan swagger awaits a deliciously dramatic history laced with eccentric characters, shady ladies, lawlessness, controversy, and utter scandal. From its earliest days as a hub for Gold Rush-era miners either setting out to make their fortune or—as was often the case—in the process of squandering what little they had on booze and carnal diversions, San Francisco has beckoned adventurers with the promise of riches and success. At the same time, she has been just as swift to take both away.

Seized unceremoniously in 1846 as part of the U.S. spoils at the end of the brief Mexican War fought largely for control of Texas, San Francisco came to be when an unopposed U.S. army detachment planted a flag in what would come to be known as Portsmouth Square, which exists today as a small public park in Chinatown. Within three years, the city exploded to become a hub for loose living and gilded dreams, thanks to the 1848 discovery of a little something called gold.

Venture along the city blocks of Chinatown and the Financial district today and you'll find high-rise buildings towering over shop-lined streets. But for the roughly 50 years spanning the time between gold's discovery and the devastating 1906 earthquake, this area was a veritable hotbed of iniquity. Nicknamed the Barbary Coast after a pirate-plagued coastal region in North Africa, the locale quickly became known as America's most infamous pleasure center. A ramshackle, often-violent red-light district born of the restless and overwhelmingly male Gold Rush-era population, the streets were riddled with cheap brothels, rowdy gambling halls, and drinking establishments. In 1869, the *San Francisco Call* newspaper described the area: "In the daytime it is dull and unattractive, seeming but a cesspool of rottenness, the air is impregnated with smells more pungent than polite; but when night [falls], the Coast brightens into life, and becomes a wild carnival of crime."

In Chinatown proper, debauchery reigned. From the 1850s to the 1920s, gangs ruled the community—subjecting it to frequent outbreaks of violence between disputing factions—while opium dens and whorehouses flourished in a cramped underbelly seemingly out of reach from San Francisco's law enforcement. The stretch of Chinatown that is



now scenic, tourist-friendly Waverly Place was home to around 100 houses of prostitution alone. The most notable of these was the luxurious bordello of the beautiful and enigmatic Chinese madam Ah Toy, remembered for her reported role importing fellow countrywomen to join ranks with her in the world's oldest profession.

The area was also known for its unconventional recruiting techniques visited upon unsuspecting sailors. During the latter half of the 19th century, San Francisco sailors were often less than enthusiastic when leaving the joys of land life for pitiful ship wages. To solve the staffing issue, ship captains sought help from recruiters known as crimpers. The most famous of these was James "Shanghai" Kelly, a bar owner whose customers were more likely to awaken from a drug-induced slumber aboard a vessel bound for Shanghai than they were to order a second round. Kelly has been credited with his creative approach to the human heist, including the use of trap doors, opium-laced cigars, knockout cocktails, and even fake birthday celebrations staged to lure potential targets. Today, imbibers can raise a glass to Kelly's legend at the popular Polk Street bar Shanghai Kelly's, whose sign bears a caricature of the bearded Irishman holding his trademark wooden club.

The drama of the city's early decades wasn't confined to the Barbary Coast. Throughout city history, leaders and socialites have proven equally adept at courting scandal in the City by the Bay. For proof, we need look into the past of one of San Francisco's most vaunted institutions, the de Young museum in Golden Gate Park. In 1865, brothers Charles and Michael de Young founded the *Daily Dramatic Chronicle*, whose modern day incarnation, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, remains in print. The *Chronicle* earned its readership, in large part, because of the provocative editorials penned by senior editor Charles de Young. In one such editorial, Charles de Young bitterly attacked minister and mayoral candidate Isaac Kallloch. When the minister responded with what we'll simply describe as a response unfitting of his chosen career, de Young retaliated by shooting the minister in the leg. The feud continued until Kallloch was elected mayor in 1880, and his revenge-seeking son shot the offending editor to death in his office.

Grieving the loss of his brother, Michael de Young picked up the torch and began writing subversive editorials of his own. One offended local sugar magnate Adolph Spreckels so greatly that the businessman broke into the editor's office and started shooting. Michael de Young survived the attack, and Spreckles escaped jail time through a clever insanity plea. Later, de Young donated \$75,000—a huge sum at the time—to build a new museum in Golden Gate Park. Ironically enough, the wife of Michael de Young's assailant, Alma Spreckles, would go on to found the Legion of Honor, which officially put an end to the founders' rivalry when it merged with the de Young museum in 1972 to form the Fine Art Museums of San Francisco.

Other famous residents from San Francisco history are remembered for leading highly eccentric lives. One was Lillie Hitchcock Coit, the wealthy benefactress who gifted the city with one of its most-visited monuments: Coit Tower. Raised by wealthy Southerners in San Francisco, Lillie Hitchcock was no ordinary member of society's elite. A fascination with firefighters reportedly started after an eight-year-old Hitchcock was rescued from a blaze. Her affection lasted a lifetime. She was rumored to have hastily departed a wedding rehearsal, bridesmaid dress and all, to chase a fire truck and was later designated an honorary member of local fire station, the Knickerbocker Five. Instead of enjoying ladylike pursuits, Hitchcock was known to cavort with firemen, play poker, don trousers, and smoke cigars. After some 15 failed engagements, Hitchcock eventually married the wealthy Howard Coit, but the society marriage was far from a happy one. The couple eventually moved into separate homes. When Howard Coit died in 1885, his widow was free to enjoy her fortune. She did so by living outlandishly for a woman of the times and was known to wash her hair with champagne, drink excessively, gamble freely, and frequent questionable establishments in the Barbary Coast.

In the end, what brought the most scandalous chapter in San Francisco history to a close was neither a moral shift nor increased law enforcement. On April 18, 1906, an earthquake rocked the city during the early morning hours with a force equivalent, as Rand Richards says in *Historic San Francisco*, to 15 million tons of TNT. In the fire that followed, large swathes of the city were completely destroyed. As the city rebuilt in the quake's aftermath, the Barbary Coast was never the same. By 1914, a series of laws prohibiting red-light district activities drove final nails into the region's rowdy coffin.

Contemporary San Francisco may no longer be America's Sin City (we'll leave that distinction to Las Vegas), but out of its wild past a legacy of freedom, nonconformity, and adventurousness of spirit was born—characteristics still marking the city today.