

Henry Infant

Henry Infant, a barber at 7th and Mission for 54 years, talks about his trade and his life in an interview conducted Feb. 3, 1978

Neighborhood
ORAL
HISTORY PROJECT

HENRY Infant was one of 165 city residents of 65 neighborhoods interviewed for San Francisco Study Center's 1978 Neighborhood Oral History Project. The project was conducted under contract with CETA, the federal Comprehensive Education and Training Act, a productive government stimulus effort of more than 30 years ago.

Study Center dispatched 17 interviewers and three photographers to cover that year's important neighborhood events and interview people who make each neighborhood unique.

Infant, born in Castellace, Italy, in 1885, landed in New York City in 1900 and moved to San Francisco with his wife in 1923. Within a year, he began work at Gordon Barber Shop at 106 Seventh St. Infant was interviewed by Oral History Project staffer Eduard Beggs, founder of Huckleberry's for Runaways.

Mr. Infant, you've been cutting hair since . . . ?

I started to learn the [barber] trade in 1898 and I've been doing that ever since. I've been in this shop 54 years this May — that's hard to believe, it's peculiar. Yes, sir, hair styles have changed considerably, [especially] in the last seven or eight years. I don't agree with men running around with ponytails. I don't want you to misunderstand me — I respect their rights, but still I do not approve of their looks.

In the old days, they used to put oil in your hair. What do you use — Vitalis? Talc?

Most people don't know the reason us regular barbers use talcum. By nature, your skin is rather damp, so to speak, and loose hairs stick to your skin. Talcum eliminates a lot of unnecessary trouble or discomfort. Of course, in the last 15-20 years we've been having the vacuum, but the talcum facilitates the suction to draw this loose hair.

And you wash hair?

Shampoos aren't too frequent anymore. All the homes nowadays have a shower or tub, whereas in the olden days many homes didn't have such luxuries, and, in fact, in the big cities there were public bath houses. Shaves? They seem to be mostly a thing of the past.

You must like this location, having stayed 54 years.

The conditions [in this neighborhood] were entirely different in 1924 than today. Very, very peaceful and not too many people. No violence at all. To be precise, the beginning of the [violence] was right after the Second World War.

All the buildings you see around here (the Main Post Office and small tourist hotels) were all here when I came here. But the population has grown considerably. The Greyhound Bus [Terminal] made a big difference — increased traffic here at least 1,000%. As you understand, traffic or transportation when it's concentrated in certain places is bound to bring all sorts of people — rich, poor, young, old — mendicants and good and bad.

SOUTHSIDE

What's the secret of having been here so long?

My philosophy is I come in contact with people and I don't get upset quickly and I'm very tolerant. If anybody hurts me through his talking, maybe he is not intelligent or is excitable, but I tolerate him. No sir, I've been fortunate and never experienced violence in my shop. Never been robbed.

You're 93. Do you have any relatives around?

Sons and daughters of my brother and sister, in Pennsylvania and Ohio, and a nephew and niece in Los Angeles. I live by myself, since my wife died nine years ago. That was hard for me — she was the most wonderful woman in the world to me. And losin' her I lost everything in the world. I feel just as bad now as the night when she died. But I try to do my best. It's something we'll all have to go through.

When you get home tonight, what will you eat for dinner?

Tonight I'm going to have a cheese omelet. To my taste, I'm a pretty good cook and do know how to prepare a good meal. You see, I don't buy any cheap stuff, and I do a lot of vegetables, although I eat meat, fish, chicken, beans, and I drink seven ounces of wine every night. I've been doin' that for almost 60 years and don't drink at any other time.

When you're not working?

Sundays, I shower, shave, eat breakfast, get dressed, do a little cleaning, then go to Mass at St. Paul's at 29th and Church. Then I go from there to the cemetery — that's one of the things I don't miss, putting fresh flowers on my wife's grave. Then I do my food shopping, go home and cook dinner. About 6 o'clock, I'm at Artichoke Joe's in San Bruno to play poker.

You go there Sunday nights?

I go Thursdays and Sundays. One night I won \$359, the most I ever won, and one night I lost \$107, the most I ever lost. I have a system. In playing poker you have to use a lot of judgment. You have to almost read the other guy's mind, and when the other guy beats me, it's because I misjudged for that particular time. Once in a while I bluff. I got caught several times. But I got my system — when I do win, I win nice, and when I lose, I don't lose much.

You said that next year you'll have been a barber for 79 years.

I don't think there's anyone else [I know] who's worked 79 years doing nothing but just barber. That's a heck of a long time. ■

Henry Infant died June 3, 1982, in San Mateo County. The Gordon Barber Shop site has gone through many incarnations. Today it is the Sidebar wine tavern and restaurant, the ground floor of the Good Hotel.

This is the first of a series of excerpts from Oral History Project interviews that Central City Extra will publish.

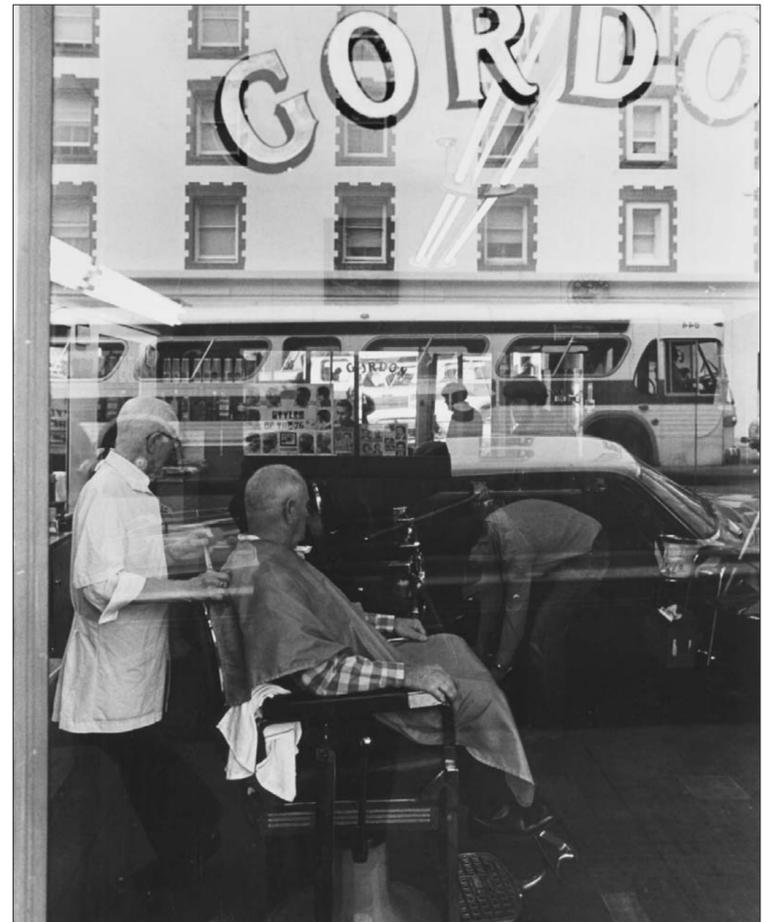


PHOTO BY BILL CARLSON

Feds crackdown leaves Sanctuary as TL's last pot shop

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The crackdown has outraged Assemblyman Tom Ammiano who authored a bill that failed to legalize recreation marijuana and state Sen. Mark Leno. In an Oct. 19 statement, they demanded the federal government end the attack on pot dispensaries.

"Instead of supporting state efforts to effectively regulate medical marijuana in accordance with Prop 215, the Obama administration seems committed to recriminalizing it," Ammiano said.

In a recent December meeting with the U.S. attorney, Ammiano said he cleared the air, espe-

cially about the San Francisco dispensaries that were in complete compliance with local and state regulations. Yet, there remains tension between state and federal regulations, he said.

"I appreciate her [Haag's] concerns and the challenges that we face," he wrote in an email to The Extra. "And it is clear that our federal representatives need to weigh in to protect the rights of California patients. Moving forward, my priority is to end this unjust federal enforcement and create effective statewide regulation for medical marijuana to reaffirm our state's rights."

Supervisor Jane Kim is equally concerned. There were 13 pot clubs in District 6 as of Dec. 1, according to the Department of Public Health. But only Sanctuary is alive in the Tenderloin. In an email to The Extra Dec. 15, Kim wrote:

"Our office has been working closely with medical marijuana small businesses to address these ongoing federal actions, and I joined my colleagues on the Board of Supervisors in passing a resolution condemning the federal crackdown on MCD's. We are very cognizant of the impact that neighborhood closures are having on patients in District 6, particularly those struggling with HIV/AIDS."

The scare has caused an estimated 2,500 dispensary employees statewide to lose their jobs since late September, 50 in San Francisco, a Nov. 25 Chronicle story said, quoting figures from the United Food and Commercial Workers' national medical cannabis division.

Three of San Francisco's 26 dispensaries closed recently: Med Thrive Co-op, 1933 Mission St., Nov. 12; Mr. Nice Guy, 174 Valencia St.; and The Divinity Tree, 958 Geary St., Nov. 11. With the shuttering four years ago of Tariq Alazraie's Mason Street dispensary because the building owner, Skyline Realty,

objected to the license, that leaves Sanctuary the last Tenderloin dispensary standing.

When Welch got a copy of Haag's letter from the landlord Nov. 28, he desperately reached out for help.

"I have written Haag, called her and her staff and emailed her," Welch says, "and she hasn't answered."

He called District Attorney George Gascon's office and City Attorney Dennis Herrera's. He wrote the White House and called Rep. Nancy Pelosi.

None replied, he said, adding that he was hospitalized within days and could have missed a communication.

Pelosi had written Welch just after his dispensary was licensed in March 2005, saying she supports medical marijuana. Moreover, she said she was "a strong supporter" of a House bill then called The States' Right to Medicinal Marijuana Act, which would have prevented "federal interference with state laws on the use of medical marijuana." But it failed.

Her view differs slightly from then President-elect Obama's support in late November 2008. He favored states legalizing the use of medical marijuana, but said it should be regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. He had earlier said he was against the Justice Department prosecuting pot users.

A Pelosi aide in Washington told The Extra she is "very pro-medicinal marijuana and hasn't changed her position."

A damning point in Haag's letter says the dispensary is subject to "enhanced penalties" because it operates "within a prohibited distance of a playground." Tenderloin Children's Playground on Ellis Street. The south end of Sanctuary's building is near the playground's north side, an apparent city law violation. The Board of Supervisors adopted the nation's first-

ever comprehensive pot club regulations, introduced in April 2005 and passed in November. It banned new clubs operating within 1,000 feet of a school or community center. Sanctuary opened March 2005 and Welch says he was "grandfathered in."

Welch said his lawyer, Patrick Goggin, has advised that this is a land issue, but Welch isn't clear what the implications are.

Even so, Welch is hoping his history as a model owner can save Sanctuary at its present location.

He has never had a complaint since opening, he says, and he's sensitive to the spirit of the law. The storefront is tastefully understated on the street behind a wrought iron gate that has a small plaque listing its three awards. One is the Harvey Milk Club's award for HIV/AIDS compassion.

Among Sanctuary's philanthropic projects over the years have been finding housing for a speech-impaired mom with four kids after her husband committed suicide and making 400 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches twice a week to deliver to children with families in shelters. It has bought baseball tickets for veterans groups. (Welch is a former Marine.) Over the past three years, the dispensary has sent three loads of HIV medications to St. Elizabeth Hospital in Malawi, Africa, worth \$300,000, Welch says.

A concern of DPH has been smoke escaping from dispensaries because the smell offends some people.

"We have no smoke that can escape," Welch says. "Patients use our vaporizer." Also known as a volcano, the device turns weed into vapor contained in a bag and can be sucked through a mouthpiece.

The dispensary insists customers not resell what they buy, or they will lose their privileges.

Same goes for smoking outside, Welch says.

"And they (the feds) are coming after us when there are people down to the bus corner and smoking crack," Welch says, perturbed. "It seems unfair."

Sanctuary's lease runs until 2020 and has

been under a new owner since last year. Welch and his crew earned points with the previous owner by finding a dozen solid renters for the 14 units upstairs in recent years.

"He doesn't want us to go," Welch says. "But she (Haag) is out for blood." ■

Sanctuary's vaporizer is a smokeless device.



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Last MacCanDo Tenderloin track clinic for a while



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Nov. 22 was graduation day at an 8-week track clinic for kids age 6 to 13 led by Rob McDaniels, formerly with Rec and Park for 23 years, coach of its track and field camps, and now an independent contractor. The clinic is likely to be the last track event for a while at Boeddeker, undergoing a \$5 million, 18-month renovation in spring of 2012. McDaniels founded the MacCanDo Tenderloin Youth Track Club eight years ago; in the last few years, the team has sent dozens of qualifying youngsters to the national Junior Olympics.