

# Recalling the '30s in the central city

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San Francisco Hospital, where they must have had 2,000 moss mattresses. I also used to write all my father's bids and contracts and other business things.

## So after the bootlegging, what jobs did you have?

In 1933 I got a job at Associated Press, Fifth and Mission at the Chronicle Building, as a copy boy — \$12.50 a week for a six-day week. Then, when Roosevelt passed the minimum-hour law, I only worked five days a week and 40 hours for the same amount of money. I worked there until 1938. By then, I'd taught myself to be an automatic operator on a teletype machine. I was a junior operator, then a senior operator, one of the best, making \$43 a week. I remember covering the Joe Louis fights, setting up the teletypes right in the linotype room, right next to the linotype operator who was handling that so they could put an extra out on the street.

## What did Fifth and Mission look like then? Were there neighborhood characters around?

It was dingier than now. The big parking garage wasn't there, lots of little bars, restaurants, hotels and wholesale florists. Hanno's Bar was there, the famous Hanno's in the Alley where all the Chronicle sportswriters and politicians and newspapermen hung out. Herb Caen was just starting then. I didn't know him — the reporters were in the big editorial room on the third floor, and Associated Press was on the second. I remember the sports writers were big drinkers.

## So what happened to your job in 1938?

I got bumped — you know, seniority. I was on my honeymoon when I got the

telegram saying I'd lost my job. I worked summer vacation relief [at AP] and then got unemployment relief. Unemployment was something new in '38. I got \$15.30 a week and I remember the two of us lived on it. We moved to the Mission, a nice neighborhood, mostly Irish, where we got a house-keeping room where you could cook. We just hung on — I remember making extra money by buying a cigarette rolling machine and selling cigarettes in the bar at 20th and Mission streets.

## Was that McCarthy's?

No, but I drank and ate a lot at McCarthy's. It was wonderful. Steamed clams and clam broth and a big schooner of beer for a dime and shot of whiskey for 15¢. When I was working at AP there was the Dawn Club on Annie Alley where Turk Murphy and all the rest of those jazz greats got started. And there was this famous bar for newspapermen, Breen's on Third Street near the Examiner building [open until 1979 when the building was razed].

## Did you stay at AP?

Little by little I was called back for extra and vacation work, and by the time we were at war in the early '40s I was working all the time, at AP as well as at United Press, the old News building at Fourth and Mission. My AP boss loaned me out to UP one night — Wendell Wilkie was making a speech up in Seattle and they needed somebody to cover it on the teletype here in San Francisco. So I'd work at United Press when there was no AP work, but then I was goin' pretty steady there. I'd work in both places and then, in 1944, I also went to work for the Office of War Information in the propaganda department here in the city. I was the supervisor in charge of teletype communications for the whole Pacific area.

## What did you do when you weren't working?

I worked day and night. When I wasn't working I was trying to sleep. But there was radio. Radio was a terrific thing in the '30s. I remember the early crystal sets when we were in San Bruno in the '20s — a marvelous thing, you know, the little wire you put on the crystal rock and try to pick up a station, maybe hit San Francisco if you were lucky, just picking something out of the air, with earphones. And of course when the electric radios came it was marvelous. Sunday was the day for all the comedy programs. There was "Amos and Andy" at night and the whole country stopped to listen to them and to "One Man's Family." There were no delayed programs — you listened no matter what time it was.

## When you weren't listening to the radio did you go out at night?

I had my favorite bars for after work. I remember one that was marvelous — you'd enter a garage and then pretty soon if you were known, you'd go in through a door with a guard on it. There were blackout curtains and you'd enter the beautiful ballroom, maybe with two bars and an orchestra set up at one end and tables in the middle — marvelous. Club Deauville, that was it, somewhere north of Market, maybe Bush or O'Farrell.

## Do you remember other places?

There were dance marathons in halls north of Market in the early and mid-'30s — people just danced until they fell down or won. The places were real crummy, with balcony seats, and the prizes were maybe a couple of hundred bucks, not much. They tried everything in those days to entertain people. I had friends who did the dance marathons and I'd go in to see them, but I was working and I didn't have time for anything else.

## How did you wind up here in the Tenderloin?

In 1939 when my first wife and I split up, she moved to Reno and I moved back with my folks, in the Portola district off San Bruno Avenue. But she came back in five weeks and we moved to 10th Avenue just off Irving. We split up again in '44 and I lived in various places. It was hard to get a room in San Francisco because this was wartime and what they called the Okies came here for shipyard work. The town was open 24 hours a day, all the theaters and the stores wide open and the shipyards going around the clock, three shifts, seven days a week. I lived two blocks this side of Fillmore and later I moved to Daly City, got married again for a year [Barton married four times], then went back to my folks off and on, and then moved downtown here. I'd never lived downtown except during the war.

*Bernard Barton didn't reveal how long he had been living in the Tenderloin when this interview was conducted. He lived at his apartment at 320 Turk St. until his death in 2000. This is the second of a series of excerpts, edited by Marjorie Beggs, from the Neighborhood Oral History Project interviews that Study Center conducted in 1977-78 under a federal CETA contract. ■*



PHOTOS BY C. MALCOLM THOMPSON

**Bernard Barton**  
in the doorway at  
320 Turk St. in 1978.



Across the street from their Tenderloin apartment in 1978, Barton's sons play catch in front of a laundromat, today is a taqueria, and the KokPit bar, now TL Tobacco & Market. Across Leavenworth Street is John's Coffee Shop, now Sam's Locksmith.