

# The historian of Golden Gate Park

## Plus a paean on Ray Clary by Herb Caen

**R**AY CLARY was collecting information and photos for his first park history book when Oral History Project staffer Isabel Maldonado interviewed him in 1978. Born in 1914 in Newark, Ohio, Clary held sundry jobs as an adult: farm hand, worker in a two-man sawmill and a foundry, on a maple sugar plant and chicken farm, as a mucker in a hard-rock mine. A crack typist during and after World War II, a watch repairman, then a California state disability insurance officer, he was 66 years old when California Living Books published his first book, *The Making of Golden Gate Park: The Early Years: 1865-1906*, still the authoritative genesis of America's greatest city park.

### What brought you to San Francisco?

I was in the Army and was stationed in the Presidio in 1941. I'd left Ohio the year before, fed up with my job in a foundry where they wouldn't give you a respirator, and all that silica will kill you. I thought, there must be a better way, so I told everyone, "I'm going so damn far it will take 10¢ to send a postcard" — a postcard cost a penny in those days. At the Greyhound depot, I looked at a map on the wall and Seattle was the farthest that Greyhound went. I got a one-way ticket and on the way stopped in San Francisco to see the Golden Gate Bridge. I was only here for three days and then went to Seattle, where I stayed six weeks and looked for work. When I found out that if you didn't join the union for \$600, you didn't get a job, I thought, if you think I'm going to pay \$600 for the privilege of asking for a job, you don't know me very well.

I figured I was going to get drafted soon so I might as well join the Army. My intention was to go up to Alaska and work on the airfields they were building, so I enlisted to join the engineers. But at the Tacoma enlisting station, they discovered I could type 60 words a minute — on the farm in Ohio, I'd taken a WPA typing class, figuring it would come in handy some time. They sent me to the recruiting office in Seattle. I didn't pull guard duty, never went to the training center, no boot camp, nothing. I just went to work typing. After a month, word came that they needed a good typist to work in headquarters, the 9th Corps, in San Francisco. I was on a train that night.

We reported to the Federal Building in the Civic Center and then were taken to the Presidio. At first we [came back to the Civic Center and] slept in the basement of one of those big stone office buildings and when new barracks opened up in Crissy Field, we moved there. But they didn't have furnaces in the barracks and that fog would come in through the windows and it was so wet you could ring water out of your blankets. We all got sick. I spent a lot

*This is the sixth of a series of photos and excerpts, edited by Marjorie Beggs, from the Neighborhood Oral History Project interviews that Study Center conducted in 1977-78 under a federal CETA contract.*



PHOTO BY BILL CARLSON

**Ray Clary**, who wrote a two-volume history of Golden Gate Park, shows his historical photos of the park at his Richmond District home in 1978. On first seeing the park in 1941, he said, "[In winter] it was a fantasy land to someone from the East."



### CAEN ON CLARY

Herb Caen wrote a short introduction to Clary's second book: "What San Francisco needs, No. 2789: More people like Raymond H. Clary, historian, gadfly, good guy, wizeguy and my kinda guy. In short, a curmudgeon, a sourpuss

with a heart of gold, a man who knows and loves San Francisco — especially Golden Gate Park. ... We need the Ray Clarys. They make us look, they make us think, they rattle the Establishment's cage. ... Long may he rave, say I."

of time in Letterman Hospital with cold and flu and pneumonia.

### How does Golden Gate Park figure in your history?

I first saw the park when I had a blind date with a girl right after I came to the Presidio. I didn't have the money to take her anywhere so we went to the park. I remember thinking that if I never saw her again, that would be too soon. But then, about six weeks later, I was sitting around the barracks and thought, what the heck, so I called her up and asked her for a date. She said, "Sure, come on over." She was still in high school. I went over and we went out again and one thing led to another. Carol and I have been married now almost 37 years. We stayed at the Presidio until 1943, when I was transferred away, and we came back to the city in 1965. [Clary's dedication in his first book about the park is: "To Carol. My inspiration, crutch, friend and wife."]

### Do you remember how you felt about first seeing the park?

My first impression in '41 was that it was so beautiful. It was wintertime, and in Ohio, where I'd moved from, you didn't go to parks in the winter because the grass was frozen. Here, there were 6-foot-tall geraniums and all the flowers were blooming. It fascinated me that you could walk around in just a suit or a uniform. Carol and I went through the conservatory and she introduced me to a distant relative who was a mounted park policeman. It was a fantasy land to someone from the East. I think that's still true for people who come here.

When we moved back here in '65, Carol said she wanted to live right near the park. Our first place was out at 25th and Balboa. We started walking in the park, all the way out to the beach, and then we'd catch the bus home. I got to thinking, there's a lot of work that went into this park, a lot of foresight

and planning. I went down to the Main Library and looked for a good history of the park, but the librarian said, "We get dozens of requests every day and there's never been a book. Why don't you write one?" I said, "I just might do that."

I had a state job as a disability insurance officer at Turk and Franklin at the time, not far from the Main Library. I got started doing research, bought a tape recorder and learned as I went. I didn't know how to do research, but I got a lot of help from Gladys Hansen, the city archivist and head of the library history room. I'd go to the library after work, pick up a roll of microfilm and read it at night, then bring it back the next day after work.

### What do you think of the park today?

I think the things that have changed that I notice most are the terrible, terrible increase in traffic and buildings in the park and the downgrading of maintenance. That's what I watch — right now they're planning three new

building expansions, for the de Young Museum, the Academy of Sciences and the Hall of Flowers. It's a trend, not a good one, and not just here but in Central Park in New York and Lincoln Park in Chicago.

That trend became Clary's rallying cry in his second Golden Gate Park history book, *The Making of Golden Gate Park: The Growing Years 1906-1950*, published in 1987.

"A secret fantasy of mine is to lift, by a giant hand, every structure out of Golden Gate Park," the book's Prologue begins. "If one could do that, there would still be a woodland park. But if one were to remove every tree, shrub, blade of grass and body of water, it would be a desolate place, even with the highly touted 'culture centers' that now disgrace [the park]."

When Raymond Clary died in San Francisco, June 9, 1992, he had completed research for a third book about the 1894 California Midwinter International Exposition in Golden Gate Park, which never was published. ■

## Find The Monthly on Your iPad

@MagmaZines

Your Local Newsstand App



Available on the  
App Store