

# One Hundred Candles on Fairmont Cake

by Rose Marie Cleese

On November 2nd, the San Francisco Museum and Historical Society will present *Standing Ovations*, a black-tie dinner gala celebrating historic anniversaries of seven of San Francisco's performing arts institutions. It will take place at another San Francisco institution celebrating a significant anniversary of its own, the Fairmont Hotel.

It was 100 years ago that the stately Fairmont, high atop Nob Hill, had its official grand opening — on April 18, 1907, exactly one year after the devastating earthquake and subsequent fires that nearly destroyed San Francisco. The Fairmont Hotel had been under construction for three years and was just a few days of wallpapering away from opening when the earthquake struck the morning of April 18, 1906. Although it suffered minor interior damage, the hotel had withstood the quake well. In fact the Fairmont was where the city fathers chose to set up a temporary “city hall,” since the new City Hall had been leveled. But within 12 hours, as walls of fire roared up the flanks of Nob Hill from downtown, Mayor Eugene E. Schmitz and his staff were forced to flee once again. The imposing big white hotel perched atop one of downtown's highest points could be seen for miles that night, a ghastly beacon with a voluminous plume of white smoke pouring from its roof and

## THE *Fairmont* SAN FRANCISCO CENTENNIAL 2007

its windows glowing gold.

Julia Morgan, the first woman graduate of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, who would go on to design and build Hearst Castle, was hired to rebuild the hotel, a huge undertaking that involved such challenges as the replacing of the gutted hotel's steel frame, which had warped under the intense heat of the fire. Not only did she get the job done, but she had it done by the hotel owners' impossibly tight deadline, the first anniversary of the earthquake.

Two nights before the official grand opening, Mrs. M. H. de Young held a charity ball attended by an estimated 10,000 people. On the night of the “invitation only” grand opening, reporters were on hand to record that the 1,000 honored guests at the dinner consumed 600 pounds of turtle meat, 13,000 oysters (that's 13 apiece!), and countless bottles of French and California wine and champagne before taking in a fireworks display.

This most dramatic of beginnings is just one of many extraordinary tales this

legendary San Francisco hotel has to tell. This is, after all, the hotel where Tony Bennett first sang “I Left My Heart in San Francisco;” where the United Nations Charter was drafted (that bank of flags in front of the hotel represent all the countries that participated); where the 6,000-square-foot, extravagant Penthouse Suite, with its two-story library, was built on the hotel roof (home, at various times, to a Drum, a Flood, and a Swig, as well as a rumored trysting place of a Hollywood star or two); where Orson Welles found himself standing next to William Randolph Hearst in a hotel elevator and invited the newspaper tycoon to the San Francisco premiere of his movie, *Citizen Kane*; where a six-year-old violin prodigy named Yehudi Menuhin gave his first public performance in 1922 during a Pacific Music Society recital (Menuhin and his family had moved to San Francisco from New York four years earlier); and, last but not least, where the Mai Tai is said to have been born (in the famous Tonga Room).

The man for whom the Fairmont Hotel was named would be dumbstruck to learn that today there are Fairmont Hotels & Resorts around the globe, from Dubai to Maui — lodgings distinguished by rich histories, elegant trappings, and prime locations. James “Bonanza Jim” Graham Fair was a hard drinking, fast



The Fairmont Hotel, then and now.



living Forty-Niner from Belfast, Ireland. In the 1860s he struck it rich in Nevada with the “Silver Kings” — James Flood, John McKay and William O’Brien. When Flood bought some undeveloped land on “Knob Hill,” Fair followed suit, intending to build a palatial mansion for his wife, Theresa, and their two daughters, Tessie and Birdie.

In 1903, Tessie finally put the land on Nob Hill to good use, constructing an impressive hotel

to honor her family name. But just 12 days before the '06 quake, the Fair sisters swapped the hotel for two office buildings owned by the Law brothers. As fate would have it, the brothers found themselves having to rebuild

their newly purchased but as yet unopened hotel over the next year.

The Fairmont passed through a slew of famous hoteliers, beginning with Dennis Linnard, who built the Fairmont’s legendary penthouse as a \$1,000-a-month rental for financial executive John Drum and began construction on The Plunge, one of the country’s largest indoor hotel pools, located in the basement of the hotel.

The next owner, George Smith, had the foresight to start work on the Cirque Room, heavily decorated with an Art Deco circus theme, in the summer of 1933. When Prohibition ended that December, Smith’s Cirque Room was the first bar to open in San Francisco. The Plunge became a popular venue for swim competitions, aquacades, and a place for the hotel’s often illustrious guests to enjoy a few laps. When John Drum vacated the penthouse, Maude Flood, the widow of James Flood, Jr., moved in to the hotel that would be her home for the next 32 years. In 1941, Dennis Linnard bought the hotel back from George Smith and found his hotel hosting leaders from all over the world as they crafted the 1945 charter for the United Nations.

In June of that same year, an ailing

Linnard sold the hotel to Benjamin Harrison Swig, a Boston real estate developer. His grandson, Steven Swig, recalls, “My grandfather came from Boston during the war. He was shown the St. Francis and bought it as a real estate investment. Even though he knew very little about the hotel business, he was a quick learner. A year later the Fairmont was available and was attractive to him in that it was a whole city block. So he



*The Fairmont’s Laurel Court, with the intricate dome structures that withstood the earthquake and fire.*

sold off half of the St. Francis and bought the Fairmont. He liked San Francisco and decided he’d like to stay, but only if the entire family moved here. My grandmother convinced everyone to come, so

she, her two sons, daughter, and two grandchildren headed west.”

Although “innkeeper” wasn’t a job he had ever contemplated, once Benjamin Swig owned the Fairmont, he was in knee-deep. Of all the hotel’s owners, he affected the most visible changes. He had purchased a hotel crammed tight with permanent residents and badly in need of a facelift. He moved to make it a bustling, popular hotel again, imposing nightly room charges and hiring decorator Dorothy Draper to transform the interior of the hotel. Today her changes would be seen as “too much,” but at the time her “Grand Venetian Palace” décor crossed with a bit of Victorian-era plush drew people back in droves. In 1947 the Venetian Room opened as an elegant supper club, with a steady stream of top vocalists appearing on the Venetian Room stage — legends such as Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, Rosemary Clooney, Peggy Lee, the Supremes, and of course, Tony Bennett.

Also during Swig’s tenure, The Plunge was transformed into the Tonga Room and Hurricane Bar, evoking memories of Hawaii and the South Seas. Al Williams’ Papagayo Room opened serving Mexican fare, but delighted patrons with the

parrots, cockatoos, and other exotic birds on uncaged perches around the restaurant. Swig was also responsible for the somewhat controversial 24-story Fairmont Tower that gave San Francisco its first outdoor glass elevator.

When Maude Flood died in 1966,

*(continued on p. 12)*

## SAN FRANCISCO’S OWN “ELOISE” SPEAKS!

Steven Swig, 65, grandson of Benjamin Swig, son of Melvin Swig, and nephew of Richard Swig, has memories of calling the Fairmont Hotel home as a small child.

“When the family moved out here from Boston in 1945, we first lived in the hotel. I had my own room, Room 654, and I lived there between the ages of four and six,” recalls Swig. “It was great to be that age and living in a hotel like the Fairmont. People have kidded me all my life about my being the ‘Eloise of San Francisco.’”

“One of my favorite memories living there is the day I lost my first tooth,” relates Swig. “My dad had picked me up from school and we were walking by the entrance to the Venetian Room where a function was underway. We peeked in and my grandfather saw us and motioned to us to come up. President Harry Truman was sitting at the head table and when I got there, he put me on his lap and asked me how my day was going. I immediately blurted out that I had just lost my first tooth. He said, ‘Well, I, Harry Truman, will be your first tooth fairy.’ He then gave me a dollar, which was way above the tooth fairy going rate back then, and said, ‘The buck stops here!’ That memory is so clear. Of course I was too young to know that that was his slogan.”

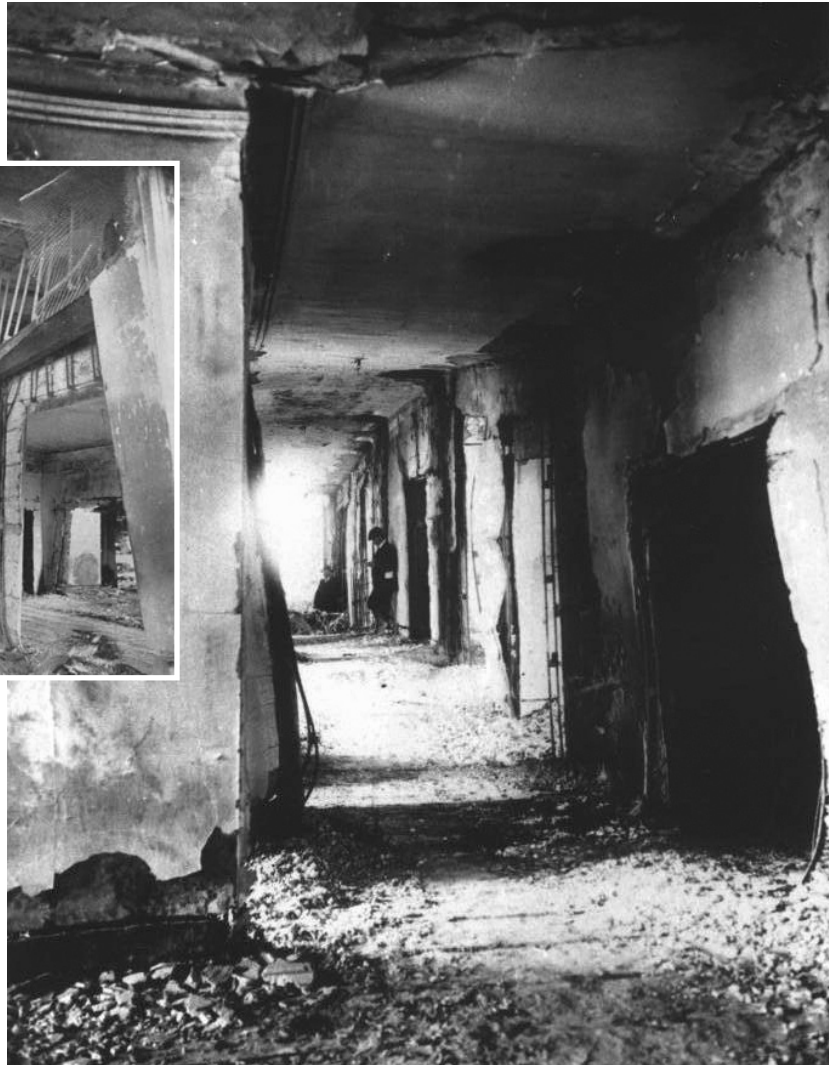
Today Steven Swig is an attorney (he studied for his bar exam in the Fairmont’s penthouse where his grandfather lived), and president of the Presidio School of Management.

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Benjamin Swig took up residence in the elegant penthouse, where he lived until his death in 1980 at the age of 86. By then, his son, Richard, had been managing the hotel for three decades.

As the Fairmont entered the Nineties, the currents of change were taking their toll on this hotel. Dorothy Draper's décor was done, the Venetian Room was going to have to close (the supper club era was fading fast), there was a glut of hotel rooms in the city, the economy was having downturns — not very good news for the Fairmont. After Richard Swig died in 1997, a partnership that invests in high-end tourism and restoring landmark hotels joined forces with Canadian Pacific Limited and bought the Fairmont Hotel, making it part of the newly formed Fairmont Hotels & Resorts.

The new owners poured \$85 million into restoration in 2001 to bring back the décor originally created by Julia Morgan in 1907. Bay Area old-timers who haven't been to the Fairmont since the days of the Merry-Go-Round Bar will be very happy to see in its place a new Laurel Court, faithfully restored to its original elegance. And San Francisco can be proud that one of its most storied hotels is gracefully poised at the beginning of its second century to add more stories to its already incredibly colorful history.



Above: The historic main building hallway, completely gutted by fire in 1906.  
Inset: The Fairmont's Gold Ballroom, formerly the Grand Ballroom, after the fire.

**Touring the Old Mint**



Left: Christopher Chadbourne of the Boston-based museum design firm of Christopher Chadbourne & Associates, points out elements of the multi-media design for the courtyard of the Old Mint during a private tour for SFMHS Board of Directors and the Storyline Committee. SFMHS Executive Director Erik C. Christoffersen holds the schematic. To his right is Dana Merker of Patri Merker Architects of San Francisco, project architects.  
Right: Chadbourne describes another gallery to guests.