

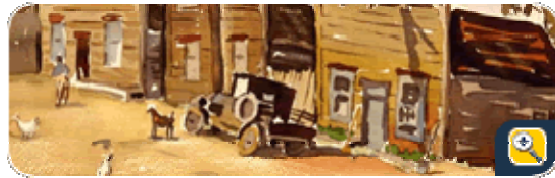
## **The Great Depression: California in the Thirties**

California was hit hard by the economic collapse of the 1930s. Businesses failed, workers lost their jobs, and families fell into poverty. While the political response to the depression often was confused and ineffective, social messiahs offered alluring panaceas promising relief and recovery.

In spite of the general gloom of the decade, Californians continued to build and celebrate their Golden State.

### **Hard Times**

Californians who lived through the 1920s and 1930s must have felt as though they were on a roller coaster. In a dizzying cycle of boom and bust, a decade of spectacular prosperity was followed by the worst economic collapse in the state's history. Ramshackle encampments, such as Pipe City in Oakland, filled with forlorn unemployed workers and their families. The crash of the Macon, a helium-filled dirigible, mirrored the collapsing fortunes of Californians everywhere. The hard times of the thirties contributed to a disturbing resurgence of nativism; authorities shipped thousands of Mexican deportees across the border.



Meanwhile, thousands of new Dust Bowl refugees from the heartland of America streamed into California seeking a better life. Their coming inspired John Steinbeck to write *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Dorothea Lange to compile an epic photographic record. The newcomers created in California an "Okie subculture," a way of life still flourishing today.

Discontented workers in the thirties went on the offensive. Farmworkers and farm owners locked horns in yet another round of total engagement. The San Francisco General Strike of 1934 paralyzed the bay area and attracted national attention.

### **Boom and Bust**

The decade of the 1920s was a time of booming economic growth in California. Older industries expanded and new ones were founded.

But the prosperity of the twenties was not well distributed. Proportionately, too much wealth was in profits and too little in wages. The income of many workers was so low that they couldn't afford to buy the products they produced. In other words, businesses produced more goods than could be consumed. This large supply of unsold products weakened the economy. The crash of the stock market in 1929 was followed by the worst depression in the history of California and the nation.

Businesses and banks throughout the state closed their doors in the 1930s; thousands of individual investors and depositors lost everything. California farm income in 1932 sank to just half of what it had been in 1929. The number of building permits in 1933 was less than one ninth what it had been eight years earlier. Many property-owners lost their farms and their homes. Unemployment in the Golden State reached a staggering 28 percent in 1932; two years later one-fifth of all Californians were dependent upon public relief.

### **Pipe City**

Thousands of unemployed workers and their families lived in makeshift encampments throughout California in the 1930s. One such village was near downtown Oakland where out-of-work residents lived in huge concrete sewer pipes being stored above ground. Each six-foot section of concrete pipe became a "homeless shelter" for one of the nearly two hundred unemployed who lived there. Residents covered the ends of their pipes with burlap or cardboard, and survived on mulligan stew made from discarded vegetables scavenged from nearby grocery wholesalers. They called their village "Miseryville," but the press dubbed it "Pipe City."

Conditions in Pipe City were typical of what the homeless faced everywhere during the depression. The Oakland Post-Inquirer on December 3, 1932, offered the following account:

"To qualify for citizenship in Pipe City you must be jobless, homeless, hungry, and preferably shoeless, coatless, and hatless. If one also is discouraged, lonely, filled with a terrible feeling of hopelessness and helplessness, one's qualifications are that much stronger. One belongs. Not all of Pipe City's inhabitants are that way. Some of them have learned that a philosophical attitude helps. One may tinge his philosophy with a drop of irony, even bitterness, and the concrete may seem less hard and the blankets less thin and the mulligan less watery. But it takes a lot of philosophy, you bet, to make concrete either soft or warm!"

### **The Crash of the Macon**

The world's largest aircraft ever was the USS Macon, a helium-filled, aluminum-framed dirigible, three times longer than a



Boeing 747. This "lighter-than-air" craft, built for the Navy in 1933, tipped the scales at just over 120 tons.

The Macon was returning home to Moffett Field on the San Francisco peninsula on the evening of February 12, 1935, when it was caught in a terrific rain squall off Point Sur. A freakish gust of wind collapsed its upper tail fin, ripping holes in three of its helium cells. The huge airship quickly lost altitude and hit the water tail first. The mist-shrouded wreckage floated just long enough for all but two of its crew of eighty-three to escape. With its nose pointing skyward and a mournful sigh of helium gasping from its open wounds, the Macon slowly slipped beneath the waves. "She soared in her death throes," wrote one local journalist, "and was lost to view in the mist."

The crash of the Macon was an event of symbolic importance. Its fate seemed to mirror the declining fortunes of millions of once prosperous Californians. Their collective epitaph was supplied by the radio operator of the Macon on that fateful evening in 1935. As the great silvery bulk dipped toward the sea at twilight, a single word flashed through the storm clouds off Point Sur: "Falling."

### **Deportees**

Xenophobia and nativism experienced a resurgence during the Great Depression. California nativists eagerly sought scapegoats to blame for the hard times of the 1930s.

Filipinos were among the first to feel the brunt of anti-foreign hostility. White workers charged that recent immigrants from the Philippines posed an economic threat to native-born workers. Anti-Filipino riots broke out in several rural counties as well as in San Jose and San Francisco. In 1935 Congress passed the Filipino Repatriation Act, offering to pay the transportation expenses of any Filipinos who wished to return to their homeland.

California nativists also complained that Mexican immigrants were taking much-needed jobs away from American citizens. The federal government responded with a program of mass repatriation. Federal, state, and local authorities encouraged a voluntary exodus, but forced deportations also occurred. As many as 100,000 deportees left California for Mexico. The repatriados expressed the pain of removal in poignant folk ballads:

"Goodbye, my friends,  
You are all witnesses  
Of the bad payment they give us."

### **Dust Bowl Refugees**

Of all the stories of western Americans, none is quite so poignant as that of the Dust Bowl refugees of the 1930s. A devastating



drought ravaged the farmlands of Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas; monstrous dust storms blackened the sky. George Turner, a resident of Oklahoma, later described what it was like when he and his family were hit by a blizzard of dust: "It was an unbelievable darkness... We seemed to be smothering in dust."

Hundreds of thousands of residents of the Dust Bowl salvaged what they could, piled their belongings into rattling jalopies, and headed for the promised land of California. They hoped to find good jobs and a better life. They soon found, however, that conditions in California were not quite what they imagined. Jobs were scarce. And many Californians greeted the newcomers with hostility.

Oklahoma-born song writer Woody Guthrie wrote several ballads about the plight of the Dust Bowl refugees. In "Do Re Mi" he offered an unheeded warning about the unfulfilled promises of the Golden State:

"California is a garden of Eden, a paradise to live in or see  
But believe it or not, you won't find it so hot  
If you ain't got the do re mi."

### **John Steinbeck**

The most enduring account of the Dust Bowl refugees' trek to California is John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in the farming town of Salinas. After attending Stanford University for six years (and failing to complete the requirements for a degree), he went to New York City where he worked as a construction laborer and reporter. In the 1930s he published a series of critically acclaimed novels, each set in California's central coast and valleys.

Steinbeck began gathering material for *The Grapes of Wrath* by traveling among the Dust Bowl refugees, viewing first hand the deplorable conditions of their lives and labor. When the novel was published in April 1939, it became a runaway best seller. Darryl Zanuck of Twentieth-Century Fox released his film version of the book while it was still at the top of the best seller lists. Not everyone was pleased with the book. The Kern County Board of Supervisors banned *The Grapes of Wrath* from public schools and libraries, and corporate landowners launched a campaign to extend the ban to other counties. The credibility of the opposition diminished following Steinbeck's receipt of the Pulitzer Prize in 1940.

### **Dorothea Lange**

Photographer Dorothea Lange captured the plight of the Dust Bowl refugees in a series of remarkable portraits, first published as *An American Exodus* (1940).

Born in New Jersey in 1895, Lange knew by age 17 that she wanted to be a professional photographer. In 1918 she came to California and opened a studio in San Francisco.

Later, in the 1930s, an agency of the federal government hired her to make a photographic record of depressed conditions in the American South and Southwest. From this record came *An American Exodus*.

Lange took the above photograph in 1936 at a pea pickers' camp in Nipomo, on Highway 101, south of San Luis Obispo. It is called *Migrant Mother*. Lange later described her experience:

"I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions.... She told me her age, that she was 32. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children had killed. She had just sold the tires from the car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me...."

### **An "Okie Subculture"**

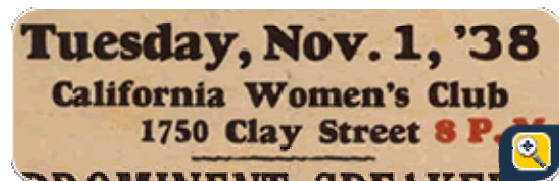
Historians recently have begun to analyze the inner dynamics and institutions of the "Okie subculture" in California. The term "Okie" encompassed not just displaced Oklahomans, but all those Dust Bowl refugees who fled the southwestern states hit by drought and depression.

The Okies who settled in California's Central Valley preserved their rural values and folkways, including their distinctive southwestern accents, food preferences, and country music. Thus, to a remarkable degree, the newcomers retained their separate identities and passed them on to succeeding generations.

The dance halls and honky-tonks of the Okies fostered positive social interaction and reinforced group identity. Country music stars, such as Gene Autry and Bob Wills, became important success symbols and sources of group pride. Known as "Nashville West," Bakersfield launched the careers of such notables as Merle Haggard, Buck Owens, Glen Campbell, and Ferlin Husky.

### **Total Engagement**

Historian Carey McWilliams once characterized the struggle between labor and capital in California as one of "total engagement." The struggle intensified during the 1930s as agricultural workers suffered the peculiar agony of watching food rot in the fields because the crops could not be sold for enough to pay the costs of harvesting and marketing. John Steinbeck commented: "There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success."

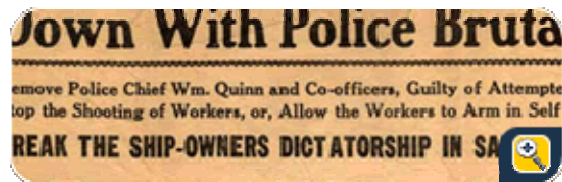


Workers formed new organizations to fight for improvements in wages and working conditions. Women were especially active in the formation of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA). The union's vice president was a gifted Latina organizer, Louisa Morena. Cannery workers in the thirties routinely worked sixteen-hour days for fifteen cents an hour. When women cannery workers struck in the Santa Clara Valley in 1931, police responded by breaking up a mass meeting with tear gas and fire hoses.

Agricultural workers in the thirties, as in previous decades, turned to radicals for leadership. The Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union (CAWIU), formed in 1933, was an arm of the Communist party. The union organized strikes of farmworkers in the San Joaquin and Imperial valleys. Farm owners responded with repressive local ordinances and acts of violence.

### **The San Francisco General Strike**

Militant labor leader Harry R. Bridges led a long and bitter strike of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) in San Francisco in 1934. The ILA demanded improved wages and working conditions, coastwide bargaining rights, and the establishment of union-controlled hiring halls. The strike began in early May and continued through the summer.



Employers and local officials denounced Bridges as a dangerous radical. The Chief of Police declared: "This strike is just a dress rehearsal by the Communists toward world revolution." On the morning of "bloody Thursday," July 5, 1934, a thousand police officers attempted to clear pickets from the waterfront so that strikebreakers could do the work of the striking dockworkers. In the ensuing riot, sixty-four people were injured and two strikers were killed. The governor sent in the National Guard to prevent further violence.

The ILA responded by calling for a general strike, asking members of other unions to go on strike in support of the dockworkers. Virtually every union in San Francisco and Alameda counties joined in the strike which began on July 16 and continued for four days. The general strike alienated public opinion, but also demonstrated the strength of united labor. The original waterfront strike was resolved when federal arbitrators granted the ILA most of its demands.



## The Politics of Depression

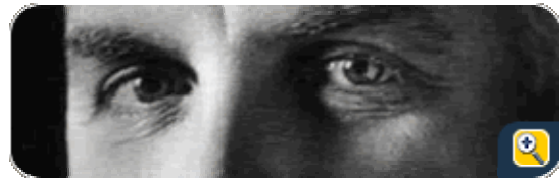
As the depression of the 1930s worsened, voters looked to the nation's elected officials for leadership and reassurance. Millions of Americans gathered around their radios on March 4, 1933, to listen to the inaugural address of their new president. "Let me assert my firm belief," said Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."



Politics in California, however, continued to resound with fear and uncertainty. Governor "Sunny Jim" Rolph attempted to win public favor by openly encouraging and defending a lynching. Upton Sinclair, a former socialist, won the Democratic nomination for governor in 1932 but was defeated in a campaign of unprecedented viciousness. Culbert Olson's New Deal for California offered only modest reform.

### "Sunny Jim"

Republican James Rolph, Jr., served as the mayor of San Francisco for nineteen years. His buoyant personality and ready smile won him the nickname "Sunny Jim."



In 1930 Rolph was elected governor. It soon became apparent that "Sunny Jim" was out of his depth in dealing with the massive economic problems caused by the depression. As his popularity declined, Rolph made the incredible decision to encourage and defend a lynching.

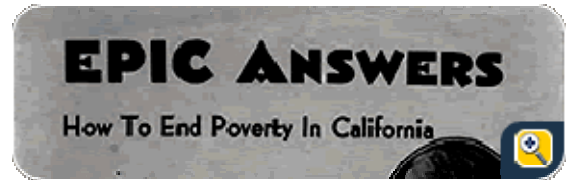
Two suspects were arrested in 1933 for the kidnapping and murder of the son of a prominent San Jose merchant. When there was talk of mob action, Governor Rolph made a public "promise" that he would never call out the National Guard "to protect those two fellows." An angry mob battered down the door of the Santa Clara County Jail, pulled the two suspects from their cells, and strung them up in St. James Park. Learning of this gross violation of due process, Governor Rolph promised to pardon anyone who might be arrested for this "good job," and added that he'd like to release all kidnapers into the hands of "those fine, patriotic San Jose citizens who know how to handle such a situation."

### Upton Sinclair

One of the most memorable elections in California history was Upton Sinclair's campaign for governor in 1934. Sinclair was a well known writer, the author of dozens of books of social criticism.



A native of Maryland, Sinclair settled permanently in southern California in 1915. He soon became active in politics, running as a Socialist in several unsuccessful bids for Congress and the governorship. In 1934 he became a registered Democrat and entered the party's primary as a candidate for governor. He began his campaign by writing a utopian novel. *I, Governor of California*, and *How I Ended Poverty: A True Story of the Future* (1933) outlined Sinclair's vision for a series of new programs that would End Poverty in California (EPIC).



Sinclair won the Democratic nomination and faced incumbent Republican Frank Merriam in the general election. Thoroughly frightened at the prospect of a former socialist being elected governor, the Republicans launched a vitriolic campaign that soundly defeated Sinclair. The campaign included faked newsreels showing wild-eyed tramps coming to California to "launch the Sinclair revolution." The unrepentant candidate published his own account of the debacle in *I, Candidate for Governor*, and *How I Got Licked* (1934).

### **Olson's New Deal**

In accepting the Democratic nomination for president in 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared: "I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people." Roosevelt and the Democratic Congress subsequently offered a depression-weary nation dozens of programs promising recovery, relief, and reform.

Democrat Culbert L. Olson, elected governor of California in 1938, was a loyal supporter of Roosevelt's New Deal. Many Californians hoped that the new governor would create programs for the state similar to those being enacted by Congress.

Early in his administration, Olson fulfilled his campaign promise to pardon labor radical Tom Mooney. The Mooney Case had been the subject of intense controversy for decades. But Olson was able to accomplish only a few modest reforms, primarily in the state's penal system and in provisions for the care of the mentally ill. Conservative Republicans remained in firm control of the state senate, and the Democratic majority in the assembly was divided into factions. Olson's administration was further weakened when the governor collapsed from exhaustion at the end of his first week in office.

### **Panaceas**

The politics of depression produced few California leaders who could meet the awesome challenges presented by a collapsed economy. Into this leadership vacuum moved visionaries who offered hope and comfort to those in need. Their offerings usually were nothing more than panaceas, simple cure-alls for a universe of complex





problems.

Sister Aimee Semple McPherson preached the "Four Square Gospel" each Sunday to her enthusiastic followers in Los Angeles. A more secular approach was taken by the technocrats and utopians. Security for the elderly was offered by those who called their plan "Ham 'n' Eggs." Supporters of the Townsend plan for old-age relief became a powerful force in state and national politics.



### **Sister Aimee**

Aimee Semple McPherson, known to the faithful as Sister Aimee, was an itinerant evangelist who arrived in Los Angeles in 1918. She built a five-thousand-seat temple for the members of her Church of the Four Square Gospel and started the nation's first religious radio station. A spell-binding preacher, she once startled her congregation on a Sunday morning by riding to the pulpit on a motorcycle.

In 1926, at the height of her popularity, Sister Aimee vanished. Her grieving congregation held a memorial service. Then, in what seemed like a miraculous return from the dead, she reappeared. She told police that she had been kidnapped. Sister Aimee's homecoming was a spectacular affair. Thousands of people lined the streets of Los Angeles, and an airplane showered rose petals in her path.

Investigative reporters later uncovered evidence that Sister Aimee's kidnapping was a hoax. The truth was she had spent her disappearance in Carmel, enjoying what the reporters called an "illicit vacation" in the company of the engineer from her radio station.

Sister Aimee's popularity inevitably declined. But throughout the 1930s she continued to attract a following. For all of her flash and pizzazz--and her scandalous indiscretions--Sister Aimee had a serious side. She and her congregation ministered to the sick, the hungry, and the homeless of depression-era Los Angeles.

### **Technocrats and Utopians**

Californians in the 1930s were desperate for relief and recovery from the depression. Out of their desperation, they supported visionary movements such as technocracy and utopianism.

The chief advocate of technocracy was Howard Scott, a Los Angeles engineer who fervently believed that poverty could be eliminated through scientific management. The technocrats advocated placing technical experts in control of all aspects of industry and government. The experts would achieve maximum utilization of both human and natural resources,

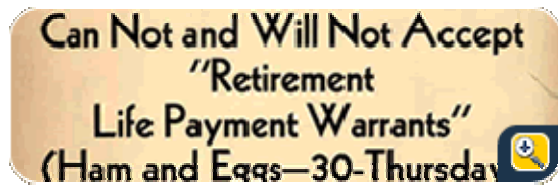


thus harnessing society's "energy" for the benefit of all. Technocrats, equipped with detailed blueprints, held meetings throughout California to explain how the golden age could be achieved.

A group of unemployed Los Angeles businesspeople broke off from technocracy in 1933 and formed the Utopian Society. The utopians went far beyond the technocrats in dramatizing their message for the masses. They staged elaborate pageants in the Hollywood Bowl, presenting their vision of the coming triumph of Abundance over Scarcity.

### **Ham 'n' Eggs**

Thousands of elderly Americans retired to southern California in the 1920s. They lived fairly comfortably during that prosperous decade, but many lost their savings and retirement incomes during the Great Depression of the thirties.



Several panaceas offered relief to the elderly. A Los Angeles radio commentator, Robert Noble, formed an organization called California Revolving Pensions that promised to pay the elderly "twenty-five dollars every Monday morning." Noble hired an advertising agency owned by two brothers, Willis and Lawrence Allen, to promote the plan. The Allen brothers then formed their own pension organization, excluding Noble. They offered a more alliterative plan of paying every unemployed person over the age of fifty "thirty dollars every Thursday." To add to its folksy appeal, they dubbed their plan "Ham 'n' Eggs."

Denounced by economists as irresponsible, the Ham 'n' Eggs pension plan was to be financed by a 3 percent gross income tax on California individuals and businesses. It was defeated as an initiative in the 1938 election, but received more than 1,430,000 votes. The plan might have been adopted had not the corrupt practices of the Allen brothers been exposed shortly before the election

### **The Townsend Plan**

"Youth for work and age for leisure" was the slogan of the Townsend Old Age Pension Plan. Created in 1934 by Dr. Francis E. Townsend, a retired Long Beach physician, the plan called for a \$200 monthly pension for each person over the age of sixty. The money would have to be spent within one month, thus restoring what Dr. Townsend called "the proper circulation of money." The monthly pensions were to be financed by a 2 percent federal sales tax.

The Townsend Plan received the enthusiastic support of elderly Americans across the country. Many had seen their savings and retirement incomes wiped out by the depression. Millions joined the five thousand Townsend Clubs and subscribed to The

Townsend Weekly. They gathered in regional and national conventions, singing their beloved anthem "Onward Townsend Soldiers."

Although the Townsendites failed to have their plan adopted, their movement was a powerful force in both state and national politics. It contributed to the congressional passage of the Social Security Act in 1935.

### **Building California**

In the midst of the worst depression in the nation's history, Californians continued to build and celebrate their Golden State.



Attended by the athletes of forty nations, the Los Angeles Olympics of 1932 was a spectacular success. Three years later, President Roosevelt officially dedicated Hoover Dam on the Colorado River. Bridging the Bay was an enormous undertaking in northern California, a process that included the completion of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge in 1936 and the Golden Gate Bridge the following year.



Standing tall on nearby Telegraph Hill was a more modest construction, Coit Tower, decorated with murals depicting scenes from the 1930s. The decade ending in grand style with the opening of the Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay.



### **The Los Angeles Olympics**

It was a bold move, indeed, for the city of Los Angeles to host the summer games of the Xth Olympiad in 1932. Southern California, like the rest of the nation, was in the midst of the Great Depression.



The city had begun preparing for the games nearly a decade earlier with the construction of Memorial Coliseum. After the stock market crash of 1929, some members of the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee wanted to call the games off. Most rem

The city went on to provide not only a new coliseum, but also an Olympic Village on 250 acres atop the Baldwin Hills. The village included Mexican-style haciendas, dining complexes, a theater, hospital, and fire department. Never before had a city provided such an extensive facility for its visiting athletes.



Fifteen hundred competitors, representing forty nations, participated in the games. The opening ceremonies in the coliseum, witnessed by a capacity crowd of more than 100,000, set a new standard for artistry and pageantry. The games themselves were a sports reporter's paradise, with new



Olympic records set in every event but the broad jump. "I came to chronicle sports' biggest disaster," wrote Westbrook Pegler. "I am leaving to describe its greatest triumph."

### **Hoover Dam**

One of the most monumental undertakings in California during the 1930s was the construction of Hoover Dam on the Colorado River. The dam was needed both for the generation of hydroelectric power and for the diversion of water to the cities and farms of southern California.



One of the engineers on the project later described the challenges the builders faced: "Sheer canyon walls so high that they distorted perspective; the lack of even a sand bar for initial footage; the desert on each side without housing or transportation facilities; and greatest of all, the terrific current of the silt-filled river."

Construction of the dam began with the drilling of four bypass tunnels through the rock walls of Boulder Canyon. The tunnels, two on each side of the canyon, were a mile long and fifty-feet in diameter. The completed dam reached the height of a sixty-story building. At its base was the world's largest powerhouse, containing the world's largest turbines and generators. Behind the dam was the world's largest reservoir, Lake Mead. The dam was dedicated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on September 11, 1936.

### **Bridging the Bay**

The building of a bridge across San Francisco Bay had been a dream since the days of the gold rush. It wasn't until the 1930s that the dream became a reality.



Construction of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge began in 1933 and was completed three years later. Extending for more than eight miles, it was the world's longest steel bridge. The western portion consisted of twin suspension bridges, while the eastern segment included a cantilevered span and several truss bridges. Its completion in November 1936 was hailed by a gala celebration. Deck guns on fourteen naval ships boomed out a thunderous salute, fifteen hundred pigeons burst into flight, and a skywriter scrawled out the fateful words: THE BRIDGE IS OPEN.

The building of the Golden Gate Bridge also began in 1933. Its central span was 4,200 feet long and its 746-foot towers were the largest ever built. The most difficult part of the project was the south tower, built a thousand feet from shore on a rocky ledge sixty-five feet below the surface. Engineer Joseph Strauss later described the challenges faced by the builders: "I know of no place on the globe which has more violent conditions of water and weather than the Golden gate. For eleven months it was an



unequal battle of men against the sea." When the bridge opened on May 27, 1937, Strauss called it "an eternal rainbow." A poet said it was "a curve of soaring steel, graceful and confident."

### **Standing Tall**

Perhaps the most familiar landmark of the San Francisco skyline is Coit Tower, a concrete obelisk erected in 1933 as a memorial to the city's volunteer firemen. Inside the tower is a fascinating panorama of California cultural history in the 1930s, the Coit Tower Murals.



The murals were commissioned in 1933 by the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), one of the many agencies of the New Deal to provide jobs for the unemployed. The PWAP hired more than two dozen artists to cover the walls with murals and paid them an average of \$31.22 a week. The completed paintings stirred quite a controversy. One mural included images of a newsstand copy of *The Daily Worker* and Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* on a library shelf. Conservatives argued that this kind of art should not be supported by public funds. Right-wing vigilantes threatened to storm the tower and chisel out the offending murals.

One local critic viewed the controversy with bemused detachment: "There is something about [art] when it is applied to the walls of public buildings that seems to breed dissension. There have always been naughty little boys who drew vilifications on schoolroom walls when their teachers were not looking. Likewise, there have always been mischievous little artists who put something over while they were not being watched. Of such substance is history made."

### **Treasure Island**

Old-timers still recall with fondness those days of lost innocence on the eve of World War II when San Francisco hosted the glittering Golden Gate International Exposition.

This grand extravaganza of culture and kitsch was held in the middle of San Francisco Bay, on an island built especially for the fair. Millions of cubic yards of mud were pumped up from the bottom of the bay to form what was called Treasure Island. Promoters hoped the name would conjure up visions of buried gold and nostalgia for the days when Robert Louis Stevenson lived on San Francisco's Bush Street.

Over ten million fair-goers visited the exposition between the time it opened on February 18, 1939, and its closing that October. The decorative motif for the fair was "Pacific Basin," an odd mishmash of Mayan and Cambodian architectural styles, with some Old West and Pirate themes thrown in for good measure. Every space on the Island had an exotic name--Tower of the Sun, Court of the Seven Seas, Court of the Moon. But just to remind visitors that they were, after all, in California, the official palette for the fair was

Santa Barbara Taupe, Death Valley Mauve, Pebble Beach Coral, and Santa Clara  
Apricot.