

HISTORY OF THE BAYVIEW OPERA HOUSE

RUTH WILLIAMS MEMORIAL THEATRE

Bayview Opera House Inc., is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation, formed to operate programming at the Bayview Opera House Ruth Williams Memorial Theater located on the corner of Third and Newcomb Streets in San Francisco. Bayview Opera House's story began with the organization of Masonic Lodge #313 in 1870. The lodge headquarters at the time were located at 1528 Gerald Avenue, five blocks north of Newcomb Street. In 1888 the Masons completed work on a new Masonic Temple with the South San Francisco Opera House as a part of it. The South San Francisco Opera House, later to become known as the Bayview Opera House, stood adjacent to the Masonic Temple, and was constructed as an amusement center. The 300 seat theatre/auditorium represents the city's first and oldest opera house.

Although there were no operas held here, there were a number of dramas and vaudeville acts by well-known actors and actresses in its early history. The most famous of them was David Belasco, who later became famous in New York's theatrical world. There was Pawnee Bill's Medicine Show and several old time minstrels.

The people of San Francisco would come out to have a good time, transported in surreys and buggies. At the opposite corner of Third Street there was a brewery where the patrons enjoyed refreshments during intermission.

Road companies first came to the Opera House in horse-drawn wagons, carrying their costumes and scenery with them. Later, as rail travel became the norm, the Southern Pacific Railroad put a line running from the south which made a stop two blocks from the theater. This made it inconvenient for the road

companies to stop on their way to San Francisco, so the number of performances began to decline. Later, a second line was built in two sections giving direct access to San Francisco proper. This and the earthquake and fire of 1906, which destroyed all of San Francisco's other theatres, resulted in the decline of legitimate theater at the Opera House. The Masons, however, continued to use the Opera House as a community social hall.



Probably the first theatrical performance to be given in the Opera House since the beginning of the twentieth century was staged on May 27 and 29, 1968 by Western Opera Theatre. The company sponsored by the Equal Opportunities Council, presented probably the first two operas ever to be performed in the Opera House: *The Barber of Seville* and *La Boheme*. Later, the Opera House was used for dances and also as a youth center. The

current board, Bayview Opera House Inc., began running programs from the facility in 1989 with a commitment to providing quality programs to the community.

On December 7, 1995, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors renamed the facility, The Bayview Opera House Ruth Williams Memorial Theater. Ruth Williams was a community resident who played a leading role in preventing the demolition of this historic structure. Ruth Williams was a producer, playwright and actress who produced numerous plays and musicals at the Bayview Opera House and was an integral influence on the careers of actor Danny Glover, singer Cindy Herron of *En Vogue* and local black playwrights and film makers. Many who grew up in Bayview to become successful artists and actors have come back to the community giving of their time and money.

Looking Back

Hunters Point in the '60's

By Amanda Jackson

Sometimes we look from the outside never trying to look in; always judging from hearsay and reputation. Sometimes we don't take the time to find out if what we know is true or just a false perception of reality. The response to the people of a community is almost entirely based on perceptions, regardless of how untrue it may be.

Hunters Point has been lied on, talked about, misused and abused. It is a living truth that people of Hunters Point have been victims of broken promises. Promises with jobs for youths, better housing and funding for programs. The recurring result was obliteration or a swift fixer-upper to keep residents quiet.

Residents have awakened and realize power lies in the citizens of the community. Government officials look to Bayview-Hunters Point for economic and cultural "growth", but do they care about the lives that are affected? Looking at the history of Hunter's Point; probably not.

In the '60s residents knew that they could not depend on the government for handouts. The only way to get the job done was to do it themselves. Organizations such as the Anti-Poverty Program, Inter-Block council and the Joint Housing Committee originated. The residents were concerned about social, economical and cultural advancement of the community. Residents didn't favor unnecessary occurrences in the neighborhood unless they had a say. Land development was a considerable issue.

They formed a non-profit corporation to influence decisions that were made involving property in the Hunters Point area. Osceola Washington and residents made it so that Urban Renewal groups were not allowed to buy or lease the land without the consent of the community. Urban Renewal groups often revitalize businesses however leaving culture to become a memory to the elders of the community. Neighborhood groups did not want developers "coming in" and changing the way things were.

Citizens understood the only way to maintain power was to first preserve the community. Residents in the projects began organizing Block organizations and improvement clubs to address problems that plagued the area. The Inter-Block Council held clean-up campaigns, educational tours, picnics and socials functions. These organizations were developed to mobilize the people of a broken community by creating better standards. Youth in Bayview-Hunters Point contributed by initiating the Young Democrats Club. Young ladies competed in



Photo of Ruth Williams, community leader instrumental in saving the Bayview Opera House in the 1960's

the annual Miss Bayview pageant. Contestants won prizes such as a 1965 convertible, color television and cash.

Events of great stature were transpiring in the community. For the first time, an art exhibit of high magnitude was held at a neighborhood center. Organizers of the Anti-Poverty program wanted to stimulate the development of artists and talents in the community. Residents created the first half million dollar grocery store once located at 6190 Third Street. The Neighborhood Co-op Residents realized that they had to fight for the right to be equal when the rest of the world didn't want them to be. Bayview-Hunter's Point was viewed as the stepchild of San Francisco. With an incline of political awareness and social movements, residents became exceedingly vocal. In August of '66 a group marched for five hours to the County jail in San Bruno to protest excessive jail sentences given to sit-in demonstrators in the Auto Row Cadillac and Sheraton Palace laydown. The march became a highly publicized event and was one of the most successful marches held by Bayview residents. Residents believed in themselves and their community. Through the strength of the community; unity was discovered.

Inequality, injustice and discrimination were factors that contributed to a "riot" on September 27, 1966. Matthew Johnson, 16, was fatally shot and killed by a white San Francisco police officer in a lot off Navy Road. Johnson fled from a suspected stolen vehicle and was shot when the officer tried to question him. The pamphlet *128 Hours* chronologically documents the civil unrest. The police report implies that the officer followed procedure. Mysteriously the car had not been reported stolen until four to five hours after the shooting occurred.

Angry youth and adults filled the Bayview Community Center and demanded answers to Johnson's death. A meeting was arranged between youth and community leaders of Bayview. Residents demanded that the policeman to be punished for his actions. Later that evening Mayor Shelley addressed a crowd and explained the policeman had been suspended for his actions. Many residents were angry that the mayor had only come to the community to pacify the civil disturbance.

This proved to be a dilemma; it continually angered residents that the city government only gave consideration to the area in times of distress, violence, or crime. After a night of looting, petty arson and rock-throwing, helpless community leaders could not address the problem.