

Moments in Time

SAUSALITO HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2015

VARDA AND MAYA

The following article is from a new book by Historical Society member Betsy Stroman, “*The Art and Life of Jean Varda*,” a look at the colorful life of Sausalito’s best known waterfront artist. See page 3 for a notice of a launch party for the book.

One of Jean Varda’s good friends was George Hitchcock, a poet, playwright, and actor who had grown up in the San Francisco Bay Area. It was through Hitchcock that Varda first met the writer Maya Angelou. At that time, in the early 1950s, Angelou—recently divorced and going by a version of her former husband’s name—was working as a singer and dancer at the Purple Onion, a nightclub in the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco. In the third volume of her autobiography, *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*, Angelou wrote about the early days of her friendship with Varda. This account is based on Angelou’s book and on an interview with one of Varda’s friends, Victor Di Suvero.

George Hitchcock, who had a play, *Princess Chan Chan*, in a theater down the street, came to the Purple Onion, watched Angelou perform, and then asked if he could see her home to her apartment, where she lived with her mother and son. Over time they became good friends. Some months after first meeting Hitchcock, Angelou received a phone call from Varda, inviting her to come to dinner on the ferryboat *Vallejo*, where he lived. She accepted his invitation after he told her, as Angelou described the conversation, “I shall prepare, as only I can prepare, an ambrosia fit for a princess, but if you are in fact a queen, as I suspect, I hope you will condescend to take a sip from these humble hands.”

Varda told Angelou that their mutual friend George Hitchcock would bring her to the *Vallejo*, and Angelou expected that the three of them would have dinner together. When they arrived, however, Hitchcock explained that only she had been invited and that he’d pick her up at 11 p.m. At that point, Angelou wrote, she was not sure whether she was being “set up for an orgy” or was to be “an innocent participator in devil worship.” However, with the courage of a race that “had survived centuries of inhuman treatment and retained their humanity by hoping for the best from their pale-skinned oppressors,” she was prepared for anything.

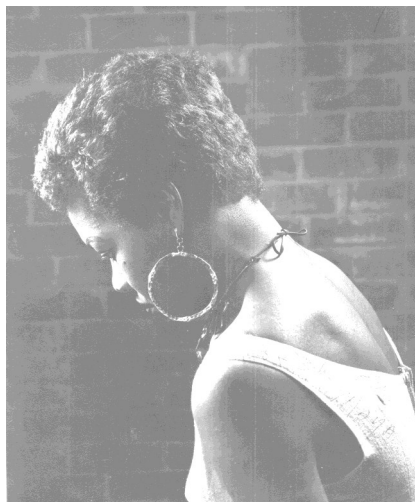
As she looked through the window, she could see Varda lighting candles in wine bottles on a long wooden table. When Angelou knocked, Varda opened the door and welcomed her as Rima, which, as he explained, was the name of a creature, half girl and half bird, that came periodically to earth in the form of a woman. After dinner, he showed her his collages, hung on the walls around the room, and explained the story behind each of them: “In this collage I have tried to show a Carthaginian ship, swathed in grace moving from the harbor on its route to pillage another civilization. And here we have the King and Queen of Patagonia before the Feast of Stars.” The hours sped by, according to Angelou, as they ate fruit and cheese and she “listened to the stories

told in English as ornate as a Greek Orthodox ritual.” As promised, George Hitchcock arrived at 11 and took her home.

Soon afterwards, following a performance at the Purple Onion, Angelou met a group of Varda’s friends, who had come to watch her. They invited her to come to the Vallejo for a Sunday gathering of friends.

On her arrival, the group she’d met at the Purple Onion greeted her warmly. Classical music played in the background, and Angelou heard people speaking in French, Italian, and other languages she didn’t recognize, as well as English.

The group adopted Angelou and she sometimes accompanied them when they went out sailing on Varda’s sailboat. One day when they were sailing, and various people on board were outdoing themselves with stories of medieval heroism, as Angelou later recounted, Varda slapped his forehead and said, “I know what we must do. We must all plan to go abroad and civilize Europe. We must get a large ship and sail down the Thames and cultivate Britain first because they need it most. Then we cross the channel and bring culture to France. Cyril, you shall be first mate because you have by nature and training the mechanical mind. Mitch, you shall be the boatswain because of your ‘Samson Strength.’”



Publicity shot of Maya Angelou as an entertainer.

Photo courtesy of Betsy Stroman

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Maya, you shall be the cantante, sitting in the prow singing us to victory. Victor, you shall be the second mate because your talent is to organize. Annette, you shall be our figurehead, for your beauty will stun the commoners and enchant the aristocracy. I shall be captain and do absolutely nothing. Allons enfants!"

A year or two later, Varda, who had been visiting his family in Greece, arrived in Paris, where he stayed with his friends Cyril and Annette March, who by that time had moved to Paris. Victor di Suvero and Mitch Lifton were also in Paris. When they found out that Angelou, who was traveling in Europe with the cast of *Porgy and Bess*, would be arriving in Paris, they



decided to greet her with flowers, but discovered at the last minute that

Varda on the Vallejo with filmmaker Frank Stauffacher. Photo courtesy of Bobbie Stauffacher Solomon

the florists were closed on Sundays. Unwilling to give up the idea of a grand gesture, they bought bags of sausages, cheese, and brioches. Angelou later described the event:

"As the train pulled into the Gare du Nord I heard my name shouted above the clamor of luggage carts and the calls of porters. "Maya Angelou, Maya Angelou, où est Mademoiselle Maya Angelou?" I knew I shouldn't have left my son. There was a telegram waiting for me to say he had been hurt somehow. Or had run away from home. Or had caught an awful disease. The train ground to a halt and I forced the conductor aside and opened the door.

"Five feet away stood the handsome and rugged Yanko Varda and Annette March, [another of Varda's friends] as svelte as a model. They were searching the train and yelling, 'Maya Angelou, Mademoiselle Angelou.'

"I felt weak with relief. 'Yanko, Annette, je suis ici.'

"We caressed one another like lovers. Annette handed me a basket that held cheese and fruit, a bottle of wine, and a loaf of bread. They motioned to me to look back along the track. Victor di Suvero, Mitch Lifton, and Cyril March were handing out similar baskets to some of the singers as they detrained. They said, 'Welcome to Paris. This is in honor of Maya Angelou. This is in honor of Maya Angelou. Welcome to Paris.'

"Yanko called to them and when they saw me they ran over. Mitch and Victor hugged me and grinned. Cyril, who was always more reserved, gave me the European embrace."

Summarizing her friendship with Varda, Angelou later wrote: "Yanko allowed me to enter a world strange and fanciful. Although I had to cope daily with real and mundane matters, I found that some of the magic of his world stayed around my shoulders."

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

I love a parade" is a song from an obscure 1931 movie musical: Manhattan Parade. But if you know me, you know those are words to live by. And you and I have a couple of upcoming opportunities.

First up is Sausalito's traditional Portuguese parade, on Sunday, May 10th. As a child, I participated in this parade in my Little League uniform and Scout uniforms. In 2014, a handful of us represented the Sausalito Historical Society: we had fun, so we're going to participate again this year, and you are invited. Costumes are welcome, but more important is lending support to this significant Sausalito institution. If you are interested, send a note to info@sausalitohistoricalsociety.org, or call us at 415 289-4117.

I'm sure you are aware that this is the 100th Anniversary of the Panama Pacific International Exhibition, and further, that Sausalito's elephants and downtown fountain came from that World's Fair. Sausalito architect William Faville, who designed the fountain, arranged for the three pieces to be floated to Sausalito in April 1916, and installed them in Depot Park.

To commemorate that "moment in time," the Sausalito Lions Club is building a replica of the Palace of Fine Arts, to reunite it with the real artifacts, on July 4th, as part of Sausalito's Parade. And, the Cal Alumni Band is planning on playing Souza's "Pathfinder of Panama," dedicated to the Canal and the P.P.I.E. So, of course, the Sausalito Historical Society members need to witness and participate in this celebration. Eminent P.P.I.E. historian Laura Ackley has the parade on her schedule, but I'm not sure if she will be playing her cymbals in the Band, or marching in costume, or both. Again, appropriate costumes are invited. Let us know if you can make it, we'll let you know the details.

In addition to the May 1 Shel Silverstein presentation and exhibit, the up close look at *the Matthew Turner* on June 7, and the Varda book launch on June 14, I'm particularly looking forward to the Society's Annual Meeting on May 12, 7pm in the City Council Chambers. Following the business meeting, Nathan Yee and Don Jen are going to speak with us about Yee Tock Chee ("Willie"), and the Marin Fruit Company. Maybe I'll bring a round stool to relieve the feeling of sitting in the store on one of those revolving stools.

See you soon,

Jerry Taylor

SAUSALITO NEWS

ACCESS EXPANDED

You can now read, copy and print back issues of Sausalito News from 1895 through 1957 via the Historical Society's website: www.sausalitohistoricalsociety.org. Just click on the Sausalito News link on the home page. Then, print out the instructions for searching the newspaper, click on the green Sausalito News link, and follow your printed instructions.

SOCIETY EVENTS AND EXHIBITS

Remembering Shel on May Day

The Sausalito Public Library and the Historical Society will celebrate the life and works of former Sausalito resident Shel Silverstein on May 1. Silverstein's diverse and remarkable body of work earned him renown as a cartoonist, illustrator, author of popular children's books, poet, screenwriter and an award-winning songwriter. SHS Board member Bill Kirsch will present a new video about Silverstein's work and his time in Sausalito, including an animated version of *The Giving Tree*, Shel and Johnny Cash singing "A Boy Named Sue," and Meryl Streep's rendition of a Silverstein song that was nominated for an Academy Award. Afterward, photographer Larry Moyer, a longtime friend and colleague of Silverstein's, who lives on Shel's converted balloon barge, *The Evil Eye*, will share some memories of the Bohemian waterfront. The presentation begins at 7 PM in the Library, and afterward, everyone will be invited upstairs to view a new exhibit of Shel's work at the Historical Society's exhibit Room.



This Shel Silverstein cartoon will be in the new exhibit.

Welcome Aboard the Matthew Turner

On June 7, you'll have a unique opportunity to inspect the progress being made in the building of the Matthew Turner Educational Tall Ship. In addition to being able to tour the completed portions of the replica brigantine, several shipbuilders will be on hand to answer questions.

Tickets for this 4-6 PM event are only \$50 per person, \$40 for members of the Historical Society, with children under 12 free when accompanied by an adult. Each ticket buyer will automatically be entered into a raffle with the Grand Prize being a sail on the Matthew Turner once she is launched. Other prizes include additional outings on the bay, a seaplane ride, use of a Southern California beach house for a week and many more. Each ticket buyer also will receive a free drink and complementary appetizers. A no-host bar will be available for your enjoyment. Support two great causes and attend the Sausalito Historical Society event at the Matthew Turner Educational Tall Ship. For tickets, email info@sausalitohistorical.org or call 415-289-4117.



Willie Yee (l.) at Marin Fruit Company

SHS Annual Meeting May 12

Plan on attending the Annual Meeting of the Sausalito Historical Society on Tuesday, May 12 in Council Chambers at City Hall. Hear a report on the Society's activities from President Jerry Taylor and meet new Board members. There will also be a vote on some routine by-law changes.

The business portion of the meeting, begins at 7 PM. Afterward, share some memories of the Marin Fruit Company and "Willie." The Marin Fruit Company grocery store on Bridgeway was a longtime Sausalito institution, as was its owner Yee Tock Chee, known to all as Willie.

Willie's son Nathan Yee and grandson Donald Jen, both Sausalito natives, will reminisce about the store and the people of the Marin Fruit Company.

Varda Exhibit and Book Launch

An exhibit featuring the work of legendary Sausalito artist and character Jean Varda will be featured at the Bay Model Visitor Center from June 1 to July 13. The Historical Society is proud to sponsor a launch for local author Betsy Stroman's book, "*The Art and Life of Jean Varda*" at the Bay Model on Sunday, June 14, from 3:00-5:00 PM. Join us to view the exhibit and meet the author. The event is free and complimentary drinks and snacks will be available. For a preview, you can see some sample two-page spreads from the book at www.vardabook.com.

History on the Waterfront

Beginning at the Ice House, you can take the Sausalito to Sets Sail walking tour, tracing Sausalito's venerable maritime legacy with historic panels along the waterfront. While you're at the Ice House, pick up a copy of the new Portuguese history walking tour guide for another look at our diversified past.

And don't forget the permanent Marinship Exhibit at the Bay Model, with photos, videos, paintings, and actual artifacts from the World War II shipyard that transformed Sausalito.

ICE HOUSE UNDERGOING CHANGES

The "coolest" historic building downtown Sausalito is undergoing changes in the coming months. The Historical Society's visitors center and historic display—also known as the "Ice House" because it was where Sausalito residents in the early 1900's bought blocks of ice to refrigerate their food--- is the #1 visitor attraction in Sausalito, according to Trip Advisor.

The Sausalito community has joined together to fund updates to the history museum and the small front office and gift store where visitors are warmly greeted and given the full range of advice on what to see and where to shop and eat while in Sausalito. The free museum prepares them for their adventure by sharing things that we love about Sausalito: our maritime culture, rich history, and the cast of colorful and talented citizens who have lived here.

The visitor center has been reorganized and outfitted with 21st century technology. We are also rethinking the small gift shop to offer merchandise that reflects Sausalito's artistic and historic heritage.

The final step will be to reconfigure the office and museum display spaces to provide a more inviting experience for residents and visitors alike.

SAUSALITO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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