Guide to the Golden Gate International Exposition Records, 1936-1939

Collection number: MS 1876

California Historical Society

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San Francisco, California

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History
It has been said that with two great bridges in the course of construction, there began in San Francisco, in about 1933, a substantial feeling that a celebration or exposition should be held to commemorate their completion. As the plans for an exposition developed, it seemed fitting that its theme should be man's progress in communication, transportation, trade and industry, since these were the fields symbolized by the bridges. The San Francisco business community promoted a celebration because it would probably stimulate business activity as the expositions in San Francisco in 1915, Chicago in 1933 and San Diego in 1935-1936 had done.
Architects W. P. Day and George W. Kelham considered various sites for the exhibition. In 1934, Kelham strongly recommended a watery area adjacent to Yerba Buena Island known as the Yerba Buena Shoals. The Shoals offered unusual and visible setting, favorable climatic conditions and accessibility by car, bus, train, ferry and eventually, air. The plan was that, following the exposition, the new island would become the much needed San Francisco Bay airport.

The San Francisco Bay Exposition commenced as a corporation on 24 July 1934. A Board of Directors, composed primarily of business and professional community members, was created with Leland Cutler as president and Atholl McBean as Chairman of the Board. In 1935 and 1936, grants were made by the WPA in order to help finance the exposition. The sponsoring agency was then responsible for raising matching funds. The San Francisco Bay Exposition board raised additional funds by the sale of exhibit space, concession contracts, advance ticket sales, public subscription and etc.

Construction of the sea wall and the 400 acre island was begun in 1936. The theme of the Exposition was to be A Pageant of the Pacific. By 1937, a large ground crew began the landscaping of the island with plants indigenous to the Pacific Basin. Architects who had worked on the Panama Pacific International Exposition and the Chicago Exposition were asked to serve on the Architectural Commission. Under the leadership of the San Francisco architect George W. Kelham, the commission, in keeping with this theme, chose to combine modern aesthetics with a blend of Mayan, Incan, Malayan and Cambodian architecture.

A crowd of 128,697 attended the Exposition on opening day 18 February 1939. They viewed such splendors as the Tower of the Sun, Court of Pacifica, Court of the Moon and the Treasure Garden. Other buildings included the California Building, the Court of Nations, the Federal Building and the Hall of National Defense.

Initially, the Exposition was planned for one year. However, before it closed on 29 October 1939, plans to reopen the fair for a second year were already in the works. In September of 1939, the president of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce Marshall Dill announced the creation of The 1940 Exposition, Inc. Although financial difficulties nearly put an end to the 1940 fair, fortunately additional funding pledged were slowly collected through contributions, city funds, the California Toll Bridge Authority, the Bank of America and other various sources. Billy Rose, the New York impresario, offered to contribute two million dollars contingent upon being given control of the fair. The commission rejected his offer.

The commission was able to garner the financial assistance to extend the fair through 1940. In January of 1940, Marshall Dill succeeded Leland Cutler as president of the 1940 Golden Gate International Exposition. Major changes were required in order to assure the fair's success. Emphasis was placed on Latin America since many European and Pacific Ocean nations could not participate due to stepped up war efforts. Enough of the 1939 exhibitors eventually pulled out so that there was actually no direct line of continuity between the two fairs. The 1940 fair was virtually a new venture in the old buildings on the old site. A new plan of operations had to be greeted, new attractions had to be secured, old structures had to be given new beauty and color.

The new streamlined fair opened with great ceremony on 25 May 1940. The theme of the fair was Fun in Forty. Among the features of the fair were the 'Special Days,' times put aside to honor various nations, trades, states, corporations etc. On 24 August, the California Building burned out but luckily the debris was cleared in time for Marshall Dill to meet Elsie the Cow as scheduled.

In September, a grand radio show tracing the history of the Exposition from the beginning to the last broadcast, 29 September, marked the end of the 1940 Exposition. Closing day attendance set the fair's record at 211,020. The grand total attendance for the two year period was 17 million.

Used by the U. S. military during the war, Treasure Island by the late 1940's was too small for use as a major airport. The Navy traded the Island for government property in San Mateo. This resulted in both the current location of the San Francisco International Airport and the Treasure Island Naval Station.

Scope and Content

This collection consists of 2 folders and three volumes documenting the history and financial aspects of the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition. Folder 1 contains undated building and cost estimates, recommendations for estimates and drawings detailing cross sections of the sea wall.

Folder 2 contains an unpublished manuscript titled: Business Aspects of the Preparation for the Golden Gate International Exposition. Written by Robert B. Hoover and dated June of 1939, the manuscript is a vivid and well written account of the events leading up to opening day. Partially based on interviews with leading individuals involved in building the exposition, the information is important, detailed and well documented. Subjects covered in the 125 pages based on the chapter headings include: the History of the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges; Choosing the Site at Treasure Island; Federal Financing; General Subscriptions; The Forecast of Income from Admissions; Concessions and the Rental of Exhibit Space; the Participation of the State of California; The United States Government—An Exhibitor; the Publicity and Promotional Program; and, Labor Relations in the Preparation and Operation of the Exposition.
The remaining three volumes are original and unique copies of the departmental records of the Division of Estimates. The only copy of these records were bound and issued in 1936 and 1938 to W. P. Day, Vice-President and Director of Works of the GGIE.

Day, W. P.
Hoover, Robert B.
Kelham, George W., 1871-1936
Treasure Island, San Francisco Bay

Volume I:  
**Historical Records of the Division of Estimates of the San Francisco Bay Exposition in Preparation of Budgetary Estimates. 1936**

- Physical Description: 209 p.
- Scope and Content Note
  Includes budget estimates for materials, labor, construction of individual buildings, services, ground construction and improvements, mass transporation terminals. Also contains a summary of estimates, re-estimates and cost reductions and plans of the exposition.

Volume II:

**Part 1: Historical Records of the Division of Estimates of the San Francisco Bay Exposition. 1938**

- Physical Description: p. 1-179
- Scope and Content Note
  Includes construction contracts let by the utilities commission, remarks, preliminary estimates, bids and final estimates divided by structure.

Volume II:

**Part 2: Historical Records of the Division of Estimates of the San Francisco Bay Exposition. 1939**

- Physical Description: p. 180-376
- Arrangement
  Includes preliminary estimates and studies in chronological order for all structures, material on water supply, sanitary and storm sewers and ornamentation of the Courts as well as some miscellaneous information.

Volume III

**Closing Report of the San Francisco Bay Exposition by H. C. Bottorff**