

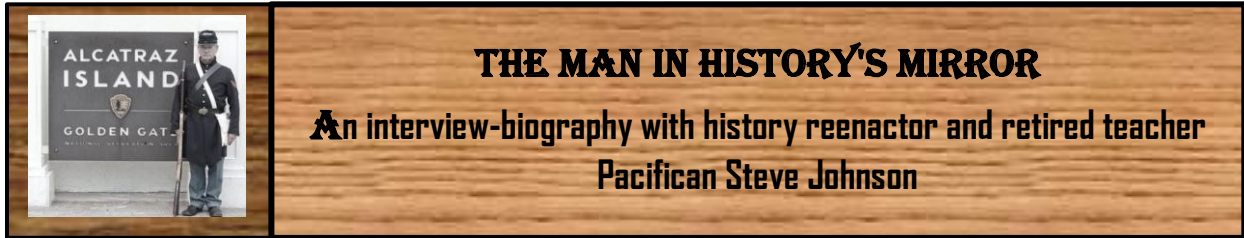
THE MAN IN HISTORY'S MIRROR

An interview-biography with history reenactor and retired teacher Pacifican Steve Johnson

By Jean Bartlett (www.bartlettbiographies.com)

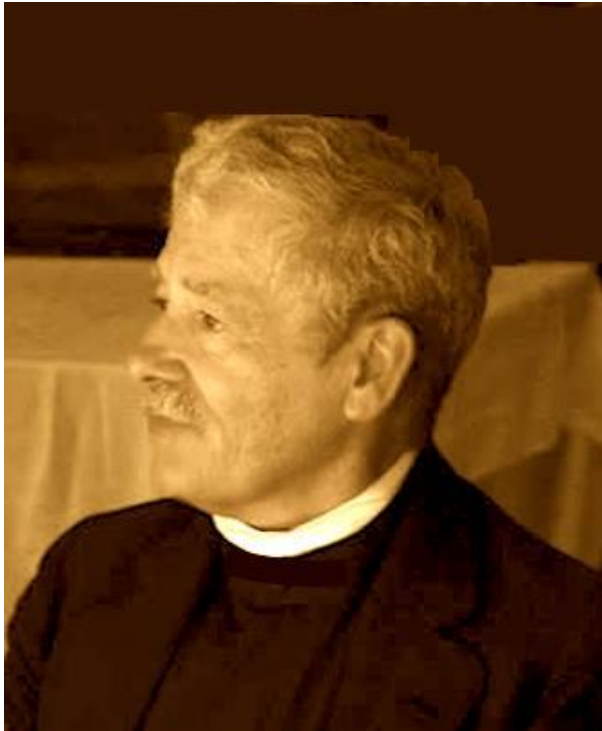
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Written by Jean Bartlett

February 10, 2025



Who have we been? Who can we become? History is our legacy and when we learn about it through animated dialogue by historians who have dug in it to know – it inspires. For instance, how many of us know that among those laid to rest in the San Francisco National Cemetery in the Presidio, which includes a number of Union soldiers, there is a famous Union spy? Pacifican Steve Johnson, Board Secretary and member of Friends of Civil War Alcatraz knows and he can tell you all about her when he leads a tour of the cemetery. Who can point out the whereabouts of the once bustling sailing ships that brought thousands of fortune seekers to San Francisco during the Gold Rush; ships that were subsequently abandoned by their crews and still lie where they sank in the mud beneath parts of the City's downtown? Steve Johnson, a member of the San Francisco Historical Society knows, as he will share on a SFHS "Gold Rush and Sunken Ships Walking Tour."

And why is that Steve Johnson, a longtime reenactor with The Great Dickens Christmas Fair held annually in November in the Exhibition Halls of the Historic Cow Palace in Daly City, knows all about the first person to scientifically describe a dinosaur, a description which in turn opened the scientific community to the profound study of the evolution of life? It is because Steve dug deeply into the reverend's story. And now, when the event calls for it, Steve dresses and lectures as the Rev. William Buckland, that very Church of England minister, famous geologist and paleontologist who realized that the bones found in a quarry near Oxford, England, were the fossilized remains of an extinct reptile. Rev. Buckland named the extinct reptile, Megalosaurus (great lizard). This was 18 years before the word dinosaur, was coined in 1842 by English naturalist Sir Richard Owen. (Steve pictured as Rev. Buckland above.)

Steve, who is currently serving his second year as Pacifica Historical Society President, said his interest in history can be traced back to his days at La Salle High School in Pasadena.

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"I had this wonderful high school teacher who taught world and U.S. history. In 1963, in his U.S. history class and subsequently as the theme of our yearbook, we celebrated the 100-year anniversary of Gettysburg. You would think our teacher had been at every battle himself, because his description of the battle, of the characters, the officers and the men – was so descriptive. I thought, this is so interesting and that sparked my interest in the Civil War. My teacher's name was Brother Emery."

Typical of this born storyteller, Steve stopped to tell a very human, but still humorous anecdote. "Brother Emery later left the order and married an ex-nun."

This dramatic depicter of historic figures arrived quietly in this world.

"My parents were Robert and Laura (Winship) Johnson," Steve began. "They were both born in Chicago, Illinois, and they met in Chicago. I am the second of their three children: Michael, Stephen and Deborah, and we were each born in a different decade. I was born on June 17, 1945, at Cedars of Lebanon Hospital in Hollywood, CA. (Following a merger in 1961 with Mount Sinai Hospital, Cedars of Lebanon is now Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.) My late brother Michael was born in 1939 in Chicago, and my sister Deborah was born in the 1950s, also in California."

Steve's dad, Robert Benjamin Johnson, was born in July of 1911 to Fred and Georgia (McNulty) Johnson. He was an electrical engineer. In Chicago, he worked for Curtis Lighting Company. He married Laura Alice Winship in the 1930s. She was the daughter of Raymond and Bertha (Doemland) Winship. Both of Laura's parents were born in Chicago, but her mom's parents were from Switzerland. Laura was born in 1914 and graduated from Antioch Community High School in Chicago. Following graduation, she received her degree in nursing and worked until the first of her three children was born. Right after the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, Steve's dad joined the U.S. Army. He was sent to Northern Ireland to help with the design of fighter planes.

Before the war, there were three airfields in Northern Ireland. But during the war, sixteen new airfields and three flying boat bases were constructed. While Northern Ireland declared neutrality at the beginning of the war, it did allow Allied aircraft through part of its airspace. Its distance from the frontlines made it a good site to build and service aircraft. Its relationship with the United States was friendly, and within the scope of Northern Ireland's neutrality, the first American troops arrived in Northern Ireland seven weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Following his time in the service, Robert and his family moved to Los Angeles. The family first lived in the Holmby Hills neighborhood of Los Angeles, and Steve's dad got to be good friends with their neighbor – film, stage and television actor Lloyd Bridges.

"I remember I had playdates with his son Beau. I recall going to the Bridges' house and playing in their yard. I am sure Beau Bridges doesn't remember!"

Steve's dad worked at Crouse-Hinds Electric Company. His boss was Horace Logan White.

"Horace White was actress Betty White's dad. I never met her personally, but she always sent all the children of her dad's employees Christmas presents. She was very kind and I so admired how she gave money to different animal charities and shelters throughout her life. She was really something."

While Steve's earliest childhood years were in Los Angeles, most of his childhood was in Altadena. "The homes I knew in Altadena are gone now, with the recent, devastating Eaton and Palisades fires. It was such a lovely place, with beautiful gardens and homes, and people really took care of their properties. I just can't fathom what it looks like now."

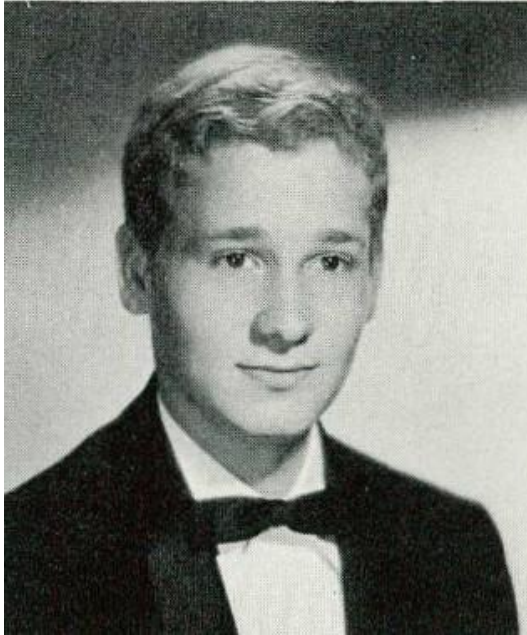
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Steve attended St. Elizabeth School in Altadena, followed by La Salle High School in Pasadena

"I learned the art of letter writing in elementary school. My only living grandparent was my dad's mom, and she lived in Chicago. But Nana was a devoted grandma, even though she lived so far away, and we communicated by letter. She enjoyed my letters and I enjoyed hers. When I was 10, we took a train to visit her in Chicago and it was a great experience. Nana lived to be a ripe old age, and when she lived in a retirement home outside of Chicago, I visited her. She was a grand old lady."

In high school, Steve was very involved in extracurricular activities: Yearbook 3, 4; Honor Society, 2, 3; Track 1, 2; Choir 2, 3; and Theater 3, 4.

←Steve, senior year, La Salle High School, 1963.

"I have a great track story though the joke was on me! I was on the Cee Track team in high school, freshman and sophomore year. I was running the 660-yard dash, a mid-distance run. It was pretty grueling. The third track meet was at a co-ed school and we were excited because La Salle was all boys then, and we wanted to show off. I am out in the middle of the track, and there are lots of people in the stands. My race was next and I took off my sweatshirt. Then I went to take off my sweatpants and I accidentally also took off my trunks. So the girls all said, 'Ooh!' I quickly had to recoup to get my mind back into the race, but I came in fourth and there were only three runners! It was kind of a disaster. I don't remember the girl's school. But I did complete the race and then threw up after it. Afterwards I was kidded incessantly by my friends!

"This whole thing about reenacting that I do now, it all started in high school when I did theater during my junior and senior years. I played a gangster in 'Brother Orchid. It's also a movie with Edward G. Robinson and Humphrey Bogart. It's about a gangster, on a hit list, who goes into a monastery to hide out and he finds solace there and eventually becomes a monk. I was also in 'Stalag 17,' which takes place at a P.O.W. camp in WWII. I played Marko the Mailman. It's the only comic role in the play. I was the one who delivered the mail. Steve calls out in a comic, demanding voice, 'Shapiro! Shapiro!'

"I didn't play an instrument in high school and I still don't. I did take up the accordion briefly, but I was too involved with so many other things, I couldn't keep up the practice. I sang in the choir in sophomore and junior years. Choir is something I still do. Annually I sing with the The Coventry Carolers at The Dickens Fair."

On January 1, 1961, Steve's beloved mom died. Laura Johnson was all of 47. Steve was 15.

"My mom was so sweet and she was a loving person. I got my love of people from my mom. She would always have a gift for the postal worker, the person who delivered milk – when they did that back in the day – and the bread man. She always thought of other people. She was very kind and generous.

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"She was baptized before she died. She always thought about being a Catholic. Certainly my dad was Catholic and like my dad, she encouraged her children's Catholic faith. What impressed me so much was St. Elizabeth's entire school came to her funeral, as did my classmates from La Salle High School. They additionally came to the gravesite, which really touched me that there was that sense of community. That also endeared me to the De La Salle Christian Brothers who taught at my school.

"What was my father like? My dad had a sense of humor, which was really useful in the electrical sales part of his job. Often, when he was doing these sales in different locations in San Diego, I would go with him. For instance, he would go to Hughes Aircraft to sell flood lights to them, and I would listen to him tell all these humorous Irish stories. It was from my dad that I learned all my Irish jokes."

Something else to add to Mr. Johnson's résumé – comic!

"Besides learning a good deal of humor from my dad, I also learned from Margie Butler's dad, Bill Butler. He was a comedian and he and I would tell stories back and forth and share jokes." (Along with being a gifted joke and storyteller, Margie's dad Bill was also a top-notch Irish lyric tenor.)

Pacificans know Margie Butler. She and her husband, Paul Espinoza, residents of Pacifica for many years, founded the extraordinarily popular Celtic trio Golden Bough in 1980. The members of Golden Bough are: lyric soprano Margie Butler on Celtic harp, bodhrán (an Irish frame drum), penny whistle, recorder and guitar; folk tenor Paul Espinoza on vocals, guitar, accordion and octave-mandolin; and folk soprano Kathy Sierra on vocals, violin and viola. Along with being a performer and composer, each member of the trio is an exceptional storyteller. Golden Bough, which performs on national and international stages, also plays at least annually at Pacifica Performances.

"Back in the 1980s, Golden Bough decided to have an Irish Variety Show in San Diego. Naturally," Steve stopped to laugh, "I joined them as a comedian. I did two, 15-minute sets and it went over well. There were probably 800 people in the audience. I was invited the next year to do it again. I was introduced as Stiofán McNulty, Stiofán being the Irish name for Stephen. I had to do this brogue the whole time and I was able to pull it off. After my second year performing, this little lady comes up to me and says, 'Dear, you were so funny.' And I said, 'Well, thank you.' And she said, 'You were so much funnier than the guy they had last year!'"

But before all that, and long before Steve became a teacher, a husband and father, a tour guide, a reenactor of many historical figures and more, he graduated from La Salle High School in 1963 and entered the Christian Brothers.

"The Christian Brothers are lay brothers and they are a teaching order. It was founded by St. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, a 17th century French priest who believed in the importance of education for the poor. He saw all these street kids who had no education and he made it his mission to change that; and that is still the mission of the Brothers."

"Locally, The De La Salle Christian Brothers run Sacred Heart in San Francisco, La Salle in Concord and St. Mary's in Berkeley," Steve went on to say. "These are all college prep schools, but the Brothers always have money in reserve for kids who can't afford to go to private high school. My high school, in so many ways, was crucial for the rest of my life. I was in the order for four years."

While Steve joined the Brothers right out of high school, he said they don't do that anymore.

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"You are so young right out of high school. I certainly didn't know what the heck I was doing. Now, you have to do some college first before you join.

"You start out in the novitiate. I was in the novitiate up in Napa for a year and a half, and then I became a student brother at St. Mary's for two and half years. I was also a student brother at Sacred Heart, but just for a short time.

"It was a hard decision to leave the Brothers because you don't know what's on the other side. I figured I could always go back if I changed my mind. But then I thought, no, because I was having a lot of trouble with the Church because of the Vietnam War and all this papal infallibility. There was all this stuff that didn't make sense to me and you have to go along with it if you want to be a brother."

In 1967, Steve registered as a Conscientious Objector.

"When I left the Brothers, I transferred to San Francisco State from St. Mary's just in time for the student riots. That was an education. Boy oh boy! We were having tutorials in people's homes instead of going on campus, because it was so crazy on campus. That was cool to learn in someone's home. It was like a British tutorial system where you are sitting down with a teacher in a living room."

In 1971, Steve's family was hit with another great loss. Robert Johnson died in September.

"My dad was just 60, but like so many of the men from that time period, he smoked and drank."

In 1972, Steve received his Bachelor of Arts in U.S. History and earned his California teaching credential from San Francisco State.

"Why did I become a teacher? I just loved the nuns I had in elementary school. I saw the joy they had in teaching and I liked my teachers in high school. I thought, this is what I want to do."

Steve did his student teaching at what was then Pacific Manor School, in Pacifica's Pacific Manor neighborhood.

"After I graduated from State, I applied for a job in the Pacifica School District. But there weren't any openings at the time, so I additionally applied to Safeway. The day before I was going to start at Safeway, I got a call to take a teaching position that just opened at Fairmont School. (Fairmont closed in 1999.) The year was 1973 and that first teaching job was a real challenge because it was a sixth grade class, and there was a lot of racial tension at the school at that time between Black, Samoan, White and Filipino students. I learned right away to be friends with the Samoan boys because by eighth grade, they were these big guys. I played basketball with them. When there was a change of classes, they would break the way for me so I could get to my class. I did make it through that challenge, and most importantly, I met so many great kids."

Steve next taught at Pedro Valley School, which closed in 1980, and then he went to work at Crespi School, which is also now gone.

"There were 12 to 15 schools in the District when I first started. In 1977, I taught at Cabrillo School, when it was the Alternative School. I taught there for many years. In 1995, I began teaching at Oddstad School, and in 2001, I became the head of the Homeschool Program which was based at Linda Mar. The District Superintendent at the time, Michele Garside, had had experience in Butte County starting the homeschool program there, and she thought Pacifica should have that same opportunity. My first class was like 8 students, but the School District had the presence of mind to keep it going, and the next year

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we had 25 students. Then it kept building. At one point we had 45 students. In those days, I had a lot of Muslim families. The kids would go to religious school in the morning and then do homeschool in the afternoon. I would visit their homes and go in and take my shoes off and sit on the rug. They always brought out a meal. Islam holds teachers in high regard. Inevitably, they had questions about Christianity and I had questions about Islam. One family invited me to their service as an honored guest, and I was honored to go. They said they would pray for me and I said, I would pray for them. After the service, there was a meal. The women were in one room and the men were in another room. I was sitting with the men and there was a lull in the conversation. I decided to tell an Irish joke. I wasn't sure how it would go over but I tried it anyway. I would say it didn't really land! But I was so welcomed and I have always said that everyone should visit a synagogue at least once, and a Muslim place of worship at least once, because you will always be welcome and you learn so much, and the people are always so kind. It is just a way to bring people together."



Steve was primarily a fourth and fifth grade teacher throughout his career.

"When I worked as a homeschool teacher, I taught all grades. Well, our youngest students were second graders, and then on up. It was a challenge because you had to prepare the lesson plan based on the standards for each grade level. That took a lot of research and it was a good experience because I could see the flow, from grade to grade, of the subject matter."

While Steve worked in Pacifica starting in the early 1970s, he didn't move to Pacifica until 1995. Up until the late 1980s, he lived in San Francisco. But then, he decided to change things up in his life by earning a tour guide and tour director certification through the International Tour Management Institute.

"This was in 1988 and I wanted to learn the fundamentals of directing tours. In 1993, I took time off from teaching to be a tour director for Tauck Tours (Canadian Maritime)."

Tauck Tours includes river cruises, ship cruises and land journeys, and each experience is managed by a knowledgeable tour director, whose duties also include providing historic details of the various travel destinations. In 1993, Steve additionally worked a season as a National Park Ranger at Fort Point National Historic Site – San Francisco. In 1995, he returned to teaching at Pacifica's Oddstad School. (Oddstad closed in the summer of 2004). A number of years after he retired from teaching in 2008—though somehow he slipped in a part-time job as a science/folkdance teacher at Sunset Ridge from 2008 through 2013, Steve decided to take on the occasional gig as a historic lecturer aboard the British Cruise Ship Arcadia. In fact, days after this interview took place at the Chit-Chat Café on W. Manor Drive here in Pacifica, Steve headed off to a ship assignment.

"This cruise is sailing from Mexico to San Francisco, and then from San Francisco to Hawaii. It's actually a round the world cruise but I am just on it for two weeks. As it goes along the California coast, I will be talking about the history of California in 45 minutes, which is going to be a challenge. Then, when we get closer to San Francisco, I'll give a talk on the history of San Francisco. The ship will be in port for a day. This allows me time to do my laundry! Then we'll head west to Hawaii. Along the way I'll be talking about the Polynesians, who basically inhabited the Pacific Ocean, and how they managed to do that. It's a fascinating story. Then I'll talk about the European explorers: Captain Cook, Sir Francis Drake and Magellan. All of them have a very interesting story and of course when I talk about Drake, I will be talking about how he landed off the Marin coast and was repairing his ship, when the Miwok People came

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out to greet him. They had a very interesting encounter and Drake – this fact is great for the British audience – claimed all of California for the Queen. He named it New Albion. He left a brass plate stating that it was now English territory."

But let's return to 1988, and Steve's training at the International Tour Management Institute.

"The school was in San Francisco, and while I was training to be a tour director, I met my future wife. She and I got to be friends and not long into our friendship, she was losing her apartment. I said, 'Why don't you come and stay at my place until you find a place of your own?' Well, you know what happened! Her name was Karina Berrner."



Karina grew up in Castro Valley and did a lot of living in her too short life. She did a bike ride from California to Montana, Yellowstone to be exact. She had planned on riding further but was stopped by a previously unknown congenital defect in her knee. She lived in Alaska at one point. She attended UC Berkeley where she earned her degree in clinical psychology. She went on to own several Bay Area homes. This is the short list. Mostly she did art.

←Karina Berrner, junior year, Castro Valley High School, 1973.

"She was a remarkable woman," Steve noted. "We were married in 1989, up in Coloma, near the American River, by one of the Renaissance Faire actors, who is also a minister, and we did marry in our Renaissance clothes! We lived in El Cerrito because Karina owned several homes there. But the commute from El Cerrito to Pacifica was killing me, so we bought a home in Pacifica in 1995 and moved here. 'We' also includes our daughter Sienna, who came along in the early 1990s.

"Once we moved to Pacifica, Karina became a teacher. She taught pottery at Vallemar and also at the Alternative School. She was an excellent potter and she loved teaching."

In 1995, it was discovered that Karina had breast cancer. She was given six months to live.

"My wife was a very determined woman, very opinionated and very direct. When they gave her six months, she immediately got a different doctor, a female doctor, who was willing to let her experiment. For example, we went to Germany because at that time they were doing this deep heat treatment. They would heat the body to a high temperature because cancer cells are susceptible to heat. Karina also took prescribed Chinese herbal medicines. There was a healing center in San Anselmo and the practitioner who ran it was familiar with both Eastern and Western medicine. Karina had gone through two mastectomies and radiation and losing her hair. But I think because she was so determined, and because she did all these alternative treatments, that is why she lived five more years – and she made use of every moment. She learned Japanese bookbinding. She learned calligraphy from me. She learned Turkish marbling and she taught it. Turkish marbling is a centuries old craft. You use a thickening and gelling agent to make the water thicker and then you put colors on top, and you lay paper on that. She wasn't about to stop doing art, or teaching art, and she spent a lot of time with our daughter.

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"People in Pacifica know her from her classes and I have to say, families from the Alternative School were so generous and kind. They helped pay for her treatments in Germany, they brought meals over after Karina passed in 2001. When you are a teacher at the Alternative School, when you are a parent there, and when you are a student there, you make friends for life."

In 2002, Steve began volunteering as a guide with Alcatraz National Park, which he still does, but that's not his first, or last, rodeo as a local tour guide. Beginning in 1989, he became a volunteer docent with Fort Point: giving tours of the Fort and describing the lives of Civil War soldiers in the 1860s. As a member of the San Francisco Tour Guide Guild, which he joined in 2023, his walking tours include a Presidio walking tour and a North Beach walking tour. His tour of the Presidio details: a doomed love affair, desertions, that female spy for the Union (mentioned earlier on page 1), and the various visions of the once small Spanish outpost which became a major U.S. military post. His tour of San Francisco's vibrant North Beach neighborhood begins with the Ohlone people, and travels an additional rich history of Spanish, Mexican, French, Irish, British and Italian immigrants, as well as shopkeepers, bankers, restaurateurs, sailors, poets and many others who left their mark. Now in his second year with the San Francisco Historical Society, Steve additionally serves as a walking tour guide.



"With the San Francisco Historical Society, one of the walking tours we do is a Gold Rush tour for students. We show them where the sunken ships from the Gold Rush are buried. We talk about some of the original buildings that are still there in Jackson Square, including the original Ghirardelli Factory."

Domenico Ghirardelli, the Italian-born chocolatier, opened San Francisco's Ghirardelli Chocolate Company during the Gold Rush. Coincidentally, the famous chocolatier, is one of a long list of personages Steve portrays as a history reenactor. (Generally, Steve does not dress as a historical figure on a walking tour.)

←In this 2012 photo, chocolatier Domenico Ghirardelli, aka reenactor Steve Johnson, serves up engaging historic tidbits along with some of his famous chocolate.

Steve has been doing reenactments since the 1980s. Along with Ghirardelli, his list of historic figures includes: San Francisco's Emperor Norton, Civil War Soldier Sgt. Johnson, miner Sourdough Steve (fictional in name but based on a real life miner), Franciscan Friar Padre Palou,

Rev. William Buckland, tea merchant Richard Twining, a 1906 San Francisco earthquake survivor representative (as such you will find him at the annual Earthquake and Fire Commemoration held at Lotta's Fountain), and English diplomat Robert Beale. The latter, as Clerk of the Privy Council, wrote the official record of the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots. Robert Beale additionally served as antiquary during the reign of Elizabeth I. Steve plays Master Beale at the Folsom Renaissance Faire and at the Central Coast Renaissance Festival held in San Luis Obispo.

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"I like all the characters I play, but if I have to pick a favorite, it would be Master Beale. He was an actual secretary and I like reviving this idea of writing by hand. I am trying to encourage young people to take up the craft."



Steve as Master Beale at the Folsom Renaissance Faire in 2023. "I wrote out the names of at least 60 children with a turkey quill," Steve recalled. (Fred Diego Pena photo.)

"I have been involved with the Renaissance Faire since the 1980s and I belong to the Friends of Calligraphy, which helped flourish my portrayal of Master Beale. I have always been interested in lettering and I took a UC Berkeley extension course on the subject from Byron Macdonald."

The purpose of The Friends of Calligraphy is "to promote the study and practice of calligraphy, to encourage individual excellence, and to foster a wider appreciation and deeper understanding of calligraphy, its history and applications." The organization formed in 1975 and their first meeting featured a lecture by Byron Macdonald.

"I thought Byron was this nice old man who knew a lot about calligraphy. But, it turns out, he was one of the most well-known commercial calligraphers in the United States and he just decided to do some teaching on the side. I had a really good grounding from him and so I joined the organization. Their motto is, 'We love letters and those who love letters.' It's a very welcoming, supportive group of about 500 members in the Bay Area. They give workshops. I taught calligraphy for many years at the Firehouse in Pacifica. I also taught in South City in their Rec Dept. At the Renaissance Faire, I teach how in the old days they would take a goose feather, or a turkey quill, and turn it into a pen.

"One time, I had a group of nuns take my calligraphy class and I teased them incessantly. I would say, 'Now you have to clean your pen after using it every time. You can use an old altar cloth to clean it with.' And they laughed. These were the Daughters of Charity at Seton in Daly City, when it was Mary's Help.

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I had been taught by nuns and I finally had my payback! But really it was pure joy, a wonderful experience, and they were so grateful they gave me a book on religious calligraphy which is beautiful."

In regards to the study of penmanship, many states no longer mandate learning cursive in school. In 2016, only 12 states did. However, in January of 2024, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed into law a bill making the instruction of cursive handwriting in public schools, mandatory.



"Is there a hardest character I've ever played? I've done Sourdough Steve for the San Francisco Historical Society. I gave a whole presentation about leaving Chicago, where my folks are from, and making that trek across the country. I wanted listeners to visualize what it was actually like to make such a journey in that day and age. I had to do a lot of research on that and then condense it down. It was definitely a challenge but people appreciated it. I actually presented the character to a group from Illinois that was visiting San Francisco."

Steve also looked to his family history when he became a member of Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War in 2018, as well as a

member of the Friends of Civil War Alcatraz. He is also Secretary for the latter.

"I got involved with the Friends of Civil War Alcatraz about six years ago. It is a fraternal organization. Our group does things like host Living History Days at Fort Point and on Alcatraz. On Memorial Day, we are there, at the San Francisco National Cemetery in the Presidio, to give a cemetery tour. On it we discuss the Union soldiers who are buried there, and we also talk about the woman who planned on being an actress, but gave it up to be spy for the Union.

"What particularly instigated my becoming involved with these Civil War organizations was my great-grandfather. He was in the Union artillery in 1865. He joined the 3rd Artillery and fought at Appomattox and Petersburg. He lost his hearing because artillery means you are firing those cannons. He had a pension from the Army because of that, and I believe he was 18 or younger when he joined."

It was very common for those serving in artillery units like the 3rd Artillery, to experience hearing loss, or some degree of hearing loss, due to the deafening noise of cannon fire. This was often referred to as "concussion deafness." As to the age of enlistees, it is estimated that 10 percent of Union forces and an equivalent percentage of Confederate forces were below the age of 17.

"That's why I joined the Sons of Union Veterans. I wanted to honor my great-grandfather's work as a Union soldier."

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Along with being a part of organizing Civil War Living History Days at Fort Point and on Alcatraz, Steve also visits local schools to talk about California and the Civil War. The Friends of Civil War Alcatraz photo below, taken on an Alcatraz Living History Day, features Sgt. Johnson, far right, a laundress and two Union soldiers under the age of 18.



Steve, who serves as editor of the Friends of Civil War Alcatraz Newsletter, wrote about Civil War laundresses in the Newsletter's May 20, 2024 issue. That story follows.

Laundresses in the Army, 1861-1865

By Steve Johnson

Congress had approved the official position of laundresses as part of the army's organization in 1802, realizing that this important chore should rightly be placed in the hands of women, who knew all the facets of cleaning clothes properly. By the time of the Civil War, each company was allowed four laundresses, or one for every nineteen men. And while the army did not encourage enlisted men to get married, it did allow wives of married men to be hired as laundresses. They were provided housing, one meal per day, and were paid by soldiers (\$1 per month) and officers (\$2.50 per month); this amount was deducted from their monthly pay and given to the laundresses. A busy laundress could earn up to \$40 a month. (Note: an enlisted man's salary was \$13 a month, and the average workingman's salary in 1860 was \$2 a day.) She had to be of good character and receive the endorsement of the fort or camp's commanding officers.

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The work of a laundress was very hard and not for the weak. There were many stages to cleaning clothes in the 19th century, invariably done by women. It should be noted that most of the daily laundry was for shirts and underwear; outerwear was only cleaned occasionally because it took more work to clean and dry woolen jackets and trousers and thus was more expensive.

The first step was to mend any tears or holes in the clothing. The next step was to soak the garments in warm water for one or two days. During this time, any stains would be removed using a variety of substances: lemon juice (for ink stains), milk (for fruit stains), turpentine (for oil stains), etc. Colors were preserved by using additives such as salt (for woolens), vinegar (for greens), oxgall (for browns), and so on.

An experienced laundress would know what additives to use, when and at what temperature to add them, and how long the soaking should be. On wash day the clothes were turned inside out and put into another tub, filled with hot water (preferably rain water) and soap. The laundress would now rub the clothes with soap on the scrub board, paying attention to any remaining stains. This was the most physically demanding part of the process, as each piece had to be completely scrubbed by hand. Also exhausting was wringing out each item before placing it into the rinsing tub. If she was lucky enough to have one, she used a hand-cranked wringer (invented 1847) to remove the water from the garments; otherwise she'd have to do it by hand.

The next step was more common in military camps than in forts - putting the clothes in boiling water to kill any lice or fleas. In forts this step may have been used if there were outbreaks of pests, and bedding as well as clothes would be boiled. After boiling came a warm rinse and a cold rinse. Bluing was then added to the water to turn the yellowish color of the clothes (from the soap) to a more favorable white or gray. Then came the task of hanging the clothes outside to dry, which on Alcatraz in certain foggy, wet months must have taken days. On such days the clothes were probably hung inside, near the kitchen areas, usually the warmest parts of the fort.

We know of five laundresses who lived on Alcatraz in 1870, thanks to research by Ranger Siena Hinshelwood. They were housed in the laundresses' quarters on the southeastern side of the island. All of them were from Ireland, a very common occurrence in San Francisco, known to be more tolerant of Catholic immigrants than the Anglo-Protestants on the East Coast. Later on in the 19th century, Chinese men and women were employed by the army to be servants and laundresses at various army posts in the Bay Area.

By the 1880s the army no longer supported laundresses officially; though no doubt army wives or single women continued to do laundry work on the side for the troops.

* * *

Many locals know reenactor Johnson from the several individuals he plays at the annual Great Dickens Christmas Fair. One of them is actually a character pulled from the pages of the Charles Dickens' novel, "The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby." Steve has been playing Mr. Charles Cheeryble on the Cow Palace Streets of Dickens since 2009. Steve's friend, Allan Schwartz, has played Charles' twin brother Edwin (Ned) Cheeryble for an equal amount of years. The Cheeryble twins are very generous, magnanimous merchants who are ever at the ready to lend a helping hand and a kind word. At the Dickens Fair, Steve explained, the twins often seek out wealthy miser, and famous Dickens character, Ebenezer Scrooge, to ask for a generous donation to a worthy cause. They are never disheartened by Scrooge's resounding, "No!" and continue their gentlemanly strolling in the cheeriest of dispositions.

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In November of 2013, writing for the *Pacifica Tribune*, I encountered them both at the Fair. They were on their way to the Food Court on a favorite bit of business.

"We ask parents if they would like their children to work in our factory," Steve, as the affable Charles Cheeryble, grinned. "This always has very entertaining reactions from agreeable parents and concerned children. But we make it very clear that ours is a progressive factory – the children never work more than 10 hours a day, and each child receives two hot meals."



Elegantly attired Ned Cheeryble (Allan Schwartz) and Charles Cheeryble (Steve Johnson), stop to chat at The Great Dickens Christmas Fair in 2013. (Jean Bartlett photo.)

Along with a great many shops, food and beverage experiences offered at The Great Dickens Christmas Fair, as customers take in the bustling streets of London, they will also come upon such venues of entertainment as the Victoria & Albert Bijou Music Hall, Fezziwig's Dance Party and The Athenaeum Club.

"The Athenaeum Club recreates the salons of that time period, where people would come and discuss matters of religion, philosophy, science and the arts," Steve explained. "During the day, you'll meet people like Florence Nightingale, Edgar Allen Poe and Charles Darwin, among others."

Included among those "others," are Rev. William Buckland and Richard Twining II of the tea company. Both of these historic figures are played by Mr. S. Johnson, who steps out of one costume, such as that of Charles Cheeryble, and into another.

A pioneer in the fields of geology and paleontology, as discussed on page 1, Rev. Buckland (1784-1856), was a theologian who became Dean of Westminster.

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"I studied Rev. Buckland deeply before I did this role, and I do it every year at the Dickens Fair. He was such an interesting fellow."



Rev. William Buckland, Steve Johnson, takes a seat in The Athenaeum Club of The Great Dickens Christmas Fair, to discuss multiple topics, and to stir up public recognition and acceptance of the sciences of geology and paleontology. (Ross Bernheim photo.)



"I also thoroughly enjoy playing Richard Twining II annually at the Fair. I additionally did a performance as Mr. Twining at Lovey's Tea Shoppe, here in Pacifica. It's such a great story of how the Twining family got involved in the tea business and there are so many more engaging Twining tea stories. For instance, when those upstart Americans dumped all that tea in the Boston Harbor (December 16, 1773 – 300 chests worth), they dumped in the cheaper China tea made by the British East India Company, not the Twining tea – because they liked the Twining tea!"

←In this 2019 photo, Pacifican Joyce Robison meets Richard Twining II at Lovey's Tea Shoppe, Coast Highway, Pacifica.

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As to Steve's dashing period attire, he said the costume makers at the Dickens Fair are absolutely brilliant.

"I had a wonderful costumer who made my Dickens Fair dresswear, and you can easily buy anything related to the Civil War: uniforms, dresses, tents and guns from the era."

Steve belongs to the The Guild of St. George. It is a nonprofit, public benefit educational corporation, incorporated in 2000 "by people with years of experience presenting the nobility of Elizabethan England at the original Renaissance Pleasure Faire." The Guild is dedicated to "teaching history through interactive theatre and it embraces historical authenticity and theatrical excellence to create an environment in which the past can be accurately and passionately experienced," by both members of The Guild and their audiences.

"The Guild of St. George is an actual acting guild and we are the ones that perform at the local Renaissance Faires. We have classes in projection and characterization and improvisational acting. The Dickens Fair also has workshops on these same acting skills.

"Why should people care about history? You can't understand the present, unless you understand the past."

In Pacifica, that thinking, spearheaded by the Pacifica Historical Society, saved: *the Little Brown Church*, home to the Pacifica Coastside Museum; the *Pacifica Jack cheese* recipe, which then began the sale of the extremely popular, California original jack cheese created at Mori Point Inn here in Pacifica in 1888; and saved *Car 1409*, the last passenger car of the Ocean Shore Railroad, a dream railroad which once traveled from San Francisco, down the coast through Pacifica and on towards Santa Cruz. OSRR Passenger Car 1409 is in the very time-consuming and expensive process of being restored. (The craftsmanship work to date on this traveling portal of Pacifica history, under the direction and tireless fundraising efforts of the Pacifica Historical Society, is breathtaking.)

"Community members who don't know much about our city's history, should really visit the Pacifica Historical Society's website and our Museum. We are such an interesting place!"

To illustrate Steve's point, the following is a tidbit on our history pulled directly from the Pacifica Historical Society's home page, www.pacificahistory.org.

"Pacifica has a fascinating history. It was the site of an Ohlone village over a thousand years ago. It was the site where Europeans first saw the San Francisco Bay. It has been part of Spain, Mexico and the United States. During Prohibition, Pacifica was the home of rollicking speakeasies. Pacifica's incredible view of the Pacific Ocean brought military lookout missile silos during the Cold War. Today Pacifica attracts visitors from around the world, drawn to our natural beauty, amazing hiking trails, legendary surfing, a castle, and the world's most beautiful Taco Bell (seriously!)."

"My wish to anyone reading my story, at any time, is to please donate to the Pacifica Historical Society. Our Historical Society does such incredible work and there is so much talent. Right now, Car 1409 really needs those donations in order to finish up its restoration and move it to its permanent location at our city's new Civic Center Campus in Sharp Park."

Steve is additionally a devotee of being involved in the natural world. From 2015 through 2018, he served as a San Mateo County Parks, Devil's Slide volunteer guide. Since 2016, he has spent time as a fire lookout for the Marin County Fire Department.

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"My friend Carl Nolte introduced me to that because he has done it. It consists of 'manning' the Fire Lookout Tower on Mt. Tamalpais. The goal is to watch for fires, and report any smoke activity to the Fire Department."

On a side note, Steve's friend, Carl Nolte, began working for the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1961. He worked as a writer and editor, and served as a war correspondent in the Persian Gulf War and in the invasion of Iraq. Currently, he writes the Chronicle's "Native Son" column.

As a fire lookout, Steve watches from the Gardner Lookout on the East Peak of Mt. Tamalpais.

"This is a great experience, going up the mountain, and it's very peaceful."

Steve explained what exactly he is watching from the lookout in the photograph below, taken in 2016.

"I am looking for 'smokes.' The left window shows Richardson Bay, Corte Madera and Larkspur. The right window is Mill Valley (foreground) and Sausalito (in the distance). Thankfully, I have not seen any 'smokes.'"



"I have a huge sense of community," Steve said, "which includes a real feeling of brotherhood with the Native American community. I've gotten to know some of the Native People that come out to Alcatraz, because every Thanksgiving they have a big powwow. When the Indians occupied Alcatraz, from November 20, 1969 to June 11, 1971, it was a momentous moment in American Indian history because it was the first time All Tribes came together for a common purpose. They came to Alcatraz from all over the country because they wanted to make a statement about, 'We are entitled to land, because it is in the Treaty.' It's why they occupied Alcatraz Island. That's why it became a National Park, really. I feel very connected to the American Peoples because they have so much to teach us."

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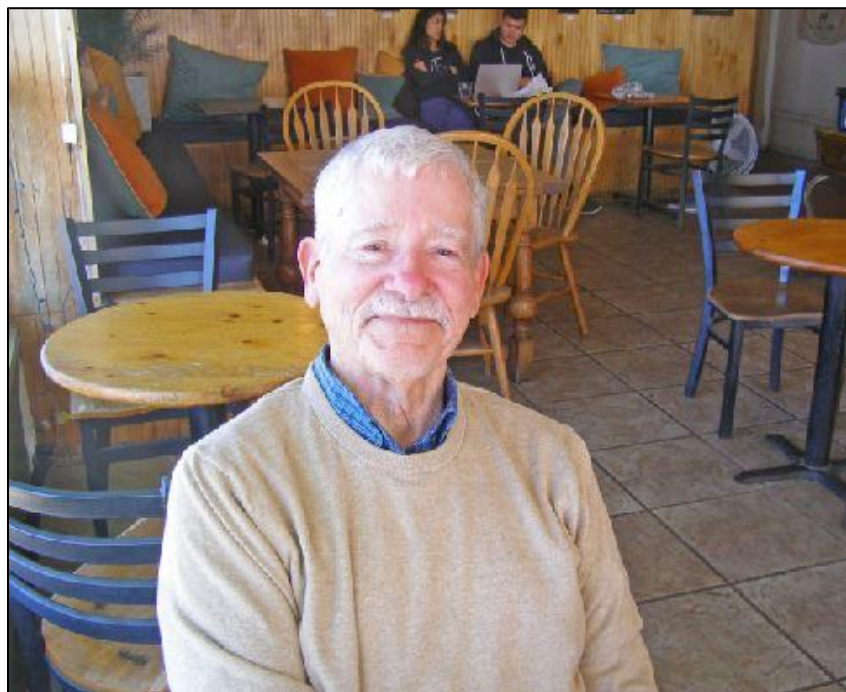
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The Indigenous Peoples Thanksgiving Sunrise Ceremony, held annually on Alcatraz Island, is hosted by The International Indian Treaty Council. Its purpose is to honor the resisters that stood up for the Indigenous Peoples rights, and to highlight Native American issues which include treaty violations and land loss.

"To me being human is being connected to all these other humans on the planet," Steve concluded, "being connected to my community here in Pacifica, the teacher community, the acting community and the fire lookout community – all these communities are all part of the human dimension. I am glad to be part of each of these segments of being human. We are a remarkable species. I just wish we could grow up and become much more sensitive to what we are doing to the environment, and to each other."



Steve Johnson, being interviewed at the Chit-Chat Café on W. Manor Drive, Pacifica, January 15, 2025. (Jean Bartlett photo.)



Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco. She is a former Hallmark Card writer, a produced playwright and a published author. Jean's writing has been recognized by the Board of Supervisors, County of San Mateo, for "connecting community and preserving local history."

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