

Bartlett's News Briefs



NOT JUST ANYBODY

community-sponsored stories

by Pacifican Jean Bartlett, longtime Bay Area News Group writer

Rotarian, Clamper, Historical Society member, Pacifican Jerry Crow believes volunteers are essential for a thriving community



Clamper Jerry Crow and his Widder, Deidra Crow, celebrate a Clampers-placed plaque to honor San Francisco's beloved and kindly monomaniac Emperor Norton. (Darlene Flynn photo.)

There are lots of reasons to volunteer: community support, historical education, new friends and maybe meeting your true love.

When Jerry Crow lived in the East Bay, he would find himself, more than once, driving through Pacifica.

"Every time I drove through Pacifica, I thought this is a great place. Its natural beauty struck me."

Jerry moved to Pacifica in 1992. He knew very few people. He did know fellow industrial engineer Mason Brown. Mason worked the desk next to Jerry at the USPS Western Region Headquarters in San Francisco, and Mason, a Pacifican, had a part-time gig as a realtor. He sold Jerry the Pacifica home Jerry still lives in.

"Mason introduced me to the Rotary Club of Pacifica so I would have some contact with other people and not be a lone fish in the water. The work they do is very interesting and so I joined in 1992. The group was friendly and welcoming and I never became a 'lone fish in the water.' I also found the work to be very rewarding."

What does the Pacifica Rotary do?

"Every year we provide dictionaries to Pacifica third graders. We also get involved and behind community beautification projects. We did the Rotary Plaza at the Sanchez Art Center, we beautify small gardens around town such as the Grace McCarthy Vista Point, and mini gardens on Palmetto and Oceana Blvd., among others. Over the years we have painted several houses, provided scholarships for high school and college students, adopted families through the Pacifica Resource Center and served meals to the homeless. We work locally and internationally to fight hunger, to educate, to eradicate polio and to promote peace."

That international help also includes providing cleft lip and palate surgeries for children in third world countries at no cost to their families, and building clean-water systems. It's a long list.

In 1992, Jerry also became a volunteer with the Pacifica Historical Society. He would go on to become a member of: E Clampus Vitus, aka, the Clampers; sign on with Pacifica's Moose Lodge; become a volunteer with Pacifica Performances; and by the way, he didn't retire from his regular job until 1997. Wait. How did this happen? How did this guy go from doing zero volunteering to full-time volunteering?

"It may well have started with my being a Boy Scout," Jerry said. "They do have much to teach and there is great camaraderie."

Jerry is from Schenectady, New York. His mom was Natalie (Shreve) Crow and his stepfather was George Landon Crow.

"Schenectady is a lovely place," Jerry stated. "It is right on the confluence of the Mohawk River and the Hudson River, and for any history buffs reading this, it was originally known as 'the broom capital of the world.'" (Broomcorn grew in abundance on the river flats of the Mohawk River. At its peak, between 1840 and 1860, Schenectady produced 1,000,000 brooms a year.)

"Did my parents volunteer? Some. They did work with their church and my mother was in a community volunteer group. But as a youngster, I became a Cub Scout and continued on through the Boy Scouts and then I became an Eagle Scout. All of these Scouting levels offer lessons on teamwork and problem-solving, which really is the foundation for community service."

Jerry listed some of the immediate things that interested him in Scouts. "Learning woodsy lore, like how to build a campfire with primitive instruments, how to set up a tent and how to be comfortable in the outdoors. I love the outdoors and most of my Boy Scout merit badges were achieved in outdoor activities."

Scouts learn about hiking and nature, first aid and science. They are also offered several "civic" merit badges, which Jerry earned. The umbrella of civic education includes: understanding the three branches of the United States government, and doing hands on civic activities such as touring, and later reporting on, a U.S. monument or one's state capitol. For those who become Eagle Scouts, leadership, time management and ethics are cornerstones.

"As a Boy Scout I was also very proud to earn a Stamp Collecting Merit Badge," Jerry smiled.

This particular merit badge teaches many things, which include: geography, world history, and how postal services work in the U.S. and around the world.

"Scouting is very fun and it's interesting," Jerry noted, "both of which are important to being a volunteer."

In 1945, Jerry's family made the Bay Area home when his stepfather received a job transfer to General Electric Company on the West Coast.

"The move made everyone very happy. It's warmer!"

Jerry received his degree in industrial engineering from Stanford University, where he was also a Naval ROTC student. Following his graduation, he served three years in the U.S. Navy. He began as an Ensign and worked his way up to full Lieutenant.

"I spent my time in the Navy on a ship called an attack transport. We spent half of our time in Asian waters and the other half in Long Beach. It was very interesting and it was such a wonderful opportunity to learn about other parts of the world and other peoples."

What is a Navy attack transport? They are designed to carry a large body of troops and their equipment, and move at a high speed from one location to another, particularly in and out of hostile waters. They must be able to land those troops and their equipment, expeditiously, under any number of conditions, and they must also be able to evacuate troops, including casualties, quickly. In addition, they must be able to provide command and logistic support for troops ashore.

Other than the occasional modification of a workspace for maximum effectiveness, Jerry did not make much use of his industrial engineering skills on the transport.

"I was in charge of the electronics and combat information center divisions. The Combat Information Center had a bunch of radar and we advised the Captain. The Captain made up his own mind but we provided the information. Radar was still quite new at that time."

Following his Navy stint, Jerry went to work for U.S. Steel in Pittsburg, CA. As an industrial engineer at U.S. Steel, Jerry's skills were focused on job design. He stayed with them for a time, made other career moves and eventually retired in 1997 from USPS Western Region Headquarters. Of course his life to date is much bigger than the events listed here to lead to his 1992 move to Pacifica – and that includes his first marriage. He and his first wife had two sons and a daughter, and Jerry is now the grandfather of six and great-grandfather of three. He's also writing a children's book for some of his youngest family members. But let's get back to that volunteering "stuff."

"I was volunteering for the Rotary Club when my friend Mason Brown, once again, approached me with a way to put myself to good use. It turns out the Pacifica Historical Society was looking for someone to serve as Board President. Now I had recently moved to Pacifica and I thought that was an absurdity to think of me for that job."

As it happened, the individual serving as PHS Board President had died and the person who stepped in to serve as Acting President didn't have the time to stay with the job and no one else did either.

"Mason Brown's wife Connie was very involved with the Historical Society. So I'm sure that was part of the motivator of Mason asking me."

Still, Jerry was reluctant until Bill Drake, former Editor/Publisher of the *Pacifica Tribune*, gave him a talking to.

"Persuasive guy," Jerry laughed. "And I said, 'Well, alright, I'll give it a try and it worked out pretty well, I think.'"

Jerry served as PHS Board President from 1992 to 1999. He additionally served once as Rotary President and he also served as Pacifica Performances President. He stayed with Pacifica Performances the least amount of time. You can only stretch so far.

"I like to learn and I learned a lot with the Historical Society. Over the years, we built a pretty good library of historical information, now in the basement of the Little Brown Church."

Jerry's PHS volunteer work has included: archiving, dressing as historic Pacifica characters at various PHS fundraising events, working the events to raise the restoration funds needed for Pacifica's historic Little Brown Church and Ocean Shore RR Passenger Car No. 1409. Somewhere along the way he also became an active member with the Pacifica Moose Lodge.

He has many great anecdotes that come from being a volunteer. For instance, because of his work with Pacifica Performances, he gained a number of friends, including the nonprofit's Founding Artistic Director Mildred Owen. Mildred used to arrange international trips for anyone interested and Jerry went to Russia with a Mildred group.

"Our guide in Russia was petite but powerful in her way and she convinced the four biggest guys in the group to put on tutus and do a little step from Swan Lake." Jerry, at 6 foot 3, was one of the "Swan Lake" stars and yes, people are still talking about it.

There are many volunteer-connected tales, but Jerry's greatest story is when he was working outside at the Shamrock Ranch with the newly obtained last passenger car of the Ocean Shore RR. That's where he met Deidra Kennedy. Deidra grew up Pacifica and is a 1966 Terra Nova graduate. She was also at the Shamrock Ranch volunteering with her mom on Car 1409. In 2018, the two Pacifica Historical Society members married, and both Jerry and Deidra admit that finding each other and falling in love is a constant wonderful reminder that true love can happen at any age.

Both still volunteer with the PHS and Deidra is also a "Widder" in Jerry's other longstanding volunteer membership, and that would be with the Clampers. Jerry got involved with that group serving on the San Mateo County Board of Historic Resources.

"This guy named Bill Howland, also serving on the Board, occasionally mentioned the Clampers and I had seen the Clampers here in the Bay Area as a young man, and they were enjoying a lot of hijinks – which I liked. So I said to Bill, 'How do you get in?' He grabbed me by the elbow and away we went." You have to be invited by an existing Clamper to be approved as a possible Clamper member. Once you are invited to join, you must participate in an initiation process which involves plenty of silliness and quite possibly some imbibing. "It's not as wild as people think," Jerry giggled while revealing nothing.

E Clampus Vitus, the Clampers, is a fraternal organization. Their name, they say, is from the language of Dog Latin, and has no known meaning. According to reliable yarn spinners, the Clampers came into being during the Gold Rush, and were founded by someone who was assigned this particular "founding" under the direction of the Emperor of China. The Clampers wear red to reflect the long johns worn by Gold Rush miners. They are focused on preserving Western American History, with humor and shenanigans, and they commemorate history by placing historical markers/cast bronze plaques. They have 51 recognized chapters in 11 Western States: Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

Included among the Northern California locations that Clamper Jerry has been part of plaquing are: Pacifica's Little Brown Church, Molloy's Tavern in Colma, Crystal Springs Road in Hillsborough where the last stagecoach robbery took place, and one of Emperor Norton's known residences in San Francisco.

Who are the "Widders?"

"We are the partner or spouse of a Clamper, or a female relative of some sort, and we are long suffering because our Clampers go off to camps and drink and smoke cigars and tell boy jokes!" Mrs. Crow relayed. "We suffer this all through the year but as a thank you to the Widders, our local Clampers have a ball every year, at the Pacifica Moose Lodge, and we dress up in our Victorian finery."

"While our historic research is very serious, our Clamper motto is, 'Credo Quia Absurdum.'" Jerry explained. "This is generally understood to mean, 'I believe it because it is absurd!'"

Along with friendships, a possible beautiful romance, history lessons and giving where you can, Jerry summed up the importance of volunteering.

"I think volunteers are essential for a thriving community because otherwise everything would be valued by the cost, whereas volunteers can act freely and accomplish things that otherwise wouldn't be done."

"My advice to volunteers, 'Grab your gloves and get to work!'"

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By Jean Bartlett (December 9, 2025)

Writer Jean Bartlett was recognized by the Board of Supervisors, County of San Mateo, for "her writing that connects community and preserves local history." She can be contacted through her website, www.bartlettbiographies.com. This story was sponsored by Pacifican Linda Jonas.