

AN INDEX TO
920 O'FARRELL STREET
By
Harriet Lane Levy

PREPARED BY
THE SOURISSEAU ACADEMY FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY
SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

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THE AUTHOR

Harriet Lane Levy's lively account of her girlhood, *920 O'Farrell Street*, is filled with references to Jewish friends, relatives, and neighbors of San Francisco's *fin-de-siècle*. Harriet herself emerges as a wry observer of the manners of her times, and interviews with her collateral descendants reveal a colorful, intelligent, and witty personality.

Harriet was born March 29, 1866, in San Francisco to Benjamin H. and Henriette Michelson Levy, the 'Benish' and 'Yetta' of *920 O'Farrell Street*. Her book chronicles the events of her life and that of her sisters, Addie and Polly, and includes vivid descriptions of daily family life and of the doings of the Levy's acquaintances. Harriet was graduated from Girls' High School and attended the University of California, translating Heine's *Lorelei* into English instead of writing the usual entrance examination.

Benjamin H. Levy was one of the many young European Jews who came to California during and soon after the Gold Rush: these included Levi Strauss, Isaac Magnin, Adolf Sutro, and others whose names figure frequently in Bay Area history--Weill, Gump, Gerstle, Roos, Fleishhacker, Zellerbach. The usual path to California was by way of Panama; to San Francisco, from there "to the mines." In the Mother Lode of California, and in the Nevada mines, these pioneers opened small shops, provisioning the miners with staple foods, pans, pickaxes, boots, and in the case of Levi Strauss, the durable work pants still worn today by all right-minded Californians.

Benish may have courted his future wife, Henriette Michelson, in Calaveras County, or in Virginia City, Nevada, where he was in business before settling in San Francisco. Both were, according to cemetery records, natives of Fordon, Prussia, a town near the Vistula River in the area of Prussia that is now part of Poland. Benish is described by his daughter as a benevolent man, while Yetta seems to have been somewhat negative and constricted in her relationships. One descendant frankly describes her as "a holy terror." Yetta's nephew Albert Michelson became the noted physicist and Nobel Prize winner.

The Levy family were practicing Jews. It might be assumed, from the site of their mausoleum, that they were members of Sherith Israel, but Harriet does not identify the family synagogue. It is clear, however, that Yetta kept kosher. Harriet, together with her friend Sarah Samuels Stein, sister-in-law of Gertrude, left the Jewish faith and ventured into Christian Science. None of Harriet's collateral descendants has remained Jewish by faith.

Benish and Yetta lived, says Harriet, south of Market before moving into their Victorian house in the then-new 900 block of O'Farrell Street. They are noted living, as of 1865, at 165 Minna Street; Benish's business--dry goods--was located at 307 Battery. It can be safely assumed that it was in this house that Harriet was born. In business with Benish was one Gustave Levy, who also resided with the family.

Harriet's recital of her girlhood reminds one inevitably of a Yiddish *Little Women* in the characterizations of the three sisters: Addie is gentle, kindly, matronly even in girlhood; Polly a madcap; while Harriet, then Hattie, is the loving chronicler, much as Jo. The names themselves indicate a graduated cultural change, for all, reports an informant, bore Yiddish names transliterated into English equivalent nicknames and then into fuller forms: "Addie" became, in time "Adeline"; "Yetta," "Henrietta"; and "Hattie," "Harriet." Indeed, this writer's own mother-in-law was born Chaya in Poland; became "Chatty" in Michigan and later, "Charlotte."

In time, Addie and Polly married, Polly to Frank P. Jacobs and Addie to Albert Moishe Salinger ("born to German parents on the Irish Sea en route to America," says a descen-

dant), but Harriet, despite several suitors, avoided marriage, opting instead for a carefree single life of travel and varied social activities. For many years she enjoyed a close friendship with Aaron Altman, Head of Art Education for the San Francisco Unified School District.

After Benish's death and the departure from the family home of Addie and Polly, Yetta and Harriet moved away; Yetta eventually lived with Addie's family in Piedmont, whereas Harriet lived in San Francisco in a suite at the Huntington. Her last years were spent, with her companion Mary Godde, at La Playa in Carmel.

Louis Levinsky (later Levinson) purchased the house next to 920 O'Farrell. His daughter Emma (later Emilia) married Ferdinand Toklas and became the mother of Alice Babette Toklas. Alice and Harriet became friends and lived through the 1906 earthquake. Harriet sought refuge across the bay, probably at Addie's, and returned to find 920 O'Farrell utterly destroyed. The site was levelled, and was later used for the building of the Cadillac showrooms.

The following year, 1907, Alice and Harriet sailed for Paris, where they entered the expatriate "Bohemian Circle" that included Harriet's friends Leo and Gertrude Stein. Harriet was writing of these years at the time of her death. A carbon copy of her typescript is in the Bancroft Library at Berkeley.

While Harriet was a great reader--her personal library, still primarily intact, is eclectic--she wrote only two works: *920 O'Farrell Street* and a collection of poems, *I Love to Talk about Myself*. . . printed by Grabhorn Press, besides articles as a drama critic in San Francisco. A descendant offers one plausible reason: "I think she was just too busy having fun. She truly enjoyed life." Certainly Harriet, who had inherited a considerable estate, never lacked the funds required for her favorite activities: travel, residence abroad, social activities, and the purchase of books and art works. She is remembered as having a great flair and sense of style in her clothing: lovely and unusual creations of oriental fabrics. Many of her family recall with pleasure elegant teas and visits in her homes in San Francisco and Carmel. Acerbic she could be, certainly; the acerbity leavened, however, with wit and kindness and generosity.

It is hoped that the indexing of Harriet's delightfully gossip-laden story of her San Francisco girlhood will assist in some measure in chronicling the doings of the children of the "Jewish Argonauts."

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Harriet Lane Levy Family Data

From Harriet's death record:

Harriet was born 29 March 1866 in San Francisco, to
Henriett [sic] Michelson and
Benjamin H. Levy.

She died 15 September 1950, in Carmel, CA.

From Harriet's obituary:

Her survivors were:

Sister: Mrs. A. M. Salinger of Piedmont (Addie)
Nephews: Herbert H. Salinger of San Francisco
Jeffrey M. Salinger of Santa Rosa
Dr. Robert S. Salinger of New Haven, Connecticut
Nieces: Mrs. Charles de Young Elkus of San Francisco
Mrs. Sylvia S. Bennett of Piedmont

From records, Hills of Eternity (Synagogue Sherith Israel, San Francisco)

Burials in the Levy Family Mausoleum:

Levy, Benjamin H., born 15 February 1826, died 8 June 1900, of Fordon,
Prussia
Levy, Henrietta, born 1827, died 17, December 1916, of Fordon, Prussia
Salinger, Albert M., born 1855, died 1941
Salinger, Adeline, born 1861, died 1956
Sickles, Lillian, died 3 June 1952 (Lillian [Lena] Salinger Sickles, sister of
Albert M. Salinger)

From *Pioneer Jews*, by F. and J. Rochlin, pp. 191-193: a biographical sketch of Harriet's first cousin, Albert Abraham Michelson:

Albert was born in 1852 in Strelno, (Polish) Prussia, to: Michelson, Samuel and Przlubska, Rosalie.

Suggested Readings

Duncan, Roland E. Oral Interview, Paris, 1953, with Alice B. Toklas. [Tapes and TS, Bancroft Library]

Elkus, Albert. *Just a Pretty Girl from the Country*. Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, Illinois.

Levy, Harriet. *I Love to Talk about Myself . . .* (Poems). Grabhorn Press.

Rochlin, F. and H. *Pioneer Jews*. Houghton Mifflin.

Rosenshine, Annette. *Life is not a Paragraph*. [TS, Bancroft Library]

Simon, Linda. *The Biography of Alice B. Toklas*. Doubleday.

Stein, Gertrude. *Harriet* (a poem).

