

Fremont and Cora Older - Cupertino's Crusading Journalists

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Fremont Older was born on August 30, 1856, in a log cabin in Appleton, Wisconsin. He started out as a "printers devil" (apprentice) in 1869. After hearing the great Editor Horace Greely declare "Go West Young Man!" he took that advice and started with various papers in Nevada and California, eventually settling in San Francisco as a reporter.

In 1894 he became editor of the struggling SF Bulletin, steering the paper for 24 years with an emphasis on social justice and fighting crime and corruption. He was determined to break the controlling grip of the Southern Pacific Railroad on the laws of the city and state. With a combination of hard work, instinct for readable material, and an eye for discovering a unique talent pool he would take the Bulletin from the brink of bankruptcy to the largest circulation of any evening paper west of Chicago.

Cora Miranda Baggerly was born in Clyde, New York in 1875. She attended Syracuse University majoring in journalism. During summer break of 1893, she traveled to California with friends. They appeared in a play in Sacramento where Fremont was in the audience. A few months later, on August 22 they were married. She had a strong interest in history and improving society. Her writing career covered novels, non-fiction, interviews, essays, and articles tackling social issues. She traveled around the country interviewing the likes of labor organizer Mother Jones, actress Sarah Bernhardt, and survivors of The Donner Party.

Older was known as a "muckraker" - a crusading journalist of the Progressive Age (1890-1920), that time of intense social and political reform. They thought concerned government involvement could improve people's lives in many ways, instead of exploitation by big business and corporate interests. Progressive reformers sought to expand the regulatory power of the federal government in order to expose corruption, eliminate unfair business practices, and improve society. This time period saw the rise of the Labor Unions giving workers protection and a voice against the powerful private sector magnates as well as the banks.

San Francisco became the first completely closed shop city in the U.S. - only union members were allowed to work there. In November 1901, the Union Labor Party was formed promoting a new mayoral candidate named Eugene Schmitz. He was backed by the powerful political boss Abe Ruef. By 1905, when Schmitz was nominated for his second term, the party

controlled all 18 seats on the board of supervisors. Vast amounts of “boodle” or graft was extracted from any business that needed the supervisor’s permission to do business in San Francisco. They had become so greedy and reckless that they had begun to arouse suspicion.

In January 1906, four powerful men met at the University Club atop Nob Hill. They were there to plot the end of Mayor Schmitz, Boss Abe Ruef, and the graft fueled City Hall. This formidable team was Rudolph Spreckels - youngest heir to the sugar fortune and president of the 1st National Bank, former mayor James Phelan, aggressive prosecutor Francis Heney, and Older. Soon, one of America’s greatest detectives William Burns would arrive, sent by President Theodore Roosevelt. Spreckels and Phelan funded the crusade.

There were so many easy opportunities for the City Government supervisors to get large “boodle” bribes that they became reckless, and according to Abe Ruef, “so greedy they would eat the paint off a house.”

On the morning of April 18, 1906, a huge earthquake and subsequent fires raged through the city for days causing incredible destruction. Incredibly, the board was still accepting payoffs that capitalized on the city’s misfortune, notably from The Home Telephone Co (later AT&T) - who received a 50-year contract for city phone services - and United Railroad - who wished to install an overhead wire trolley system instead of the underground system the Graft Hunters wanted. Their system would have no ugly and dangerous visible wires. A week after the quake, United Railroad received a staggering \$200,000 in gold. It was exchanged at the mint for small bills, many sent in from all over the world for earthquake relief. Instead, they were distributed among the corrupt supervisors to obtain the rail contract. This heinous act was the last straw for the Graft Hunters.

Traps were set, but eventually only Ruef and two telephone executives were found guilty. All 18 supervisors testified in exchange for total immunity. Mayor Schmitz evaded prison on a technicality, but in December 1908 Ruef went to San Quentin sentenced to 14 years. Fremont Older felt it was unfair he was made the lone scapegoat and lobbied for his release, which was granted in 1912. Schmitz returned as a supervisor in 1917 and won the first of several terms. It depressed Older that even his powerful allies were unable to stop this vice and corruption.

Fremont and Cora lived in San Francisco hotels starting in 1893. Cora longed for a home of her own she could landscape instead of tending potted plants on the balcony. In 1912, the Olders and several friends like Clarence Darrow considered founding an “artists’ colony” in the

Santa Clara Valley, where the group would create their own community of separate homes and a clubhouse to socialize. Older met with Charlie Fay, a real estate broker and friend of James D. Phelan. He knew of a fruit ranch in Cupertino owned by retiring orchard keeper William Pfeffer, located on Prospect Road. Thinking that this would be a shared endeavor, Fremont made plans to start financing the large property. Unfortunately, everyone else dropped out of the plan and the Olders were left with a large mortgage partially paid for by Cora's mother.

They were confident the approximately \$1800.00 a year yield from the fruit crop would help pay all expenses they had been stuck with. Workers would be needed for the harvesting, and Fremont looked to paroled convicts that he was helping with integration back into society. This would give the men room and board and help pay the bills. Cora purchased an additional 54-acre hay field with the aim of turning it into a walnut orchard. "Old Charlie" Dorsey, a long-time ex-prisoner friend, was named foreman. In 1911, Governor Hiram Johnson paroled Charlie as a Christmas present. The Olders officially moved in December 18, 1914. Fremont Older had many notable friends who were guests at Woodhills. Among them were attorneys Lincoln Steffans and Clarence Darrow, poet Carl Sandburg as well as his next-door neighbor, the flamboyant dentist Edgar Randolph "Painless" Parker.

Older was a great admirer of Mark Twain and, like the humorist, loved collecting stories of people from all walks of life. This variety was reflected in the Bulletin with its pioneering art department. He had 25 illustrators and designers, and all were talented. They created eye-catching art that enhanced sections like sports (developed by Cora's brother Hiland Baggerly), serialized fiction, and the latest fashions for women. The puzzle contests offered amazing prizes, but each entry had to be on the original entry form from the paper - this helped with selling more copies. When he believed in a reporter, writer or artist he encouraged them with enthusiasm both generous and creative. He hired on merit and discovered women such as Bessie Beatty, the first female journalist to enter Russia during the revolution. Later, she founded the magazine McCall's. Other alumni were Robert Ripley, Rube Goldberg, Sinclair Lewis, Edgar "Scoop" Gleason, and Rose Wilder Lane known for later writing the "Little House on the Prairie" books with her mother Laura Ingalls Wilder. There were many more, all who held Older in the highest regard. Working at the Bulletin and later the Call was a more useful education than attending any formal school of Journalism.

Fremont Older was a pioneering publisher in many ways. Besides giving opportunities to women, he shone a spotlight on members of society that were not merely voiceless. Some of the public preferred that they never be acknowledged at all. Prisoners and felons were one such group. He published his friend Jack Black's memoir "You Can't Win", as well as using paroled laborers on Woodhills and other jobs. He had been a champion of working people in the graft trials, and in 1913 The Bulletin published daily installments of the autobiography of "Alice", an anonymous prostitute. This had a huge impact on the society of the time, as alongside Alice's story the paper ran letters to the editor, with many of them written by other prostitutes and working class women who had never been able to share their experiences in such a candid way. Soon, people from different classes began to dialogue through the letter columns in ways never known before. This series sparked what is believed to be the first sex worker strike in modern U.S. history. It was organized in 1917 by Fremont Older and the madams Reggie Gamble and Maude Spencer against City Hall's closing of the Barbary Coast district and the eviction of all brothel workers.

Living in the city had changed Older's mindset on crime and punishment. He once thought that harsh punishment like whipping posts and convict rock piles were the path to reform. But his very first reporting job - to a gunfight in the Barbary Coast - left him shaken. From this "night of horrors" he began to turn his influence into more progressive solutions to social problems.

In 1916, WWI was devastating Europe but so far the USA had stayed out of the conflict. The government, however, was in favor of bolstering support for the military and general citizen awareness in case the war affected America, who entered in April 1917. The labor unions felt the movement was just a way for industries like munition makers to get big government contracts. Also, it would possibly lead to a draft which was not wanted by the working class.

Parades happened all over the U.S. - The SF parade occurred on July 22, 1916. There were a lot of groups who opposed it. In fact, leaflets were distributed warning of "a violent protest". It was the largest parade ever held in The City with an estimated 51,329 marchers, 2,134 organizations and 52 bands. It began at 1:30 PM at Steuart and Market streets very close to the Ferry Building on the Embarcadero, led by Mayor "Sunny Jim" Rolph. At approximately 1:40 PM, what was described as a "short dark-complexioned man in a battered felt hat" set a large tan suitcase in front of a brick wall around the corner from the entrance of the Ferry

Exchange Saloon on Steuart. At 2:06 PM, it exploded. 10 people were killed and 40 were injured - some severely.

A labor organizer and revolutionary named Tom Mooney and his assistant Warren Billings were framed for the bombing, even though there was photographic evidence that they were nowhere near the blast site. The SF District Attorney Charles Frickert didn't care about that. He despised Mooney and was determined to pin the crime on him and Billings. They were found guilty in February 1917 due to false testimony, and Mooney was sentenced to death. Huge protests were held all around the world. For the last 15 years of Fremont Older's life, his main cause was the release of the two men, as he had other evidence they were not guilty. Older found letters written by the star witness that he was not even IN San Francisco on the day of the parade, as well as he was motivated by the large reward for information. President Woodrow Wilson was so alarmed by the anger of protestors that he had the Governor commute Mooney's sentence to life. Despite increasing public disapproval, Mooney and Billings remained in prison until 1939 when Governor Culbert Olson was elected and paroled both men. Sadly, Fremont Older did not live to see them free as he died March 3, 1934 at age 78. Tom Mooney died in 1942, Warren Billings lived until September 5, 1972.

The SF Bulletin lost subscribers and revenue rapidly after Older departed. In 1927, William Randolph Hearst purchased it and merged it with the Call. At age 73, Older became editor of the new SF Call-Bulletin. He had always been interested in memoir writing and started a series of columns giving his opinion on current events and other topics. He loved this new career and wrote so many articles he was months ahead in content creation. He said these were his happiest days as a newspaper man.

On March 3, 1935, Fremont and Cora, along with their chauffeur and friend Mary D'Antonio, drove to Sacramento to attend a flower show. They wanted to choose camellias to plant at Woodhills. He chose three in his favorite colors of white & red. For the drive home, he requested to take the wheel with the chauffeur next to him and the ladies in the back. They had not traveled far when the car started slowing down and drifted to a stop on the side of the road. His head bowed forward and his hands slipped from the wheel. Fremont Older had suffered a fatal heart attack.

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The chauffeur looked at the speedometer and noticed the needle was stuck at 30. In newspaper jargon, 30 is the sign left by the printer that a story was absolutely ended and no more copy would be forthcoming.

Cora continued to live at Woodhills with her dogs and some friends until she passed on September 26, 1968.