

## BEING A DOCENT AT THE CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### WHAT IS A DOCENT?

The word *docent* comes from the Latin word *docere* “to teach.”

### The role of unpaid volunteer docents at CHS is three-fold:

1. They serve as hosts to provide a welcoming atmosphere. In many cases they are the museum’s “front-line” representatives.
2. They serve as interpreters of the museum’s exhibitions, helping to give visitors a deeper understanding and appreciation of the themes, objects, and stories in the exhibition.
3. They assist in preserving the collections by providing auxiliary security in exhibition areas during their shifts.

**Docents must strive to actively involve visitors in the interpretation, giving them the tools of visual literacy. They should help visitors to attain some sort of “ownership” of the exhibition and to include history in their own lives.**

In order to do this, docents should provide a broader understanding of the exhibition’s concepts and provide a context for the collections with which they are working.

- **Docents should strive for objectivity.** The goal of a good tour or program is to enable visitors to think for themselves about history and culture. In addition, docents must be sensitive to visitors’ differences – learning style, cultural backgrounds, age level, and special needs.
- ***Today’s audience is as varied as objects on display and requires open-mindedness, flexibility and respect.***

### CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD DOCENT

The following qualities make a good docent:

1. A sincere and genuine interest in people of all ages.
2. A love for and excitement about learning and teaching.
3. Attention to detail and accuracy.
4. A sense of flexibility and cooperation.
5. An attitude of tolerance and respect for all people’s points of view.

**It is the policy of the California Historical Society that all staff members/volunteers respect visitors' opinions. Staff proposing negative or overly subjective views in public on historic objects, exhibitions, or people will receive only one warning. A third incident will result in dismissal. This will be based on the Volunteer Coordinator's/CHS Staff observations as well as the Group Tour evaluations.**

CHS Docents are:

1. **PREPARED** – This means not only knowing your material, but also being on time (actually a bit early is better, since your group may show up early), and having everything you need for an outreach program or activities/projects in the museum (such as our History for Half Pints family event).
2. **FRIENDLY** – You are the host/hostess, the front line of the museum. Enthusiasm is contagious!
3. **GOOD VOICE/GOOD DRESS** – This relates back to being a good host/hostess. You may want to practice speaking with a tape recorder or have someone follow you to see if your voice is loud enough, and always remember to face your audience for the best projection and so that those who lip read can see you. Communication includes the eyes and face!
4. **INTERACTIVE** – The best tour is one in which the audience feels that they have participated. Not only does it help them to remember more of what they have seen and heard, it gives them a sense of ownership. In addition, this demonstrates that the docent is responsive to the audience's interests and needs.
5. **RESPECTFUL** – We all come from different backgrounds and have unique beliefs and opinions. It is important to respect each person's views and be open-minded to new information. It is also important to remember that our own views should not be a part of the tour—we are here to guide visitors.

**Our role is to connect history to visitors' lives so be RELEVANT!**

6. **READ AN AUDIENCE** – Age levels, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds enter into every tour. With practice you can learn to read your audience and see what methods of touring suit them best, what learning styles are represented, and if you are keeping their attention. **Timing is another aspect of reading your audience – let them set the pace with their interest level, but remember to control the over-talker, etc.**
7. **GOOD JUDGEMENT** – This will help to control visitors and help in emergency situations.
8. **YOU WONT KNOW EVERYTHING** – While preparation is mandatory, we can't know everything. Admit when you don't and assist the visitor in finding out.

#### **QUALIFICATIONS AND COMMITMENTS**

1. Attend all training sessions; make-up sessions are not common, so if you are unable to attend, please inform your Volunteer Coordinator and add an additional READING DAY or walkthrough independently.

2. Docents MUST attend at least one or more public programs related to the exhibition.
3. Docents MUST commit to doing spotlight tours for at least two hours during the public opening.
4. Undergo a yearly evaluation with the Docent Coordinator.
5. Docents MUST commit to volunteering at CHS for the length of the exhibition.

**Docents MUST provide at least two weeks' notice prior to leaving and must complete all tours assigned to them previous to their leaving date.**

6. Commit to at least three shifts per month (shifts equal one to two hours).

**Leaves of absence must be sent over to the Volunteer Coordinator two weeks in advance.**

7. Keep track of all hours volunteered (training and working) on the Your Volunteers. These hours are important for grant applications.
8. Be able to use an online shift sign up system and email to be in contact with your Docent Coordinator.
9. Arrange for your own substitute and notify your superior of changes. In the case of an emergency, notify the office by 8:30 am. **Please call 415-318-1848, ext. 222, when needed.**

## **BENEFITS AND ENRICHMENT**

The California Historical Society aims to ensure that all volunteers benefit from and feel enriched by their experience as a Docent/Volunteer. We hope each volunteer benefits from the educational opportunities and camaraderie provided by the docent program.

1. Volunteer lunches/celebratory volunteer night.
2. Letters of recommendation for students/job opportunities.
3. Museum newsletters (and membership).
4. Free copies of selected museum publications.
5. Invitations to special VIP events such as Exhibition VIP reception, Historic Libations, and other special member and donor events.

## **TRAINING FORMAT**

(Please note that these requirements may change from year to year)

### **Training Course**

The California Historical Society hopes to prepare prospective docents to deal with a variety of educational situations. As a result the initial training course is rather extensive, consisting of:

- One or more walk-throughs of the exhibition with the curator(s).
- One-on-one sessions with the Volunteer Coordinator.
- Shadow current docents, if needed.

**The training course is designed to meet the following goals:**

1. Develop exhibition literacy.

2. Develop familiarity with the California Historical Society's permanent collection/Collection/Archives training.
3. Provide a general history of the time period around the exhibition.
4. Train docents in interactive museum education and touring techniques.
5. Develop audience sensitivity.

## **EVALUATION**

1. Docents will do a one-on-one with the Volunteer Coordinator prior to their first tour.
2. Docents will be evaluated during their first tour by the Volunteer Coordinator.
3. Docents will participate in a yearly volunteer review with the Volunteer/Docent Coordinator. This review will consist of a self-evaluation form and discussion with the Volunteer/Docent Coordinator. Volunteer/Docent Coordinator will tour the galleries with docents from time to time to spot check training needs. Evaluation forms for tours will be made available to all docents.
4. Docents are encouraged to participate in peer review to help each other grow as tour guides.
5. Docents are encouraged to make suggestions about training or express needs or areas of confusion.

## **SPECIFIC TO OUR CITY RISING: SAN FRANCISCO AND THE 1915 WORLD'S FAIR EXHIBITION**

At the California Historical Society  
678 Mission Street, San Francisco  
February 22–December 4, 2015

At the Palace of Fine Arts  
3301 Lyon Street, San Francisco  
February 20–December 4, 2015

- Docents are expected to be fluent and knowledgeable of both exhibitions.
- Docents are expected to do tours of BOTH exhibitions, at the California Historical Society and at the Palace of Fine Arts when applicable, necessary, and within the docent's means. Docents may choose their schedule at both locations and it must be consistent.

### **Training Specific to the *City Rising* Exhibition:**

- Walking tour of the Palace of Fine Arts with Gary Holloway/SF City Guides.
- A curator walk-through of both exhibitions.
- A close reading of our exhibition publication, *San Francisco's Jewel City*, by Laura A. Ackley.