



California Historical Society opens Golden Gate Bridge exhibit to honor span's 75th anniversary

By Mark Prado
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Anthea Hartig, the executive director of the California Historical Society, stands in front of a Ansel Adams photograph from 1953 titled "The Golden Gate Bridge" at the Society's building in downtown San Francisco. The California Historical Society hosts an exhibit on the Golden Gate Bridge title "A Wild Flight of Imagination: The story of the Golden Gate Bridge." The opening celebration will start at 2:30 p.m. on Sun. Feb. 26. (Special to the IJ/Douglas Zimmerman)

SAN FRANCISCO — The history of the Golden Gate Bridge has been captured by the California Historical Society with a mix of drawings, artifacts and art as part of a new exhibit that debuted this week in honor of the span's 75th birthday this year.

Bridge district officials approached the historical society about joining with them in a partnership to display photos, letters and other memorabilia that had largely rested in storage, invisible to the public. The historical society also tapped its own archive for the gallery, and others contributed as well. The result: "A Wild Flight of the Imagination: The Story of the Golden Gate Bridge."

There are more than 300 items as part of the showing that take visitors

through a multilayered narrative from the Golden Gate before the bridge to plans for the bridge and then to its construction.

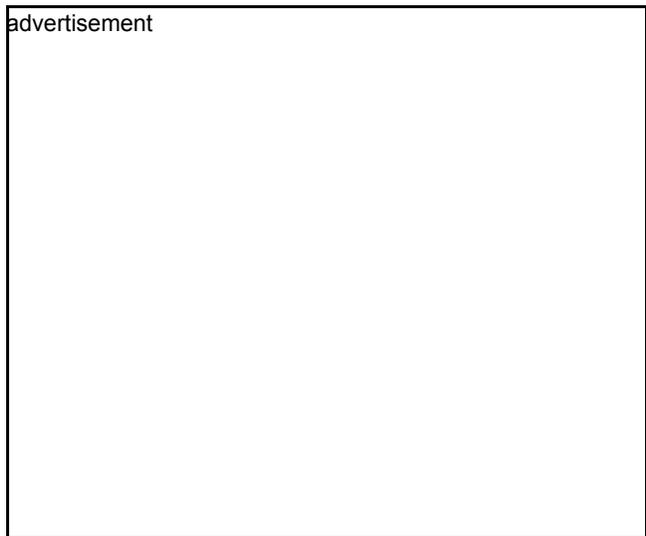
Jessica Hough, curator of the exhibit, initially thought it would be hard to fill the historical society's Mission Street museum — which now has its front painted international orange, the color of the span.

"I had to edit, there was so much material," she said. "I was looking for the most interesting items. The challenge is to tell the story with objects."

Hough said some of the more interesting items are photos of the making of the steel for the bridge in Pennsylvania.

"The photographs of the steel being made in the factory are stunningly beautiful," Hough said. "You wouldn't expect it,

but the light is unbelievable."



The first room inside the gallery features a panoramic black-and-white photo of the span taken by Ansel Adams from Baker Beach in San Francisco. Like many in the area, the famed photographer was inspired by the bridge.

"He was adamantly opposed to the bridge initially; he thought it would ruin the natural beauty of the gate, but he grew to love it," said Anthea Hartig, executive director of the historical society.

Adams wasn't alone in his initial reluctance.

"The Department of War was adamantly opposed to the bridge," Hartig said. "They were concerned if the bridge was bombed it would collapse and block the gate and keep military boats trapped in the bay."

But the war department relented. The exhibit features a Western Union telegram to Mayor "Sunny Jim" Rolph of San Francisco, dated Dec. 29, 1924, alerting him that the bridge had the department's blessings.

There also was pressure from Bay Area residents to make the bridge aesthetically pleasing.

"It is no accident it was so beautiful," Hough said. "There was so much put in to the creative process. The engineering was very elegant and it had to because there was pressure from the community to make it

so."



Anthea Hartig, the executive director of the California Historical Society, shows the logo for the opening ceremonies of the Golden Gate Bridge, part of an exhibit called "A Wild Flight of Imagination: The story of the Golden Gate Bridge" at the Society's building in downtown San Francisco. The California Historical Society hosts the opening celebration for the exhibit on Sun. Feb. 26, 2012 at 2:30 p.m. (Special to the IJ/Douglas Zimmerman)

Even the color was argued, ultimately successfully by consulting architect Irving F. Morrow. A letter addressing the issue is part of the collection. Bridges were typically a silver color in the 1930s.

"His letter is a poetic argument for this color, a rusty orange, red, because it picks up the autumnal glow of the Marin Headlands," Hartig said.

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Also on display is a detailed sketch of the span by artist Ray Strong. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was so impressed with the work, and with construction of the bridge, he had a full painting of it hung in the White House.

"FDR hand-picked it because he saw the bridge as such a symbol of hope during the Depression," Hartig said.

A scrapbook of newspaper clippings from the late 1920s traces the media campaign to convince people to vote and bond themselves to raise money to build the span.

Along those same lines, paintings by Maynard Dixon and Chesley Bonestell — the latter known for art depicting space before it was explored — also are part of the exhibit as they put on canvas their images of what the bridge would ultimately look like.

"They were hired by the bridge and it was really marketing to let the public know what they were getting for their money," Hartig said.

Artwork depicting American Indians at the gate and ferries — the way people spanned the gate before the bridge — also are featured in the exhibit. Original tools, a hard hat, cable samples and an opportunity to hold a rivet from the bridge gives visitors a more physical sense of the massive project.

Hartig wants the exhibit to get people thinking about what it took to build the span.

"I hope people get the true sense of the power of an idea," she said. "It's a powerful American story. People also may walk away

wondering if this could be done today. Ideally, history should get you thinking about your past, present and future."

Contact Mark Prado via email at mprado@marinij.com

GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE EXHIBIT

The new exhibition "A Wild Flight of the Imagination: The Story of the Golden Gate Bridge" is being shown at the California Historical Society's gallery at 678 Mission St. in San Francisco. It will be open from noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday through Oct. 14. Admission is free, but there is a suggested donation of \$5.

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