

Bay Area history exhibit aided by crowdsourcing

BY JASON DEAREN
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO - The photo taken in 1942 shows singer and civil rights activist Paul Robeson serenading a sea of black and white workers at Oakland's Moore Dry Dock Corp., one of the San Francisco Bay Area's first integrated shipping yards.

Early this month, Rue Mapp - whose father was a Moore dockworker - scanned the old picture she had found at the Oakland Public Library into a computer at the California Historical Society.

The image was beamed onto a screen, instantly becoming part of the society's new experimental exhibit of San Francisco Bay history.

"Moore Dry Dock represented this new economic and social frontier for African Americans to have the chance to prosper and thrive, no longer under the shadow of the Jim Crow South - and my dad did just that," said Mapp,

Dan Walters' column will return April 28.

42. "The Robeson photo captured my imagination because he is somewhat of an enigma for my generation. And the photo locates him not only in my hometown, but also at the place my father worked."

The photograph and Mapp's family memories were little-known pieces of Bay Area history - but in an instant both became part of an academic project blending two of the region's resources: technology and people.

The 142-year-old historical society may seem an unlikely place for innovation, but its new exhibit is using crowdsourcing - organizing people online to contribute to a project - to find new stories about the bay. Historians hope the technique will help them unlock a richer, deeper historical portrait.

The project is being led by UCLA historian Jon Christensen as part of his work studying the bay's environmental history.

But the project goes beyond just Christensen's project, seeking to create an online database of photos and stories

from which historians of all stripes can benefit.

"We're trying to attract a more diverse community to contribute to the sources of history," Christensen said. "If you don't like the history that's been written, tell your own history with us."

The idea is to augment the traditional source material used by historians - often the story as told by an era's most powerful people or biggest events. Stories and historical materials from other racial and economic groups were less collected and archived, leaving gaps in the record.

The crowdsourcing project uses a website called Historypin, where anyone with computer access can upload a photo, pin the picture's location onto a Google map and set a date range for when it was made. Historians at Stanford University are also participating.

The exhibit can be found online under the Historypin "channel" YearoftheBay.org, where they'll find a map with links to the photographs sorted by geographic area and spanning more than a century of time.

Participation so far has varied from citizens such as



Eric Risberg Associated Press

Jon Voss of Historypin tries out an interactive display linked to an exhibit called "Curating the Bay: Crowdsourcing a New Environmental History" at the California Historical Society in San Francisco.

Mapp to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries, which uploaded startling images of the destruction of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake.

Christensen hopes the project will not only provide new source material for a book, but help solve mysteries surrounding some of the items already in the historical society's collection.

"This is an experiment and we don't know how it will work, but we want to find out whether crowdsourcing can be useful for scholarship," he said.



Rue Mapp prepares to scan a 1930s Berkeley photo for the exhibit that uses crowdsourcing to obtain Bay Area stories and photos.