



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

MEMORIES PROJECT: Goldstein & Co., SF Opera scene shop

Featuring: Allen Gross in conversation with Ann Farris (former SF Opera administrative and archives staff, 1969-71 and 2014-17) and Richard Sparks (former SF Opera box office and subscription manager, 1974-93)
(transcript read time ~ 20 minutes)

SF Opera Archives: Memories Project

The San Francisco Opera Archives has, since 2009, been interviewing leading participants in, or well-placed witnesses to, major events in the development of the San Francisco Opera Association.

In 2009, Ann Farris, former administrative staff, began typing notes as former staff and others shared their experiences with SF Opera and/or its affiliates. In 2013, Richard Sparks, former season ticket manager, joined the Archives volunteer team and has accompanied Farris as they interview former staff, artists and others. Later, they began audio recording interviews. Beginning in 2017, interview questions are included in subsequent Memories, as part of the interview reports. Most recently, Mary Seastrand, Marianne Welmers, Stan Dufford, and Richard Balthazar joined the Archives volunteer team assisting in the editing and electronic organization of these materials.

Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is held by the Archives of the San Francisco Opera Association for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

Interview conducted on: 11/08/2019

Allen Gross -- San Francisco Opera Affiliation:

Stagehand; Scenic Shop 1970, 1972, 1978 -1981, 1988 -1992
Goldstein & Co. Employee, 1971

[BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION]

ANN FARRIS [AF]: Allen, we are very grateful for your willingness to do this. Let's begin with the following. Do you have any knowledge about the history of Goldstein & Co.?

ALLEN GROSS [AG]: I know it was around before WW II. I seem to remember that Louis Goldstein was Rose's husband. It was his family's business. I don't know if it was a generation before or not. I have found a reference to a Goldstein Co., costumers, in a lawsuit filed in Los Angeles around 1916. The company officer at that time was a Robert Goldstein.

Goldstein's shop in San Francisco was on the south side of Market St, [Edit: between 6th and 7th] I want to say that the address 1019 Market is ringing a bell for me, for at least 71 years that I know of. I know they did the costumes for the Opera, Bohemian Grove, Bohemian Club and costume balls around. That's what they did. They had a workroom and the office on one floor and the two floors above they had more storage, a whole floor of storage.

AF: Do you have an idea what year roughly that they might have begun their business?

AG: I did a little research online this week, and have found, through the UC Riverside Digital Newspaper Collection, a February 11, 1889, Daily Alta California reference to Goldstein's and Cohn's Costume, 822 Market St. There are hundreds of additional hits in the CDNC database as Goldstein was mentioned in numerous social reports of masquerade balls and advertisements. References appear in the Napa, San Luis Obispo, Sacramento, Marin County and Chico newspapers, just to mention a few.

There are possibly two ways to ascertain its founding date. One is through Rick [Edit: Levin, grandson of Louis Goldstein]. He might know. And also, there was a City Directory that they did every year. It is on my mind right now. Somebody just sent me a City Directory from 1890. All the businesses in the City were listed.

AF: Super. We can research that. That was through City Hall?

AG: That was a private publication. City Directory, San Francisco, pick a date. When you put in a name, you will find it. That is as much I know specifically about Goldstein's ancient history.

AF: Thank you for that idea. When did you get involved with Goldstein's?

AG: I was always in and out of Goldstein's, growing up.

AF: From our previous conversation I remember you said you kind of grew up with the Goldstein family. Am I correct?

AG: I did. I grew up with the Levins – which was Rose Goldstein's daughter, Phyllis, and her husband, Derek Levin. The Levins and Rose Goldstein lived in flats in the same building on Francisco Street [Edit: in the Marina]. The Levins lived on the lower floor and then took over the mid-floor and Rose lived upstairs. I remember traipsing up and down the back stairs.

AF: Was Rose's husband dead by then?

AG: Yes, I think he was dead before I came along. I have no recollection of Louis.

Aunt Rose and Aunt Phyllis Levin [Edit: Rose's daughter] was how I called them. They always called me nephew. It was a family house.

My maternal grandmother and either Ann Levin [Edit: Phyllis' mother-in-law] or Rose, went way back. My maternal grandmother, Della, was born just outside Winnipeg and moved to San Francisco in 1920. She knew them. Part of me thinks that Ann might have been Canadian.

AF: I have a question here. Without being too intrusive can you tell me roughly how old you were when the family activity happened with the Goldstein's and you?

AG: From the day I was born.

AF: When were you born?

AG: March 1948. As soon as I came home from the hospital Phyllis was there. Rick Levin was a year or so older than me and Steve [Edit: Levin] was a little bit younger.

AF: How did you become active with them in the Market studio? By the way, what was the address?

AG: I think it was 1019 or 1035 [Edit: it was 1019]. Both of the addresses ring a bell. One of them rings a bell because my father and grandfather were in the garment manufacturing supply business. My paternal great grandfather [Edit: Louis Winer] started his business in 1903. They sold the buttons and linings, interfacing, coat fronts [Edit: hair cloth] and shoulder pads catering to tailors and the garment trade. I started working with my Dad and Grandfather when I was five inventorying boxes and spools of thread by color. I did inventories every year of the thread, the spools of thread and having to put it down by the color. I had to make sure the dye lots matched. They trained me early to do that. I worked there every summer.

I also worked around my maternal grandmother's business. She and my grandfather, who died in 1955, had a steamship cargo salvage business. By the time I was 12, her warehouse moved onto the 1100 block of Mission, between 7th & 8th. Sometimes, I headed out the back door of the warehouse which was adjacent to the Greyhound Bus depot and crossed the alley and walked the half block over to the back door of Goldstein's – I thought it was very cool.

I started doing walking deliveries [Edit: for Louis Winer Co.] by the time I was ten all throughout the South of Market area. In 1961 that business moved to 2nd and Mission. Before that it was at 166 Eddy. It was very close to Goldstein's. I was ten taking boxes of thread and stuff to the various customers and Goldstein's was one of the places I was delivering to. It was always kind of fun. I would go in there and Rose would drop whatever she was doing and make a fuss. I always found it interesting, racks and racks of costumes. I did that right through high school and a few years of college. At that point I was doing driving deliveries. When my Dad's driver would take a vacation, I would fill in.

I always felt really close with Auntie Phyllis. We had a very special relationship my whole life. We got each other. Then, in 1970 I went to work at the Opera for Ivan [Edit: Van Perre] in the Prop Department.

AF: How did that happen?

AG: In the Spring of 1970 I was taking some theater classes at State [Edit: San Francisco State University]. I had a teacher, Lilli Rogers who was a makeup person at the Opera.

She was teaching the theater history class. She knew Rose. But I never played on that. One day, she said to me that "You probably would do well at the Opera. It would be good for you." I said that that would be cool to have a summer job at the Opera.

She called Ivan Van Perre. She was close with Ivan and sent me to see Ivan. Ivan hired me. A few weeks later I went down to the Union Office to see Eddie Powell, [Edit: the Business Agent]. I had a beard -- that didn't go over well. I stayed for the season, working as a member of the Prop Crew in the house and the out-of-house rehearsals at Norse [Edit: Norse Auditorium a few blocks from the Opera]. Do you remember Tom "Moose" [Edit: Edwards]?

AF: Yes, I do.

AG: He was a stagehand [Edit: at the Opera House]. "Moose" who by legend is credited for saving the signing ceremony for the United Nations Charter. There was some issue with syncing up the interface of worldwide network of teletypes [Edit: newswire] and radio broadcasts for the simultaneous translations. He always carried, under his arms, stacks of cigar boxes full of screws, nuts, and electrical parts. Somehow or other he had just the right parts in the cigar boxes to cobble together the teletype network just in time for the ceremony.

By time I met him in 1970 he was fairly old and in poor health he was nearing retirement, so they found a job for him as the out-of-house carpenter at Norse [Edit: Auditorium]. Ivan assigned me as the out-of-house prop department guy.

So, I did that in addition to the other general Prop Department tasks such as laying ground cloths, sweeping and vacuuming the stage, setting up the orchestra pit, pulling and repairing props from storage, moving props onto and off of the sets and storage, etc. The Prop Department liaised with Goldstein's. We would send the costume props up to them to make sure they worked, swords or whatever. I worked a lot up in the spear room off of 2F and 1F, [Edit: off the 4th floor Courtyard side of the Opera House], kind of half a flight down. I did that.

Then the season ended and I went back to school.

During that season we did Ponnelle's *Otello*. The construction technique was very old-school (canvas-covered flats with Styrofoam appliqued to the canvas with hot melted animal glue), it smelled horrendous when it got hot under the lights. They glued the foam block onto the canvas, the muslin and duck flats. Then they distressed it to look like quarried stone by spraying acetone and carving the surface. It was all fine until the temperature changed, and then, from the heat, big sections would fall off.

I was really aware that the hot glue technique wasn't working very well and when I got back to SF State in the Spring I decided to take, besides the theater classes, plastic classes in the industrial design department. I thought that I might get a chance to come up with a new technique. It might be interesting. I did that. Then I was planning to go back and work for Ivan for the Summer and maybe even the Fall again. Before I was able to check in with Ivan, Phyllis Levin called me. At that point her mother, Rose [Edit: Goldstein], wasn't up to running the business anymore. And Phyllis was going to try and take over. She asked me to come and help, to be the gofer and have my eyes open and make sure that everything was running okay. I was 23.

And I had been around the Opera House and in and out for Goldstein's. And, I never, ever said no to Phyllis. I went to work for her at Goldstein's for the 1971 season. There was the *Manon*. Hal George was the designer. And he brought with him his assistant.

AF: Do you know what her name was?

AG: No, I don't.

AF: Okay, I will look in the program. Maybe it is there. [Edit: not found in programs]

AG: She was very loyal to Hal. And, whatever he wanted she did even if it meant buying the most expensive fabrics she could from New York as opposed to going locally which had been done before. Trying to get stuff locally, brocades and other stuff. She kept charging stuff to Goldstein's. And, when the bills came in and, Phyllis said: "where is it?" Sometimes they would buy stuff, dye it, cut it, and then not use it and put it into the back of the workroom. I remember, because I worked props at the House, it was such a small company and everybody kind of knew each other. I knew John Priest [Edit: San Francisco Opera Technical Director] from working the 1970 season.

We got to opening night and the costumes, the principal costumes had to be finished, final finish and some of the chorus people. One of the things I did for Goldstein's was drive the van and took everything up to the House. It was five o'clock and I loaded the costumes into the van. I went through my checklist, and a number of the costumes weren't there. I looked and looked and realized that there was something missing. Hal's assistant had not finished one or two of the costumes. I found them hidden on a rack outside of the workroom. They were important. I took them down and I heard her say they weren't ready. I said: well, they are going. I put them in the van. John was out in the parking lot [Edit: of the Opera House].

AF: John Priest?

AG: John Priest, for some reason he came out and Craig Hampton. The costumes got there. It was literally crazy.

AF: I'll say. In other words, they didn't have all the costumes for the dress rehearsal?

AG: This was for opening night.

No, they didn't. Or they took stuff back [Edit: after the Dress Rehearsal]. They didn't have all the costumes for the *Manon* dress rehearsal. Hal's assistant was working on doing final finishing touches on everything. She was pretty highly strung. It wasn't her money. Goldstein's, at that point, was probably doing business on a cost-plus basis for the Opera. I can't imagine it was on a contract. When it was all done there wasn't a cash flow. And that is when Phyllis decided to close the business, sell the business off, actually. And reduce the stock. So, they weren't having so much of the non-opera stuff. People rented costumes for Halloween. In the 40s and 50s and 60s all the social clubs in town would have masquerade balls. That market had dried up by 1970. They provided all the costumes for that. I don't think there was another costume house in town.

AF: Do you have any idea of the steps that Phyllis went through to sell to the Opera?

AG: I don't know all of it. I just have a general sense of it. The business couldn't stay open. I think she approached the Opera and said: "We have all these costumes that essentially are yours. You essentially bought them. We have been warehousing them, we have been refurbishing them and altering them and a lot of the choral costumes were repositioned for other shows. The principals and stuff." I think she said: "I can't do this anymore. If you want your costumes, we have to figure something out."

In the spring of 1972, my first wife and I started taking costumes out to the Flea Market at the drive-in theater out on Tunnel Avenue in Brisbane on Saturday and Sundays; we had a stall out there selling stuff for other people as well. In the off-season we had a stall so we could afford to go to school. We sold hundreds of costumes out there. Then there was a big sale somewhere. I forget exactly where it was. I think my mother helped. I think there was a sale up at the [Edit: Goldstein's] shop on Market Street. That was spring/summer 1972.

In the shop, Rose had the office. The office was a glass-enclosed office toward the middle of the shop. All of these wonderful costume books stacked up all over the place. Bookshelves, portfolios, renderings. It was just stacked. I have always wondered what Steve Levin [Edit: Rick's brother] and Rick did with that. It was up to them. It was an amazing collection. It ought to have gone to a Library. It was just staggering.

AF: That is a question we can put to Rick?

AG: Yes, I don't think – Lots of stuff out of the 1800s. They brought back lots of stuff that they were using as source material.

AF: In order to know how to design and cut?

AG: Right. John Bauer, I think, who did inventory and kept track of the Men's stuff. Marcella was the draper and ran the workroom. There was a Polish guy who came over after the War, short fella, who had pickled herring for lunch every day and nobody could get close to him. He was there, with his shirt sleeves rolled up and sleeve protectors and a vest [Edit: where he kept his chalk marker] and a tape measure around his neck. Central casting.

AF: Is it Hyman?

AG: Rick may remember better than I. There was another fella who tracked the women's stuff.

AF: It wasn't Walter [Edit: Mahony], was it?

AG: Walter was there, too. That's true. I forgot about Walter. Walter was Rose's assistant, I think. He was like second in command. Nice guy.

AF: Yes, wonderful person.

AG: There were two women who did the pressing and a couple of women who did the alterations, mostly of the women's stuff. One of the things that I did, the season I was there, was to deal with repairing the chain mail and pull the armor and swords. When I wasn't doing goffering. I was upstairs on the other floor dealing with that stuff.

AF: Would that have been the summer 1971 or 72?

AG: 1971. By 1972 I was back at school. I had taken three plastics classes. In March 1972 there was a USITT [Edit: United States Institute of Theater Technology] national conference at the Hilton in San Francisco. My undergraduate TD [Edit: Technical Director] SF State, Chuck Williams, asked me if I would come and do a little workshop, a little session on plastics building scenery and props out of plastics. I prepped it and did that. John Priest came to that session. A week later I got a call from John saying: "Could you come down to the Opera House? I have some questions for you." When I got down there, he showed me renderings and models for *Tosca*, *Norma* and *Lucia* and said: "Could these be made out of plastics?"

I said to him: "Nobody has ever done anything this big, not even in Czechoslovakia." which was doing more. They were doing Svoboda stuff which was happening at that point. They had never done anything quite to this scale. There were plastic elements.

John Priest said: "What do we need to do?"

I said: "John, this has never been done before. I have no idea. You are going to need a foam machine, a fiberglass machine, special ventilation, etc. It is a lot of money." And, he said "Great, thanks."

A few weeks later, I went off east to interview for graduate school. I got back on Friday night and the phone rang and it was Eddie Powell who said: "Monday morning, 8 AM, see Pierre at the Opera Scene Shop" and hung up. I was still at my last semester, six weeks away from my last semester at State. I called all my profs and said: "What do I do?" Everyone said: "Don't worry about it. Take the job, it will be just fine. You will graduate."

Monday morning, I showed up at the shop with Grady Larkins. I don't know if Grady was involved in that session I did at USITT. He was a designer at the Muni Opera in St. Louis. I was the tech kind of guy. And he was kind of the artistic guy. And we did that. We set up the plastic shop.

Because we [Edit: the Opera Company] had an audience involved and fiberglass was a resin system, we had to find out how flame retardant it was. UC Berkeley had a test facility in Richmond. I made a bunch of test panels. I took them over there. They did a [Edit: ASTM 84-63] Flame Spread test. We did it and it

didn't pass. So, I contacted the company who manufactured the resin, Reichhold Chemical in New Jersey, and they had to add flame retardant to the polyester resin. And we worked it out and they put a flame retardant in the fiberglass resin.

AF: Wow.

AG: And they sent it back out. We did more test panels. And they passed. There was a lot of smoke generation. But the fire department didn't care about the smoke generation. They cared about the flame test. So, we were able to provide that data on the material to the SF Fire Department. They signed off on it.

AF: Now, this was for the Fall of 1972. Right?

AG: Right.

AF: So, it was like May and June when you are doing all these tests? And, you had a tech coming up.

AG: Yes, we had the Summer Tech. We started with the *Norma* in the shop. Yes, there was a big overhang in *Norma*. That wasn't Carl Toms [Edit: Stage Designer] was it?

AF: We will check.

Richard Sparks [RS]: It was Jose Varona. [Edit: Stage Designer]

AG: Yea, yea. We made things that went on the floating rake. That probably doesn't mean much to anybody but those folks who knew of our raker boxes. Some of them had nosings and some were raked and some were floating rakes. From the front it appeared they did not touch the stage floor. That was a floating rake. We did a bunch of things, plywood and covered them in foam and they got carved, and they fit on the raker boxes, keyed into the raker boxes.

There was one scene where there had to be a counter-rake rock in the middle of the set. We were putting it together and putting on the Visqueen [Edit: plastic sheeting], tacking that in and then spraying the foam into that. Then we used more plastics. When it got carried out it was reasonably light weight, and it was dropped in. That is how we did that. The ceiling panels were done using light-weight plywood and did these and columns that were reinforced by fiber-glass string, essentially, for structure to be able to make it a truss. It had this big overhang with things that came over it. Again, it was all the way downstage to the proscenium line. There wasn't any way to get any fly cables to it. I digress from what we were talking about.

AF: It seems to me that you are talking in this last part about it being at stage level – there were a lot of people walking on it.

AG: Yes, not the cantilever part [Edit: which was the ceiling/roof structure] that was above it. The back of it was open.

AF: But some of what you were describing sounded as though it was stage-level.

AG: Yes. It was the platform. The floating raker was the platform and that had foam sprayed on which was then fiber glassed to be able to get the texture.

AF: And, then it could be painted.

AG: Yes.

AF: Boy, you really set the Opera up.

AG: Yeah. We did that just for that year. I didn't go back to the Opera. I was heading off to graduate school. That was 1973. I didn't go back to the Opera. Mike Wilcox and Don Watson took things over. They ran the fiberglass and foam machines.

AF: So, you taught them all.

AG: We taught each other. Nobody had ever done this before. We made it up as we went along.

AF: What fun.

AG: Act III *Tosca* was the ramparts and we needed a texture. The rigid foam didn't work well very well. We tried something using flexible foam, two-part flexible urethane foam and poured that on the flats but it set up a grid of Vaseline-coated battens that had been on the face of the flats. That was how we got the big quarry stones, the big stones. Because it was the flexible foam and we used sticks to knock it down while it was foaming. It finished with a skin. It was very rounded, textural. Not like the *Lucia* which was carved sharp. The trees for *Lucia* had a wire armature and then sprayed the foam and carved it and then sprayed fiber glass resin on it. The three shows were done very differently. And none of this had been done before.

AF: To integrate Pierre [Edit: Cayard] into this. Pierre was obviously the Master.

AG: Master Shop Carpenter.

AF: So, he was overseeing all of this?

AG: Yes, absolutely. He was overseeing it. Pierre could do anything. It wasn't until the mid-late 70's we had a metal shop. Pierre knew wood. He designed the raker-boxes system.

The shop had moved from Grove St. to Indiana St. in 1968 or so. The new shop was 2 blocks long and 1/2 block wide, so there was plenty of space to set up the plastics shop in addition to the wood/metal, drapery, and paint shops. Plus, we were able to store dozens of previous productions. In those days, the Company built 3 to 5 new shows a season. There were about 11 or 12 shows onstage for a Fall Season as well as mounting revivals and sets rented from other companies. So, a lot of productions were being worked on simultaneously.

AF: Okay, let's go back to Goldstein's. Anything you remember about the operational change that happened in 1972? Basically, by Fall season of 1972 Goldstein's was no longer in charge, as the costumes were now under the SF Opera's care? Is that correct? That must have happened in the summertime, would you suggest?

AG: I am not recalling. Rick probably does. I am sure his Mom talked to him about it.

AF: In 1972, how old were you?

AG: Twenty-four.

AF: So, Rick would have been 25? It gives me and Richard a context for the end of Goldstein's.

AF: He probably was at graduate school. He went to Stanford for his undergraduate work. I don't remember if he went to Yale first and then to Oxford (or the other way around). By 1970, he and his wife Jane finished their classes at Stanford and left SF for graduate school. They were so damn smart.

[Much laughter]

AF: You know what, Rose was so damn smart.

AG: Rose was. It was very funny. Phyllis didn't go to Lowell High School like all the Jewish kids did. Rose went to Dominican. She was boarded up at Dominican.

AF: She had an interesting family that allowed her to do that.

AG: She [Edit: Phyllis] married Derek Levin. He was a liquor guy. Haig & Haig? There were three liquor houses in the City, [Edit: Sobel, Baruh?] and the one that Derek was at. They were all friends of my parents. All of us kids from the three families were of the same age group. We all grew up together. Some of us grew up down the Peninsula. Some of us grew up in the City.

When I talked about how it was at the Levin/Goldstein house. Up and down the stairs. There was a room that had a grand piano in it. It was like a salon. Whenever they did parties there was stuff around the piano. Mary Costa and I think Frank Loesser. There was someone from Tin Pan Alley. Phyllis was very close to Beverly Sills.

AF: Here's a question. Rose had a party for my former husband and myself after we had been married. She was living, at the point, down on Francisco. Was that a building that the Goldsteins/Levins owned?

AG: I believe so, yes. Rick Levin would know for sure.

AF: It was very fancy. It was very dramatic. Paneling... Is that correct?

AG: Yes. When we stayed in the City for parties, the parties were there. Sometimes I would stay with the boys at the house. During summer vacation we would take the Muni to Seals Stadium. So, it had to be 1958, 1959, before Candlestick was finished.

The families were really close. I never remember them living anyplace else. When I was born, my first three or four years we lived on Filbert Street in North Beach. My folks decided to move out of the City. And we moved down the Peninsula. In the summer we had a pool and they would come down or we would come up. When Rick started at Stanford, Rick would come over for dinner.

AF: Okay, we will get this transcribed. If you suddenly came up with an idea that you want to add back in that is just fine. Eventually we will tailor it a little tighter.

AG: Thanks for tracking me down. This is stuff I want to remember when I can. It is very emotional. A lot of stuff flooded back.

AF: Sometimes old memories need to come up to be able to get complete with them. I am glad that some of your personal memories came up. I appreciate you sharing that.

AG: Okay, thanks, be well guys.