

An Afternoon with the Archivist

Traveling through the mists of time

By Laurie Snyder



"God, how lucky can you be?" says Mary-Ellen Jones of her time as a noted historian and former archivist with The Bancroft Library. Jones is shown here early in her career, documenting tombstone carvings in Mendocino County, Calif. Photo Mary Ellen Maton

Those who would sooner poke their eyes out than peruse a history book might want to bely that thought and, instead, make the acquaintance of Mary-Ellen Jones. A resident of Orinda for nearly 50 years, she has a knack for making the study of history fun, and has dazzled everyone from famed doc-

umentarians to funeral directors. "I just don't ever remember not being interested in history. It probably stems from being born in Springfield," she shrugs. "Mother taught me to read at 4. So, I learned to read earlier than most kids. We always had books around the house, magazines.

There was no shortage of stuff to read."

Her beloved father also played a major role in fostering her passion for the past. A mechanical engineer who was forever schlepping visiting relatives around to historic sites, he often included his daughter in his adventures. On one of their outings, she ended up sitting on Abraham Lincoln's rocker.

"It wasn't cordoned off the way it is now," she says with a bit of a laugh. "It was Lincoln's home the way he lived in it."

After so many visits, her father had come to know the staff. "Apparently the custodian was bored that day, or maybe I asked a question. I must have said something that triggered it ... but [the custodian] picked me up and just plopped me there." Her Pop would later credit her becoming a history major at the University of California, Berkeley to that moment.

After graduation, she worked at the Sather Gate Book Store before accepting a position at Cal. "One of my jobs was to open the mail and separate it and put it on shelves to go to the branches. ... The books going to Bancroft Library I had to hand deliver." Bancroft's acquisitions librarian got to know her. A mentorship bloomed.

Meanwhile, Jones became transfixed by tombstones. She began researching 19th century carvers, and started studying photography - first in Berkeley, then with Ansel Adams. She attended one of his Yosemite workshops, staying on for another 10 days to pick his brain.

She also built her own darkroom, and was introduced by her Bancroft mentor to Professor George P. Hammond, the Coronado Expedition scholar and Bancroft director credited with making the library the powerhouse it is today.

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Perhaps Dr. Skinner wished he'd never brought his wife out West? Tombstone inscriptions like this one at the Pine Grove Cemetery in Nevada City, Calif., often provide genealogists with new avenues for research. Photo Mary-Ellen Jones

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