

Something About Harry

By Mary Forney

The wonderful thing about talking to people who have lived in the same place through decades of change is that they provide – to those willing to listen – a link to the past, and a personal look at local history. From the perspective of the 24/7, cap-puccino-fueled lives that many of us lead, through such people we can occasionally get a glimpse of the world as it was and the way it *could* be.

Harry Aleo provides us just such a glimpse, and he graciously agreed to share his unique memories, thoughts, and advice in a special interview with *Owners' Circle*.

The San Francisco native, who has operated Twin Peaks Properties from the same storefront location for 48 years, is quick-witted and feisty, with an energy and sparkle that belie his 86 years. He is also simply charming – the epitome of an old-fashioned gentleman, who quickly leaps to the outside of a sidewalk when walking with a woman.

Aleo claims that his two passions in life are baseball and horse racing. In the early 1940's he suffered perhaps his biggest disappointment in life: after signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers, an arm injury cut short his young, promising baseball career. But, some 60 years later, fate is making up for the earlier slight, rewarding him with that once in a lifetime horse – the Eclipse award-winning champion sprinter, Lost in the Fog.

"It's hard for me to believe I've had this good luck with that horse," Aleo said. "Everywhere I turn, I read about Lost in

the Fog. I walk over to his stall, and I look, and I think, 'This is the best sprinter in the whole country!' It just boggles my mind!"

"Boggles my mind" is apparently one of Aleo's favorite phrases. It is one he also uses to describe the changes he has seen in his neighborhood, his city, and the world in general during his lifetime. The only child of Italian immigrants, Aleo grew up just steps from his present-day office, above a grocery store that his parents owned.

"My father worked for Randolph Hearst at the Chronicle down on Front Street," said Aleo. "In those days, my dad used to walk down to the pier at lunchtime, throw his crab net in, and come home with half a sack full of fresh Dungeness crabs. I don't know if we realized how great the times were then."

Leaning back in his wooden swivel chair behind an antique



Aleo with trainer Greg Gilchrist and jockey Russell Baze.

TWIN PEAKS PROPERTIES

HARRY J. ALEO REALTOR EST. 1947



desk stacked with dusty files and papers, Aleo speaks fondly of growing up in San Francisco of the 1930's and 40's. With the familiar lyrics of "That's Life" sung by Frank Sinatra emanating from an old counter-top jukebox, listening to Aleo's vivid memories of his experiences in the neighborhood's schools – James Lick, Alvarado, Mission High, San Francisco City College – it's not difficult to believe you have been taken back to a different era, a kinder, simpler place in time.

In recalling his first job, for the Navy Department, Aleo remembers it as the start of a transition: "I worked there for a year or two, and eventually I ended up in the army, where I served three years, one overseas. I was in the 87th Infantry Division," he continued. "We landed in Scotland, and we went through France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, the Battle of the Bulge – and ended up on the Czechoslovakian border, waiting for the Russians!"

Upon returning from the war, Aleo went back to the Navy Department, where a permanent, civil service job awaited him. "I went in there, and the same people were there as when I left, sitting at the same desks, doing the same thing," Aleo chuckled. "And I said, 'Ah, no!' I quit the Navy Department and went into real estate. It was a tough decision," he said, "because I had a wife and two little kids at the time." After six months, he went into business for himself.

In 1959, Aleo bought the building that has since been the home of Twin Peaks Properties. "They wanted \$35,000 for

this building, \$5,000 down," he recalled. "Of course, I didn't have the money, so I borrowed the \$5,000 and bought it." Above the storefront office are four rental units. The property is one of several Aleo purchased over the years in and around the quaint Noe Valley district of San Francisco.

"I've been telling people since I opened up to buy something here," he said. "Even if it's not what you really want, use it as a steppingstone, because there are only 49 square miles in this city." He continued, "Houses that I sold for \$12,000 – now they're worth a million, a million and a half!"

When invited to share other advice he might have for the "younger generation," Aleo – with what is unquestionably his refreshing candor and charm – quickly offers two pearls: "The important things in life – stay healthy, number one; and, number two, don't get married too young!" As for himself, Aleo says, "I've been happily divorced for 30 years, but I've been going with the same lady now for 25 years."

When it comes to staying healthy, Aleo has his own proven method. "First thing I do is get on the scale every morning. If it says 172 pounds, I start at breakfast to cut down on my food. If it says 169, I'll have some bacon and eggs! But when it gets up there, then I just eat less, that's all."

Keeping active certainly doesn't hurt, either. "I think that's a must," Aleo says, "not only your body, but your mind. I'm busy all the time with paperwork." He continued, "So if I keep coming in here, doing what I've been doing for 50 years, I won't realize how old I'm getting to be – or that I

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“People come in to say, ‘I love your signs in the window,’ or once in a while they come in and say, ‘I hate your signs,’” said Aleo. “And I say that’s fine, you’re entitled.”

Just up the street is a frame shop that was once home to his first bookie. Aleo was 15 years old at the time, and already in love with horseracing. As a young Northern California race fan, he saw greats like Seabiscuit, Silky Sullivan, and Citation run in their glory days. But, it wasn’t until “just” 27 years ago that he took the plunge himself.

On a referral from a friend, Aleo found a young trainer by the name of Greg Gilchrist. “I went out and talked to Greg,” said Aleo. “And I said I want to get a horse for around \$3,000. Greg said, ‘You don’t want a horse for \$3,000.’ And when I asked why, he said, ‘Well, the only way I can explain it to you is that it’s like buying a used car. Do you want to buy one for \$500 or \$5,000? That’s the difference.’”

So, Aleo bought a little horse called Sonny Shy for \$10,000, got his owners’ license, and ordered his flame orange silks. Sonny Shy won his second race for Aleo. “To see my name in the *Form*, to own the horse – that was great,” he said. “So I kept buying horses every year, hoping someday to get a real good one.”

Through the years, Aleo has campaigned several accomplished runners, including Minutes Away, winner of the Grade 3 Bay Meadows Derby; and multiple stakes winner Beyond Brilliant. In 2004, Aleo told Gilchrist, “I want a good horse – a real good horse – and I’m willing to pay some more money this year!” Gilchrist found Aleo a good-looking two-year-old colt in Florida by the name of Lost in the Fog.

Lost in the Fog won his debut at Golden Gate Fields by 7 1/2 lengths, and completed his two-year-old season with a smashing victory in the Arizona Juvenile Stakes at Turf Paradise.

As a three-year-old, Lost in the Fog made seven cross-country trips, racking up eight more victories, with his only loss coming in the Breeders’ Cup Sprint at Belmont Park. “I was devastated,” said Aleo of the loss. “You win ten in a row, you expect to win that race.” But he continued, “The Eclipse Award kind of took the edge off that. Hopefully, he’ll be back bigger and stronger than ever. He’s a great horse, no doubt about it.”

Yet, Aleo remains practical about it all, talking about how very fragile

Thoroughbreds are. “They get everything – bone chips, swollen ankles, knees, hocks, viruses, colic – so that’s always in the back of your mind, too. You hope they stay fit.”

“Just one misstep, and that’s it,” said Aleo. “You’re always a step away from nothing.”

It’s an odd statement coming from someone who admits he’s been “lucky” all his life. For example, Aleo said, “I got to Paris after the war when they drew two names out of a hat, out of our whole regiment, for a three-day pass. Then, when we were in England,” he continued, “they drew two names for 48 hours in London, and I was one of them... I win all the time – it’s so funny!”

But spend some time with Aleo and you will soon discover that you’re the lucky one – lucky to have crossed paths with such a gentleman at this particular juncture in time. In his most endearing way, Aleo provides something very special – a first-hand look at a bygone era and attitude.



Aleo hugs trainer Greg Gilchrist at the Eclipse Awards.