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Charlie by the Bay

Jack Totheroh's
father

From time to time, Charlie Chaplin needed to escape what he termed the "anemic" environs of Hollywood. In 1922 he was the most famous comedian in the world, with some of his greatest films — *The Kid*, *A Dog's Life*, *The Immigrant* — already behind him, and yet, he complained, sun-warped Los Angeles had made him "lackadaisical." For a change of pace he decided to visit San Francisco, where he could scout new locations, seek fresh ideas and mull over plans for his first dramatic picture, *A Woman of Paris*. Also, that city was full of fond associations: it had been the scene of some of Chaplin's earliest successes, and its fog and drizzle pleasantly reminded him of his native London. "San Francisco I love," he told a local reporter who had trailed him in a pouring rain. "It is decidedly refreshing and more livening."

Though Chaplin's relationship with the San Francisco Bay area was never as consuming as his affair with Hollywood, it set the stage for some of the most significant events of his personal and professional life. In 1911 his association with the region got off to a happy start, when he garnered the first starring headline of his career as the leading vaudevillian at San Francisco's Empress Theater. By 1915 Chaplin was back in the Bay Area and in the "pictures," working for the Essanay Film Manufacturing Corporation at their Niles studios just southeast of San Francisco. There, Chaplin and Essanay co-owner and cowboy star G. M. "Broncho Billy" Anderson made five silent shorts: *A Night Out*, *The Champion*, *In the Park*, *A Jitney Elopement* and the landmark *The Tramp*.

Chaplin had already created the well-known figure with the baggy pants and shabby derby hat while with the Keystone film company in 1914. But with *The Tramp*, however, the character began its transformation from mere mischievous imp into the down-but-never-defeated romantic the world would come to love. One of the most persistent legends about the film has been that it was inspired by Chaplin's meeting with a hobo on the streets of San Francisco. According to the story that appeared in *The Theater* in September of 1915, Chaplin took the hobo to

a restaurant for a meal. Listening to the tale of the hobo's wanderings, Chaplin decided to make a film with himself cast as just such a wayfarer. But whatever its origins, the resulting story of a vagrant who falls hopelessly in love with a farm girl demonstrated a dramatic leap forward in Chaplin's understanding of the possibilities of moviemaking. *The Tramp* was his first film to mix humor and pathos, and the first to feature that quintessential Chaplin ending: the Tramp striding with renewed hope down that long and dusty road.

Chaplin also made other important discoveries in San Francisco. His leading lady in the Niles films was Edna Purviance, a 19-year-old with no acting experience, discovered in the Tenderloin District's Tait-Zinkand Cafe on O'Farrell Street. Purviance would appear in 34 of Chaplin's 36 films between 1915 and 1923, and prove to be one of his most enchanting leading ladies. Another important friendship struck locally was that between Chaplin and Niles cameraman Roland "Rollie" Totheroh, who eventually became Chaplin's head cameraman and supervised the photography of some of his greatest films, including *The Gold Rush* and *City Lights*.

Although Chaplin only stayed in Niles three months (after which he settled in Hollywood, constructing his own studio there in 1918), he repeatedly revisited San Francisco. One of his favorite stories told how he came to the city incognito at the height of his popularity and entered a Chaplin impersonation contest. "I did my best," he assured his friend Konrad Bercovici, who preserved the tale, "but couldn't even win the booby prize."

A preview audience of San Franciscans were also privileged to hear the Little Tramp's first words in 1935, when the city was the site of the first showing of the classic *Modern Times*. Chaplin had been concerned about the reception of that film in which he was making his "sound" debut, singing a little tune near the end of the picture. He needn't have worried: the San Franciscans applauded the song and even called for an encore. Another landmark in the Chaplin career came in 1940, when the Golden Gate International Exposi-

tion hosted the first-ever symphony performance of a Chaplin musical composition. The piece, prelude to the film *The Great Dictator*, was performed by the San Francisco Symphony. Composer Chaplin listened along with the audience of 10,000 at Treasure Island.

But perhaps Chaplin's most fateful encounter with San Francisco was in May of 1942. He arrived in the city to speak on behalf of Russian war relief, taking the place of the ailing Joseph Davies, former U.S. Ambassador to Russia. At a mass rally at Civic Auditorium, Chaplin greeted his audience with a single word "Comrades!"

"At this moment," he later wrote, "I believe my troubles began."

Although the speech was a relatively innocuous appeal for decency and understanding, it sparked the controversy over Chaplin's already suspected communist "leanings." Over the next decade he would be watched closely by the authorities — his appearances at other such rallies duly noted, his friendships monitored, his films searched for any objectionable message. An unjustified paternity suit brought his morals into question; his refusal to become a U.S. citizen, his loyalties. Hollywood turned against him. In 1957, when Chaplin embarked for a vacation in Europe, his re-entry permit into the United States was abruptly rescinded.

Charlie Chaplin never returned to San Francisco, although he retained an affectionate memory of the city, as warmly evinced in his memoirs. His legacy survives in the Bay Area in many ways. In San Francisco as elsewhere Chaplin films still weave their magic in the theaters, while in the Niles district residents and local businesses hold an annual summer event dubbed "Charlie Chaplin Days," a lively weekend of film showings, costume contests, parades, and historical tours. Some say Niles would have been forgotten entirely were it not for the Chaplin connection, and regret the fact that a Niles motion picture museum that was to have been named after him was unable to secure sufficient funding. Of course, Chaplin requires no museum to ensure the survival of his name. And in an odd way, he pays a similar compliment to the Bay Area. Recalling in his autobiography his first impressions of that region, Chaplin said that he still found something remarkable about "the freshness of San Francisco." "Nature," he wrote, "has endowed the north of California with resources that will endure ... when Hollywood has disappeared into the prehistoric tarpits of Wilshire Boulevard." —Mylène Dressler