

Did You Know....

By Clem Dougherty

Did you know ... that the Queen of San Francisco Society in the first half of the 20th Century was a woman tolerated, but not fully accepted, by the rest of San Francisco Society? Yes, it's true. Her name was Alma deBretteville Spreckels, and it was her wealth that made her society's queen. Alma was born on March 24, 1881, to a poor family living in what is now the Sunset District of San Francisco. In her teenage years she helped her mother operate a laundry business where her mother sometimes washed clothes in Washerwoman's Lagoon in what was known as Cow Hollow. Alma then delivered the clean clothes to the homes of the wealthy on Nob Hill and Pacific Heights. Seeking to better herself, Alma took up art lessons and then, to make more money, she posed nude for several artists. Alma was nearly six feet tall with a full figure described then as "Rubenesque." At the time there was a ready market in which artists sold paintings of Rubenesque nude women such as Alma to be hung in the bars on San Francisco's Cocktail Route running down Montgomery and Kearny Street to Market Street, up Market to Powell, and then up Powell St. Alma's modeling career climaxed in her becoming the semi draped model for the statue of the woman often referred to as "Winged Victory" atop the Dewey Monument placed in the middle of Union Square in San Francisco. The Dewey Monument with Alma on top of it still stands today.

Alma's life changed forever when in 1902 she met Adolph Bernard ("A.B.") Spreckels, a multimillionaire son of Claus Spreckels and a man 24 years Alma's senior. Alma then became A. B.'s mistress for the next five years. A. B. would go on later to succeed his father as President of the Spreckels Sugar Company. A.B. also had a colorful history when in 1884 he sought to avenge his father for perceived scurrilous attacks made upon Claus by Michael de Young, the editor of the S.F. Chronicle. A.B. showed up at de Young's office, announced he

was there to shoot de Young, and when the editor ran down the hall, A.B. shot him in the buttocks. Luckily, the editor survived with minor injuries. A jury later acquitted A.B., believing his temporary insanity defense. The incident, however, continued in a huge rift between Alma on one side and the de Young sisters, the daughters of Michael, on the other. Subsequently, A.B. became a model citizen and, finally succumbing to Alma's continued demands, married her in 1908. They subsequently had three children: "Little" Alma, Adolph Frederick, and Dorothy.

Alma was a woman full of energy, a lover of martinis, loud, demanding, controlling, boisterous, manipulating, and sometimes crude. She spent A.B.'s money as if there were no tomorrow. Many in San Francisco society criticized her because of her background and her behavior. One observer recalled that "if she just cared more about conforming, she'd have it made." But she loved to put her feet up on the coffee table and have a beer with the local tradesman. She made no effort to put on airs. She was a perfectly natural human being."(see Thomas Carr Howe as quoted by Scharlach, Bernice: Big Alma, p. 194) Alma preferred to associate with people she found interesting over people she considered stuffed shirt bores. Alma had a habit of saying what she thought and of not giving a "damn." Upon meeting with Harold Zellerbach, a wealthy San Francisco industrialist, the first time, and with A.P. Giannini, the President of the Bank of America, for some time, Alma blurted out before introductions could be made: "Guess what? I just found my cook in bed with the butler."(see Alma as quoted by Scharlach, Bernice: Big Alma, p. 192). A.B.'s millions gave her the advantage of being very independent.



SPREKELS MANSION

Beginning in 1910 Alma set out on one of her most sought after projects – to build a home worthy of A.B.’s wealth. The home was located at 2080 Washington St. in San Francisco. Using A.B.’s money, Alma had an existing home on the property demolished. She then acquired adjoining properties and removed their structures thereon to create one huge lot with a commanding view of San Francisco Bay. It took 3 years to build the home which was completed in 1913. The home was a three story white stone mansion flanked in the front by long, beautifully carved columns. In the basement there was a hotel-sized kitchen. The first floor included a huge hallway running the full length of the house, and a reception room, a massive ball room, and a dining room on either sides of the hallway. The second floor included Alma’s bedroom, A.B.’s bedroom, the children’s bedrooms, each with its own bathroom, some guest rooms, and a large library. The third floor included servants’ rooms and a large playroom for the children. The home was unlike anything ever seen in San Francisco. When you consider the layout of the rooms and the placement of the first floor entrance and living rooms, the second floor bedrooms of the family, and the third floor bedrooms of the servants, 2080 Washington St. bears a strong resemblance in layout to Downton Abbey. Today 2080 Washington St. is owned by novelist Danielle Steele.

Alma’s creative efforts did not stop with her home. Her most ambitious project was building, with A.B.’s money, the California Palace of the Legion of Honor honoring World War I veterans and located in Lincoln Park on the bluffs of San Francisco

outside the Golden Gate. The California Palace of the Legion of Honor (the "CPLH") should not be confused with the Palace of Fine Arts built for the Pan Pacific International Exposition of 1915 and located in the Marina. At the opening of the CPLH in 1924, crowds first encountered in the courtyard Auguste Rodin's sculpture of "the Thinker," and inside the building the crowd roamed through 19 galleries containing more than 700 works of art. Two of the galleries contained Alma's collection of Rodin's sculpture, the largest such collection outside France, while other galleries included such French masterpieces by Cezanne, Degas, Gauguin, and Van Gogh lent to the museum by the French government. San Francisco stood in awe at what Alma had brought about and adopted a city charter amendment accepting the CPLH into its fold and agreeing to staff and to maintain the CPLH.

A.B. died on June 28, 1924. Alma outlived him by 44 years and died on August 7, 1968. Her chief contribution to making San Francisco the Queen City of the Pacific during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was to help secure San Francisco's position during that time as the cultural center of the West Coast.

(Sources: Scharlach, Bernice: *Big Alma*, pp.5,9,16,23,138,139,192-194; Carroll, Jerry, *The Palace that Alma Built*, S.F. Chronicle, 10-29-1995; Graig, Christopher, *Spreckels (nee de Bretteville), Alma Emma, Philanthropist, Socialite, and Patron of the Arts*, Encyclopedia of San Francisco, Part 1, pp. 1-3; Part 2, pp. 1-3; *Alma deBretteville Spreckels*, Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, pp.1-4)