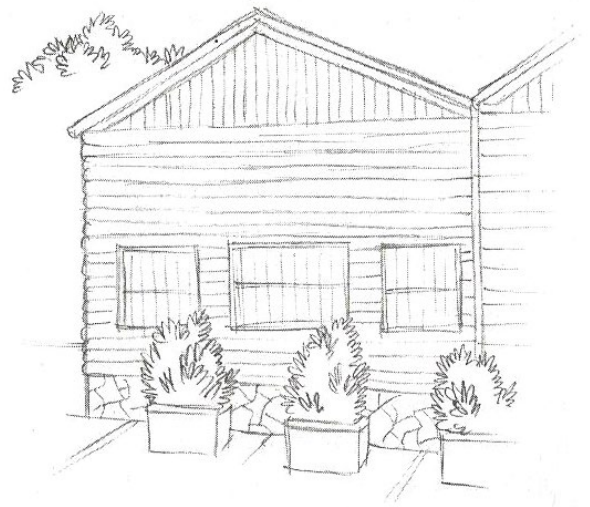


An excerpt from Gary Kamiya's best selling book which describes the history of our beloved log cabin showroom.

CHAPTER 28

CITY LIMITS



The building formerly known as George's Log Cabin, 2629 Bayshore Boulevard, on the San Francisco-San Mateo county line

... Leafing through an Arcadia book about Visitacion Valley, I found a photograph of an old log cabin, occupied by various nightclubs over the years, which sat directly on top of the San Francisco - San Mateo county line. According to the book's authors, the building's owners had painted a line down the middle of the floor, right over the county line.

To understand the purpose of this line, it's necessary to know a little about the peculiar history of San Mateo County. That county is now a staid and ultra-respectable place, dominated by wealthy peninsula communities like Burlingame, Hillsborough, and Atherton, but the matron used to be a trollop. Starting as early as 1856, gambling, dueling, prostitution, and drinking flourished in the northern end of the county, whose laws were much laxer than San Francisco's. Between 1890 and the early 1900's, an estimated 30 percent of San Mateo County's businesses were saloons. By 1900, the county also hosted boxing and dog racing, the latter disallowed in San Francisco. One now-defunct municipality located just west of the Cow Palace, Bayshore City, made its money entirely from dog racing; when the sport was outlawed in 1939, Bayshore City died. An ancient roadhouse just over the city line, the still-going 7 Mile House, was variously a stagecoach stop and a whorehouse, a speakeasy, a biker bar, and a mobbed-up gambling den that was busted twice by the FBI. During Prohibition, San Mateo County was a hotbed of bootlegging: Under cover of fog, shiploads of booze from Canada were dropped in coves off Half Moon Bay, picked up by obliging artichoke farmers, hauled on sleds to the road, and trucked into San Francisco. Female speakeasy owners known as "whisper sisters" poured drinks for police chiefs and mayors, who also enjoyed the company of the county's numerous women of easy virtue. Small wonder that throughout the 1930's and 1940's, San Mateo County rejoiced in the title "the Most Corrupt County in California."

San Franciscans in the first half of the 20th century, by some unhappy twist of fate forced to endure life in an uptight, Calvinist burg where the booze stopped flowing at 2 A.M. naturally saw San Mateo County as their southern playpen, a pre-Castro Cuba, a den of iniquity whose merry paid-off officials turned a blind eye to the bacchanalian vices that should rightfully have belonged to the big city.

Hence the line painted on the floor of the old log cabin. At 2 A.M., all a customer had to do was step over that line, yell "O for a beaker full of the warm South," and he or she could keep partying all night long with impunity.

I had hit the jackpot. Not only had I located the border with exquisite precision, I had found the bar I had been looking for my entire life.

A little research revealed that the building that had once been the old log cabin was still standing and was now owned by the A. Silvestri Company. Silvestri is a well-known San Francisco family business that manufactures and sells garden statuary. In fact, one of their fountains - of Bacchus, by happy coincidence - stands in my backyard. Sandra Silvestri, who runs the business, agreed to show me the log cabin. So I drove down to the company's big Visitacion Valley showroom, located just on the San Francisco side of the border, across Bayshore from the log cabin.

Sandra Silvestri was giving directions in Spanish to three Mexican employees who were moving some pieces into the showroom. A successful middle-age businesswoman with a no-nonsense air warmed by Italian earthiness, she told me that the seeds of her family's business were planted in the early 20th century, when her great-grandfather Arcangelo and grandfather Adorno came to America from Bagni di Lucca, a region home to many of San Francisco's Italian immigrants. Experienced at working in plaster, the two men got jobs in 1916 creating the decorative molding for Bernard Maybeck's Palace of Fine Arts. They also started a workshop where they made little figurines of saints, which they peddled door-to-door, mostly to other Italian immigrants. When the Great Depression came, Arcangelo and Adorno returned to Italy, but they emigrated again to San Francisco in the 1950's, joined by Sandra's father, Alfeo, and other family members. "They started pouring concrete into molds, instead of plaster and alabaster, and making bigger objects like St. Francis statues and pagodas," Sandra said. "And they started selling wholesale to nurseries." The business took off in the 1970's. The company that started with poor immigrants peddling tiny statues door-to-door now grosses millions of dollars, has 50 to 70 employees, and is an anchor in a neglected part of the city. "When we walk into a community meeting, the police cheer," Sandra said.

She took me across the street to the log cabin, which her family purchased in the 1970's. "It had been abandoned for a few years and was filthy. The roof was caving in," she said as we waited for the light at Bayshore. The company used it as a showroom until 2001, when they bought the place across the street.

The cabin was a conventional frame structure, but the logs were real redwood. A San Francisco city limits sign stood right outside the door. "Look at this," Sandra said, pointing down. Embedded in the sidewalk was a round, cast-iron disk about eight inches across, which read "Survey monument SF-CAL," the words circled by eight stars. "It's an old marker for the city limits," she said. "One day someone stole it. And you know who it was? An old man with a cane! I had installed a video camera in front of the building for security, and on the film I saw him lean down and pick it up. He could hardly walk!" She laughed, then said, "I don't know if his conscience started bothering him, but a few months later it appeared again." Before it was returned, she had asked the city about replacing it. They said they didn't know anything about it or any marker like it. It is apparently the last one in existence.

Uneasily wondering if my San Francisco mania was pointing me toward the fate of that light-fingered old man, I followed Sandra into the building. We found ourselves standing in a cavernous, high-ceilinged room with a weird split-level roofline and big vertical support beams. To the left was a vast stone fireplace, at least 10 feet wide. Dozens of old fiberglass molds for statues and fountains rested on the floor. The oddest thing was that the entire interior was covered with shaggy redwood bark. It was like a Dean Martin-style cocktail lounge decorated by Daniel Boone. It was one of the stranger buildings I'd ever been in, and it kept getting stranger the farther we went into it.

"The stage area was straight ahead," she said. "The bar was to the right. It was a beautiful bar - 60 feet long and made out of mahogany. We had to cut it up - there was nowhere for us to put it."

And the famous line on the floor? "That was right here," she said, pointing down. "It was painted yellow." The line ran from around the center of the front door back to the stage area. Since the bar ran parallel to the line, and was on the San Mateo side of the building, anyone standing at the bar did not have to move to keep legally drinking at closing time. I wondered whether the line was just a gimmick, or whether the police ever stormed in to arrest miscreants, only to run into an invisible wall that stopped them in their tracks like Marcel Marceau.

