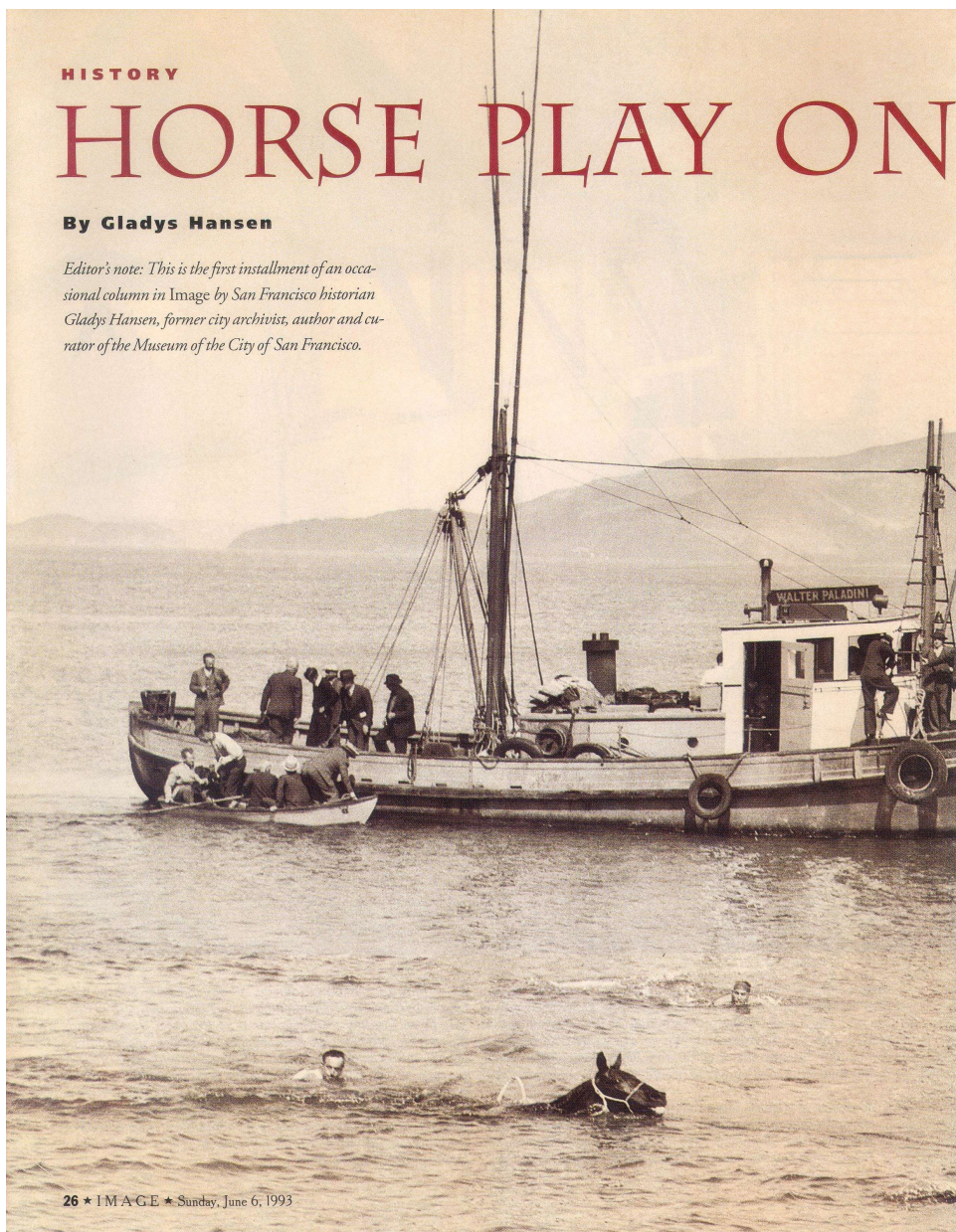


HISTORY

HORSE PLAY ON THE BAY

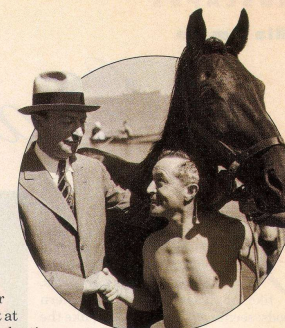
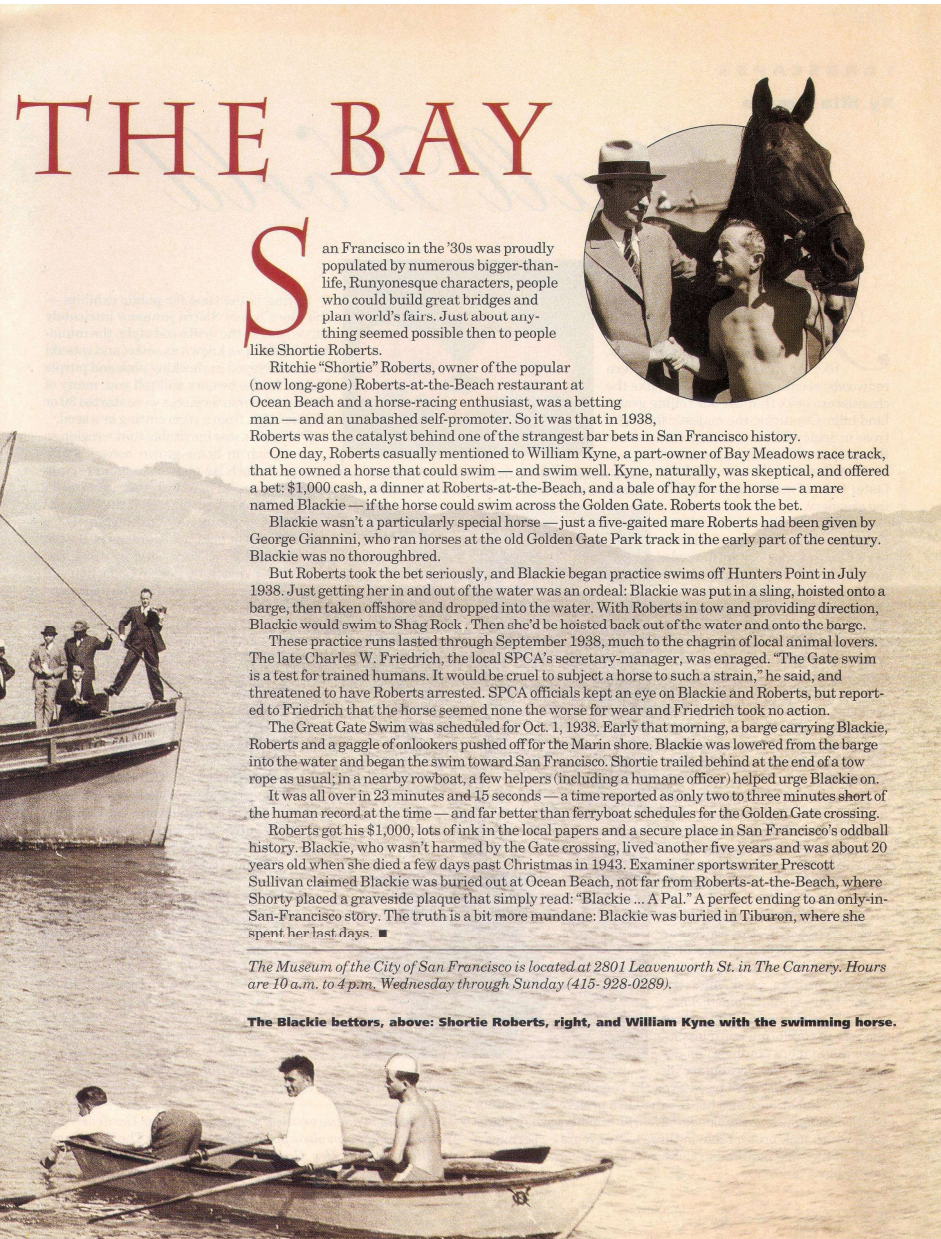
By Gladys Hansen

Editor's note: This is the first installment of an occasional column in Image by San Francisco historian Gladys Hansen, former city archivist, author and curator of the Museum of the City of San Francisco.



26 • IMAGE • Sunday, June 6, 1993

p1.2



San Francisco in the '30s was proudly populated by numerous bigger-than-life, Runyonesque characters, people who could build great bridges and plan world's fairs. Just about anything seemed possible then to people like Shortie Roberts.

Ritchie "Shortie" Roberts, owner of the popular (now long-gone) Roberts-at-the-Beach restaurant at Ocean Beach and a horse-racing enthusiast, was a betting man — and an unabashed self-promoter. So it was that in 1938, Roberts was the catalyst behind one of the strangest bar bets in San Francisco history.

One day, Roberts casually mentioned to William Kyne, a part-owner of Bay Meadows race track, that he owned a horse that could swim — and swim well. Kyne, naturally, was skeptical, and offered a bet: \$1,000 cash, a dinner at Roberts-at-the-Beach, and a bale of hay for the horse — a mare named Blackie — if the horse could swim across the Golden Gate. Roberts took the bet.

Blackie wasn't a particularly special horse — just a five-gaited mare Roberts had been given by George Giannini, who ran horses at the old Golden Gate Park track in the early part of the century. Blackie was no thoroughbred.

But Roberts took the bet seriously, and Blackie began practice swims off Hunters Point in July 1938. Just getting her in and out of the water was an ordeal: Blackie was put in a sling, hoisted onto a barge, then taken offshore and dropped into the water. With Roberts in tow and providing direction, Blackie would swim to Shag Rock. Then she'd be hoisted back out of the water and onto the barge.

These practice runs lasted through September 1938, much to the chagrin of local animal lovers. The late Charles W. Friedrich, the local SPCA's secretary-manager, was enraged. "The Gate swim is a test for trained humans. It would be cruel to subject a horse to such a strain," he said, and threatened to have Roberts arrested. SPCA officials kept an eye on Blackie and Roberts, but reported to Friedrich that the horse seemed none the worse for wear and Friedrich took no action.

The Great Gate Swim was scheduled for Oct. 1, 1938. Early that morning, a barge carrying Blackie, Roberts and a gaggle of onlookers pushed off for the Marin shore. Blackie was lowered from the barge into the water and began the swim toward San Francisco. Shortie trailed behind at the end of a tow rope as usual; in a nearby rowboat, a few helpers (including a humane officer) helped urge Blackie on.

It was all over in 23 minutes and 15 seconds — a time reported as only two to three minutes short of the human record at the time — and far better than ferryboat schedules for the Golden Gate crossing.

Roberts got his \$1,000, lots of ink in the local papers and a secure place in San Francisco's oddball history. Blackie, who wasn't harmed by the Gate crossing, lived another five years and was about 20 years old when she died a few days past Christmas in 1943. Examiner sportswriter Prescott Sullivan claimed Blackie was buried out at Ocean Beach, not far from Roberts-at-the-Beach, where Shorty placed a graveside plaque that simply read: "Blackie ... A Pal." A perfect ending to an only-in-San-Francisco story. The truth is a bit more mundane: Blackie was buried in Tiburon, where she spent her last days. ■

The Museum of the City of San Francisco is located at 2801 Leavenworth St. in The Cannery. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday (415-928-0289).

The Blackie bettors, above: Shortie Roberts, right, and William Kyne with the swimming horse.

p1.3