

6.17.04
Wednesday
Gino & Carlo

I drove into San Francisco today to meet a client for a progress report. Driving south on 80 and looking across the Bay from Berkeley at the San Francisco Skyline, and then the view of the City from the Bay Bridge never fails to thrill me.

When Marilyn and I crossed the Bridge to San Francisco returning to our City apartment from our cabin at Tahoe one or the other of us would always say: "Back in the Land of Oz". It was a ritual for ten years.

Calling San Francisco the Land of Oz was not original with us. We read that line in a San Francisco Chronicle story about the A to Z bar tour, an annual event that began and ended at, and was organized by, Gino & Carlo, a North Beach saloon (*don't call it 'Frisco, and don't call it Gino & Carlo's*). I cannot recall the name of the author, but he was a well-known Chronicle reporter. He said in the article that Gino & Carlo was to San Francisco what the Emerald City was to Oz. The tour began with a box lunch at G&C, and ended with midnight chilli back at the start. Transportation from A to Z was by chartered bus. One bar, every half-hour.



Our apartment then was on Telegraph Hill, a steep 4-block walk up from Gino & Carlo. The bar was a favorite place. We became friends with the three owners, who tended bar, and many of the patrons. We would often make Gino & Carlo the last stop of a night on the town in North Beach. We loved it for its total lack of pretension, and its Picon Punches. It had a long wooden bar, lots of stools, only two cocktail tables, and two half-sized, quarter-fed, pool tables. No locals *ever* sat at the cocktail tables. Besides the A to Z bar tour, it was the "office" for Charles McCabe, a Chronicle columnist only slightly less famous than Herb Caen. Gino & Carlo attracted a large following among Telegraph Hill and North Beach locals, and few tourists. Though it looked rough, as did many of its patrons, I never saw, nor heard of, a fight at Gino & Carlo.

The illustration above is a reproduction of a 2-ft by 3-ft ink drawing of Gino & Carlo by San Francisco artist Sam Provenzano. The drawing also shows Coit Tower on the top of Telegraph Hill in the background. I won the drawing in a raffle at Gino and Carlo one Sunday afternoon. The raffle was held to raise funds for long term medical care for one of the bar's regular patrons.

One night, when G&C was crowded, Marilyn was sitting at the bar while I was standing in the first rank of patrons behind the bar stools. A man sitting next to Marilyn, apparently thinking she was alone, began to talk with her. I was not paying close attention, engaged in a conversation of my own. Suddenly Marilyn exploded with laughter. Marilyn had a wonderful, infectious laugh. She would begin by crinkling up her eyes and giving a sort of half-screech: "Oooh, Ha, ha, ha. If she was especially amused she would interrupt her laughing with another screech once or twice more. This time, she laughed so loud that most of the other patrons, including me, all looked over to see what was so funny. The man she had been talking with quickly got up and left the bar.

When Marilyn could stop laughing, she told me what had happened. Apparently attracted by Marilyn's good looks, and encouraged by her sociability, he offered to buy her a drink. Never one to pass up a drink, Marilyn accepted. A little later the man said: "Whatta ya say we go back to my place and fuck our brains out."

Now, Marilyn was a gregarious woman. She loved parties. She loved going to bars and talking to strangers. She was enormously entertained by raunchy behavior, so she did not take offense at the man's proposition, she just laughed her trademark uproarious laugh.

The poor man was mortified. Of all the reactions he might have been expecting, Marilyn's laughter was not among them. He must have felt that she was laughing at him, rather than at the situation, and that her amused rejection of him was now the focus of all of the bar's patrons.

On that particular night, Dorothy did not offer kindness and support to the poor scarecrow in the Land of Oz.