

THE FRESNO BEE Friday, May 16, 1986



## Historic walks will be highlight of celebration

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Bee staff writer

Ever wonder what it would be like to walk in the footsteps of a famous person, to let your imagination soar, to step back in time if only for a few precious moments?

One of the highlights of this weekend's second William Saroyan Festival will be Saturday's walking tours of the old neighborhood where the Fresno-born, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright-author romped as a youth.

The festival, intended to be shared by young and old alike, will begin with today's Saroyan Writing Contest awards ceremony at the Tower Theater, starting at 9:30 a.m., followed by a movie, "The Oyster and the Pearl," (screenplay by Saroyan) and two Saroyan-themed photographic essays by Paul Kalinian.

The festival will conclude on Sunday at the Tower Theater with a filmed version ("Playhouse 90") of Saroyan's 1939 prize-winning play, "The Time of Your Life"; a book fair; more Kalinian photographs; music by the Chookasian-Dorian Ensemble; dancing by the Arax Dancers; and lots of Armenian food, all for \$5 per person and starting at 1 p.m.

Saroyan (1908-1981) frequently mentioned his old haunts in his books, among them "Chance Meetings" (W.W. Norton, 1978):

"The neighborhood just south and east of Emerson School in Fresno was instantly recognized as an Armenian neighborhood, even though Syrians, Assyrians, Slovenians, Portuguese, Irish, and Serbs also lived there, and just at the edge of Armenian town there was a Basque hotel, complete with a jai alai court . . .

"I liked all of these people because they were quite simply part of the mystery of my neighborhood, because I saw them daily for quite a few years, and because they had a quality about them that both amazed and amused me . . .

"Years after the neighborhood lost its identity and was as good as gone forever, I suddenly understood its mystery — it had been populated by willing exiles who nevertheless had deeply longed for a place they would never see again."

Saroyan was a gambler, a drinker, an eccentric, bombastic verbalist. He once explained, "If I talk too much, it's a cultural problem."

He also was a hoarder, obsessed with saving thousands of notes and scraps of paper in addition to hundreds of letters and manuscripts.

And he remembered addresses. Boy, could he remember addresses.

Anyone even superficially acquainted with Saroyan's writing will recall mentions of his childhood homes at 2226 San Benito Ave. and 3204 El Monte Way and, during his final years, the side-by-side dwellings at 2729 W. Griffith Way.

He wrote of Kazanjian's Grocery, the Asbarez Armenian Men's Club, Guggenheim's water tank, Ahboud's stand at the Fresno free market, the Santa Fe Depot, and the Ararat Cemetery, among the many old landmarks.

Saroyan never forgot his boyhood playmates from the empty lot at San Benito and M streets: Ralph and Yep Moradian, Levon Kemalyan, Elish and Vahan Shekoyan, Fat Khashkhash, Joe and Al Kalakian and Eddie Emerian.

Most of the landmarks are gone, but several of them, such as Saroyan's birthplace (Elish Shekoyan has validated it as 617 Broadway), the round church (First Armenian Presbyterian), and the Hye and Valley Armenian bakeries will be included on the walks.

Short walking tours (two hours) will begin at 10 a.m. at the Convention Center's William Saroyan Theater, leaving every 10 minutes, and will

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include the old Fresno Evening Herald building, southwest corner of Inyo and L streets, where Saroyan picked up papers to sell on street corners; Paul's Cleaners and Black's Package Store, 700 block, Van Ness Avenue, where he had his hats blocked and clothes cleaned for a half century; his birthplace; the round church, 515 Fulton St.; the old Emerson School ground, Santa Clara Street and Van Ness Avenue; old Arax Market, 500 block of L Street; the old neighborhood, Santa Clara and San Benito streets; the Armenian bakeries, L and M and Santa Clara streets; and the Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church, 2226 Ventura Ave. at M Street.

The three-hour walks also will leave every 10 minutes, starting at 10 a.m., from the Saroyan Theater and will include the Santa Fe Depot, Meux Home, Varaz Art Muse-

um, Postal Telegraph Cable Co., Fresno Water Tower, Green Bush Spring and Southern Pacific Depot in addition to the old neighborhood stops. Although there is no fee for the tours, \$1 donations will be accepted.

Obviously the walks are interesting, but some of "Whisky Willie's" old cronies probably would consider it more Saroyanesque if the tour included a couple of the "watering holes" that he mentioned in his books, such as Fat Aram's Saloon from "Rock Wagram" (Mayflower, 1961) or the White Fawn Saloon out of "Places Where I've Done Time" (Praeger, 1972).

It's too bad that the original Old Fresno isn't still standing at 1825 Mariposa St., next to the old Greyhound Bus Depot in the old tenderloin district. That's where Saroyan quenched his thirst on many occasions.

"Saroyan was the type of guy who went wherever he wanted to and stayed as long as he wanted

to," confided an old-time bartender who requested anonymity. "About 90 percent of the customers in the joint didn't know him as a writer but as a person.

"He didn't have much of a social life in Fresno but he sure did make the rounds. He no doubt also stopped at the New York Bar on Broadway, Martin's Cafe in the old red light district, and the Asbarez Club where some of the old *rakhi* sippers held court."

Last year the festival, without the historic neighborhood walks, drew about 1,000 persons. This year the co-sponsoring Alliance for the Arts, North Fresno Merchants Association and Fresno Bee expect twice as many participants.

The festival is a good idea, something for the youth of today to cling to as they pass through life, through some of the same places as the man who, more than anyone else, turned Fresno into the cultural center for all Americans of Armenian heritage.