

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Boomtown:
Barbary Coast at the Conservatory of Flowers
San Francisco's rowdy past comes to life in the Conservatory of Flowers'
newest garden railway exhibition

November 16, 2012 through April 14, 2013

SAN FRANCISCO -- Land ho! Get ready to jump ship into San Francisco's rowdy past as the Conservatory of Flowers presents an all new garden railway display celebrating San Francisco's gold rush Boomtown days and its infamous Barbary Coast neighborhood. In an enchanting display landscaped with hundreds of dwarf plants and several water features, model trains wend their way along miniature docks crowded with replicas of the clipper ships that brought fortune seekers to California, then zip past whimsical recreations of the city's most important landmarks of the day, including Portsmouth Square, Chinatown's Waverly Place, and Maiden Lane where many a greenhorn was parted from his gold.

Boomtown: Barbary Coast at the Conservatory of Flowers, the historic conservatory's 5th Annual Garden Railway, introduces an entirely new layout that brings to miniature life the colorful history of the city after the 1848 discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill. Fewer than 500 people lived in San Francisco before James Marshall found gold in the American River, but over the next year, the population would double every ten days, and more than 600 ships would sail through the Golden Gate, bringing thousands of treasure hunters to California.

At the heart of this Boomtown was the world famous Barbary Coast, a neighborhood described by 19th Century actress Sarah Bernhardt as "fascinatingly wicked." This 40-square-block area bounded by the Embarcadero, Grant Avenue, Broadway, and Commercial Street, was both a busy maritime district at the heart of San Francisco's Port and an infamous concentration of saloons, dancehalls and more lurid attractions where cutthroats and con-men preyed on entertainment-starved sailors, miners, and thrill seekers.

Visitors can imagine the past as they watch G-gauge steam engines and small cable cars loop around Portsmouth Square where the city's first schoolhouse was located and where, in the streets leading down to the Bay, houses were built right on top of ships hastily abandoned in port by men hoping to strike it rich. Other landmarks include Union Square with its familiar Victory Monument (the statue at the top, in fact, modeled after a well-known San Franciscan of the day named "Big Alma"); Maiden Lane (formerly Morton Lane), home to some of the area's most notorious dives and reputed to be the site of one murder a week during its hey day; and Waverly Place in Chinatown. Small tents, shanties, and lean tos ramble up San Francisco's famous hills, testament to the transitory nature of housing in a time when the city burned repeatedly. A water feature in front of the model train platform bustles with small schooners and others ships offloading their cargo at miniature docks.

As in past years, these replicas are all creatively crafted in miniature from recycled and repurposed materials. San Francisco artist James Sellier, back for his fourth year as a Garden Railway model maker, created Waverly Place from old wooden lantern pieces and the buildings of Portsmouth Square from old speaker cabinets. Also back this year is sound designer Andrew Roth who fills the gallery with echoes of the past including vintage recordings of the saloon songs of the day, the sound of creaking docks and more.

Other features of the exhibit include a recreation of a life-sized schooner that greets visitors as they enter; a special photo booth for souvenir "mug shots;" a smaller train track especially for children that features San Francisco Bay, Alcatraz and Angel Island; and immersive displays about the banking business during the Gold Rush, as well as the well-known men and women of the time like Emperor Norton I, a highly eccentric, but celebrated citizen who proclaimed himself "Emperor of these United States," and dancer, singer, actress and banjo player Lotta Crabtree who entertained in mining camps throughout the West. Copies of original photos, maps and fascinating interpretive signs written by Founder and Director of the Barbary Coast Trail Daniel Bacon help visitors to understand this formative and shadowy chapter in San Francisco's history.

“The Conservatory of Flowers is in Golden Gate Park as a direct result of the fortunes made in San Francisco at the time of the Gold Rush,” says Lau Hodges, Director of Exhibitions. “The building is a link to a really fascinating part of the city’s past. Our annual garden railway, so popular with kids and families during the holiday season, presented a fun opportunity to animate this moment in history and to illustrate how much San Francisco was shaped by it.”

Media sponsors for *Boomtown: Barbary Coast at the Conservatory of Flowers* include KQED Public Broadcasting and The San Francisco Examiner.

RELATED PROGRAMMING

Green and Gold Gala: A Night Out in Boomtown
Thursday, November 15, 2012
7 - 11 PM (VIP reception 5:30 – 7 PM)
Tickets: \$95-250

This opening night jubilee celebrates San Francisco’s gold rush Boomtown days and its infamous Barbary Coast neighborhood with an evening of dancing, delectable food, saloon specialty drinks, “burlesque” entertainment, and even a visit from Emperor Norton I. Gala guests will be the first to see *Boomtown: Barbary Coast at the Conservatory of Flowers* and have the rare chance to experience the magic of the Conservatory at night. The event raises funds for the Conservatory’s youth environmental education programs. Tickets can be purchased at www.greenandgoldgala.org.

Conductor of the Day

All aboard!!! The Conservatory offers train enthusiasts of all ages the opportunity to be Conductor of the Day during the run of *Boomtown: Barbary Coast at the Conservatory of Flowers*. Conductors receive a whistle and engineer’s hat, get the chance to explore the exhibition for a full half hour before it opens to the public, and can help “set up” the trains for the day. A \$50 donation to the Conservatory covers admission for the Conductor and up to three others (additional “stowaways” will be charged regular admission fees – limit 6 children). For more information, contact the Development Associate at bnichols@sfcog.org or 415-577-2584.

***Boomtown: Barbary Coast at the Conservatory of Flowers* is open Tuesdays – Sundays from 10 am to 4 pm and is included with admission to the Conservatory. Admission for San Francisco residents (with proof of residency) is \$5 general; \$3 youth 12-17, seniors and students with ID; \$1.50 children 5-11; children 4 and under FREE. Admission for non-residents is \$7 general, \$5 youth 12-17, seniors and students with ID; \$2 children 5-11; children 4 and under FREE. The public should call (415) 831-2090 or visit www.conservatoryofflowers.org for more information.**

Background

The Conservatory of Flowers is a spectacular living museum of rare and beautiful tropical plants under glass. From Borneo to Bolivia, the 1,750 species of plants at the Conservatory represent unusual flora from more than 50 countries around the world. Immersive displays in five galleries include the lowland tropics, highland tropics, aquatic plants, potted plants and special exhibits. Opened in 1879, the wood and glass greenhouse is the oldest existing conservatory in North America and has attracted millions of visitors to Golden Gate Park since it first opened its doors. It is designated as a city, state and national historic landmark and was one of the 100 most endangered sites of the World Monuments Fund.

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