

# Joe Alioto, Son of North Beach

The poetry of Joseph L. Alioto, selections and comments by Carol Purroy

Joe Alioto is a true son of North Beach. His mother's family, the Lazios, arrived in San Francisco in 1890 — 106 years ago; and his father got here seven years later — they'll celebrate their first century in San Francisco next year.

Joe's father, Giuseppe Alioto, emigrated from Italy all by himself at the age of 10. He was met by an uncle in New York and worked there awhile before coming west to San Francisco where a cousin lived. He worked hard and returned to Italy at age 17 with enough money to bring the rest of his family back with him.

Both Joe's maternal and paternal families, Sicilian immigrants all, settled in the Italian neighborhood of North Beach. And both families, individually and collectively, prospered. They built piers up and down the coast as receiving stations. They were seafood packers and wholesalers.



Joe, Kathleen, Patrick & Domenica at GG Bridge's 50th

Joe's mother (Domenica Lazio) and father (Giuseppe Alioto) first met on the day of the 1906 earthquake. In those days, when an earthquake shook things up, anyone who had access to a boat made a run for it and sailed out to the middle of the bay, figuring that was the safest place to be. It was there that Giuseppe and Domenica first met — she was 12 and he was 19. They didn't marry for another 8 years, but that's where it all got started.

Their son, Joseph L. Alioto, now 80, has had (and continues to have) a brilliant career as a high-powered attorney and was one of San Francisco's most illustrious mayors. That's part of who Joe Alioto is, but not all. Not by a long shot. For starters, he's also a family man who is madly in love with his wife and his kids (two sets of kids); a grandfather who'll do anything for his grandchildren; a patron of the arts; a musician. . . . and a poet.

He's written (among others) a poem about his own history and that of his town. It's titled *THE BALLAD OF MY SAN FRANCISCO with Vignettes of North Beach*; dedicated to his wife, Kathleen, and children, Patrick and Domenica. It's a saga of epic proportions, so we'll just print an occasional stanza here, interspersed with brief commentary. Joe's poems give us great insight into his head and heart -- into his sense of humor, his sensibilities, his sense of justice.

*From Siskiyou to San Diego  
Sierras to the Sea  
There is a fascinating span  
That's native sod to me.*

*And at the heart of that great land  
Dramatic in her way  
A sparkling city rises from  
The San Francisco Bay*

*She started life with Indians;  
And then the Padres came,  
They stamped the culture with a Cross  
It's never been the same*

*At Sutter's Mill the Mormons cried  
"Eureka — we've found gold"  
The people of the world rushed to  
Our town in hordes untold.*

*And thus, the blend of different strains  
Our City grew diverse  
With Asians and New Englanders  
Some better and some worse.*

*'Twixt Telegraph and Russian Hills  
There lies the fabled Beach  
Where artists and Italians made  
A life you just can't teach*

*This spirit we inherited  
When young in Old North Beach  
How rich a life we knew as kids  
The grasp beyond the reach.*

That was all before his time, so it stands without comment. He tells of his early life in North Beach. Giuseppe Alioto married Domenica Lazio, and three of Giuseppe's siblings married three of Domenica's siblings. They all lived in separate flats in a building on Filbert Street built by his Grandfather Lazio. This made for an incredibly close-knit family and, as Joe says, "We never wanted for babysitters."

Good Catholics all, the Alioto and Lazio children attended parochial schools, and the extended families were participating members of the neighborhood parish. Joe calls it "The Italian Church" on Washington Square. He recalls the time when he was a boy, living within a block of the church, and it was bombed:

*Two anarchists despised the Church  
And bombed it seven times  
It rattled windows by my bed  
And stilled the Church's chimes.*

*The eighth time didn't happen 'cause  
Two brave inspectors hid  
Behind the bushes in the Square  
And foiled the bombers' bid.*

*The cops shot at the bombers' legs  
They shot back at the head  
And when the fight was over, well,  
The anarchists lay dead.*

*The black-robed Padre knelt to give  
The Last Rites to the men  
A poignant love-for-hate exchange  
I never saw again.*

*A touch of Thornton Wilder, too,  
In this dramatic fray:*

*The cop who killed, the priest who blessed  
-- The brothers de Mattei.*

As Joe says, "All this about churches being burned is nothing new. It's always gone on."

And he speaks of prohibition, which was pretty much ignored in North Beach. In his neighborhood, wine was a staple — everybody made it and everybody drank it.

*The law permitted homemade wines  
For Health and Holy Mass  
North Beachers suddenly got sick  
And saintly — we had brass!*

*As kids we trampled with bare feet  
The juice-filled Zinfandels  
And thumbed our nose at edicts of  
The Volstead infidels*

*The law that made our "dago-red"  
A vat of contraband  
Just made no sense to us at all  
We couldn't understand.*

Another childhood memory was of the day Marconi, the inventor of the radio, was in San Francisco. The Mayor, the Chief of Police and all sorts of dignitaries were at a luncheon in his honor. "Dago-red" flowed like soda pop but the authorities looked the other way.

*When great Marconi came to town  
A civic lunch with wine  
Presided over by Jim Rolph  
Who gave the cops the sign.*

Not mentioned in his poem was that the kids from his school put on the program that day, and he, Joe Alioto, aged 10, played a violin solo for Marconi. "I wasn't any good. It was just a school music program." As time went on, however, he improved, and eventually played violin with a big band around the Bay Area.

In his San Francisco ballad, he boasts of other San Francisco violinists, as well as its cultural institutions:

*Music was our force majeure  
Our fiddlers gained renown  
Yehudi, Stern and Ricci, too  
All hailed from our town.*

*Op'ra, symphonies, ballet  
An art-filled diadem  
Of all the jewels in that crown  
Our Asian Art's the gem.*

He touches on the story of the legendary tenor, Enrico Caruso, who sang at the San Francisco opera house the night before the '06 quake, and was among those who got shaken from bed the next morning. Caruso vowed never to return to San Francisco, and kept his promise.

*The history of our opera has  
The richest lore to tell  
Caruso, sketching drawings of  
The buildings as they fell.*

*Sang Don Jose the night before  
And rocked the total scene  
But not like San Andreas rocked  
The town at five-thirteen.*

*Before he split Caruso sang  
To calm the troubled crowd  
From a Palace balcony  
That gesture did him proud.*

*He fled our ruined city 'cause  
He found the Quake too rough  
But Gigli filled the yawning gap  
Respectably enough.*

He wrote of some of the town's legendary characters, among them, Lola Montez:

*Lola knew some emperors  
The European kind  
And everywhere that Lola went  
The Kings were right behind.*

*Nevada City, her home-stage  
Still brags of Lola's trysts  
And thinks her worldwide romps deserve  
A tribute to her nights.*

and Emperor Norton:

*A guy named Norton ran a corner  
For rice monopolies  
A bulgin' ship with lots of rice  
Then limped in from the seas*

*It snapped his brain and he became  
The Emperor of us all  
He donned a tawdry uniform  
And put us all on call.*



Gino Palucci, Frank Capra, John Volpe and Joe Alioto at 1984 event honoring Frank Capra, director of *It Happened One Night*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*

*Ran up the hill and spread his arms  
To issue a decree  
"Build a bridge across the bay  
And name it after me."*

and Gertrude Stein and "her old man:"

*Gertrude lived where there's no there  
As recent talk discloses  
But ran off to Parisian haunts  
A-stuttering on roses.*

*Her old man ran a cable car  
Where plenty of there's there.  
He slipped his let go's, rang his bell  
With gusto and with flair.*

and Fatty Arbuckle's escapades:

*The D.A. caught ol' Fatty doing  
Something rather lewd  
And charged Arbuckle with a crime  
They caught him in the nude.*



The charges rattled Hollywood  
I wondered why it ought.  
The only difference I could see  
That Fatty just got caught.

And William Randolph Hearst:  
Willie Randolph had a flair  
A knack for ringing bells.  
I'm glad he made it to our town  
Instead of Orson Wells

Except when Joe was 6 and wanted to be a fireman, he  
always wanted to be an attorney.

I watched them all in City Hall  
The Hall of Justice too  
I'd break off from filleting dabs  
To sneak a scoop view.



Chicago's Mayor Daley and Mayor Joseph Alioto in one of their regular meetings, 1968-75

Our lawyers were just lawyers then  
They weren't corporations  
They didn't need to sell their goods  
Like chain-store operations.

He waxes poetic about his hometown-within-a-hometown,  
North Beach, which he says was always "Bohemian," long  
before the "Beats" discovered it and claimed it for their own.

The Cappuccino circuit thrives  
A route with zest and style  
No better spots to sip and talk  
The hours to beguile

Germain-des-Pres is great, they say  
But tourists there reveal  
Deux Magot's a fakers den  
North End Caffè is real.

The Coney Island of North Beach!  
It lives in Ferlinghetti  
His presence on Columbus blends  
With bolognese spaghetti

In a separate piece, printed here in its entirety, he tells of  
Lawrence Ferlinghetti's arrest and trial on pornography  
charges; he published Allen Ginsburg's poem, *HOWL*:

**FERLINGHETTI HOWLS AND BEATS THE RAP**  
*An Apostrophe to Dissent*  
*As Exemplified by Lawrence Ferlinghetti*

Such rot! They had him in a prisoner's dock  
Arraigned for an intimidating shock.  
No fierce Savonarola suits our time,  
Yet there was Ferlinghetti charged with crime  
What crime? He published and then sold a poem.  
By Ginsberg; but it made the Censor foam!  
Could Allen's "Howl" forever pose a threat  
To damning anybody's soul? - and yet  
Lorenzo placed there under rude arrest  
To face a blue-nosed criminal inquest.

Defended by the ACLU buffs  
Jake Ehrlich there with Lip and shooting cuffs.  
"Not Guilty" piped Judge Horn when all was done  
Instead of jail, Ferlinghetti won.  
And when His Honor ruled for an acquittal,  
Our town redeemed itself more than a little.

Dissent! Dissent! The truth is better found  
When touch, robust and hard debate abound  
Without Dissent all power brooks decay  
Subjects us to the angry Censor's sway.

Dissent! Dissent! The Truth takes it in stride  
'Tis only mushy error seeks to hide.  
So long the anvil of debate obtains  
So long, as well, the likely Truth remains.

So Howl, Lorenzo, Howl night and day  
To knock the dry-balled Censor out of play.  
And leave the First Amendment to decide  
What people want to honor or deride.

The vacillating Pilate pondered Truth;  
And with a hero's chance, he chose, forsooth,  
To wash his hands in gutless disarray  
To pander to the venom of his day.

An Inquisition with or sans the Spanish  
Means safeguards of Dissent will surely vanish.  
So let ideas contend in open fight  
To crystallize in what is wrong or right.

No sacred icons should exemption seek  
What won't be tested tells us that it's weak

The Areopagitica, indeed,  
Blind spot and all, is better to our need  
Than let the rigid Censor grab the hour  
Or let dull politics usurp the power.

Our restaurants are much better now  
Our culture's ridin' high  
The Black & White and Opera Balls  
All glitter to the eye.

Fran Coppola and Lucas bring  
The trail-blazing word  
And Charlie Schultz and Charlie Brown  
Keep stealing home from third.

And Herb Caen keeps a-going strong  
He meets a daily deadline  
He does it with panache and wit  
And scoops the daily headline.

Cooney's is here, Bob Moose is hot  
Abe's irony is telling



Joe Alioto in the Oval Office with President Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968

When thought-controlling politics prevails  
The quest for goodness, truth and beauty fails  
So Howl, Lorenzo, Howl loud and clear;  
The Arts and the Humanities will cheer.

John Henry pre Charles Darwin made the claim  
Ideas evolved through change remain the same,  
The only permanence is change, he said;  
What doesn't somewhat change might well be dead.

Tradition and Invention are not foes,  
But interacting agents in whose throes  
The Truth in new development ascends  
In tested old and innovative blends.

The rose-seed and the full-grown rose display  
That growth by change need not produce decay.  
But change requires freedom to Dissent  
Unsuffocated by the Censor's bent.

Thank God Lorenzo braved the battle through  
It opened up the gates for others, too.

"My name is writ in water" Keats intones  
While lying there beneath the Roman stones.  
The Abbey chiselled it with jeweler's eye  
"Among the English poets when I die."

The Ferlinghetti name's not writ on ice,  
'Cause San Francisco's memories suffice;  
Recalling that he lit our City Lights  
With sweet and wise poetical delights.

The passions of the intellect survive;  
The First Amendment thus keeps them alive.  
It keeps alive as well in literary art  
The music that flows sweetly from the heart.

**WE'VE KNOWN A TOUCH OF STARDUST IN OUR DAY**  
**'CAUSE LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI CAME OUR WAY.**

He also writes of the Oakland Raiders, whose attorney  
he's been for a good number of years:

Al Davis left from Oakland 'cause  
They didn't keep their word  
Instead they stooged for Pete Rozelle  
That choice was quite absurd.

They should have stuck with Al who brought  
Them fame and football glory  
If they had poise and excellence  
We'd have a different story

Joseph L. Alioto is a forward-looking man. He is young  
beyond his years, vibrant, brilliant, with a head for de-  
tails and an unbelievable memory. In his *Ballad of My*  
San Francisco he talks not only about his city's past, but  
also of its present:

We've had a rowdy tabloid crowd  
We've had our saints and sinners  
We also have -- just look around  
Contemporary winners

Hoppe's satire hits the spot  
And Wilkes keeps right on selling

Shorenstein plays Monopoly  
With real towers of steel  
No mogul in our history  
Has played the game this real.

We are a very clubby bunch  
No doubt about that fact  
Our clubs are dens for booze and fun  
Where moguls interact.

This doggerel is ended now  
I wrote it for Kathleen  
And Patrick and Domenica  
So they would know this scene

I love my San Francisco  
Her quality of living,  
I got a lot from this old town  
And it keeps right on giving.

Here's one he wrote for Kathleen in 1994:

**THE TREE THAT FLASHES REDS AND WHITES**  
A fabled Hawthorne in our garden grows  
That bursts white blossoms when the sparrow  
shows:  
And bleeds red berries when the autumn fades  
In one of Nature's magic escapades.

Just like that tree our Love is varied too  
And lives on Red and White, eschewing blue.  
The passionate Red; your elegance in White  
Combine in joyous sensual delight.

That elegance and passion both display  
What luscious White and ruby Red portray.  
Abandon and reserve in balanced grace  
Shine in your eyes and glisten on your face.

The tabernacle of your heart contains  
The Whites and Reds that vivid love ordains.

What's past is truly prologue in our lives  
The passion of our love not just survives  
But moves in strength'ning tides with all that's best  
Yet hasn't risen to its destined crest.  
I'll love you, dear Kathleen, so long I live,  
Though what I get is better than I give;  
But Patrick and Domenica fulfill  
That Browning arc at higher levels still.

**ALIOTO** (cont'd on page 17)



## **ALIOTO** (cont'd from page 14)

His conclusions about San Francisco:

*Our City has its weaknesses  
Of that I'm well aware  
But if perfection's what you want  
You better look elsewhere.*

*Our current personalities  
Are good and moving fast  
One day they too will be a part  
Of our nostalgic past.*

When asked how he envisions his future, Joe answered, "I'll keep on practicing law." And when I asked how he stays so young he said, "Every once in a while you have to do something new; something totally different. For example, I went into politics and did that for awhile. Maybe, in my old age, I'll write. But I'll always bear in mind the dictum of William James: "Keep the faculty of effort alive."

*Heraclitus had it right  
He hit it on the head  
The only lasting thing is change  
If we don't change, we're dead.*

*So don't despair 'bout changing times,  
The cores of things survive  
What's permanent must often change  
If it's to stay alive*

"My wife and kids keep me young. At age 60 I got married and started a new family."

It's clear to me, the love that fills his home keeps him young, too. I had the privilege of meeting his wife, Kathleen, and his two youngest children, 17-year-old Patrick and 15-year-old Domenica. Kathleen beams when speaking of him and sings his praises. "He's WONDERFUL!" Both Patrick and Domenica kiss him hello and good-bye, their deep love and respect demonstrated in every interaction. I did not feel that it was for show -- because somebody was there -- but that it was completely natural and commonplace.

Joe Alioto also has six children by a prior marriage, five boys and a daughter, Angela. His pride in them is obvious, as well. Four of them, including Angela, are lawyers and have practiced law with him in spectacular legal suites with panoramic views from the Golden Gate to the Berkeley campanile. The other two sons he affectionately describes as life-long students of philosophy and theology.

Within the past year alone, he's tried a three-month case in Boston's worst winter in history; a one-month trial in New York; a six-week trial in Los Angeles; a three-week trial in San Francisco. And all the time working on pre-trial maneuvers, particularly for Al Davis and the Oakland Raiders on surprise litigation brought by the National Football League against Davis and Jerry Jones. His confident conclusion: "We'll beat 'em again!"

I'd have to say that Joseph L. Alioto is one of the luckiest men alive, not because of material things, his magnificent Pacific Heights home, or anything else money can buy. Or the fact that his careers have brought him in contact with the famous and powerful people of his time. No, he's exceptionally lucky because of his young outlook, his excellent youthful health and vigor, his fine mind which seems totally undiminished by age, and perhaps most important, a family that loves him.