

San Francisco in the Roaring Twenties

In 1920, more than half a million people lived in San Francisco, making it the twelfth-largest city in the United States. The city had rebuilt after the devastating 1906 earthquake and fire. As in the rest of America, many of the well-to-do were playing the stock market and drinking bootleg gin.

Increases in manufacturing, especially of automobiles, were changing the American way of life. But the stock market crash of October 1929, which would herald the Great Depression, was lurking just around the corner.

All this fleeting prosperity had a flipside, and Fremont Older, editor of the *San Francisco Call*, exposed it in *My Own Story*, an account of his years on that paper's city desk. An insider's look at crime on the streets of San Francisco, these terse stories, originally serialized in his newspaper, included many intimate details that could only be published after the fact. The serials mesmerized San Francisco readers with a glimpse of their city's corrupt politicians and crooked courts – a system easily glimpsed between the lines of *The Maltese Falcon*.

Geographically, the city was a different place from the one we know today. San Francisco Bay's two great bridges didn't go up until the 1930s. The '20s were really the last decade in which the city stayed true to the one physical feature that originally induced people to settle there: namely, the greatest natural deep-water port on the West Coast. Cars were already menacing pedestrians in the city proper, the East Bay and Marin County, but driving from one of these places to another was virtually impossible. Instead, ferries transported people around the Bay, and the Ferry Building at the foot of Market Street numbered among San

Francisco's greatest landmarks. It still does today, but as a gourmet mecca, not the teeming transportation center it was during the Roaring '20s.

With easy air travel years away, the international steamship trade accounted for most of San Francisco's foreign commerce. The Embarcadero, mostly a pedestrian and tourist destination nowadays, remained for decades a working waterfront. When Sam Spade checks the daily paper for the comings and goings of Captain Jacobi's ship in *The Maltese Falcon*, this is no exaggeration. A San Francisco newspaper in the 1920s would no sooner omit the shipping news than a radio station today would discontinue its traffic reports.

In the era of *The Maltese Falcon*, San Francisco celebrated its diamond anniversary by tucking into a banquet of prosperity and expansion, with a piping-hot side of debauchery. The stock market crash soon brought an end to what had appeared to be limitless growth for almost everyone – except, curiously, Dashiell Hammett. With the publication of *The Maltese Falcon* the following year, he was about to make his fortune as all around him were losing theirs.