

# Legacy Business Registry Staff Report

HEARING DATE NOVEMBER 27, 2017

## CLIFF'S VARIETY

*Application No.:* LBR-2017-18-019  
*Business Name:* Cliff's Variety  
*Business Address:* 479 Castro Street  
*District:* District 8  
*Applicant:* Terry Asten Bennett, General Manager/President  
*Nomination Date:* October 2, 2017  
*Nominated By:* Supervisor Jeff Sheehy  
*Staff Contact:* Richard Kurylo  
legacybusiness@sfgov.org

### BUSINESS DESCRIPTION

Cliff's Variety is a neighborhood hardware and variety store serving the Castro District since 1936. Founded by Hilario DeBaca, a former merchant and school teacher from New Mexico, the business was originally run solely by Hilario with help from his granddaughter, Lorraine, after school. The store was named after Hilario's youngest son, Clifford, but it was Hilario's oldest son, Ernie, who joined the business and eventually assumed ownership.

Ernie had previously operated his own repair shop in the Tenderloin during the 1930s. After suffering from a bad accident that forced him to close his shop in the Tenderloin, he began to work for his father, bringing his superior repair skills to the variety store where he carried out electronic, lock, clock, electrical, plumbing and mechanical repairs. Ernie also designed several space-saving machines that came to characterize the store. These included a ribbon machine, two button machines and rolling ladders. Ernie started the store's tradition of creating elaborate window displays, especially during holidays like Halloween, and was responsible for launching the first Halloween street party on Castro Street. The event was family-focused and centered on a children's costume contest from the 1950s through the 1970s until adult Halloween parties took over.

The store has offered hardware, home goods, fabrics, candy, and other everyday items for neighborhood residents for over 80 years. Its offerings range from home improvement, to textiles and toys, to art and cooking supplies. It is the Castro's longest-running retailer and has long been known as the place to go for repairs and knowledgeable advice on decorating, costuming, cooking, sewing, and entertaining.

Cliff's Variety greatly expanded from the 1970s to the 1990s, changing locations several times and modifying inventory to reflect changing tastes and needs of the neighborhood over the years. Now operated by fourth generation family member Terry Asten Bennett, the business serves over 700 people daily and helps attracts foot traffic to surrounding businesses. The business gives to neighborhood schools such as the Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy and to nonprofits like AIDS LifeCycle.





## OFFICE OF SMALL BUSINESS

CITY AND COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO  
EDWIN M. LEE, MAYOR

OFFICE OF SMALL BUSINESS  
REGINA DICK-ENDRIZZI, DIRECTOR

### **CRITERION 1: Has the applicant operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years?**

Yes, the applicant has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years:

545 Castro Street from 1936 to 1942 (6 years)  
515 Castro Street from 1942 to 1960 (18 years)  
495 Castro Street from 1960 to 1971 (11 years)  
479 Castro Street from 1971 to Present (46 years)

### **CRITERION 2: Has the applicant contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community?**

Yes, the applicant has contributed to the Castro neighborhood's history and identity.

The Historic Preservation Commission recommended the applicant as qualifying, noting the following ways the applicant contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community:

- Cliff's Variety is associated with the tradition of operating small neighborhood-serving variety and hardware stores with knowledgeable and helpful staff.
- Cliff's Variety has contributed to the history and identity of the Castro by serving as a neighborhood hardware and variety shop, and a reliable source of repair assistance and homeware advice, since 1936.
- The property has not been evaluated for historical or architectural significance on its own, however it is located within the California Register-eligible Castro Street Historic District and formerly housed the original Castro Theater.
- Cliff's Variety is mentioned in the LGBTQ Historic Context Statement which references how "run-down Victorians were restored by new residents who shopped for paint, hammers, and other tools and supplies at Cliff's Variety Store" in the 1970s (p. 170).
- The business has been cited in the following publications:
  - Armistead Maupin's *Tales of The City*.
  - San Francisco Chronicle, 2/13/2015, "Hardware stores hammer out creative Valentine's Day displays," by Steve Rubenstein.
  - Hoodline, 5/28/2016, "80 Years and counting: Castro's Cliff's Variety Recognized as Best Small Business in California," by Shane Downing.
  - Hardware Retailing, 9/8/2017, "Diverse San Francisco Retailers Collaborate on Training," by Renee Changnon.
  - Hoodline, 3/28/2017, "Neighborhood Shops See Poster Board, Art Supply Sales Soar In the Time of Trump," by Shane Downing.
  - SF Gate, 6/11/2011, "Cliff's Variety Store – 75 and going strong," by Sarah Adler.
- Cliff's Variety has also been the recipient of numerous awards and accolades, including:
  - 2009 Best Small Business Owner, 25 or More Employees, San Francisco Small Business Network.
  - 2014 Small Business of the Year, Council of District Merchants.
  - 2016 Best Small Business in California award, California State Legislature.



- 2015 Certificate of Honor, San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee.
- 2015 Certificate of Honor, City and County of San Francisco Office of the Assessor-Recorder.
- Cliff's Variety Day, June 2, 2016, City and County of San Francisco Proclamation.

**CRITERION 3: Is the applicant committed to maintaining the physical features or traditions that define the business, including craft, culinary, or art forms?**

Yes, Cliff's Variety is committed to maintaining the physical features and traditions that define the neighborhood hardware store and variety shop, including its eclectic retail that respond to the needs of its customer base, its practice of offering knowledgeable advice, its use of space-saving inventions, and its long tradition of creating interesting and expressive window displays.

**HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION**

The Historic Preservation Commission recommends that Cliff's Variety qualifies for the Legacy Business Registry under Administrative Code Section 2A.242(b)(2) and recommends safeguarding of the below listed physical features and traditions.

Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business:

- Eclectic variety of goods.
- Knowledgeable customer service.
- Tradition of creating specially themed and creative window displays.
- High arched ceiling.
- Rolling ladders.
- Ribbon machine.

**CORE PHYSICAL FEATURE OR TRADITION THAT DEFINES THE BUSINESS**

Following is the core physical feature or tradition that defines the business that would be required for maintenance of the business on the Legacy Business Registry.

- Hardware store.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the San Francisco Small Business Commission include Cliff's Variety currently located at 479 Castro Street in the Legacy Business Registry as a Legacy Business under Administrative Code Section 2A.242.

Richard Kurylo, Manager  
Legacy Business Program



# Small Business Commission Draft Resolution

HEARING DATE NOVEMBER 27, 2017

CLIFF'S VARIETY

LEGACY BUSINESS REGISTRY RESOLUTION NO. \_\_\_\_\_

<i>Application No.:</i>	LBR-2017-18-019
<i>Business Name:</i>	Cliff's Variety
<i>Business Address:</i>	479 Castro Street
<i>District:</i>	District 8
<i>Applicant:</i>	Terry Asten Bennett, General Manager/President
<i>Nomination Date:</i>	October 2, 2017
<i>Nominated By:</i>	Supervisor Jeff Sheehy
<i>Staff Contact:</i>	Richard Kurylo legacybusiness@sfgov.org

## ADOPTING FINDINGS APPROVING THE LEGACY BUSINESS REGISTRY APPLICATION FOR CLIFF'S VARIETY, CURRENTLY LOCATED AT 479 CASTRO STREET.

**WHEREAS**, in accordance with Administrative Code Section 2A.242, the Office of Small Business maintains a registry of Legacy Businesses in San Francisco (the "Registry") to recognize that longstanding, community-serving businesses can be valuable cultural assets of the City and to be a tool for providing educational and promotional assistance to Legacy Businesses to encourage their continued viability and success; and

**WHEREAS**, the subject business has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years; or

**WHEREAS**, the subject business has operated in San Francisco for more than 20 years but less than 30 years, has had no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years, has significantly contributed to the history or identity of a particular neighborhood or community and, if not included in the Registry, faces a significant risk of displacement; and

**WHEREAS**, the subject business has contributed to the neighborhood's history and identity; and

**WHEREAS**, the subject business is committed to maintaining the physical features and traditions that define the business; and

**WHEREAS**, at a duly noticed public hearing held on November 27, 2017, the San Francisco Small Business Commission reviewed documents and correspondence, and heard oral testimony on the Legacy Business Registry application; therefore







SAN FRANCISCO

## OFFICE OF SMALL BUSINESS

CITY AND COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO  
EDWIN M. LEE, MAYOR

OFFICE OF SMALL BUSINESS  
REGINA DICK-ENDRIZZI, DIRECTOR

**BE IT RESOLVED** that the Small Business Commission hereby includes Cliff's Variety in the Legacy Business Registry as a Legacy Business under Administrative Code Section 2A.242.

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Small Business Commission recommends safeguarding the below listed physical features and traditions at Cliff's Variety:

Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business:

- Eclectic variety of goods.
- Knowledgeable customer service.
- Tradition of creating specially themed and creative window displays.
- High arched ceiling.
- Rolling ladders.
- Ribbon machine.

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Small Business Commission requires maintenance of the below listed core physical feature or tradition to maintain Cliff's Variety on the Legacy Business Registry:

- Hardware store.

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I hereby certify that the foregoing Resolution was ADOPTED by the Small Business Commission on November 27, 2017.

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Regina Dick-Endrizzi  
Director

RESOLUTION NO. \_\_\_\_\_

Ayes –  
Nays –  
Abstained –  
Absent –





SAN FRANCISCO

OFFICE OF SMALL BUSINESS

CITY AND COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO  
EDWIN M. LEE, MAYOR

OFFICE OF SMALL BUSINESS  
REGINA DICK-ENDRIZZI, DIRECTOR

## Legacy Business Registry

# Application Review Sheet

*Application No.:* LBR-2017-18-019  
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**CRITERION 1:** Has the applicant has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years? ☒ Yes ☐ No

545 Castro Street from 1936 to 1942 (6 years)  
515 Castro Street from 1942 to 1960 (18 years)  
495 Castro Street from 1960 to 1971 (11 years)  
479 Castro Street from 1971 to Present (46 years)

**CRITERION 2:** Has the applicant contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community? ☒ Yes ☐ No

**CRITERION 3:** Is the applicant committed to maintaining the physical features or traditions that define the business, including craft, culinary, or art forms? ☒ Yes ☐ No

**NOTES:** NA

**DELIVERY DATE TO HPC:** October 19, 2017

Richard Kurylo  
Manager, Legacy Business Program



Member, Board of Supervisors  
District 8



City and County of San Francisco

**JEFF SHEEHY**

October 2, 2017

Dear Director Regina Dick Endrizzi:

I'm writing to nominate Cliff's Variety Hardware Store for the Legacy Business Registry. A San Francisco landmark in the Castro District, Cliff's Variety's first store has been open since the mid 1930's. Opened by a former merchant and school teacher, Hilario DeBaca, he has provided multiple goods such as home hardware, magazines, sewing notions, and candy.

Cliff's Variety Hardware Store has been a place for the neighborhood to come together, and has provided a sense of community for over 80 years. I strongly believe the business would benefit greatly from being a part of San Francisco's Legacy Business Registry, and thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeff Sheehy".

Jeff Sheehy  
Member, San Francisco Board of Supervisors

## Section One:

### Business / Applicant Information. Provide the following information:

- The name, mailing address, and other contact information of the business;
- The name of the person who owns the business. For businesses with multiple owners, identify the person(s) with the highest ownership stake in the business;
- The name, title, and contact information of the applicant;
- The business's San Francisco Business Account Number and entity number with the Secretary of State, if applicable.

NAME OF BUSINESS:		
DeBaca Corp. dba Cliff's Variety		
BUSINESS OWNER(S) (identify the person(s) with the highest ownership stake in the business)		
Ernest Asten		
CURRENT BUSINESS ADDRESS:	TELEPHONE:	
479 Castro Street San Francisco, CA 94114	(415) 431-5365	
	EMAIL:	
	terryasten@cs.com	
WEBSITE:	FACEBOOK PAGE:	YELP PAGE
Cliffsvariety.com	Cliff's Variety	Cliff's Variety

APPLICANT'S NAME	
Terry Asten Bennett	<input type="checkbox"/> Same as Business
APPLICANT'S TITLE	
General Manager / President	
APPLICANT'S ADDRESS:	TELEPHONE:
479 Castro Street SF CA 94114	(415) 431-5365
	EMAIL:
	terryasten@cs.com

SAN FRANCISCO BUSINESS ACCOUNT NUMBER:	SECRETARY OF STATE ENTITY NUMBER (if applicable):
0080170	C0685322

OFFICIAL USE: Completed by OSB Staff	
NAME OF NOMINATOR:	DATE OF NOMINATION:



## Section Two:

### Business Location(s).

List the business address of the original San Francisco location, the start date of business, and the dates of operation at the original location. Check the box indicating whether the original location of the business in San Francisco is the founding location of the business. If the business moved from its original location and has had additional addresses in San Francisco, identify all other addresses and the dates of operation at each address. For businesses with more than one location, list the additional locations in section three of the narrative.

ORIGINAL SAN FRANCISCO ADDRESS:	ZIP CODE:	START DATE OF BUSINESS
545 Castro Street SF CA 94114	94114	1936
IS THIS LOCATION THE FOUNDING LOCATION OF THE BUSINESS?	DATES OF OPERATION AT THIS LOCATON	
<input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	1936-1942	

OTHER ADDRESSES (if applicable):	ZIP CODE:	DATES OF OPERATION
515 Castro Street SF CA 94114	94114	Start: 1942 End: May 1960

OTHER ADDRESSES (if applicable):	ZIP CODE:	DATES OF OPERATION
495 Castro Street SF CA 94114	94114	Start: May 1960 End: Aug 1971

OTHER ADDRESSES (if applicable):	ZIP CODE:	DATES OF OPERATION
479 Castro Street SF CA 94114	94114	Start: Aug 1971 End: current

OTHER ADDRESSES (if applicable):	ZIP CODE:	DATES OF OPERATION
		Start: End:

OTHER ADDRESSES (if applicable):	ZIP CODE:	DATES OF OPERATION
		Start: End:

OTHER ADDRESSES (if applicable):	ZIP CODE:	DATES OF OPERATION
		Start: End:

## Section Three:

### Disclosure Statement.

#### San Francisco Taxes, Business Registration, Licenses, Labor Laws and Public Information Release.

This section is verification that all San Francisco taxes, business registration, and licenses are current and complete, and there are no current violations of San Francisco labor laws. This information will be verified and a business deemed not current in with all San Francisco taxes, business registration, and licenses, or has current violations of San Francisco labor laws, will not be eligible to apply for the Business Assistance Grant.

In addition, we are required to inform you that all information provided in the application will become subject to disclosure under the California Public Records Act.


Please read the following statements and check each to indicate that you agree with the statement. Then sign below in the space provided.

- ☒ I am authorized to submit this application on behalf of the business.
- ☒ I attest that the business is current on all of its San Francisco tax obligations.
- ☒ I attest that the business's business registration and any applicable regulatory license(s) are current.
- ☒ I attest that the Office of Labor Standards and Enforcement (OLSE) has not determined that the business is currently in violation of any of the City's labor laws, and that the business does not owe any outstanding penalties or payments ordered by the OLSE.
- ☒ I understand that documents submitted with this application may be made available to the public for inspection and copying pursuant to the California Public Records Act and San Francisco Sunshine Ordinance.
- ☒ I hereby acknowledge and authorize that all photographs and images submitted as part of the application may be used by the City without compensation.
- ☒ I understand that the Small Business Commission may revoke the placement of the business on the Registry if it finds that the business no longer qualifies, and that placement on the Registry does not entitle the business to a grant of City funds.

Terry Asten Bennett 08/01/17

Name (Print):

Date:

Signature: 

## **CLIFF'S VARIETY**

### **Section 4: Written Historical Narrative**

#### **CRITERION 1**

**a. Provide a short history of the business from the date the business opened in San Francisco to the present day, including the ownership history. For businesses with multiple locations, include the history of the original location in San Francisco (including whether it was the business's founding and or headquartered location) and the opening dates and locations of all other locations.**

Cliff's Variety Store and Hardware is a hardware, home goods, variety and fabric store located in the Castro neighborhood of San Francisco, California since 1936. It has been in business for over 80 years, is considered a neighborhood institution, and predates the neighborhood becoming the first widely recognized gay mecca starting in the 1960s. It is one of the oldest family-run stores in the city.

Cliff's Variety has operated in San Francisco for more than 80 years and should be considered for listing on the Legacy Business Registry. The history of the business is as follows:

Cliff's Variety was founded by Hilario DeBaca, a former merchant and schoolteacher from New Mexico, who came out of retirement to open the business at 545 Castro Street. The shop was mostly a one-man operation with Hilario's granddaughter, Lorraine, helping out after school. Hilario named the store after his youngest son, Clifford. The store sold a variety of goods including magazines, cigars, sewing notions, greeting cards, toys, and candy.

Besides his son Cliff, Hilario and his wife Lena had four other children: Irene, Ernie, Eloy, and Estelle. It would be his oldest son Ernie, not the store's namesake Cliff, who would join in the business with his father.

Ernie was born in 1903. From his earliest days Ernie was an entrepreneur. At the age of 14 he operated a horse-drawn popcorn wagon at baseball games in Arizona. At the age of 15 he entered an apprenticeship on the Santa Fe Railroad to be a boilermaker. In the early 1920s he worked on steam locomotives at the Santa Fe yard in Richmond, California. Ernie DeBaca went on to start a taxi service in San Rafael with four limousines. In 1921 he married Alice and later they moved to San Francisco, where he bell-hopped at the Wiltshire Hotel (now the Drake near Union Square). At this time he also formed a dance band called the Spanish Don's with his brother Cliff on tenor saxophone. Ernie played banjo in the five-piece band.

In the 1930s Ernie DeBaca operated Ernie's Repair Shop in San Francisco's Tenderloin. His business offered radio sales and service, lock repair, electrical and plumbing repair, welding, sheet metal work, and mechanical repairs. In 1933, in the midst of the Depression, Ernie and Alice bought a used Studebaker President, which they converted into a motor home. They closed the repair shop and with their daughter Lorraine they headed to the Chicago World's Fair. Ernie loaded the caravan with radio parts and in every town they stopped in along the way he would ask if anyone needed a radio fixed. In some of the small towns people brought him radios that hadn't worked in years.



After seeing the fair and a good slice of the country, Ernie and his family landed in Los Angeles and, without missing a beat, he started up a small candy factory. In 1936 they returned to San Francisco to open another repair shop. This was about the same time Ernie's father was opening Cliff's at 545 Castro Street.

In 1942 Hilario DeBaca moved his store a few doors closer to 18th Street to 515 Castro Street. This shop, though still quite small, had double the space of the first Cliff's. In 1946, Ernie DeBaca had a motorcycle accident that crushed his ankle. He was laid up for several months recuperating. He had to close his repair shop and he set up a workbench in the back of Cliff's Variety where he could repair small appliances.

Cliff's at 515 Castro Street became the birthplace of many of Ernie DeBaca's innovations in merchandising. To take advantage of the only space left in the store, the ceiling, he created a candy machine that consisted of metal trays full of candy bars. The trays were suspended between two loops of a bicycle chain, which ran in tracks. The customer could throw a switch to start a motor to move the chain. The trays at counter level would rise up to the ceiling as the higher trays descended to the customer's reach. This allowed a large selection of candy to be displayed in a small counter space. Later he built a similar device for spools of sewing ribbon (this machine is still operational and can be seen in the Sewing Department of our Annex). More machines followed: two machines for sewing buttons which took cards of buttons for a ride up to the ceiling and the length of the store and back, and similar machines for key blanks, greeting cards, and fabric dyes.



On July 19, 1952, Hilario DeBaca passed away and Ernie DeBaca took over ownership of Cliff's Variety.

In May of 1960, Cliff's Variety Store moved to 495 Castro Street. Three of the space-saving machines were set up in the new space: the ribbon machine and two button machines. Ernie DeBaca was a native genius and was able to fix almost anything. People brought in nearly everything to be repaired: televisions, radios, toasters, lamps, locks, clocks, windows, and the kitchen sink.

Alice DeBaca, Ernie's wife, worked the store and took care of their grandson, Ernie Asten. In 1963, she suffered a stroke. It took more than a year for her to recover to the point where she could visit the store in her wheelchair and later with her walker. Ernie and Alice DeBaca's daughter, Lorraine, returned to help run the store in Alice's absence. However, Lorraine's husband was in the Navy stationed on the East Coast, and she needed to be with him. Ernie Asten was by this time old enough to help out at the store after school. He would mind the store while his grandfather went home for dinner, but more help was necessary and a few other employees were hired. One of these was Lena Sozzi, who worked for Cliff's from 1964 until her death in May of 1989. Martha Sullivan, Ernie Asten's girlfriend, started helping out at Halloween and Christmas. In the summer of 1968, Martha started full time. Ernie and Martha married in 1969 and they have been at Cliff's ever since.

In early 1971, the landlord of 495 Castro Street told Ernie DeBaca that his rent would triple when his lease expired later that year. Fortune smiled on Ernie and Cliff's when the Bon Omi store (a five and dime) went out of business. The day it closed, Ernie made an offer on the building and purchased 479 Castro Street in August of 1971.

In September of 1971, Alice DeBaca passed away. She had been working along with Ernie, her husband of 49 years, to get the store moved, but she never got to see it open in the new location. After Alice passed away Cliff's was incorporated, and Ernie Asten took over the ownership.

In October of 1971, Cliff's opened at 479 Castro Street. The building was erected in 1910 as the Castro Theater. It was remodeled into a retail store in the mid 1920s after the larger Castro Theater was built. This store was much larger than the previous one, and it seemed that it would be impossible to fill the place up. The merchandise was spread out to make the store look full, however, it was not long before the shelves started going higher up the walls. Ernie Asten, who had grown up at his grandfather's side, had learned many skills. It was his idea to add the rolling ladders. As new counters were needed, he found it easier to build them himself than to find just what was needed to fill a particular spot. Product lines were added and expanded to meet the needs of people restoring their Victorians, and lines were also added to accommodate people putting their drag costumes together. So, you could get a plaster ceiling medallion, a feather boa, a toilet fill valve, a rhinestone tiara, and toys for the nieces and nephews all in one place!

The 70s not only witnessed the expansion of the business, it also saw the birth of Ernie and Martha's two daughters. After growing up in the city, the youngest daughter Marian decided to forgo city life as an adult and moved north for a life in the country. The older daughter, Terry, spent her high school years working at the store in the family tradition before going away to college.

The 80s were a time of rapid growth for Cliff's. The property value in the neighborhood experienced a steady climb as gay people the world over flocked to live in the new gay mecca. As the energy in the neighborhood increased so did the business at Cliff's. It became a neighborhood hub where old friends would meet and new friends were made.

As the business flourished, so did the need for more space. Even though a decade earlier an entire basement had been excavated beneath the floor of the store, Cliff's was still quickly running out of room. The counters grew taller and more creative ways were devised to display and store the ever-growing number of items needed to satisfy the growing demands of the neighborhood.

It was in the late 80s that relief would come to an overloaded Cliff's Variety. The store adjacent to Cliff's, a Hallmark Card shop (formerly Work Wonders, a furniture store, and before that Square Deal Paints), became available to lease. Ernie and Martha quickly jumped at the opportunity and it was decided the space would become the new home of Cliff's fabric and linens as well as bedding and bath accessories now referred to as "The Annex."

The store would go through many changes during the early 90s, and it would be the dot com boom of the late 90s that would shape the product selection that is Cliff's Annex today. The rapid influx of money into the city and a mantra of "money is no object" allowed Cliff's to break away from its 5 & 10 reputation and move into the world of upscale marketing.

It was in the height of this boom that another opportunity for expansion would arise. After many years trying to convince the building owner at 471 Castro (The Annex) to sell, she finally conceded. Cliff's quickly bought the property. This created many possibilities for the future growth of a booming business. Plans were soon devised to remodel the existing structure creating more floor space as well

as desperately needed storage. In July of 2004, the parcels at 479 and 471 Castro Street were merged into one parcel. Cliff's today is a larger structure comprised of the two stores combined creating a larger overall retail space while maintaining the better-best offering our customers have grown to expect.

The late 90s also saw the return from college of Terry, Martha and Ernie's eldest daughter. It was during this period of growth that Terry chose to carry on the family tradition and began her rite of passage to becoming the latest generation to take over operations of Cliff's Variety. In 2003, Terry herself had a daughter who is growing up in her grandfather's footsteps and may one day be the next generation to carry on the history of one of the oldest family owned stores in San Francisco.

**b. Describe any circumstances that required the business to cease operations in San Francisco for more than six months?**

Cliff's Variety has been in continuous operation since its founding in 1936 - always in San Francisco and always on the same two blocks of Castro Street.

**c. Is the business a family-owned business? If so, give the generational history of the business.**

Yes, Cliff's Variety is a family-owned business. Cliff's was founded in 1936 by Hilario DeBaca. Hilario's son Ernie DeBaca took over the business in July of 1952 when his father died. Ernie Asten, Ernie DeBaca's grandson, took over ownership of the business when it was incorporated in 1971. This is also when Cliff's moved into its current location at 479 Castro Street.

**d. Describe the ownership history when the business ownership is not the original owner or a family-owned business.**

Not applicable.

**e. When the current ownership is not the original owner and has owned the business for less than 30 years, the applicant will need to provide documentation of the existence of the business prior to current ownership to verify it has been in operation for 30+ years. Please use the list of supplemental documents and/or materials as a guide to help demonstrate the existence of the business prior to current ownership.**

Not applicable. Cliff's Variety has been owned by the same family since it was founded in 1936.

**f. Note any other special features of the business location, such as, if the property associated with the business is listed on a local, state, or federal historic resources registry.**

Cliff's Variety's current location, 479 Castro Street, is the site of the original Castro Theatre, which was built in 1910. This reflects the historical significance of the building to Eureka Valley. The building was erected in 1910 as the Castro Theater but was remodeled into a retail store in the mid 1920s after the larger Castro Theater was built. The original architecture of the theater can still be seen in the high arched ceilings. The building is classified as a Category A building (historical resources present) with regard to the California Environmental Quality Act.

## **CRITERION 2**

### **a. Describe the business's contribution to the history and/or identity of the neighborhood, community or San Francisco.**

Cliff's Variety has been at the center of the identity and history of San Francisco especially in the gay rights movement. Cliff's Variety has served the Eureka Valley community since it was founded. Eureka Valley was a sleepy neighborhood in the early 1960s, then the Haight-Ashbury "happened" and San Francisco had an incredible influx of people. When the apartments in the Haight filled up, some of the overflow came to Eureka Valley. The weather was nice and the flats were spacious and cheap, so groups of "hippies" moved in. After the Summer of Love, many of the hippies drifted away to communes in Oregon and other destinations. By the mid-60s, there were already a few gay owned businesses on Castro Street: a gift shop, a record store, and an antique shop; and there was a bar, The Missouri Mule, on Market Street. Gay men and lesbians were becoming more visible on Castro Street. Gays started buying the old houses recognizing the potential of these neglected Victorians. As the property values rose, families were selling and moving to the suburbs. As gays moved in, gay bars replaced the straight bars and the sleepy neighborhood took on a new and different life. Other businesses in the area were changing. Property values were rising and it was inevitable that commercial rents would increase.

There were rapid changes in the neighborhood during the 70s. As the gay population exploded, the street was constantly bustling with people. In 1971, Cliff's had three employees who were not family. As the business grew, the number of workers increased to 42. Cliff's was the first straight-owned business on the block to hire openly gay employees. As the neighborhood changed, so did the skills required of sales clerks. In addition to a knowledge of hardware, electrical and plumbing, people were needed who could advise with decorating, costuming, cooking, sewing and entertaining.

Further, Ernie DeBaca had a long tradition of elaborate window displays, especially at Halloween and Christmas. As new people were hired, they were encouraged to share their talents and creativity. Over the years, Jay Jebens, Paul Ellis, Larry Bair, A.J. Powell, Erik Morales, Franc Robles and many others have contributed to the innovative window displays that the customers have come to love.

### **b. Is the business (or has been) associated with significant events in the neighborhood, the city, or the business industry?**

On Halloween in 1946, Ernie DeBaca produced the first Halloween street party on Castro Street. It started very small as a children's costume contest. The first year, a stool served as a stage. Each child would stand on the stool and the crowd would applaud. The child with the loudest applause won. The tradition grew over the years with a flatbed truck serving as a stage with lights and a P.A. system. In addition to the costume contest, there were musicians, clowns, jugglers and other types of entertainment; and there was an ice cream eating contest and a parade. This tradition of a children's Halloween party continued through the 50s, 60s, and 70s. It came to a sad end in 1979 when instead of hosting hundreds of local children, Castro Street had crowds of tens of thousands of rowdy adults fighting and breaking windows. Ernie DeBaca realized that his Halloween tradition had ended.

As the neighborhood changed so did the flavor of Halloween, transitioning Halloween from a holiday only for children into the adult event it remains today. Although Cliff's no longer hosts the children's event, they still sponsor the Children's Halloween Costume Contest now hosted by The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

In 2009, Cliff's was honored by the Small Business Network as Best Small Business Owner with more than 25 employees of the year. In 2014, Cliff's was honored by the Council of District Merchants as Small Business of the year. In 2016, Cliff's was honored as one of the Best Small Businesses in California by the State Legislature. Cliff's has countless accolades from Mark Leno, David Chui, Mayor Ed Lee, Scott Weiner and a multitude of other politicians.

**c. Has the business ever been referenced in an historical context? Such as in a business trade publication, media, or historical documents?**

Cliff's Variety is referenced in Armistead Maupin's Tales of The City. Cliff's is frequently featured on the news around Halloween, Christmas, Gay Pride or whenever anything is going on in the Castro. There are several articles about Cliff's in the BAR, SF Bay Times and Hoodline. Cliff's has been featured in 7x7 Magazine, Where Magazine and Hardware Retailing Magazine.

**d. Is the business associated with a significant or historical person?**

While none of the Cliff's family is historically significant, several historic figures have frequented Cliff's including: Harvey Milk, Cleve Jones, Marga Gomez, Armistead Maupin, Donna Sachet, Benjamin Bratt, Tracy Chapman, Randy Schiller, Robin Williams, Sylvester and Divine.

**e. How does the business demonstrate its commitment to the community?**

Cliff's believes in giving back to the community that supports us. Through endless donations of products and gift cards, the business supports the neighborhood schools and city-wide nonprofits.

Cliff's Variety hosts an annual fundraiser to support Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy, the public elementary school located 3 blocks away. Over the years, Cliff's has raised more than \$50,000 for the school. Cliff's also sponsors the annual "Inscribe" event held annually on World AIDS Day by providing the supplies needed. Cliff's also donates a portion of their profits that day to support the AIDS LifeCycle.

**f. Provide a description of the community the business serves.**

The Castro is known for being the Gay Mecca of San Francisco and tourist destination. However, the reality of the Castro is that it is a mix of gay, straight, singles, families, home-owners, renters, natives and transplants. The physical makeup of the Castro is a residential neighborhood, with a thriving business corridor and transportation hub.

**g. Is the business associated with a culturally significant building/structure/site/object/interior?**

Cliff's Variety's current location, 479 Castro Street, is the site of the original Castro Theatre, which was built in 1910. This reflects the historical significance of the building to Eureka Valley. The building was

erected in 1910 as the Castro Theater but was remodeled into a retail store in the mid 1920s after the larger Castro Theater was built. The original architecture of the theater can still be seen in the high arched ceilings. The building is classified as a Category A building (historical resources present) with regard to the California Environmental Quality Act.

**h. How would the community be diminished if the business were to be sold, relocated, shut down, etc.?**

If sold, relocated or shut down, the community would lose one of the oldest family stores in San Francisco with Ernie's roots going back to the 1930s. The absence of Cliff's Variety would result in the loss of a robust store that has served San Francisco and helped the gay community. Cliff's is the anchor retail business in the Castro driving foot steps to all of its neighbor businesses. Without Cliff's in the Castro to serve its over 700 customers per day, the Castro would be less of a neighborhood and more of an entertainment district.

### **CRITERION 3**

**a. Describe the business and the essential features that define its character.**

Cliff's mission has always been to serve the needs of the community. Cliff's has accomplished that with its every changing variety of goods and knowledgeable customer service. As the make-up of the neighborhood changes, the business adjusts to continue serving its needs.

**b. How does the business demonstrate a commitment to maintaining the historical traditions that define the business, and which of these traditions should not be changed in order to retain the businesses historical character? (e.g., business model, goods and services, craft, culinary, or art forms)**

The characteristics that have defined Cliff's through the years are its eclectic variety of goods and its knowledgeable customer service. While the product mix changes frequently to meet the needs of the community, these two things remain consistent.

**c. How has the business demonstrated a commitment to maintaining the special physical features that define the business? Describe any special exterior and interior physical characteristics of the space occupied by the business (e.g. signage, murals, architectural details, neon signs, etc.).**

Cliff's most defining characteristics are the high arched ceiling, rolling ladders, ribbon machine and amazing window displays. These are features that the Cliff's family holds dear and has maintained through the decades.

**d. When the current ownership is not the original owner and has owned the business for less than 30years; the applicant will need to provide documentation that demonstrates the current owner has maintained the physical features or traditions that define the business, including craft, culinary, or art forms. Please use the list of supplemental documents and/or materials as a guide to help demonstrate the existence of the business prior to current ownership.**

Not applicable.

# BUSINESS REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE

RENEW BY DATE  
05-31-2017

EXPIRATION DATE  
06-30-2017

BUSINESS ACCOUNT NUMBER

0334024

LOCATION ID

0334024-01-001

TRADE NAME (DBA)

ASTEN FAMILY REVOCABLE TRUST

BUSINESS LOCATION

471 CASTRO ST

# BUSINESS REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE

RENEW BY DATE  
05-31-2017

EXPIRATION DATE  
06-30-2017

BUSINESS ACCOUNT NUMBER

0080170

LOCATION ID

0080170-01-001

TRADE NAME (DBA)

CLIFFS VARIETY STORE

BUSINESS LOCATION

479 CASTRO ST

DISPLAY CONSPICUOUSLY AT PLACE OF BUSINESS FOR WHICH ISSUED

CALIFORNIA STATE BOARD OF EQUALIZATION

## SELLER'S PERMIT



ACCOUNT NUMBER

1/1/1974 SR BH 19633300

CLIFF'S VARIETY STORE  
DE BACA CORPORATION  
479 CASTRO ST.

SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94114

THIS PERMIT DOES NOT  
AUTHORIZE THE HOLDER  
TO ENGAGE IN ANY  
BUSINESS CONTRARY TO  
LAWS REGULATING THAT  
BUSINESS OR TO  
POSSESS OR OPERATE  
ANY ILLEGAL DEVICE.

IS HEREBY AUTHORIZED PURSUANT TO SALES AND USE TAX LAW  
TO ENGAGE IN THE BUSINESS OF SELLING TANGIBLE PERSONAL  
PROPERTY AT THE ABOVE LOCATION

Not valid at any other address

THIS PERMIT IS VALID UNTIL REVOKED OR CANCELED BUT IS NOT TRANSFERABLE. IF YOU SELL YOUR BUSINESS,  
OR DROP OUT OF A PARTNERSHIP, NOTIFY US OR YOU COULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR SALES AND USE TAXES  
DUE BY THE NEW OPERATOR OF THE BUSINESS.





OPENING NIGHT, CASTRO THEATRE. DEC. 21, 1910.

W. H. MILLER, PHOTOGRAPHER

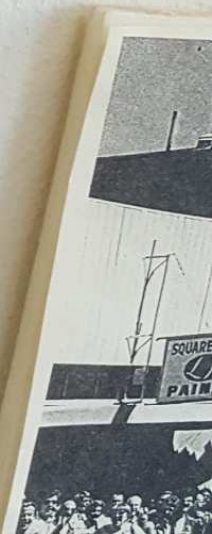
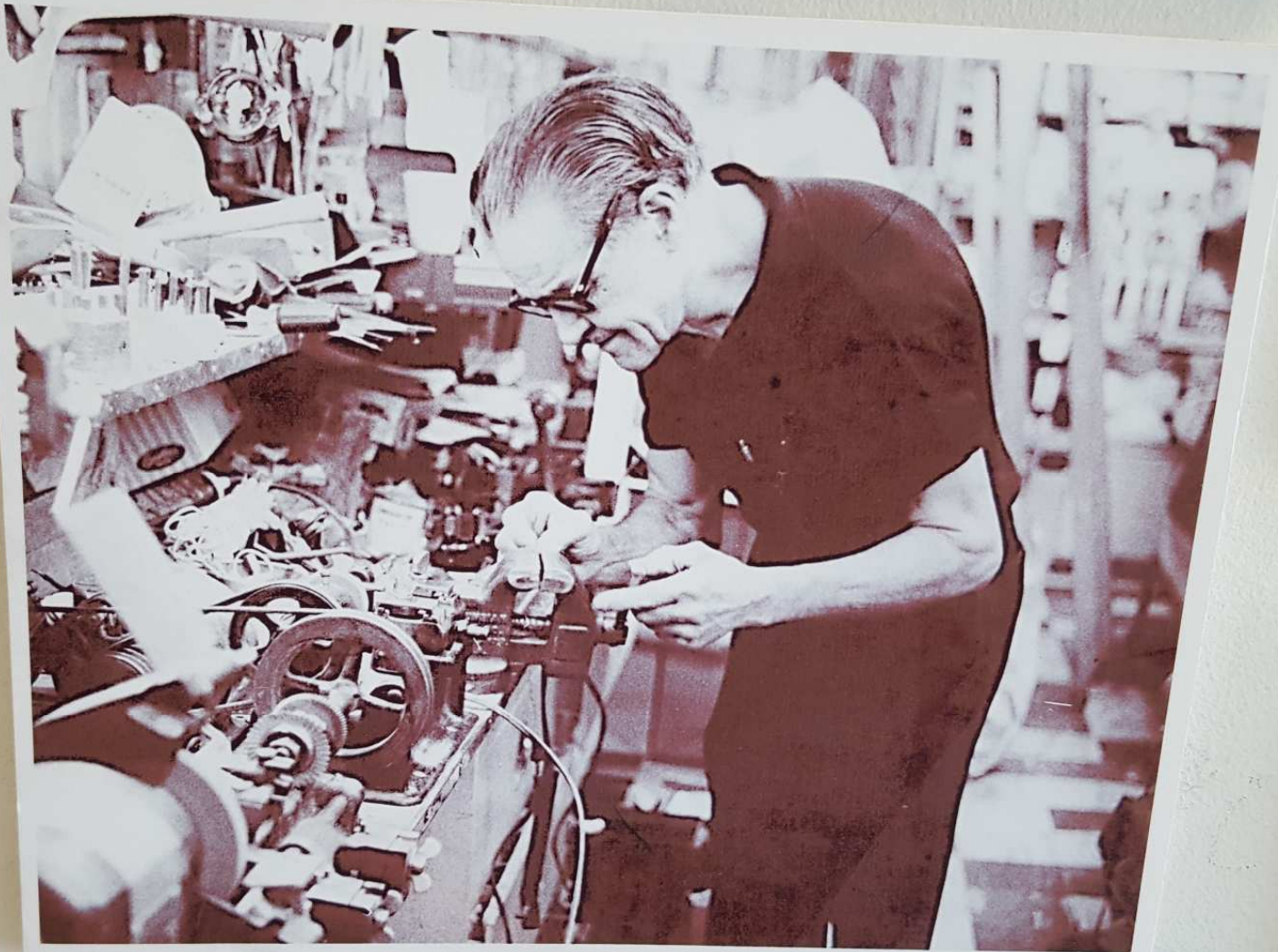


cliffsvaryety.com

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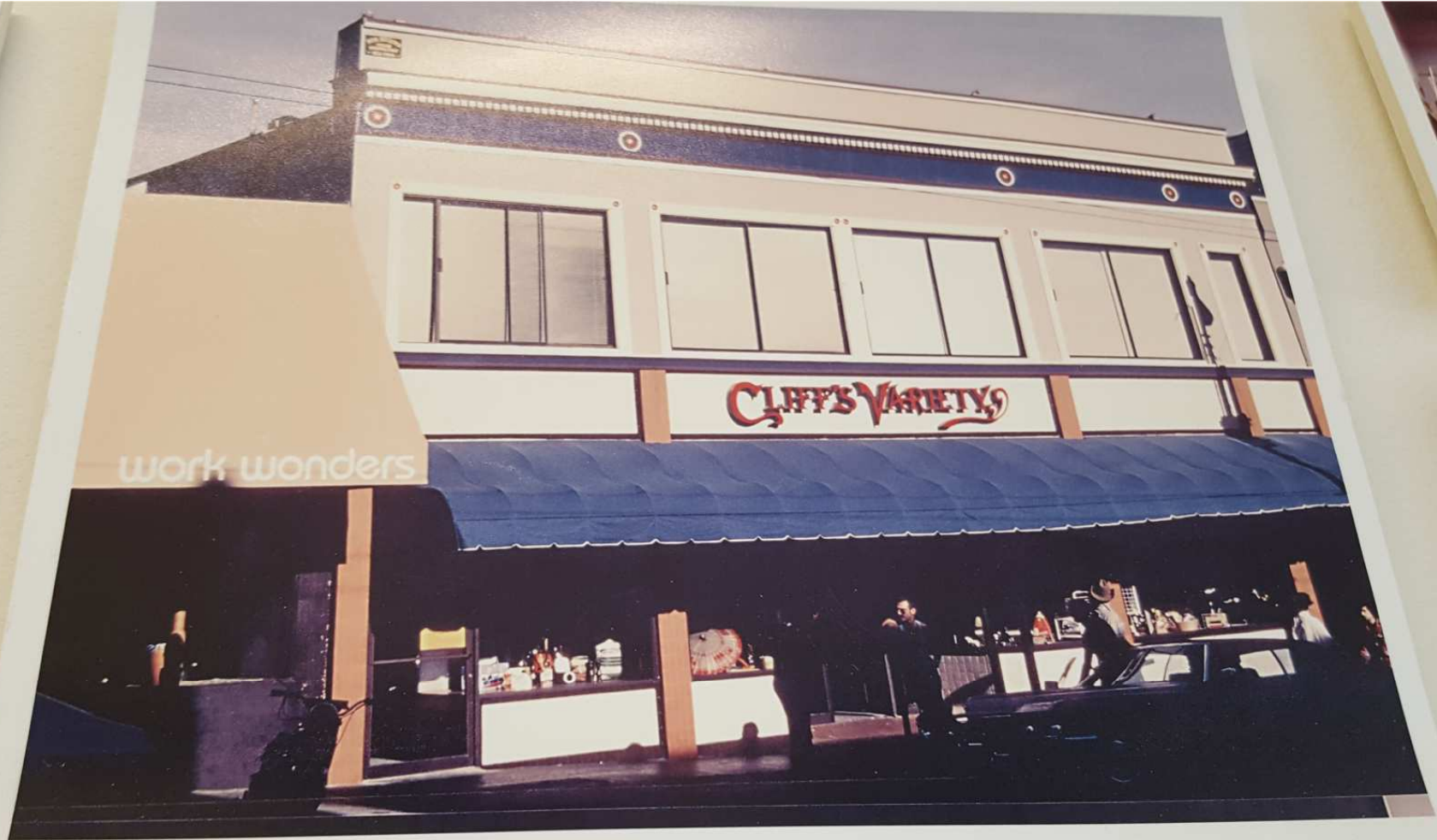












work wonders

# CLIFF'S VARIETY

479









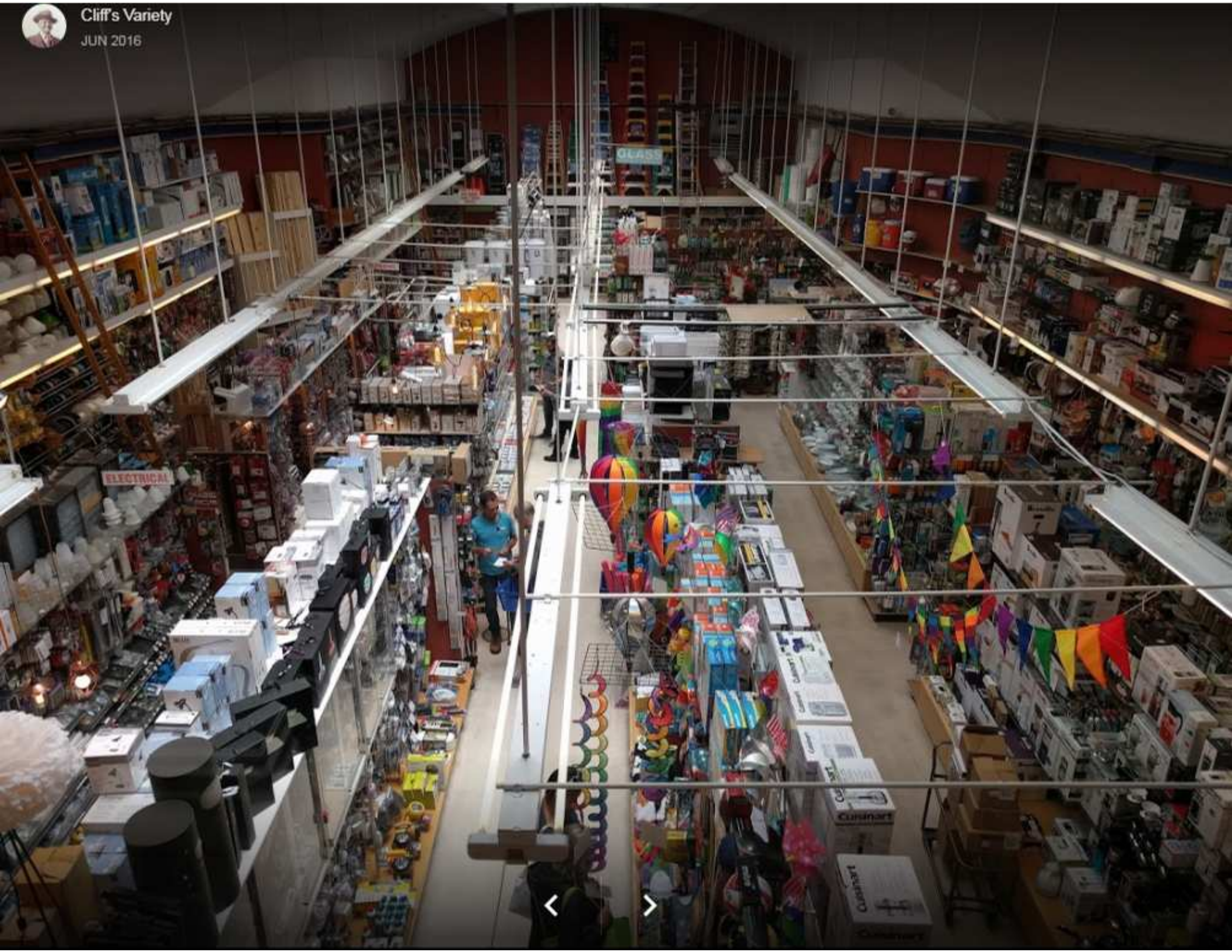
CLIFF'S VARIETY

CLIFF'S VARIETY

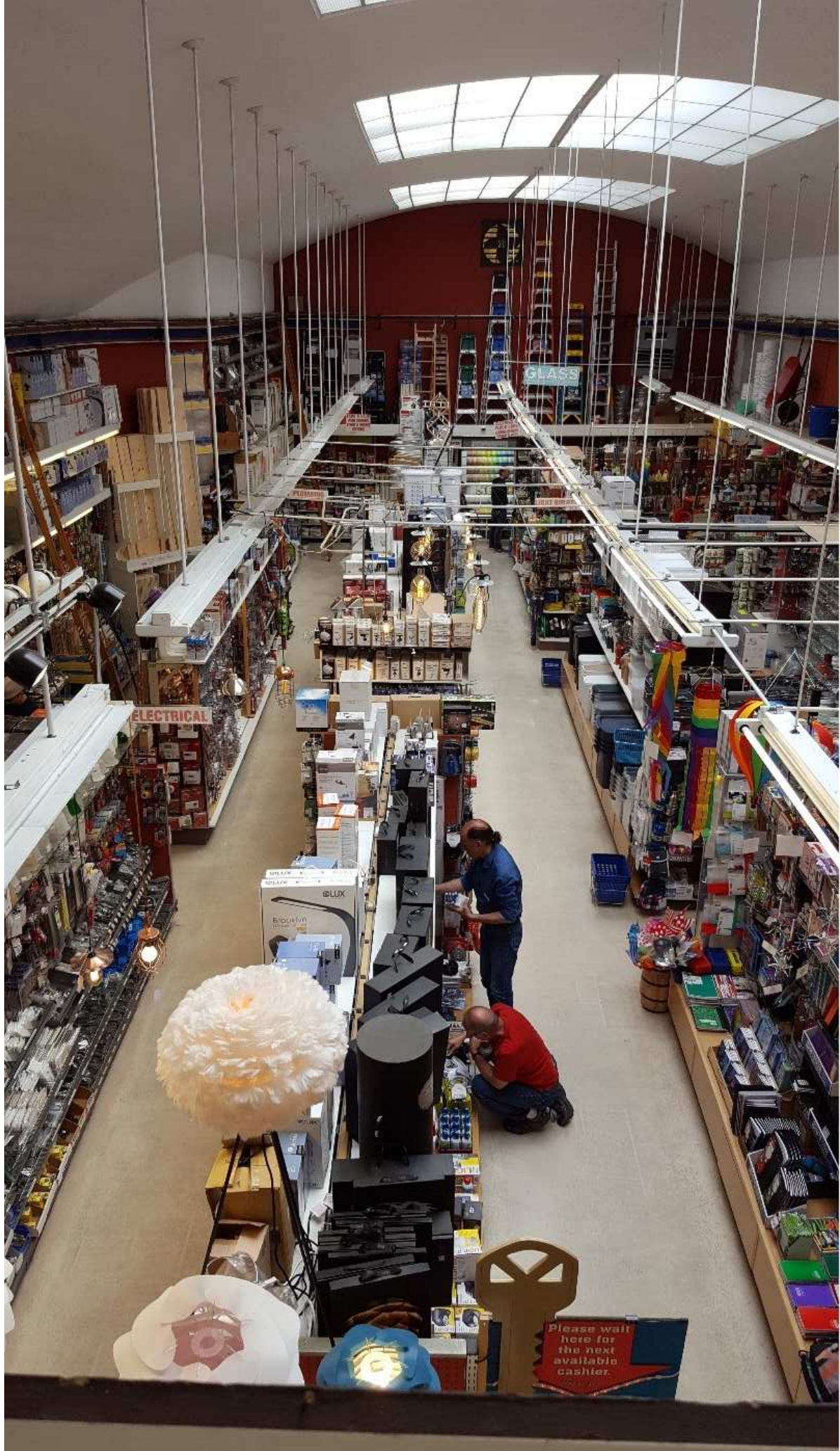
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# The importance of being ERNIE

By Susan Andrews

**A** MAN ENTERS sheepishly, his shoulders hunched together, locked in his own handcuffs. A homeowner lugs in the faucet fixture he removed trying to change the washer. A woman rushes in to say she dropped her housekey down the grate at the corner.

Rescue is on the house. One worker picks the lock, another changes the washer, and the grate man departs with magnet and twine.

This is Cliff's Variety Store, 479 Castro St., and here you can come by almost anything that's legal. French cutlery, Chinese baskets, Stillson wrenches and penny candy that still costs a penny. Christmas ornaments in August. A duplicate for the key to your grandmother's trunk.

Cliff's has everything from hardware to underwear, along with a repair service, a custom parts service and an unlimited supply of advice.

You probably wouldn't come from North Beach or the Marina to shop at Cliff's and if you live in the neighborhood, you're already a customer. But the story of Cliff's is really the story of Ernie DeBaca.

DeBaca lives two blocks from his store, owns three identical pairs of tailor-made black bellbottoms, and subsists on coffee, pie and four hours of sleep a night. He's been a boxer, a boilermaker and a banjoist. He is a natural-born businessman whose heart is as large as his store of goods, and in more than 50 years of doing business, he has done a lot of things with no thought of the bottom line.

Lena Sozzi has been with Cliff's the longest of anyone on the staff of 16, except for Ernie's grandson, Ernie Asten, who is now 30 and has been working in the store since he was 3. Sozzi thinks Cliff's succeeds



Ernie DeBaca, the driving force behind Cliff's Variety Store on Castro Street

Stewpots and laundry baskets grazed the peeling paint of the ceiling, the conveyor belts meandered over the walls, and the storeroom admitted no one beyond a depth of two feet.

By 1971, the rent was \$80 a month. One day in July, the landlord entered and announced that when the old lease expired, the rent would be \$1500 a month. DeBaca told the landlord he would move. The landlord just looked around and laughed.

When the landlord gave notice at No. 495, the Bon Ami store a few doors up was going out of business.

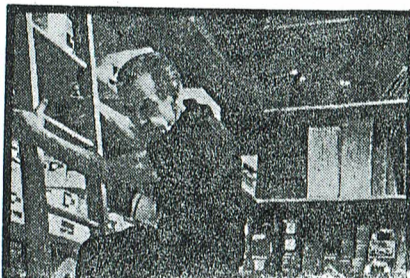
It was gloomy, but it was sound, DeBaca bought it, and for the first time in 50 years of doing business, he became his own landlord.

Ernie Asten took charge of the work crew, and renovations began. The skylights were scraped clean. A new floor was laid. Sixty-seven gallons of blue paint covered the walls; shelves went up, along with 200 feet of rolling ladder track (it just wouldn't be Cliff's without the ladders). Six hundred fifty tons of earth were excavated from beneath the store to create a full basement. Sunlight re-entered the building, and Cliff's moved to 479 Castro.

Ernie's partner for all these years had been his wife Alice. She was the one who had saved the \$41,000 down payment for the old Bon Ami store. The blue of the walls and of the awning out front is Alice's Blue. Long-time customers remember the vigorous, smiling woman who worked in the store with Ernie. Those of shorter duration knew a fragile, smiling woman who sat near the cash register.

She died in 1971, just after she and Ernie took title to the new store, and just a few months shy of their golden wedding anniversary.

"We never argued and we never fought," DeBaca says. "We were a team."





because Ernie's kindness just runs on on everybody else." Astén agrees. "In 50 years, my grandfather has never made an enemy," he says. "He doesn't know how."

Ask DeBacca himself why his staff is so loyal and he says, "I don't know, but I've never fired anyone. I just couldn't do that. If this isn't the place for them, they generally know it and leave."

Forty-eight years ago, when the neighborhood was mostly Irish police officers and their families, Ernie knew all his regular customers "by face."

On Christmas Eve, some of those regulars would find DeBacca in the store at 4 a.m., sorting out the toys they had put on layaway in September. "Nowadays," he reports, "Christmas isn't that big anymore, so I only stay 'til about 2."

Halloween, however, is very big. About two weeks before, Cliff's main window is appropriated by two witches and an animated wooden skeleton, a bubbling cauldron, assorted spiders, webs and other mood-enhancers. On Halloween Day the police close the street for the annual Halloween parade, which features costume-judging, talent show, pie-eating contests and prizes for all the winners. Photos of everyone are posted in Cliff's window the following week. Thirty years ago, DeBacca carved the skeleton from sugar pine and the witches from plaster of Paris, and he has been throwing this party for the neighborhood kids even longer.

DeBacca says he's been in business "for about a hundred years." Actually, it all started in Prescott, Ariz., where, with a rented horse and 12 helpers, he ran the popcorn wagon for the baseball games. He used to take in \$75 on a Saturday afternoon. Not bad for a 14-year-old kid.

That was his first venture on his own. But all his life he had worked in his father's stores. The elder DeBacca owned general stores in Prescott, Flagstaff and Cliffs, one at a time. Like his son, he would rather have one store that had everything than a whole chain of second-raters.

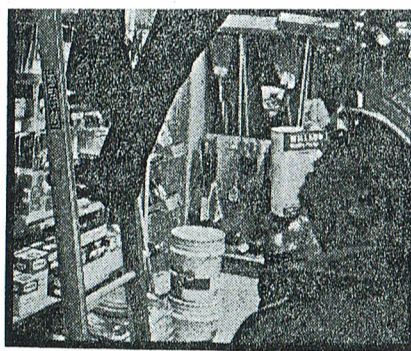
A lot of people call DeBacca Cliff. That's OK with him, but the real Cliff is Ernie's baby brother. Ernie always had a soft spot for Cliff, and in 1929, when he first opened a store on Castro Street, he named it after his brother. Cliff in turn was named after Cliffs, the small logging town where he was born. Cliff DeBacca lives in Santa Rosa and has no connection with the store. Cliff's Variety Store is thriving. Cliffs, Ariz., is now extinct.

DeBacca hated school. What he loved was running his father's store and fixing things, which just came naturally. "I never learned anything. I just did it."

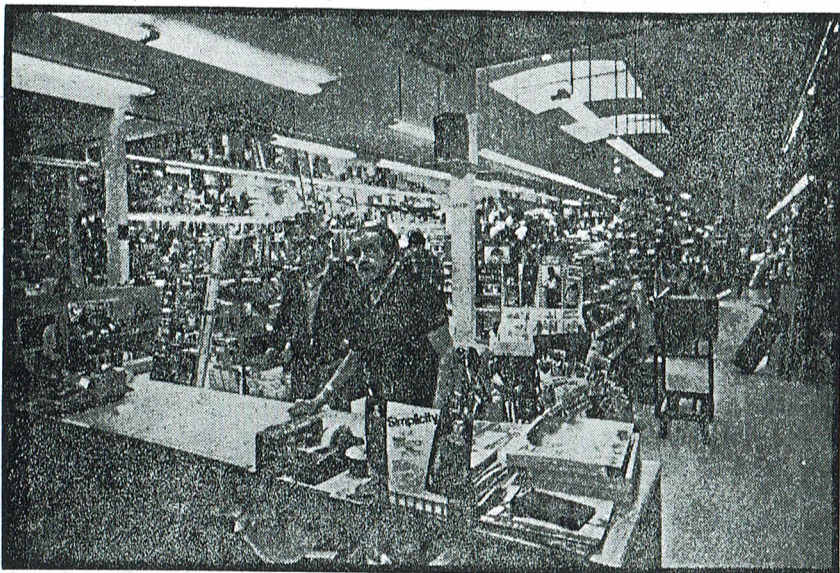
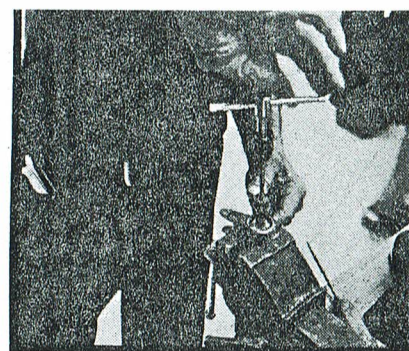
At 14 Ernie said he was 16 and got taken on by the Santa Fe Railroad as a boilermaker's apprentice. In 1920 he was transferred to the yard in Richmond, Calif., and he stayed there, making boilers and boxing on the railroad boxing team, until 1922 when the railroad workers went out on strike. During that strike, trains were derailed and looted, violence flared. DeBacca never went back.

Instead, with four limousines, he started the first taxi service in San Rafael. He bell-hopped at the Wilshire and played banjo for the Spanish Dons, his own dance band. (Cliff played sax.) Around 1925, he started up another business from a little shop on Eddy Street. He rode his blue Indian motorcycle around the city to do plumbing and electrical repairs. The shop on Castro was just an outpost that gave his ailing father something to do.

That first Cliff's was a tiny storefront, with candy



Cliff's offers personal service and plenty of merchandise amid its cheerful jumble



Examiner photos by Paul Glines

inside and second-hand magazines out front. The neighborhood kids would swipe the magazines, sell them back to the store at the going rate, and buy candy with the proceeds. In its first month, Cliff's took in seven dollars. This was not much, even in 1929.

The store survived and stayed in that same spot for 10 years. DeBacca moved his repair business over to Cliff's, and gradually enlarged his stock with sewing notions, then toys, then hardware — now his biggest seller. Even so, things were tight; the family used to erase their greeting cards and sell them in the store second-hand.

In those days," DeBacca says, "You couldn't afford to waste one penny. Nowadays, money is like water used to be. People have no idea of its value and still don't have enough."

The second Cliff's, still in the neighborhood, was

four times bigger than the old one, and the rent was \$60 a month. It remained there for more than 20 years. Expansion never stopped. Shelves were built from the floor to the 12-foot ceiling. DeBacca invented a system of seven motorized belts that conveyed and displayed the smaller items. Flip the switch and the entire stock of records, buttons, dyes, candy, keys, greeting cards and ribbons would travel the height of the wall, cross the ceiling and pass before your eyes. "People used to watch them by the hour," he recalls.

Cliff's III was located at 495 Castro, where the Village Deli and Donuts-&Things now stand. DeBacca made the move in 1960 because he liked the spot. "In business, location is everything. And the first block is always better than the second block." This store was more than twice as large as its predecessor. The ceiling was 15 feet high, and there was even a little storeroom in the back. But again, content triumphed over form.

Ernie met Alice in Richmond, where she was working in a music store, in 1921. He went there to buy an accordion. He and Alice kept company every Sunday for a year. "Nobody asked anybody. We just told our folks we were going to be married."

Alice and Ernie had a lot of fun. They went to Playland-at-the-Beach and to the movies, roller-skated, swam at Suto Baths, "all the usual things," as Ernie puts it. They had a baby. But what they mostly did was work together, and they loved it. "I would get these ideas," he recalls, "and Alice would be in there helping with both hands."

She kept the books for the repair business and manned the phones for the taxi service. She was the hostess for Ernie's dance band; for the Golden Gate Exposition of 1939 she hand-made 3,000 candy boxes in the shape of a Spanish Don. In 1939, they left DeBacca's father in charge of the store and went off to the World's Fair in Chicago. Coming home, they stopped off in Los Angeles for a visit and ended up in the wholesale candy business.

DeBacca invented the kite sacker, a large lollipop in the shape of a kite. Ernie poured and Alice wrapped, and the business boomed for the next six months.

Then they returned to San Francisco for a visit. As soon as old repair customers found out he was back in town, that was it. Ernie and Alice were back at Cliff's for good; for more than 20 years, Alice opened the store in the morning and went to the bank at the end of the day. Even in her last years, when she was frail, she insisted on going with Ernie to the store in her wheelchair and staying until he closed up at 10 p.m.

DeBacca misses her sorely. Sometimes," he says, "I feel like I'm just marking time."

Part of the secret of Cliffs is that it has always been a family affair. Ernie Astén and his wife Martha have been helping DeBacca run the store for more than seven years.

"Even though we are growing," says Martha Astén, "we are still a personal servicestore. Our people don't just wave a customer to the back of the store and tell him, 'It's in there someplace.' They go and find it with him. And our customers know we'll take a special order for them, and if necessary, manufacture it ourselves."

"Growing up with my grandfather has taught me more than I could ever have learned any other way," says Ernie Astén. In college he majored in electrical engineering and he has done other things, but the spirit of Cliff's runs deep. "Working here, you never get bored. We have our own lathe and welder in the basement, and we can engineer our way out of any problem. Today I'm making a spigot for a customer who has an old bathtub that doesn't work because they don't make the parts for it anymore. The people who come to work here find out they are free to help people, and they enjoy it. We solve hundreds of problems every day."

DeBacca gives a lot of credit for Cliff's current success to the Asténs and to his staff. He also gives his customers their due. Since the gay renaissance on Castro Street, business has never been better. "There's nothing like traffic for business and this street is busy day and night."

In the nearly 50 years since its beginning, Cliff's Variety Store has grown from a one-man candy shop into a thriving enterprise that makes any other store of its kind seem stuffy and barren. But there is no other store of its kind — only Cliff's has Ernie DeBacca.

What is his secret?

"Be natural, that's all."





## Cliff's Discovered the Castro Before We Did

Long before the Castro was a queer enclave, Cliff's Variety was up and running in the neighborhood. It's now been in business for 78 years, and is one of the oldest family-run businesses in all of San Francisco. Like the items it sells, Cliff's was built to last and is still going strong. Let's take a look back at some key moments in its still-evolving incredible history.



**1936**— Hilario DeBaca, a former merchant and schoolteacher from New Mexico, comes out of retirement to open Cliff's Variety at 545 Castro Street. DeBaca names the store after his youngest son, Clifford. The store sells a variety of goods including magazines, cigars, sewing notions, greeting cards, toys and candy.

**1942**— DeBaca moves his store to 515 Castro Street, providing him with double the original space. Gay men begin to move into the area as the U.S. military dishonorably discharges thousands of homosexual servicemen during World War II.

**1946**— DeBaca's oldest son Ernie sets up a workbench in the back of Cliff's Variety so that he can repair small appliances there for customers. Later that same year, Ernie produces the first Halloween street party on Castro Street.

**1952**— DeBaca dies. Ernie continues to work at the store, helped by other family members.



**1960**— Cliff's moves again, this time to 495 Castro Street. Ernie's amazing repair skills gain him fame. Customers bring in televisions, radios, toasters, lamps, locks, clocks, windows and even the proverbial kitchen sink. Ernie fixes all with ease.

**1960s**— Throughout the 60s, the Castro's LGBT population steadily climbs. Many purchase formerly neglected Victorians, outfitting them with goods purchased at Cliff's.

**1967**— The Summer of Love happens, bringing as many as 100,000 new young people to San Francisco. They converge upon the Haight-Ashbury, but also gather in other neighborhoods too.

**1971**— The landlord of 495 Castro Street tells Ernie DeBaca that his rent will triple. That same year, the five and dime store Bon Omi goes out of business and Ernie purchases it in August. The re-located Cliff's is now at 479 Castro Street. Product lines are expanded to meet the needs and desires of the still-growing LGBT population. From then on, shoppers can get a plaster ceiling medallion, a feather boa, a toilet fill valve, a rhinestone tiara, and toys for the nieces and nephews all in one place!

**1970s**— Ernie and his wife Martha's two daughters—Marian and Terry—are born. Marian later moves north for a life in the country. Terry spends her high school years working at the store.

**1980s**— Cliff's popularity continues to rise. As the business flourishes, so does its need for more space. In the late 80s, a Hallmark Card shop adjacent to Cliff's becomes available for lease. Ernie and Martha quickly jump at the opportunity, making 471 Castro Street their new home for Cliff's fabric and linens, as well as bedding and bath accessories.



**1990s**— Cliff's becomes the owner of its retail space, leading to remodeling and even more goods. 471 Castro Street is now called "Cliff's Annex." In the late 1990s, Terry returns home from college and chooses to carry on the family tradition by taking over operations at the store.

**2003**— Terry has a daughter who may one day be the next generation to carry on the family history of Cliff's Variety.

**2014**— Terry and her husband Rich Bennett have a blast posing for *San Francisco Bay Times* photographer and designer Abby Zimberg, and wish you all a joy-filled holiday season!

### **Holiday Magic Happens Every Day of the Year at Cliff's Variety**



Rumor has it that some of Santa's LGBT elves left the North Pole for sunnier San Francisco and set up shop at Cliff's Variety, where kids of all ages can experience glowing queer holiday magic all year long. Even general manager Terry Asten Bennett, whose family owns the Castro-based landmark, lights up thinking about the store's latest toys and housewares.



“The new Breville appliances are very well made,” she said, “and RC cars (which perform stunts, pop wheelies, light up, and more) are hard to resist. Last year’s must-have item for kids, loom bands, are still popular, but we have new building and science sets too.” When asked what newly arrived offerings are her faves, she replied: “I think most of us want one of everything.”

Cliff’s visitors can peruse the store’s full line of Fuller O’Brien paints for home improvement projects, gorgeous Victorian and Art Deco doorknobs and lock plates for restoration needs, snazzy doorbell buttons, colorful housewares, fabrics and crafts galore, tiaras and boas to make anyone feel like a star and, of course, one of the best selections of holiday items. This is only just scratching the surface of what’s available in the literally packed-to-the-rafters store.



“We have four head buyers,” Asten Bennett said, helping to explain how Cliff’s manages to stock such an astounding array of fabulous items. “They travel to shows in Chicago, Las Vegas, Atlanta and other cities,” she added.

In addition to being a shopping paradise, Cliff's has also been a work saver for us, with one or more *San Francisco Bay Times* staff members running there for zip ties (to hold up banners on parade vehicles), office supplies, and goodness knows what else. The store is a true treasure in our neighborhood, and we don't know what we'd do without it.

Cliff's is fully integrated into our LGBT community, giving back whenever possible. For example, from Friday, November 28, through Sunday, November 30, if you give \$5 or more to the School Support Fund via Cliff's, you'll receive 20% off your transaction and the raised money will go to support the Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy. If you do the math, and depending on what you purchase, the savings will quickly start to add up, all while you contribute to a great cause.

*Cliff's is at 479 Castro Street. San Francisco, CA 94114, telephone 415-431-5365,  
<http://www.cliffsvariety.com/index.html>*



<http://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Hardware-stores-hammer-out-creative-Valentine-s-6080213.php#photo-7524024>

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Hardware stores hammer out creative Valentine's Day displays

By Steve Rubenstein

February 13, 2015

Selling a toilet seat in San Francisco has never been more exciting than right now, when hardware stores are engaged in a quirky battle of display windows in honor of Valentine's Day.

It's all for love. Also art and good plumbing.

For years, San Francisco hardware stores have tried to outdo one another with oddball, arty, hardware-inspired displays in their front windows. If Macy's can put live puppies in its front window for Christmas, the thinking goes, why can't Cole Fox Hardware put a toilet seat in its front window for Valentine's Day?

So there's a toilet seat in the window at Cole's. And there are four flexible toilet supply pipes in the window of Brownies Hardware, twisted into the shape of a heart. There is a glowing heart in the window of Cliff's Variety hardware store, illuminated by the amazing \$50 remote-controlled lightbulb being offered for sale inside.

And there are antique tools in the windows at Papenhausen and Roberts, all designed to set a certain kind of throbbing heart to flutter on this day of days.

“Just because someone is looking for a toilet seat does not mean he has left behind his sense of humor,” said Frank Robles, who has been designing the three display windows at Cliff’s on Castro Street for eight years. The main window has a white plastic heart that glows red, blue, green and yellow in rotation, and it’s adorned with the words of Martin Luther King Jr:

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.”

The Rev. King and St. Valentine, along with the amazing \$50 remote-controlled lightbulb, all joining forces to fight prejudice, spread love and move the merchandise.



Image 1 of 6

Brownies Hardware on Polk Street celebrates Valentine’s Day by achieving extraordinary results with ordinary objects.

Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

Robles changes the windows every few months, whenever the muse strikes. His windows have featured drag queen mannequins puking glitter, along with more sedate concepts involving an old-fashioned washtub on a rotating pedestal. The idea, he said, is to get people to come inside.

“We’re on Castro Street — we have to put on a show,” Robles said. “We have an amazing canvas here to work with.”

His boss, store owner Ernie Astin, agreed. The more glitter-puking mannequins, the better.

“Boring windows don’t sell anything,” he said.



Image 2 of 6

Imaginative window displays have resulted in design awards at Cole Fox Hardware on Fourth Street.  
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

## Potential distraction

The windows are so distracting that they might be why a motorist crashed his Mercedes-Benz through one of Cliff's windows last summer, seriously damaging the glitter-puking mannequin as well as the Mercedes.

The store is still restoring that window to its former glory. Robles cradled the mannequin in his arms, carried her to his upstairs workshop and performed major surgery, saving her life. She'll be back in action for his top-secret Easter window, he vowed.

At Papenhausen Hardware on West Portal Avenue, owner Matt Rogers said the store's windows are designed to put at ease passersby who are all thumbs and who might otherwise be "intimidated" by a hardware store.



Image 3 of 6

Cliff's Variety on Castro Street observes Valentine's Day with colorful windows.

Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle





Image 4 of 6

Cliff's Variety on Castro Street celebrates Valentine's Day with an imaginative display.

Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

## **In search of art**

The current window features antique saws and wood planes abandoned in mid-job, as if the carpenter had just set aside her tools for a Valentine's Day tryst. Past windows have included a whimsical 4-foot-high wooden iPod that Rogers called an "iPod Macro." That one got people talking. The store doesn't sell iPods. The customers came in anyway and bought screwdrivers.

"Whimsy is OK, sometimes," Rogers said. "It's not our core product."

Which brings up the key question in the arty hardware window war — isn't the nuts and bolts of hardware stores nuts and bolts? Are customers in search of a toilet seat searching for fine art?

Yes, said Will Schindler, floor manager at Cole's Fox Hardware on Fourth Street, they are. The Cole's windows, which have been scooping up design awards the way Cole's shovels scoop up other things, are a masterwork.

In one window, a smooth toilet seat is juxtaposed next to a smooth giant chess piece. Is the lavatory a giant game? Are bathroom users but pawns, with the player moving the pieces unknown?

In another window, dozens of keys, screwdrivers and scissors hang suspended in midair on invisible fishing lines.

"We're trying to say something," Schindler said. "I don't know what. We're trying to draw people in."

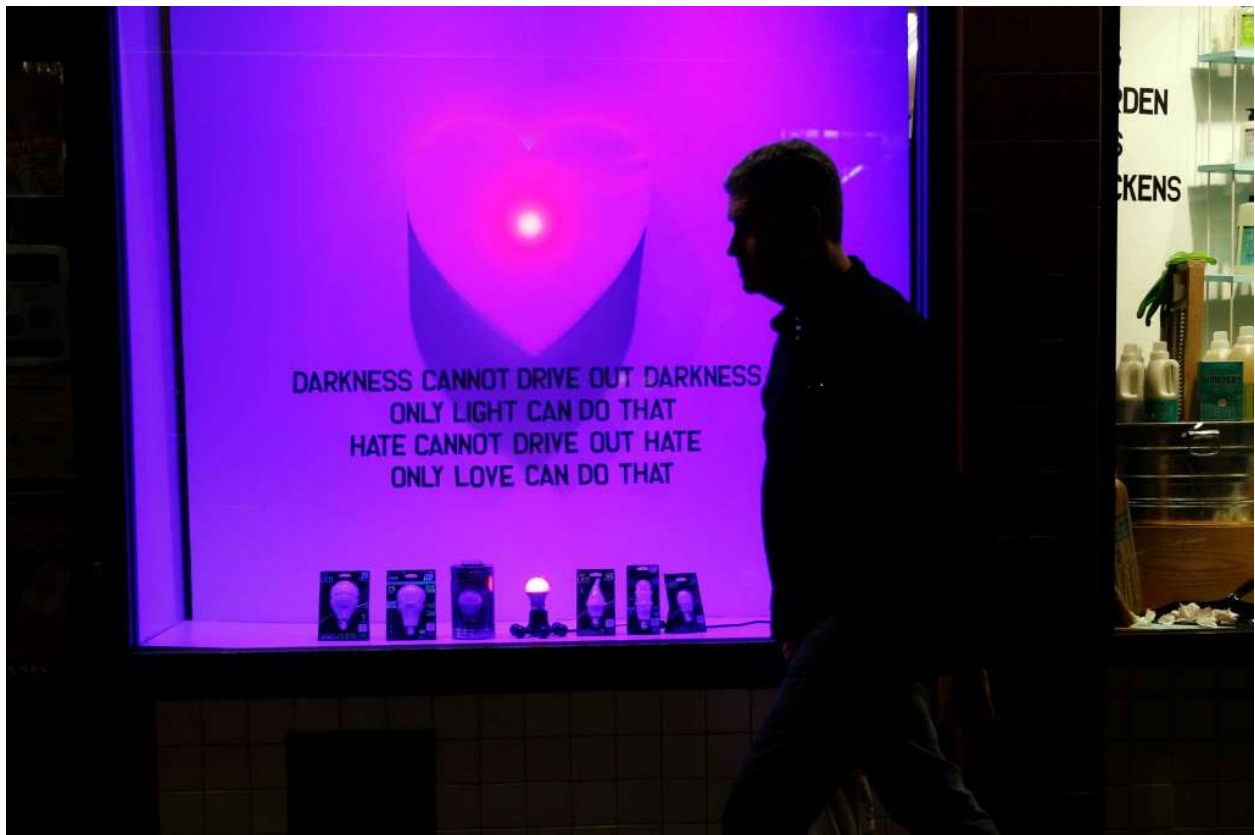


Image 5 of 6

A window vividly marks Valentine's Day at Cliff's Variety on Castro Street in San Francisco.  
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle



## Burning Man

At Roberts Hardware on Haight Street, the front window changes against a background display of 50-year-old hand tools. Owner Bruce Smith said the tools were owned by his father, the original Robert for whom the store was named.

At Burning Man time, Smith said, the tool display is augmented by a slew of artfully arranged Burning Man supplies. On the Fourth of July, there's a barbecue grill with glowing red lights to represent the coals.

At Brownies on Polk Street, there are giant hearts in the window. One is made from a bike cable, its ends secured with a red padlock. Another is made with four flexible pipes that are commonly seen supplying water to toilet tanks.



Image 6 of 6

A creative display at Cole Fox Hardware on Fourth Street celebrates Valentine's Day.

Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

## **Battling big-box stores**

Owners of small hardware stores, one and all, said there is a big reason to do something to stand out. The big reason is the existence of big-box hardware stores.

The real battle is not between local hardware stores. The real battle is between local hardware stores and the behemoths. There's nothing whimsical about that one.

"Many of the people who come in here come from places where local hardware stores have been wiped out by Home Depot," Schindler said. "These people just don't have their old hardware store anymore. So they look at our window, and they come in here laughing. You don't do that at Home Depot."

*Steve Rubenstein is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail:*  
*[srubenstein@sfchronicle.com](mailto:srubenstein@sfchronicle.com)*

<http://hoodline.com/2016/05/80-years-and-counting-castro-s-cliff-s-variety-recognized-as-best-small-business-in-california>



## 80 Years And Counting: Castro's Cliff's Variety Recognized As Best Small Business In California



General manager Terry Asten Bennett (center) surrounded by some of her employees at Cliff's Variety. (Photo courtesy of Cliff's Variety).

Sat. May 28, 2016, 8:55am  
by Shane Downing

Location  
479 Castro St, San Francisco, CA



“We have what you want.” That’s the slogan of Castro Street’s very own [Cliff’s Variety](#), which come the first week of June, will celebrate its 80th anniversary in the neighborhood.

In the spirit of Small Business Week, not to mention the fact that the [store was recently named](#) the 2016 Small Business of the Year by the California Small Business Association just a few days ago, we caught up with Terry Asten Bennett, Cliff’s general manager and the great, great grand-daughter of store founder Hilario DeBaca.



**Photo: Shane Downing/Hoodline**

Founded in 1936 and named for Hilario's youngest son, Clifford, the variety store [has had a rich history](#) over the decades — although Asten Bennett admitted that they’re not exactly sure of when Cliff’s set up shop. “When we were getting ready to celebrate our 75th anniversary, we could not find the day we actually opened,” Asten Bennett said. “We know it was the year 1936, and so we picked June 6th as our anniversary date because that was grandpa Ernie’s birthday.”

Asten Bennett is more confident about the store’s formula for success. “I think the best thing we’ve done is we’ve changed with the neighborhood and we’ve catered to what the neighborhood needs and is looking for,” Asten Bennett said. “Because we have such a variety of stuff, when one area is not doing well, we’re able to change it up with something different.”



Terry Asten Bennett is the general manager at Cliff's and grew up in the store. **Photo: Shane Downing/Hoodline**

Cliff's sells exactly what its name implies: a variety of goods. From its home improvement selection to its cooking department, its art department to its selection of fabrics and textiles, the store is truly a catchall shop. "I think the most important thing we've done," said Asten Bennett, "is we've given a lot of ownership to what we carry to our employees. We let our employees make a lot of choices about what's going on in the store. They participate in the buying, they participate in the merchandising."

Asten Bennett, who was born and raised in the Castro and who grew up around the store, worked at Cliff's throughout high school and returned after college in 1997. "I don't remember what year we promoted me," she laughed. She and her family now live near the Cow Palace in the city. "I wasn't able to afford to buy in the Castro," she said.





A snapshot of Cliff's Variety's... of goods. **Photo: Shane Downing/Hoodline**

Regardless of where she calls home, Asten Bennett still maintains a good sense of how the Castro has changed over the years. “Some things in the neighborhood are exactly the same, and some things are completely different. [Rossi’s Delicatessen is still there](#),” she said, “and a lot of the flavor of the neighborhood is still the same. A lot has changed.”

“The biggest challenge is dealing with city politics and city regulations,” Asten Bennett said. “We’ve always worked really hard to take care of our employees, and every time the city or the state mandates a benefit, they’ve actually mandated it in such a way that it’s taken away from what we’ve been offering.”

She provided the example of the store’s sick pay policy. “Long before that law was ever put in, we paid our employees; they had a week of paid sick leave and if they didn’t use it, we paid it out at time and a half the following year,” explained Asten Bennett. “The sick pay law requires it be rolled over and that we can’t pay it out.”





Asten Bennett (left) pictured with Marian (right), an employee at Cliff's. **Photo: Shane Downing/Hoodline**

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“The city wide policy changes, I understand that on a big scale, they may think they look good, but they aren’t actually looking at the entire picture.”

Cliff’s has always cared about the well-being of its employees. Although she was quite young during the AIDS epidemic, Asten Bennett remembers the fear and uncertainty of those times. “Our store felt it acutely. We watched our customers walk in healthy one week and gaunt and diminished the following week.”

“When our first employee was diagnosed with AIDS,” said Asten Bennett, “we brought in a long-term disability plan to make sure that our employees would have a continuing quality of life whether they could only work part time or not work at all. We’ve always been supportive of all the fundraisers going on, but really it was about being humans and being there for the people.”



Cliff's has been a longtime ally to the neighborhood's LGBTQ community. **Photo: Shane Downing/Hoodline**

The store currently employs 41 employees, including Franc, who has been decorating the storefront windows for over 10 years. In Asten Bennett's opinion, Cliff's "fabulous windows" are what the variety store is best known for. "We have incredibly talented and creative people with really twisted, quirky senses of humor — we let them loose."

Along with her employees, Asten Bennett is joined in the store on a daily basis by her parents, Ernie and Martha, and husband, Richard. Interestingly enough, the man whose name the store is named after, founder and retired school teacher Hilario DeBaca's youngest son, Cliff, never worked a day in the store. According to Asten Bennett, "[he named it after his son Cliff](#), who was a saxophone player. He wanted Cliff to get a 'real job,' so Cliff never worked here. It was Cliff's brother, Ernie, who took over the store and [the store] came down the family on that side."





Cliff's infamous window displays. **Photo: Shane Downing/Hoodline**

Whether it's the window displays or the range of offerings, Cliff's has never really struggled to attract a crowd. "We have customers that have been here my entire life and before," Asten Bennett said. Besides welcoming a large, loyal contingent of neighborhood patrons to the store, Cliff's also sees its fair share of tourists.

"You can feel the ebb and flow of the F-Market. Every time the F-Market stops, there's a wave of tourists coming in, and it seems like whole countries go on vacation at the same time," Asten Bennett laughed. "One week we'll hear nothing but French, and the next week it will be your Japanese tourists and then your German tourists."

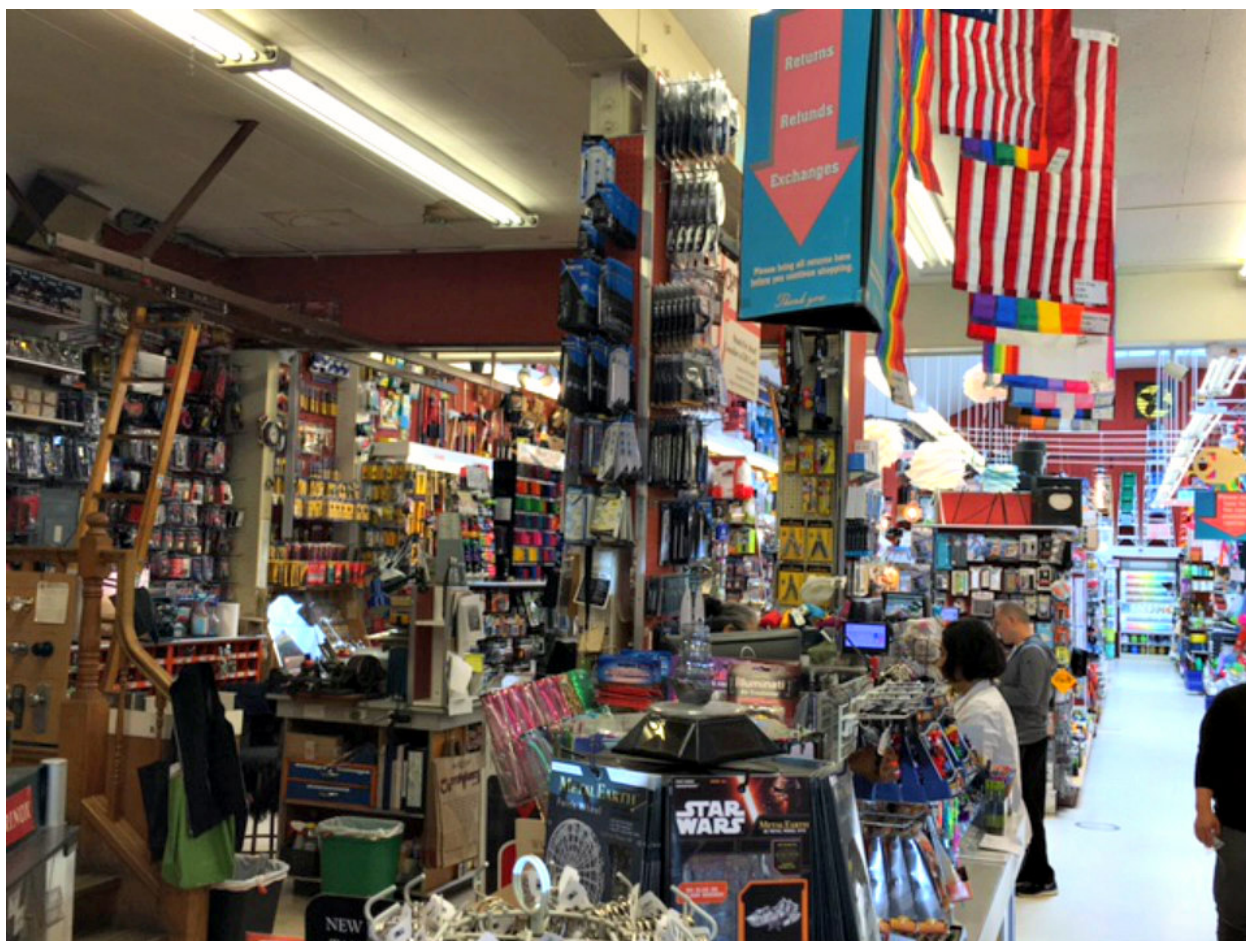


A customer checks out at Cliff's. **Photo: Shane Downing/Hoodline**

In light of the [Castro's recent string of burglaries](#), Cliff's general manager said that although the store hasn't been the victim of a burglary, another genre of crime has become a particularly annoying thorn in the store's side. "Shoplifting has run rampant with our special friends on the street," Asten Bennett said. "It really picked up [when the sidewalk widening started](#). That seemed to attract a new breed of traveler. It's been an ongoing challenge."

Whereas a number of neighborhood businesses have been [subjected to rent hikes](#), Cliff's general manager was quick to add that her store is lucky to own the building it operates in. "We bought the main building in 1971, and then in the late '80s, we were fortunate enough to be able to buy the Annex side."





A shot of Cliff's Variety, moments after walking through the front doors. **Photo: Shane Downing/Hoodline**

She did, however, have advice for newer neighborhood businesses that are trying to get off the ground. “Get out there and be vocal. Find your niche. Make your business inviting. Do things to draw people in. Get them talking, and if you’re struggling, talk to your employees,” said Astin Bennett. “They’re the most amazing source of advice. They’re down there listening to what the customers want and are looking for.”

It’s this kind of mindset and approach that has elevated Cliff’s Variety to statewide recognition. This past Wednesday, the Castro’s very own Cliff’s was recognized by the [California Small Business Association](#) 2016 Small Business of the Year.



From left to right: Asten Bennett's husband Richard, daughter Camille, Asten Bennett, Assemblymember David Chiu, Ernie and Martha Asten. (Photo courtesy of Cliff's Variety)

“Last month, I received a phone call from Assemblyman Chiu saying that he wanted to nominate us as the best small business in California from his assembly district. [Earlier this week], we went up to Sacramento and were honored with that award. It’s really exciting to be seen on a statewide level,” Asten Bennett said.

Upon asking her what the award meant to her and to Cliff’s, the general manager said “The thing we’re most grateful for is the community that supports us. I dedicated my life to being here for the community and the store and I intend to keep that. My 12-year-old, Camille, was raised in the store and thus far, she thinks it’s a good idea to keep it going.”





Cliff's Variety carries an array of goods. **Photo: Shane Downing/Hoodline**

Only time will tell whether or not Cliff's has another 80 years in it; however, for now, diehard Cliff's patrons can look forward to 80th anniversary sales sometime in July, although Asten Bennett said that "we don't limit celebrating small businesses to just one week a year."

"San Francisco and the Castro have been an ever changing scene, I think anyone who's been here for any amount of time will know that good stuff happens, bad stuff happens, and we just keep on ticking. When it gets really bad, we pray for an earthquake," she joked.

"We're gonna keep doing what we're doing," Asten Bennett said. "I mean obviously we're doing something right."

*That concludes our coverage of Small Business Week in the Castro. In case you missed it, we caught with [Rossi's Deli](#) and [Pioneer Renewer](#) earlier in the week. Like Asten Bennett said, however, we also don't limit celebrating small businesses to just one week a year. We like to cover businesses not just when they open or close, or when they're burglarized or burned. If you have a small business that you would like to see Hoodline feature, [send us a tip](#) or leave a comment below.*



Small Business Owner  
25 or More Employees

Terry Asten Bennett  
Owner  
Cliff's Variety

*Celebrating 25 Years  
of Small Business Advocacy  
1984-2009*





*The City and County of San Francisco*

# *Certificate of Honor*

*Presented To*

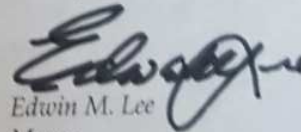
**CLIFF'S VARIETY**

**FEBRUARY 5, 2015**

**WHEREAS**, on behalf of the City and County of San Francisco, I am pleased to recognize and honor Terry Asten Bennett and Cliff's Variety for your steadfast commitment to the vitality of our small business community and the legacy of our neighborhoods, including the Castro, where Cliff's has served the needs of our communities for nearly 80 years. Thank you for your dedication to our City, your service as a delegate of the Castro Merchants Association and your life-long commitment to running the family store so residents and visitors alike can enjoy all it has to offer. Congratulations on being recognized with the well-deserved 2015 Merchant of the Year Award from the San Francisco Council of District Merchants Associations in recognition of your contributions to our City's small business community and the entrepreneurial and friendly spirit that reflect the best of San Francisco. We are pleased to honor and recognize the vital economic, social, and cultural contributions that Cliff's Variety provides for our communities and City and wish you the best of luck in all your future endeavors.



**THEREFORE**, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the City and County of San Francisco to be affixed.

  
Edwin M. Lee

Mayor



**THE HONORABLE FIONA MA**

*California State Board of Equalization Member*

*Joins with*

*San Francisco Council of District Merchants Associations*

*In Recognizing*

***Terry Asten Bennett***

**♦ Cliff's Variety ♦**

**Gala Celebration and Awards Dinner**

*In Recognition of Outstanding Service &  
Dedication to the Community.*

*Congratulations and Best Wishes for Continued Success.*

---

**Fiona Ma, CPA**

**Member – District 2**

**California State Board of Equalization**

*Dated this 5th Day of February, 2015*



# *Certificate of Honor*

**City and County of San Francisco  
Office of the Assessor-Recorder**

*The Office of Assessor-Recorder of the City and County of San Francisco hereby issues and authorizes the execution of the Certificate of Honor in beholden public recognition of distinction and excellence for esteemed service to a significant portion of the people of the City and County of San Francisco by:*

**TERRY ASTEN BENNET**

*Castro Merchants Association*

On the auspicious day of the San Francisco Council of District Merchants Association's 2015 Gala Celebration and Awards Dinner, I am pleased to honor Terry Asten Bennet for her dedication to serve and support the business community in San Francisco. The Office of the Assessor-Recorder extends best wishes on all of your future endeavors.



A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "C. Chu", written over a horizontal line.

**Carmen Chu**  
Assessor-Recorder of San Francisco  
February 5, 2015



*The City and County of San Francisco*  
**PROCLAMATION**  
**CLIFF'S VARIETY DAY**  
**JUNE 2, 2016**

**WHEREAS**, Cliff's Variety celebrates its 80th anniversary in business on June 6, 2016; and

**WHEREAS**, Cliff's Variety over the years has served San Francisco's Castro neighborhood from four locations in its neighborhood, and since 1971 at 479 Castro Street; and

**WHEREAS**, Cliff's Variety honorably fulfills its motto "We Have What You Need" with goods and services such as home improvement and repair products, including authentic reproductions of historic Victorian, Art Deco and other architectural ornamentation; home décor; housewares; art and stationery supplies; fabrics and crafts; toys, fun and games; locksmith services; glass shop service; home repair service referrals; and seasonal and holiday merchandise, including unique specialty items highly valued for LGBTQ Pride, as well as Halloween, and other celebrations; and

**WHEREAS**, Cliff's Variety has been under the same family's ownership and management throughout its eight decades and spanning six generations, beginning with Hilario DeBaca (who named the store for his youngest son, Clifford); succeeded by Hilario's oldest son Ernie and his wife Alice; then Lorraine Asten (Ernie's daughter and Hilario's granddaughter); followed by Lorraine's son and today's patriarch of Cliff's, Ernie Asten and his wife Martha; and now their daughter and Cliff's General Manager, Terry Asten Bennett (and her husband Rich); and perhaps then to be succeeded by Terry and Rich's teenage daughter Camille Bennett; and

**WHEREAS**, Cliff's Variety was an early leader among Castro area businesses which welcomed LGBTQ residents as they moved into The Castro beginning in the 1960's, becoming what is recognized as a world-renowned neighborhood significant for its LGBTQ life and culture; and

**WHEREAS**, Cliff's Variety continuously provides generous support for causes and non-profit groups in its community; and

**WHEREAS**, Cliff's Variety recently was honored by California Assemblymember David Chiu for nomination among a select statewide group as a "California Small Business of the Year" representing San Francisco Assembly District 17; and

**WHEREAS**, Cliff's Variety is widely beloved and respected in The Castro and elsewhere by its customers, local residents, industry peers and suppliers, and fellow Castro merchants; now, therefore, be it

**RESOLVED**, That the Board of Supervisors proclaims June 2, 2016, to be Cliff's Variety Day in the City and County of San Francisco.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Scott Wiener".

Scott Wiener

威善高

Member, Board of Supervisors

June 2, 2016





# SAN FRANCISCO PLANNING DEPARTMENT

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## Legacy Business Registry Case Report

HEARING DATE: NOVEMBER 15, 2017

*Filing Date:* October 19, 2017  
*Case No.:* 2017-013491LBR  
*Business Name:* Cliff's Variety  
*Business Address:* 479 Castro Street  
*Zoning:* NCD (Castro Street Neighborhood Commercial)/  
40-X Height and Bulk District  
*Block/Lot:* 3582/103  
*Applicant:* Terry Asten Bennett  
479 Castro Street  
San Francisco, CA 94114  
*Nominated By:* Supervisor Jeff Sheehy, District 8  
*Staff Contact:* Desiree Smith - (415) 575-9093  
desiree.smith@sfgov.org  
*Reviewed By:* Tim Frye - (415) 575-6822  
tim.frye@sfgov.org

1650 Mission St.  
Suite 400  
San Francisco,  
CA 94103-2479

Reception:  
**415.558.6378**

Fax:  
**415.558.6409**

Planning  
Information:  
**415.558.6377**

### BUSINESS DESCRIPTION

Cliff's Variety is a neighborhood hardware and variety store serving the Castro District since 1936. Founded by Hilario DeBaca, a former merchant and school teacher from New Mexico, the business was run solely by Hilario with help from his granddaughter, Lorraine, after school. The store has offered hardware, home goods, fabrics, candy, and other everyday items for neighborhood residents for over 80 years. Its offerings range from home improvement, to textiles and toys, to art and cooking supplies. It is the Castro's longest-running retailer and has long been known as the place to go for repairs and knowledgeable advice on decorating, costuming, cooking, sewing, and entertaining.

While the store was named after Hilario's youngest son, Clifford, it was Hilario and Lena's oldest son, Ernie, who joined the business and eventually assumed ownership. Ernie had previously operated his own repair shop in the Tenderloin during the 1930s. After suffering from a bad accident that forced him to close his shop in the Tenderloin, he began to work for his father, bringing his superior repair skills to the variety store where he carried out electronic, lock, clock, electrical, plumbing, and mechanical repairs. Ernie also designed several space-saving machines that came to characterize the store. These included a ribbon machine, two button machines, and rolling ladders. Ernie started the store's tradition of creating elaborate window displays, especially during holidays like Halloween, and was responsible for launching the first Halloween street party on Castro Street. The event was family-focused and centered on a children's costume contest from the 1950s through the 1970s until adult Halloween parties took over.

Cliff's Variety greatly expanded from the 1970s to the 1990s, changing locations several times and modifying inventory to reflect changing tastes and needs of the neighborhood over the years. Now

operated by fourth generation family member, Terry Asten Bennett, the business serves over 700 people daily and helps attracts foot traffic to surrounding businesses. The business gives to neighborhood schools such as the Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy and to nonprofits like AIDS LifeCycle.

Located on the east side of Castro Street between 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> streets, Cliff's Variety is within the NCD (Castro Street Neighborhood Commercial Zoning District and a 40-X Height and Bulk District.

## STAFF ANALYSIS

### *Review Criteria*

1. *When was business founded?*

The business was founded in 1936.

2. *Does the business qualify for listing on the Legacy Business Registry? If so, how?*

Yes, Cliff's Variety qualifies for listing on the Legacy Business Registry because it meets all of the eligibility Criteria:

- i. Cliff's Variety has operated for 81 years.
- ii. Cliff's Variety has contributed to the history and identity of the Castro District by serving as a neighborhood hardware and variety shop, and reliable source of repair assistance and homeware advice, since 1936.
- iii. Cliff's Variety is committed to maintaining the physical features and traditions that define the neighborhood hardware store and variety shop, including its eclectic retail that respond to the needs of its customer base, its practice of offering knowledgeable advice, its use of space-saving inventions, and its long tradition of creating interesting and expressive window displays.

3. *Is the business associated with a culturally significant art/craft/cuisine/tradition?*

The business is associated with the tradition of operating small neighborhood-serving variety and hardware stores with knowledgeable and helpful staff.

4. *Is the business or its building associated with significant events, persons, and/or architecture?*

The property has not been evaluated for historical or architectural significance on its own, however it is located within the California Register-eligible Castro Street Historic District and formerly housed the original Castro Theater.

5. *Is the property associated with the business listed on a local, state, or federal historic resource registry?*

No, however it is located within the California Register-eligible Castro Street Historic District.

6. *Is the business mentioned in a local historic context statement?*

Yes. It is mentioned in the LGBTQ Historic Context Statement which references how "run-down Victorians were restored by new residents who shopped for paint, hammers, and other tools and supplies at Cliff's Variety Store" in the 1970s (p. 170).

7. *Has the business been cited in published literature, newspapers, journals, etc.?*



The business has been cited in a number of publications, including but not limited to: Armistead Maupin's *Tales of The City*; San Francisco Chronicle, 2/13/2015, "Hardware stores hammer out creative Valentine's Day displays," by Steve Rubenstein; Hoodline, 5/28/2016, "80 Years and counting: Castro's Cliff's Variety Recognized as Best Small Business in California," by Shane Downing; Hardware Retailing, 9/8/2017, "Diverse San Francisco Retailers Collaborate on Training," by Renee Changnon; Hoodline, 3/28/2017, "Neighborhood Shops See Poster Board, Art Supply Sales Soar In the Time of Trump," by Shane Downing; and SF Gate, 6/11/2011, "Cliff's Variety Store – 75 and going strong," by Sarah Adler.

Cliff's Variety has also been the recipient of numerous awards and accolades, including:

- 2009 Best Small Business Owner, 25 or More Employees, San Francisco Small Business Network
- 2014 Small Business of the Year, Council of District Merchants
- 2016 Best Small Business in California award, California State Legislature
- 2015 Certificate of Honor, San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee
- 2015 Certificate of Honor, City and County of San Francisco Office of the Assessor-Recorder
- Cliff's Variety Day, June 2, 2016, City and County of San Francisco Proclamation

### ***Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business***

#### **Location(s) associated with the business:**

- 479 Castro Street

#### **Recommended by Applicant**

- Eclectic variety of goods
- Knowledgeable customer service
- Tradition of creating specially themed and creative window displays
- High arched ceiling
- Rolling ladders
- Ribbon machine

#### **Additional Recommended by Staff**

No additional recommendations



# SAN FRANCISCO PLANNING DEPARTMENT

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## Historic Preservation Commission Resolution

HEARING DATE NOVEMBER 15, 2017

1650 Mission St.  
Suite 400  
San Francisco,  
CA 94103-2479

Reception:  
**415.558.6378**

Fax:  
**415.558.6409**

Planning  
Information:  
**415.558.6377**

*Filing Date:* October 19, 2017  
*Case No.:* 2017-013491LBR  
*Business Name:* Cliff's Variety  
*Business Address:* 479 Castro Street  
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40-X Height and Bulk District  
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479 Castro Street  
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*Nominated By:* Supervisor Jeff Sheehy, District 8  
*Staff Contact:* Desiree Smith - (415) 575-9093  
desiree.smith@sfgov.org  
*Reviewed By:* Tim Frye – (415) 575-6822  
tim.frye@sfgov.org

**ADOPTING FINDINGS RECOMMENDING TO THE SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSION APPROVAL OF THE LEGACY BUSINESS REGISTRY NOMINATION FOR CLIFF'S VARIETY, CURRENTLY LOCATED AT 479 CASTRO STREET (BLOCK/LOT 3582/103).**

**WHEREAS**, in accordance with Administrative Code Section 2A.242, the Office of Small Business maintains a registry of Legacy Businesses in San Francisco (the "Registry") to recognize that longstanding, community-serving businesses can be valuable cultural assets of the City and to be a tool for providing educational and promotional assistance to Legacy Businesses to encourage their continued viability and success; and

**WHEREAS**, the subject business has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years; and

**WHEREAS**, the subject business has contributed to the Castro neighborhood's history and identity; and

**WHEREAS**, the subject business is committed to maintaining the physical features and traditions that define the business; and

**WHEREAS**, at a duly noticed public hearing held on November 15, 2017, the Historic Preservation Commission reviewed documents, correspondence and heard oral testimony on the Legacy Business Registry nomination.



**THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED** that the **Historic Preservation Commission hereby recommends** that Cliff's Variety qualifies for the Legacy Business Registry under Administrative Code Section 2A.242(b)(2) as it has operated for 30 or more years and has continued to contribute to the community.

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the **Historic Preservation Commission hereby recommends** safeguarding of the below listed physical features and traditions for Cliff's Variety.

*Location:*

- 479 Castro Street

*Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business*

- Eclectic variety of goods
- Knowledgeable customer service
- Tradition of creating specially themed and creative window displays
- High arched ceiling
- Rolling ladders
- Ribbon machine

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the **Historic Preservation Commission's findings and recommendations** are made solely for the purpose of evaluating the subject business's eligibility for the Legacy Business Registry, and the Historic Preservation Commission makes no finding that the subject property or any of its features constitutes a historical resource pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15064.5(a).

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the **Historic Preservation Commission hereby directs** its Commission Secretary to transmit this Resolution and other pertinent materials in the case file 2017-013491LBR to the Office of Small Business.

I hereby certify that the foregoing Resolution was ADOPTED by the Historic Preservation Commission on November 15, 2017.

Jonas P. Ionin  
Commission Secretary

AYES:

NOES:

ABSENT:

ADOPTED: