

Bulletin





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Gary Francis Kurutz

(1948 – 2025)

Gary Kurutz, among the most enthusiastic and respected of California's historians, passed away peacefully at home on December 9, 2025. He was a man of grace, generosity, gratitude, good humor, and gusto! In a career that spanned more than forty years, Gary built some of the most significant and culturally diverse library collections representing the unique character and story of the American West, ranging from the rarest historical to the most ephemeral materials. He preserved stories that could not or would not otherwise be told. As he often stated, "History is what is saved." He also believed that books and artifacts of material culture were treasures, and referred to them as the "gold of the mind."

One of Gary's colleagues described his impact: "He was generous with his knowledge, patient with questions, and always able to connect the smallest pamphlet or ephemera piece to a much larger historical story. His enthusiasm for the material was contagious." Gary believed in bringing young people into the profession. One such inspired colleague shared his story: "He educated and inspired so many of us who were just finding our way in the rare book world. I will always be grateful for his kindness, his example as a scholar and librarian, and the time he took to encourage new generations of bibliographers."

Gary retired in 2017 as Principal Librarian Emeritus of Special Collections of the California State Library in Sacramento, a position he had held since 1980. In 2018 he retired as the Executive Director of the California State Library Foundation where he had served for twenty years. Previously, he held positions as Head Librarian of the Sutro Library, a branch of the California State Library in San Francisco, and as Library Director for the California Historical Society. He began his library career in 1971 as Bibliographer of Western Americana at the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino. For several years, he enjoyed teaching a course on Books of the American West for the California Rare Book School.

Gary authored numerous books and articles, gave hundreds of lectures and presentations, and curated several notable exhibitions. His descriptive bibliography of the California Gold Rush (1997) and the Klondike and Alaska Gold Rushes (2021) are

two of the most authoritative references on their respective subjects. The latter was awarded Honorable Mention by the Bibliographical Society of America. "California Calls You: The Art of the Golden State 1870-1940" (2000), co-authored with his wife, KD, was awarded a Silver Medal by The Commonwealth Club of California Annual California Book Awards in 2001. They collaborated again with essays written for "The Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament," a publication covering the history and architecture of the Sacramento Cathedral at the time of its restoration and rededication (2006). His book, "Architectural Terra Cotta of Gladding McBean," (1989) spurred a revival of respect for the history of this business and its significant contributions to the architectural landscape.

For many years, Gary was a valued member of several bibliophilic organizations such as the Book Club of California, the Roxburghe Club of San Francisco, the Zamorano Book Club, and the Bibliographical Society of America. In 2019, he was inducted into the California Library Hall of Fame. He was presented with the prestigious Hubert Howe Bancroft Award in 2018, and in 1998, the Book Club of California's Oscar Lewis Award for outstanding contributions in the field of California History.

Gary grew up in La Cañada, California, in a home designed by his father Jack Kurutz, a prominent commercial artist. His mother, Marion, was a talented musician, artist, and scientist and it was she who encouraged his devotion to books and history. Gary earned both his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in History



from the University of San Diego, and his Master's in Library Science from the University of Southern California.

Gary is survived by his wife of forty-five years, KD; his son, Nicholas; his daughter-in-law, Blanca; his granddaughter, Serena; and his sister, Kristin. His brother, Denis, predeceased him.

Gary will return to Sacramento where he left his heart and built his legacy. For those wishing to honor him, the family suggests gifts to the "Gary Kurutz Memorial Fund" of the California State Library Foundation or to the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament with gifts designated for architectural restoration or programs aiding the homeless.

To plant trees in memory, please visit the Sympathy Store.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The following tributes were featured in our 2022 Special Edition dedicated to Gary and his decades as our editor. They were so thoughtfully penned by so many who cared deeply for him that we wanted to share them again.

*From Brittneydawn Cook,
Executive Director of CSLF*

My Mentor, My Boss, My Friend

When I first met Gary Kurutz, I was a student at Sacramento State University struggling to figure out what I wanted to do with my double major in photography and journalism. One evening, my photo history class piled into the rotunda at the California State Library and there he stood like a proverbial guardian to the golden gates of library knowledge. For the next two hours he exuberantly talked us through an extraordinary collection of historical photographs taken by photographers that I had long respected. His enthusiasm and passion were far more than contagious it was instantly infectious. By the end of the evening, I was one of the few students left taking in all the knowledge he had to offer. I became fascinated with Gary's appreciation of these photographs, the photographers, and all things California. I was a sponge trying to absorb every ounce of wisdom, but with his grasp of history I knew I would never have time to take it all in. It was in that moment where my admiration for him and our beautiful California State Library began.

From then on, I was hooked, I found projects that would take me to the State Library for research. I found a job where I could work and learn about historical photographic processes and how to preserve them, but mostly I found places where I could work and learn from Gary even if at a distance. Ultimately, I ended up working alongside him at the California State Library Foundation. He became my mentor, guiding me as a contractor in digitization and inspiring me to get my master's degree in Library Science to continue my career path. After getting accepted into Syracuse's Grad School program Gary hired me as his administrator allowing me the stability that I needed to get through grad school. During that time, Gary and I worked on several projects together including the publication of the CSLF *Bulletin*. Once again, I found myself enthralled. His editorial professionalism was unlike anything I had experienced before, and I was more than happy to be taken under his tutelage. I graduated Sacramento State University in 2012, which means I have now spent a little over a decade with Gary as my North Star. His passion is what draws in, but it is his guidance, support, wisdom and kindness that keep you coming back. Gary was and is a fantastic mentor, the world's kindest boss, and truly one of the best people you could call friend. Thank you, Gary, for taking me under your wing and providing a space for me.

From Gary E. Strong
Honoring a Champion

My first acquaintance with Gary Kurutz was when I became state librarian in 1980 and was handed a pamphlet *Treasures of the State Library*. I knew then I would “treasure” working with him. His knowledge of what a unique piece of California history is embodied in the state library was a valuable resource to the state of California. Gary introduced me not only to California history but to the incredible heritage of the state’s first public library. His introduction to Herb Caplan would begin my education on California history and the books that recorded it. These sessions at Herb’s shop are treasured memories,

and I began to build my own collection of Californiana.

Together we worked to build the reputation of the state library and its place among the great collections of the state. Being part of state government was an almost insurmountable challenge. Faced with the impact of Proposition 13 and subsequent budget reductions did not stop Gary from reaching out and bringing in outstanding collections and resources. One of the greatest challenges was “how to get the word out.” I recalled that Librarian of Congress Jim Billington was often quoted saying, “getting the champagne out of the bottle.”

The state library collections are rich and delicious champagne.

A state agency is hampered by its own bureaucracy. The “official” communications from the state library were just that, official. The *California State Library Foundation Bulletin* was conceived as a mechanism to communicate with the Foundation’s growing membership, but also to tell the story of the vast and wonderful collections of the library.

I would edit the *Bulletin* until my retirement as state librarian in 1994. From the outset Gary Kurutz was the right hand by writing something for virtually every issue. Not only that, but he also often selected appropriate photographs from the collections of the state library to be included along with an article making each issue livelier and more attractive. His contributions are significant with his byline appearing in all but 10 issues. Even then he would have penned a note on an exhibit or a new acquisition. In several issues, he contributed more than a single article. More than 150 articles carry his byline.

Gary created several special issues of the *Bulletin* of note, particularly those highlighting the treasures of the state library or guides to collection and how to use the library. The special issue on the state library building included a color cover photograph and color was introduced enhancing the *Bulletin*’s visual impact.

Gary’s careful selection of photographs and highlighting photograph collections are an important contribution to the understanding of California. He highlighted the acquisition of collections of Arnold Hysten, I.W. Taber, pictorial letter sheets, county library service, Vernon Cartwright, Gladding, McBean & Company, photographic albums, Alfred A. Hart, Thomas Patrick Vano, C.E. Wat-



From Don Hagerty
A Salute to Gary Kurutz

kins, William Reagh, William Fletcher, and descriptions of daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, stereographs, and other photographic images.

A range of topics were highlighted by his articles. He wrote about the 1932 Los Angeles Olympic games, the California Gold Rush, automobile travel along route 66, aviation, cities and towns, significant manuscript collections, ballooning, trade cards and citrus crate labels, California art and artists, Proposition 13 and Jarvis and Gann, California's grand hotels, architecture, libraries, librarians, and the history and development of the state library. He would often highlight new acquisitions of significance, most of which resulted from his perseverance and stewardship. He would pen the remembrance of numerous Californians who passed during his watch.

While Gary wrote articles for each issue, he also sought the work of contemporary California authors and state library staff. These articles would add to the breadth and coverage of the Foundation's efforts to reach out across the state. State librarians Kevin Starr, Greg Lucas, and I contributed to this effort as well. Gary not only contributed to the success of the *Bulletin* but to the numerous book organizations in California. His writing found a home at the Book Club of California, Zamorano Club, the UCLA Library and with local publishers, such as the Windgate Press. His popular lectures and talks were well attended as was his class with the California Rare Book School.

It is difficult to quickly summarize Gary's contributions to the longevity of the *California State Library Foundation Bulletin* through its some one hundred and thirty issues. A compilation of his articles would make a very welcome contribution to the Foundation.

Words, lots of words, countless words, important words. In the 28-year tenure as editor, and as a frequent contributor for the California State Library Foundation *Bulletin*, Gary Kurutz has orchestrated a publication renowned for unearthing and showcasing the vast resources of the California State Library. A self-described "Californiac," Kurutz has been driven by his unflagging curiosity about all things California. Under his guidance, the *Bulletin* embraced an array of subjects, from the California Gold Rush, photography, biography, political events and personalities, murals, architecture, Foundation news, and, it seems, almost everything else. In between. Like an archaeologist, he identified subjects for excavation, then from his network of knowledgeable scholars, asked someone (or perhaps cajoled) them to create an article that illuminated the stirring history of the Golden State. The result for nearly three decades has been a parade of informative, exciting, and readable stories.

From Kathy Correia

I had the honor and privilege of working in the California History Room with Gary for 35 years. Through his acquisition expertise, he procured untold numbers of beautiful, unique and unforgettable items for the collections of the California State Library and thus the people of California and beyond. His curatorial skills were truly highlighted when one viewed any of the hundreds of stunning exhibits he created with the California State Library's breathtaking collections. And when Gary gave talks, it was always standing-room-only and listeners were on the edge of their seats! What a legacy!!

