

THE RECORD

Burlingame's Oldest Business- 110 Years of Art and Framing

by Carl Martin

Quarterly EVENT

Walking Tour:

Tales From Auto Row

pg. 5

*Above:
1920s
Original
Arts &
Crafts style
frame from
The Studio
Shop-
Burlingame
Historical
Society
Collection*

Burlingame's oldest continuously operating business, the Studio Shop Gallery, is celebrating 110 years in business this year. For the past 70 years it has been owned and operated by the Benson Martin family. First, John and Martha Benson purchased the business from the founding Crawford family in 1955. For the last 35 years, second generation owners Janet and Carl Martin have focused on exhibiting fine art by artists from the Bay Area, California, and beyond, in addition to providing high quality picture framing for artwork. They are now transitioning to the third generation with daughter-in-law Stephanie Martin, a native of Austria, taking over and injecting youthful energy and an international flair.

The Studio Shop was founded in 1915 when Dorothy Crawford and husband Ralph Crawford opened their picture frame shop, photo studio and art store on Burlingame Avenue. Dorothy Crawford had been operating her own photography studio since 1913.

In 1915, the couple joined Dorothy's photography studio with Ralph's picture frame shop, calling the combined business "Crawfords' Studio Shop." Together, they built a thriving business. Dorothy became a renowned portrait photographer in the area and many of her photographs still survive today. (See "Priceless Portals to Our Past," Spring 2024, Issue 178).

In 1925, they purchased a vacant lot at 311 Primrose and began construction of an English Tudor building designed by Ralph (see photo above right). He was trained as an engineer and had worked for a time as the Burlingame City Engineer. Today, 311 Primrose is home to Halo Blow Dry Bar. Before the building was completed, Ralph died of leukemia in 1929, at the age of 52. Dorothy soldiered on through the Great Depression, completed the building and moved the Studio Shop there in 1931.

Throughout the 1930s, Dorothy exhibited famous California artists such as Maynard Dixon, Percy Gray and Ralph Stackpole at The Studio Shop. She worked another 13 years before contracting Parkinson's disease and retired in 1944. Dorothy's niece, Carolyn Misselwitz and brother, Sid, ran the business until 1955, when they sold it to John and Martha Benson.

In 1955, John Benson was between jobs as a high school shop teacher and had a young family to support. He saw a classified ad in the *San Francisco Chronicle* for a picture frame business for sale and borrowed \$500 from his



John Benson stretches a canvas at The Studio Shop, 311 Primrose Rd., as seen above in 1957. Photos courtesy of Studio Shop Gallery



Martha, Janet and John Benson pose proudly with 1st prize trophy for their "Burlingame Days" float; note the large pinwheel near John's head. The float is a large whirligig with a moveable hammer.

The Studio Shop's location from 1972-1988 was at 1180 Carolan Avenue (replaced by Rector Cadillac). Photo Courtesy of Studio Shop

father-in-law for the down payment. John and Martha settled in Burlingame and quickly became established in the community.

As the parents of three daughters, John and Martha taught their children the value of art and of making things with your hands. The girls grew up working in the store, cleaning glass and fitting picture frames together. In 1972, when daughters Janet and Kristen were at BIS and Mills High School, John and Martha moved the shop from 311 Primrose to 1180 Carolan Avenue near the intersection of Broadway and Carolan, across from where the Chevron gas station and car wash is now located.

During the Carolan Avenue years, 1972 to 1988, John and Martha were very active in the community. John never missed a meeting at the Burlingame Lions Club and Martha served on the Burlingame Beautification Commission and the Civil Service Commission. Full of creative energy, John decorated the family Rambler station wagon for a *Burlingame Days* Parade in 1974, complete with an operating whirligig with a wooden man hammering nails into a picture frame (see photo above).

While on the Beautification Commission, Martha contributed to the 1977 publication, "Trees of Burlingame." The Bensons' combined service to the community led to their recognition in 1989 as the

first couple jointly to receive the *Burlingame Citizen of the Year* award.

In 1988, John and Martha moved the shop again to make way for the expanding Rector Cadillac dealership-[now an Audi/Porsche dealership]. They moved the business to 741 San Mateo Avenue, a small street that loops behind the Mrs. Bubbles laundromat near Oak Grove and California Drive. Daughter Janet began working with them full-time to expand the framing business into art and prints.

Janet had her hands full working at The Studio Shop and having her first baby, son Patrick, in 1990. To cut down on the work commute, Janet and Carl rented the house next door to The Studio Shop, the historic red house built in 1907 by the Axel Larson family, who moved from San Francisco after the earthquake. It is located at 725 San Mateo Avenue. There is an early picture of the house with the family cow, "Bossy", out in front.

Times have changed.



Ribbon-cutting at 1103 Burlingame Avenue included then-Mayor, Marti Knight. The Studio Shop was a fixture at this location from 1995-2004.

Photos Courtesy of Studio Shop Gallery



Artist Kotowski at left, John Benson, and realtor Paul Davis pose in front of train-related artwork during a 1994 fundraiser for the Train Station Centennial. Between 1988-1995 The Studio Shop was located at 741 San Mateo Ave. (behind California Drive).

A big move for The Studio Shop occurred in 1995 when Janet and Carl saw a vacant storefront at 1103 Burlingame Avenue (near today's Limón Restaurant) that they imagined as a wonderful gallery space with

high ceilings and tall windows. The Mediterranean Revival building, designed by famed Burlingame architect Ernest L. Norberg, has loads of 1930s charm with colorful tiles and wrought iron balconies. This was in the day when the Avenue was much less glamorous, before Starbucks and Pottery Barn had arrived, and they were able to negotiate an affordable lease. Carl was a contractor at the time and so he was able to work up a design and do the remodeling of the new space. The high ceilings and wood floor

created a perfect venue for displaying artwork and picture frames. Janet's sister, Kristen, rejoined the shop as art and frame designer and employees were hired. Business was booming and Janet and Kristen needed some help managing the growing business, so Carl offered to help them for one year to get things organized. He wound up staying permanently and now manages the administrative side of the business.

Into the late 90s, all the picture frames were made by hand in the back of the small 1200 square-foot space at 1103 Burlingame Avenue. All the picture frame mouldings were cut on a foot-operated chopper and joined the traditional way with rabbit-hide glue and hammer and nails. In 2000, a warehouse space was rented on Bayshore Highway, near the Hyatt, for an expanded production facility

with industrial miter saw, pneumatic joiner and computerized mat cutter. By 2004 The Studio Shop moved to a larger gallery space at 244 Primrose, its current location, presenting the opportunity to emphasize the art gallery side of the business with a more contemporary showroom for both art and picture framing.

Before the 2007-08 financial crisis, plans for a second location, called The Studio Shop Annex, at 350 Peninsula Avenue in San Mateo, had already begun, so when the stock market cratered it was too late to turn back. The Annex had its grand opening on Tax Day, 2008. It offered an expanded range of picture framing and housed the entire production facility in one space (*note framers hard at work at right and below*).

Today, the Annex is solely focused on picture frame production.



*Grand Opening at 244 Primrose Road in 2004, the Studio Shop Gallery's current location
(Left to Right: Kristen, Martha, Carl, Janet, and John).
Photos Courtesy of Studio Shop Gallery*



By 2013, the economy had largely rebounded from the 2007-08 crisis and an opportunity to expand the art gallery exhibition space at the Primrose location came along when the adjacent wallbed store moved out. Janet and Carl took a leap of faith and rented the space. This is now the footprint of the current store. It allows for expanded gallery space and a dedicated picture frame design area.



The Studio Shop Gallery, while being one of the oldest art galleries in the country, continues to evolve and adapt to changing times. Today, the gallery is one of the premier galleries in the San Francisco Bay Area exhibiting work by artists from California and as far away as England, France and Italy. It also offers museum quality framing. The Studio Shop Gallery will host a 110th anniversary celebration on September 20, 2025 at the gallery and will be open to the public.