

The Reactor

Paul Azevedo



Benioff! Did the fur fly?

My thanks to Stu Cross for loaning me his 1944 San Francisco phone book, which included San Mateo County listings, and the SF Yellow pages. There's no doubt about it. The yellow pages today are heftier than in the 1944 book, more than three and a half times as many pages, in fact. Each page today is five columns wide, instead of three, and much more squeezed and crowded, rather than the spacious openness of 1944. The ads today are larger and more numerous, reflecting a more vigorous, competitive commercial climate.

With at least one exception. Furs. The 1995-96 SF Yellow Pages carry only seven listings under Fur Dealers-Retail. There are only two ads, one for Roberts Furs, the other for Hans Plattner, each of them on the fifth floor of their respective buildings. Three of the seven listings give no address, often a clue to an out-of-town or very tiny business, perhaps run out of a

residence.

In the wartime 1944 book there were six full pages of fur and fur-related listings and advertisements. More than a hundred listings, many of them duplicates or triplicates of the same firm did their best to get the attention of the potential fur user or gift-giver. There were 12 large display ads, and quite a few smaller panels as well.

The two largest ads, each covering two-thirds of a page, were for The Fur Doctor, and Fred Benioff Himself. The Fur Doctor was Truman "Doc" Denman. Until his death, not too many years ago, Doc was the well-liked owner of Shamrock Ranch and an important part of Pacifica. In the forties he was also a commuter to 1521 Market Street, where his establishment featured a mounted polar bear out front which was worn bare by the affectionate patting of countless children.

The most competitive, and by far the most humorous and numerous, fur

dealers in the book were the Benioffs. There was "Fred Benioff Furs, the original firm, 133 Geary, only one location in San Francisco," which advertised on (radio station) KPO daily. Company president was Helen Harris Benioff.

Then there was "Fred Benioff Himself, 35 years fur leadership." His firm occupied six floors at 250 Stockton near Post.

Benioff Brothers was at 140 Geary, David Benioff, President. They advertised "No branch stores, we do not advertise on the radio."

George H. Benioff Fine Furs was at Post and Stockton.

Alexis Benioff was with Fred Benioff Furs (Helen's co. at 133 Geary), David Benioff was with David Benioff Brothers at 140 Geary, Fred Benioff (Himself) was in the Fred Benioff building at 250 Stockton, Union Square.

Helen Harris Benioff was with Benioff Furs, the original firm at 133 Geary. Ida Benioff was with Fred Benioff Himself. Robert Benioff was with David Benioff Brothers, the one at 140 Geary. The mind boggles at the divorces, arguments, and family disputes that may have been behind the competitive world of the Benioffs.

Let's see. You've come into some money. It's 1944, and you ask a friend to recommend a dealer where you can get a mink for your girl. "Benioff's" he says.

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