United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property
   historic name California Hotel
   other names/site number N/A

2. Location
   street & number 3443-3501 San Pablo Avenue
   city, town Oakland
   state California code 06 city Advance
   zip code 94608

3. Classification
   Ownership of Property 
   ☐ private 
   ☐ public-local 
   ☐ public-State 
   ☐ public-Federal 
   Category of Property 
   ☑ building(s) 
   ☐ district 
   ☐ site 
   ☐ structure 
   ☐ object 
   Number of Resources within Property
   Contributing Noncontributing
   buildings 0 0 
   sites 0 0 
   structures 0 0 
   objects 0 0 
   Total 0 0 

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

4. State/Federal Agency Certification
   As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination or request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.
   In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. ☐ See continuation sheet.
   Signature of certifying official
   State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. ☐ See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official

State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification
   I hereby certify that this property is:
   ☑ entered in the National Register.
   ☐ See continuation sheet.
   ☐ determined eligible for the National Register. ☐ See continuation sheet.
   ☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.
   ☐ removed from the National Register.
   ☐ other, (explain):

   Signature of the Keeper
   Date of Action

MAY 3 1 1988
National Register
6. Function or Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)</th>
<th>Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domestic/hotel</td>
<td>Work in progress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commerce/trade/specialty stores</td>
<td>Commerce/trade/specialty stores</td>
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7. Description

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Architectural Classification (enter categories from instructions)</th>
<th>Materials (enter categories from instructions)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival</td>
<td>foundation brick</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>walls brick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>stucco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>roof asphalt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>other ceramic tile (storefronts &amp; pentroof)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>metal (marquees &amp; cornice)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The California Hotel is a 5-story and mezzanine and penthouse, L-plan structure of reinforced concrete in the Spanish Colonial Revival Style, located in west Oakland near the border of Emeryville and adjacent to the MacArthur Freeway (Interstate 580). Clad in pressed red brick in American bond, and trimmed in off-white and painted stucco, the building features, on the north (freeway) facade, a pair of off-square towers that are very conspicuous because this is the tallest building for miles around. There is a good original lobby in southwest style. The building's use has scarcely changed since it was constructed on this site in 1929-1930 as a 150-room commercial hotel with a few permanent units and ground floor commercial uses (the hotel/residential floors have been vacant for a dozen years and are about to be rehabilitated as low-income housing). Currently in run-down condition with a few ornaments missing and slightly vandalized (especially unit entry doors on the double-loaded corridors), the California Hotel retains its original character from the tiled parapet and galvanized iron cornice down to the tile storefront bases (now painted), the mezzanine clerestory windows behind modern metal cladding, the metal marquee and almost all the original windows.

The building's L-plan stretches about 214 feet along San Pablo Avenue, the eastern perimeter of its polygonal lot shaped like a flatiron with the tip cut off. The main arm of the L-plan is 50 feet deep and filled with lobby and five or six commercial spaces on the ground floor and mezzanine, and with one-room-and-bath hotel units (33 per floor) on double-loaded corridors above. Typically each facade window, single or double, represents one hotel room. The northern arm of the L-plan extends 80 feet back from San Pablo and at a slightly obtuse angle to it; this line was parallel to and ten feet south of the original lot line. (In 1960-1962, the MacArthur Freeway and its parallel 35th Street were cut through a gas station that used to complete the gore of San Pablo Avenue and Chestnut Street. The Hotel lost a tiny corner of the 10 feet strip and gained the leftover lot fragment that now separates it from 35th Street to the north.) The northern arm of the building's L-plan is also 50 feet deep, but its western wall borders Chestnut Street and is at a somewhat wider obtuse angle to the northern facade. This arm contains balconied lobby and banquet room on the ground floor and mezzanine, double-loaded corridors with four apartment units each on floors two through five, and a penthouse consisting of connective rooms and the two observation towers, one at each corner, carefully designed to look square although in plan they contain not a
8. Statement of Significance

The California Hotel appears eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C architecture, because it is a fine and essentially intact example of the large hotel building type, executed in a 1920s Period Revival style by prominent local builders and architect, and located a considerable distance from any other similar development so that, ever since its construction in 1929-1930, it has always stood out as a landmark on the cityscape for its large scale, twin towers and interesting architectural detail. Only 40 feet away, the MacArthur Freeway (Interstate 580) both impacts view of the building from the street, and enhances its prominence, for the towers and upper floors are one of very few structures rising above freeway road level, and the building is a daily sight familiar to hundreds of thousands of commuters, providing a modern relationship to its historic context, the development of Oakland along transportation routes.

The thesis that development both follows and leads transportation routes is well established. (1) In Oakland the process involved water transportation encouraging development near First and Broadway in the 1850s and 1860s, construction near the Seventh Street train line in the 1870s and 1880s, a city center around the turn of the century near 14th and Broadway where another train line and various streetcar routes met, and movement of the commercial center "uptown" to a clean new site near Broadway and 20th in the 1920s in response to increased flexibility of access via automobile and public transit. Planning of the California Hotel leapfrogged over a dozen low-density residential blocks to respond to a relatively new transportation hub just beyond Oakland in Emeryville. The Santa Fe Railroad's main Eastbay passenger station, a large and impressive Mission Revival structure, stood at San Pablo and Yerba Buena, about 6 blocks north of the Hotel. The Santa Fe's trainyards were and are still northwest of the intersection of San Pablo and Yerba Buena. Southwest of the same intersection where the local transit's Key System yards and shops, and Yerba Buena itself is on a direct line from and continuation of the Key System Mole, where the Key System's San Francisco
9. Major Bibliographical References

---, The California Voice, 5 April 1963, 2.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

I preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
I previously listed in the National Register
X previously determined eligible by the National Register
I designated a National Historic Landmark
I recorded by Historic American Buildings
Survey # _________________________
I recorded by Historic American Engineering
Record # _________________________

Primary location of additional data:
I State historic preservation office
I Other State agency
I Federal agency
X Local government
I University
I Other

Specify repository:
Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey in Department of City Planning

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property: 0.9 acre

UTM References

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone</th>
<th>Easting</th>
<th>Northing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>1[4]</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property occupies nearly all of city lot 5-479-2-1 and is an irregular polygon roughly 243 feet on the east (San Pablo Avenue) side, 66 feet on the north (35th Street) side, and 215 feet at its widest point.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire city lot that was historically associated with the property, except for about 8 square feet subtracted when 35th Street was cut through in the early 1960s. The boundary excludes that portion of the present city lot that was added in the early 1960s.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Anne Bloomfield, consultant
date: January 1988
organization: ______________________
street & number: 2229 Webster Street
city or town: San Francisco
county: __
state: California
zip code: 94115
telephone: (415) 922-1063
single right angle. The remainder of the lot has been the Hotel parking lot with access through an original gateway on San Pablo Avenue (brick pylons and metal arch survive, gate is new), but now the rear lot is merely an abandoned junk yard. There used to be an auto repair shed along the Chestnut Street line. Next to the building are several small, 1-story structures accessory to the commercial spaces and slated for demolition: a 1956 concrete block addition to the banquet room, a 1939 frame bottle storage shed altered in 1946, and the like. Brick 1-story entry, storage, and mechanical rooms at the rear angle of the L-plan will remain.

A two-part vertical composition, the San Pablo facade is divided into five bays by very slightly projecting, off-white stucco panels each extending two floors down from the cornice, encompassing a pair of casement windows per floor and terminating in a balcony resting on consoles. The northernmost bay, over the lobby, contains five three-over-one double-hung windows per floor between the divider panels; the other bays have only four. The corner stucco divider panels are further marked by a pair of vertical stucco strips like quoins, which extend from ground to cornice at the south end and from ground to top of tower windows at the north end, defining the tower's relationship to the ground. The north facade is treated similarly at both corners, and its single bay has one small and six regular windows per floor plus a staircase stack of double windows. The west and south facades have corner "quoins" but lack the balconied divider panels. The quoin-like strips are repeated on piers under the lobby's metal marquee. Further ornament consists of an arced, pressed metal cornice, repeated on the towers, a tile pent roof above the cornice, a pyramidal roofline element above each of the bay dividers, several squat fluted urns scattered variously on balconies and moldings, and a stucco belt course separating the commercial "base" from the "shaft" of the upper floors.

The roof is flat and asphalt behind parapets and from it can be seen a 360° view of the Bay, and City of San Francisco, Berkeley, the East Bay hills, and the downtown Oakland highrises. The towers have low-pitch hipped roofs surmounted by flagpoles. From at least 1934 through the 1970s, a solid-letter, neon-lit roof sign, "CALIFORNIA HOTEL", stretched between the towers; its rickety, empty framework still stands.

The storefronts retain their original clerestory windows and muntins behind 1971 metal cladding. Their bases are clad in 4-inch glossy black glazed ceramic tiles, highlighted with a few polychrome tiles in the second course (counting down) and a red-orange tile divider strip between the third and fourth courses. The tile bases on the north facade are in original condition; those on the San Pablo facade have been painted and some may have been altered for store entry changes, though two of the three or four original store entry vestibules remain intact. The stores themselves have been altered repeatedly.
Lobby windows originally were single sheets of heavy plate glass, none of which survives. One is boarded over, and the others are filled with many small panes set in cheap wooden muntins of unmatched patterns. The original metal marquee survives but not in good condition. The pair of metal entry lanterns, the paneled vestibule and its terrazzo floor with the legend "CALIFORNIA" also survive from the original hotel, but the doors have been replaced.

The lobby itself is essentially intact but unfurnished. The roughly 50 foot by 35 foot by 18 foot high space is visually extended beyond the west and south walls by a mezzanine balcony with iron railing. On the south side some ground-floor office space and some of the mezzanine were partitioned off in 1971-1972, not impacting the main lobby space. The lobby's beamed ceiling has panels stencilled in black, green, and terra cotta color, and the beams rest on a major north-south girder clad in wood and visually joined to the walls and a single pillar by brackets decorated with sunburst reliefs and painted polychrome. Decorative metal chandelier bosses and chains survive, but not the fixtures themselves. Walls are a swirl-textured plaster; at this time its original peach-colored tinting is visible under many layers of peeling paint. The lobby floor is square of tan terrazzo. The focal point is a fireplace with broad plastered chimney breast on the west wall. The hearth and firebox surround are finished with irregularly shaped terra cotta-glazed ceramic tiles, a few of which have Mayan-style reliefs.

A few other interior spaces should be mentioned. At the lobby's southwest corner a staircase rises to the mezzanine and second floor; its treads are terrazzo of the same color as the lobby floor but without partitions and with the addition on each tread of a pair of the California bear symbol outlined in brass. The three staircases connecting the residential floors at north, south, and center have similar bear-adorned terrazzo treads, but many are severely damaged by removal or attempted removal of the brass. The upper floor corridors, long and straight, have walls and ceilings plastered like the lobby walls; each of their girder bracket ornaments is a pair of satyrs holding a large rose-in-circle. Mezzanine walls and floors match the lobby. Mezzanine rooms on the west have sage-stained wood doors glazed with amber cathedral glass. One of these rooms has large similarly glazed multi-pane windows overlooking the banquet room on the rear of the ground floor. This banquet room retains its original space and columns, but very little else. The penthouse and towers interior has severe water and fire damage, and its last remodeling had been about 1970 for a gambling casino use that lasted about a year.

The bathroom in each unit has glazed ceramic tile wainscot of a color different from all the others nearby. There must be at least 15 or 20 different color combinations, such as peach with maroon trim, tan with white trim, pale smoky blue with pastel pink, brick red with pale blue, speckled sand color with aqua, or black and white checkerboard. The unglazed white hexagonal floor tiles have occasional tiles colored to pick up one of the wainscot colors. All this bathroom tile is intact.
ferries met its Eastbay Interurban trains until completion of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge in 1937. For autos, San Pablo Avenue was the main north-south highway along the eastern shore of the San Francisco Bay, and one block north of the Hotel was the important intersection with MacArthur Boulevard, a major east-west artery. Around this transportation hub in Emeryville there are several small brick-clad hotel buildings, but the California Hotel is many times larger than any of them, and a much more significant design. It is Oakland's only architecturally significant response to this transportation hub, and indeed aerial photos published in 1931 and 1932 show the Hotel as the only large mass anywhere in the vicinity.(2) In all of Oakland, the only larger historic hotel is the Hotel Oakland on 14th Street.

Whether or not the original developers believed the Oakland commercial core would repeat its historic northward progression and move from the 1920s shopping center around Broadway between 17th and 21st to this vicinity of 34th Street, they did see the Hotel as attracting customers from the north. That is why the twin towers face north. North was the location of the transportation hub, and automobile drivers along San Pablo Avenue, the main highway from the north (Berkeley, Richmond, Sacramento, etc.) could see the towers from a distance and would conveniently find this major hostelry immediately upon entering Oakland. A newspaper article celebrating its opening in 1930 said, "The location on San Pablo Avenue was selected to cater to travelers entering Oakland from the north", and "Transportation facilities are particularly convenient, the Hotel being near the main Santa Fe depot, a block from the Key Route trains to San Francisco, a block from the main thoroughfare to the San Francisco auto ferry. Four Oakland carlines pass the doors."(3) Also to the north in Emeryville was the ballpark for the Oakland Oaks, a minor league baseball team whose fans contributed to the California Hotel's economic viability in the 1930s and 1940s. However, the Hotel remains a solitary monument because the developers' gamble on this location was a failure; the Hotel never achieved a reputation to match its architecture, and by the late 1930s it already seemed "seedy".(4)

The California Hotel's five-story, 214 foot long facade on San Pablo Avenue might be notable anywhere in Oakland. The contrast of dark brick to light stucco, the satisfying proportions, the prominent towers and the balconied panels that define bays only at the top two floors -- all these form a distinguished whole. The Spanish Colonial Revival detailing is limited to moldings, cornices, quoins, and interior area; it is distinctly subordinated to the overall massing, making the total design forward-looking for 1929, rather than purely historicist.
The original developers, Sommarstrom Brothers, were also the contractors and so much involved in the planning of the Hotel that the original Building Permit reads "None" in the blank for architect.(5) The firm at one time consisted of Mathew Felix, Edward and Hugo W. Sommarstrom; it had been founded about 1907 by the first two; M. F. Sommarstrom; died before the California Hotel was built. Work by the firm or one or another of the brothers, includes 36 buildings found so far by the Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey, and over 100 smaller ones claimed in 1911.(6) The Survey shows Sommarstrom Brothers as a major factor in the development of the Lakeside Apartment District and in the commercial/residential developments along Grand Avenue. They concentrated on apartment buildings in Oakland, but they also constructed industrial buildings in and near the Produce Market, and they owned the Clinton Mill and Lumber Company, a large cabinet shop and planing mill. They often continued to own and manage apartment buildings they had constructed. The California Hotel was their largest known building and one of their last. For its ownership they created the Eastbay Hotel Corporation, with principle stockholders Edward Sommarstrom, Hugo Sommarstrom, J. Goldstein, and Axel Bern, the Hotel's manager.

Attribution of the design to architect Clay N. Burrell (1882-1958) comes from the original blueprints and the newspaper announcement.(7) The California Hotel is the seventh building known by Burrell for Sommarstrom Brothers and the 22nd of 25 Burrell structures that the Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey has found. After at least five years as draftsman with Oakland architect Frederick Soderberg, Burrell became known for many apartment buildings and for some hotels designed for another speculative developer, Morris & Muller. He was a prolific and locally important early twentieth-century architect; the Survey rates him "Very Good" and finds his work "distinguished by its high, often imaginative quality."(8) Certainly high, imaginative design quality is evident in the California Hotel.

In time the building may also become significant under "Ethnic Heritage: Black" for its role as the principle and highest quality social center for East Bay Blacks in the 1950s and 1960s, but this area of significance has not been noted at the beginning of this section because the activities are so recent. From its opening in 1930 through World War II, the California Hotel was a commercial hotel for whites only. After the war, it began accepting Black entertainers as hotel guests and was the first and best East Bay hotel to do so. Dancer and master of ceremonies, Jay Payton, remembers that when he moved from the east to Sacramento in 1952, the standard show-business lodging for his East-Bay bookings was the California Hotel. Black entertainers met each other there, found a favorite barber right in the Hotel (Alfred Keyes 1959-1972), used its Ray & Ray's Flowers, and after shows would unwind in its Club Zanzibar and its all-night
restaurant. The Zanzibar and the restaurant were in commercial spaces fronting on San Pablo which retain no trace of their passing. But the original banquet room, later called the Gold Room and beginning in 1963 the Side Door, was the balconied space extant behind the main lobby. There, Blacks came for Pete Escovido's Sunday mamba dances, and for a host of Black musicians, especially blues and gospel performers. Big Mama Thornton sang there, and Charles Brown, Little Willie John, Beebee King, Lou Rawls, James Brown, Sam Cook, and Gaylord Birch. People remember Cal Tjader coming to play the California Hotel, and Ray Charles and Richard Pryor. Sports and political figures came to see, enjoy and be seen, for the California Hotel was the Black social center. Unfortunately it degenerated into illegal activities and ceased abruptly in the middle of a rehabilitation in 1972. A lot of Oakland's Blacks fondly remember good times at the California Hotel.(9)

Footnotes:


2. Oakland Tribune Yearbook, 1931, 121 and 1932, 6, 15.

3. "Open House to Mark Openings of New Hotel: California Hotel Opens Today", Oakland Tribune, 18 May 1930, 2-M.

4. Information relayed by the observer's son, William Sturm, Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library.

5. City of Oakland, Building Permit Application No. A40907, filed 11 October 1949, final inspection 27 February 1930, estimated cost $265,000.


7. Blueprints, courtesy of Oakland Bureau of Building Inspection. "Open House...California Hotel Opens Today".

8. Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey, California Historical Resources Inventory Form for "Lakeside Apartment District", 7.

Oakland Cultural Heritage Survey. File on 3443-3501 San Pablo Avenue.
---. File on Clay Burrell.
---. File on Sommarstrom Brothers.
---. State Historic Resources Inventory Form, Lakeside Apartment District.
Oakland Directory, various years and pages.
"Open House to Mark Opening of New Hotel: California Hotel Opens Today", Oakland Tribune, 18 May 1930, 2-M.
---. Oakland, 1951, I, 9.
"Sommarstrom Brothers", Bolts and Nuts, 4 January 1923.

Interviews:
Jones, Johnnie (Oakland resident since 1939), 4 December 1987.
Payton, Jay (dancer, entertainer, former California Hotel resident), 10 December 1987.
Raymond, Norman (California Hotel commercial tenant since 1969), 2 December 1987.
United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Photographs Identification

1. California Hotel, Oakland, California
   Photo Anne Bloomfield, 9 October 1987, negative 160/32A with photographer
   North facade, looking southeast

2. California Hotel, Oakland, California
   Photo Donna Kempner, 15 July 1987, negative 458/26 with Oakland Cultural Heritage
   Survey (hereafter, OCHS)
   East and north facades, looking southwest

3. California Hotel, Oakland, California
   Historic Photo, courtesy The Tribune
   Photo Estey Photo Service, 7 March 1934
   Copy negative with Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library
   East and north facades, looking southwest

4. California Hotel, Oakland, California
   Photo Donna Kempner, 15 July 1987, negative 458/25 with OCHS
   Detail of east facade, looking west

5. California Hotel, Oakland, California
   Photo Anne Bloomfield, 9 October 1987, negative 160/27A with photographer
   Entry details, looking northwest

6. California Hotel, Oakland, California
   Photo Anne Bloomfield, 9 October 1987, negative 160/25A with photographer
   Detail at southeast corner of building, looking northwest

7. California Hotel, Oakland, California
   Photo Anne Bloomfield, 9 October 1987, negative 160/24 with photographer
   Stucco detail at southwest corner, looking east

8. California Hotel, Oakland, California
   Photo Anne Bloomfield, 10 December 1987, negative 163/12A with photographer
   View of north facade from across the freeway (Interstate 580), looking south
   along San Pablo Avenue

9. California Hotel, Oakland, California
   Photo Anne Bloomfield, 9 October 1987, negative 160/35A with photographer
   View of east and south facades, looking north-northwest across San Pablo Avenue
California Hotel, Oakland, California

10. California Hotel, Oakland, California
   Photo Anne Bloomfield, 9 October 1987, negative 160/34A with photographer
   View of portions of south and west facades, looking north along Chestnut Street

11. California Hotel, Oakland, California
    Photo Anne Bloomfield, 9 October 1987, negative 160/22 with photographer
    West and south facades (portions) looking northeast from courtyard

12. California Hotel, Oakland, California
    Photo Anne Bloomfield, 9 October 1987, negative 160/10 with photographer
    View of and from the roof, looking west to the San Francisco Bay

13. California Hotel, Oakland, California
    Photo Anne Bloomfield, 9 October 1987, negative 160/8 with photographer
    View of and from the roof, looking south to Oakland's downtown highrises

14. California Hotel, Oakland, California
    Photo Betty Marvin, 20 August 1987, negative 480/22 with OCHS
    Lobby, looking northwest from entry

15. California Hotel, Oakland, California
    Photo Betty Marvin, 20 August 1987, negative 480/0 with OCHS
    Lobby ceiling detail, looking up

16. California Hotel, Oakland, California
    Photo Gary Knecht, 20 August 1987, negative 480/1 with OCHS
    Lobby fireplace detail, looking west

17. California Hotel, Oakland, California
    Photo Betty Marvin, 20 August 1987, negative 480/7 with OCHS
    Detail of typical terrazzo stair tread

18. California Hotel, Oakland, California
    Photo Gary Knecht, 20 August 1987, negative 481/12 with OCHS
    Typical corridor view, looking north

19. California Hotel, Oakland, California
    Photo Anne Bloomfield, 9 October 1987, negative 160/24 with photographer
    Hall ceiling detail

20. California Hotel, Oakland, California
    Photo Gary Knecht, 20 August 1987
    Typical hotel room, looking east
Sources:
Alameda County Assessor, Map 5-479.
U.S.G.S. 7.5 Minute Series Map, "Oakland, West"