



## Marin history: Sarah Bernhardt among performers at San Quentin

Courtesy of Marin History Museum

Performances at San Quentin by stars of stage and screen go all the way back to the second decade of the 20th century.

By **Scott Fletcher** | Marin History Museum

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A History Watch column several months ago made mention of the inmates of San Quentin being entertained by popular comedian, **Phyllis Diller**. Performances at San Quentin by stars of stage and screen, however, go all the way back to the second decade of the 20th century.

Near the end of the reform-minded progressive era, rehabilitation of prisoners was an emerging goal of the California Correctional System. It was thought that bringing art

and culture to prisoners could have an ameliorating effect on the lives of the men and women serving time behind bars.

In 1911, warden John Hoyle brought the 1910 Broadway play "Alias Jimmy Valentine" to the San Quentin, a tale of a reformed safe-cracker who goes "straight" in order to stay out of jail and win the heart of the woman he loves. Two years later, internationally acclaimed stage actor Sarah Bernhardt (third from left) arranged with California authorities and Warden Hoyle to come to Marin's "Big House" and perform in a play that her son had written about the French Revolution. She chose Feb. 22, George Washington's birthday, for her visit, "declaring it was one in which the French people took pride because of the intimate relations of Lafayette and Rochambeau with the first president of the nation."

The San Francisco Call newspaper reported that the prisoners built an open-air stage on one of their exercise yards and formed an orchestra to accompany the production. Nearly 2,000 inmates, including a number of women prisoners and men condemned to death, were seated for the show when, "a pair of huge and massive doors of iron barred oak were opened to admit the very modern six-cylinder automobile bearing Madame Bernhardt and her leading man M. Lou Tellengen."

In the photograph, Tellengen is standing to Bernhardt's left and Warden Hoyle to her right. After the play concluded, the imprisoned San Francisco political boss, Abe Ruef, wrote an address to the actress, which was read on stage. "Today, for one short hour, these walls of stone have vanished and — thanks to your marvelous personality and your enchanting art — we have been at perfect liberty in soul and mind, and captives only to the singular genius and incomparable art through which you have justly gained the title of "The Divine Sarah."