State of California — The Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

PRIMARY RECORD

Primary # _____
HRI # _____
Trinomial _____
NRHP Status Code 6Z
Other Listings _____
Review Code _____ Reviewer _____ Date _____

 *Resource Name or #: (Assigned by recorder) 850 Van Ness Avenue/869 Ellis St.

P1. Historic name of building (if any): J. E. French and Don Gilmore used auto sales room
P2. Location: *a: County San Francisco ☐ Not for Publication ■ Unrestricted
*b. USGS 7.5' Quad _____ Date _____ T ___; R ___; ___¼ of ___¼ of Sec ___; _____B.M.
c. Address 850 Van Ness Avenue/869 Ellis St. City San Francisco Zip 94109
d. UTM: Zone _____; _____mE/ _____ mN *e. Assessor's parcel #: Block 739, lot 10

*P3a. Description: (Describe resource and its major elements. Include design, materials, condition, alterations, size, setting, and boundaries)

This is a one-story, L-shaped brick masonry commercial building with a frontage of 44'-4" on Van Ness Avenue and 27'-6" on Ellis Street. (Another small brick building, 899 Ellis, fills the angle of the ell.) Both facades are faced in brick that has been painted and are almost devoid of ornament. The Van Ness Avenue façade is divided into three bays and rises to a pediment-shaped parapet over the central bay. All openings are filled with new metal window and door sash and frames. It appears that a cornice or decorative band of ornament once stretched across the building near the top and that this has been removed or chipped away. The Ellis Street façade is more intact, with a simple cornice with block modillions just below the parapet and three large, evenly-spaced windows that are divided by mullions into smaller lights. The entrance in this façade also now has a new metal door.

*P3b Resource Attributes: HP6 – commercial building; HP8 – industrial building

*P4. Resources Present:
■ Building ☐ Structure ☐ Object ☐ Site ☐ District ☐ Element of District ☐ Other

P5b. Description of Photo: (View, date, accession #)
View looking east at Van Ness façade, June 2009

*P6. Date Constructed/Age and Source: ■ Historic ☐ Prehistoric ☐ Both
1919; published building contract

*P7. Owner and Address:
RKI INVESTMENTS LLC
121 SPEAR STREET, SUITE #25SAN FRANCISCO CA 94105

*P8. Recorded by: (Name, affiliation, and address)
William Kostura
P. O. Box 60211
Palo Alto, CA 94306

*P9. Date Recorded: November 2009

*P10. Survey Type: (Describe) intensive

P11. Report Citation*: (Cite survey report.) William Kostura. *Van Ness Auto Row Support Structures*. San Francisco Department of City Planning, 2010.

*Attachments: ☐ NONE ☐ Location Map ☐ Sketch Map ■ Continuation Sheet ■ Building, Structure and Object Record ☐ Archaeological Record ☐ District Record ☐ Linear Feature Record ☐ Milling Station Record ☐ Rock Art Record ☐ Artifact Record ☐ Photograph Record ☐ Other (List)

Looking south at the 869 Ellis Street façade

BUILDING, STRUCTURE, AND OBJECT RECORD

***NRHP Status Code** 6Z

***Resource Name or #** (Assigned by recorder) 850 Van Ness Avenue/869 Ellis St

B1. Historic Name: J. E. French and Don Gilmore used auto sales room

B2. Common Name: _____

B3. Original Use: used auto sales B4. Present Use: piano sales

***B5. Architectural Style:** none

***B6. Construction History:** (Construction date, alterations, and date of alterations)
Built in 1919. Window sash on the Van Ness Avenue side was replaced at an unknown date. A cornice or decorative strip on the same façade was removed at an unknown date.

***B7. Moved?** ■ No ☐ Yes ☐ Unknown **Date:** _____ **Original Location:** _____

***B8. Related Features:**
none

B9a. Architect: Henry Shermund and John T. Harms b. Builder: Paul K. Jones

***B10. Significance: Theme** automobile industry **Area** San Francisco
Period of Significance n/a **Property Type** used auto sales room **Applicable Criterion** n/a
(Discuss importance in terms of historical or architectural context as defined by theme, period, and geographic scope. Also address integrity.)

History: Construction and architect

This building was built in 1919 as an investment for the owners, Nellie and Agnes Lowrey and Isabel Soule, to designs by architects Henry Shermund and John T. Harms. Henry Shermund trained as a draftsman under Edward Swain and Newton Tharp and opened his own office in 1904. He was active as an architect of houses through 1927 and did little work afterward. Some of his houses are quite striking; the best include a shingled Craftsman-style house at 1432 Fifth Avenue (1910); a house in a blend of Mission Revival and Craftsman styles at 12 Jordan Avenue (1911); and Mannerist Classical Revival apartments at 500-528 Laguna Street (1912). Besides other residential buildings in San Francisco he designed houses in Menlo Park, Los Gatos, and San Anselmo and a small number of commercial buildings in San Francisco.

B11. Additional Resource Attributes: (List attributes and codes) _____

***B12. References:**
Edwards' Abstracts, July 17, 1919 (building contracts)
Crocker-Langley and Polk's city directory, and PT&T reverse directory listings for occupants of this building, 1921-1964
S. F. Chronicle classified ads 1919-1922 (found via ProQuest)
1929 Sanborn insurance maps (auto sales, with repair in ell)

B13. Remarks:

***B14. Evaluator:** William Kostura
Date of Evaluation: November 2009

(This space reserved for official comments.)

(Sketch map with north arrow required)

History -- Occupants

This building was occupied almost continuously from the time of completion through at least 1964 as a sales room for used automobiles. Auto sales took place in the wing facing Van Ness while the wing facing Ellis was devoted to servicing and repairs. In all, eight used car dealers occupied this building, three of them for seven to ten years each and the others for shorter periods. The dealers were:

1919-1921: Associated Auto Company. Their classified ads in the Chronicle newspaper used language similar to that of used car dealers several decades later: "Cars Near New," "All Guaranteed," "Clearance Sale – Prices Slashed – Real Bargains," and "Reliable Used Cars – Prices Right." They sold used Stutz, Cadillac, Buick, Ford, Chevrolet, Dodge Brothers, Haynes, and many other cars.

1922-1925: Hessel Motor Car Co. This firm advertised that it sold "Slightly Used Cars" including Buick, Nash, Hudson, Chevrolet, Stephens, Cleveland, Olds, and of course others.

1926-1927: Van Ness Avenue Company (used cars)

1927-1936: J. E. French Company. French's used car sales in this building were a sidelight to his main business of selling new Dodge Brothers autos at the northeast corner of O'Farrell and Polk streets.

1937-1938, 1941-1944, 1953: Don Gilmore, Inc. Like French's, Gilmore's used car sales here were a supplement to his main business, which was selling new Chevrolets at 550 Van Ness Avenue.

1945-1947: Sam Hines (used car sales)

1948-1950: H. A. Stoll (used car sales)

1954-1964+: Jack Philes' Wholesale House (used car sales)

In sum, this building held used car sales for forty-one years through 1964.

Of the many buildings in the study area that were devoted primarily to used car sales for a substantial number of years, this is one of seven good examples that remain. The six others include:

*700-710 Van Ness Avenue (36 years of such use during 1919-1964)
1415 Van Ness Avenue (34 years of such use during 1923-1964)
*824-828 Ellis Street (27 years during 1938-1964)
714 Van Ness Avenue (24+ years during 1920-1960)
*1545-1549 Pine Street (about 20 years of such use during 1938-1964)
1350 Van Ness Avenue (about 20 years during 1944-1964)

Of these seven, 850 Van Ness is the only one that was devoted to used car sales from the beginning of its history; the other six buildings were devoted to other uses at first and became used car salesrooms later. Three of the above buildings – those marked with an asterisk (*) – have substantially better integrity than 850 Van Ness does.

(Continued next page.)

History (continued)

To recapitulate, 850 Van Ness held used car dealerships for longer than any other building that still stands; only 700-710 Van Ness comes close to its record. 850 Van Ness had this use beginning at a date as early as, or earlier than, any other building. Only 700-710 Van Ness equals its early date for this use, while 714 Van Ness comes close. Three of the other used auto sales buildings that still stand have better integrity than 850 Van Ness does. Ranking these buildings is difficult, but considering length of use, the earliest date of such use, and integrity, it seems that 700-710 Van Ness is the best example of a used car salesroom still standing in the study area; while 850 Van Ness is the second best example; and 1415 Van Ness is the third best example.

Integrity

This building has lost its original window sash, plus a cornice or pent roof, on its more important Van Ness Avenue side, but retains such features on its Ellis Street side. In sum, it retains integrity of location, while integrity of design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association are present but somewhat diminished. Due the replacement of several older buildings in the vicinity integrity of setting is also diminished.

Evaluation

This is one of more than 100 buildings along the Van Ness Avenue corridor that have a history as automobile support structures, and that are being evaluated for possible historic significance according to the criteria of the California Register of Historical Resources. With a few exceptions, these buildings were auto showrooms, public garages, auto repair shops, auto parts and supplies stores, and auto painting shops. The time period that is being studied is from the initial years of the automobile industry in San Francisco through 1964. Among the factors that have been considered when evaluating a building are its date of construction, its longevity of auto-related use, the importance of its occupants in local auto industry history, integrity, and architectural quality. These factors, and how they apply to evaluations of buildings, are discussed in a cover report, *Van Ness Auto Row Support Structures, 1908-1964*.

Completed in 1919, this is one of the two earliest examples of a used automobile salesroom in the study area, and is the only building in the study area that was a used car salesroom from the beginning of its history. With 41 years of use as a used car salesroom in its history (through 1964), it has excellent longevity in this use. Its integrity is not as good as that of some other buildings that had this use. As noted above, it is perhaps the second best example of a used car salesroom in the study area.

As auto-related businesses go, used car sales is less important in the history of the study area than new car sales or public garages, and should also be considered less important than some of the larger and longer-lasting auto repair shops or auto supply houses. Given that that this is a relatively minor building type among auto-related buildings, and that the main façade of this building has been so substantially altered, it appears that this building should not be considered to be eligible for the California Register of Historical Resources under Criterion 1.

(Continued on page 6.)

Evaluation (continued)

The only people associated with this building that stand out in any way are J. E. French and Don Gilmore, both of whom were more important as new car dealers in other buildings. Accordingly, this building does not appear to be eligible for the California Register under Criterion 2.

Architecturally, this building is very modest, and lacks distinction. It does not appear to be eligible for the California Register under Criterion 3.