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

PRIMARY RECORD

Primary # _____
HRI # _____
Trinomial _____
NRHP Status Code 7
Other Listings _____
Review Code _____ Reviewer _____ Date _____

 *Resource Name or #: (Assigned by recorder) 2100 Van Ness Avenue

P1. Historic name of building (if any): Grison's Steak and Chop House
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 Location: *a: County San Francisco ☐ Not for Publication ■ Unrestricted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 2100 Van Ness Avenue City San Francisco Zip 94109
d. UTM: Zone _____; _____mE/ _____ mN *e. Assessor's parcel #: Block 574, lot 14

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

This one-story building fills its 91'-8" by 107'-6" lot at the northeast corner of Van Ness and Pacific avenues. Because of the descending slope of Van Ness Avenue toward the north end of the lot, a basement level is evident along the Van Ness side elevation. In structure this is a reinforced concrete, Class C building, and in form the building is rectangular, save for a chamfered corner at the corner of Pacific and Van Ness. The façade is coated in stucco. In composition, the Van Ness façade is divided into six bays of equal width, and the Pacific Avenue façade is divided into six bays of similar width to those facing Van Ness, plus two narrow bays. A very simple cornice with recessed panels wraps around both facades plus the chamfered corner a few feet below the parapet. Window bays are defined by plain piers with flared tops and profiled bases. Extremely narrow pilasters frame the window openings. All former window transoms have been filled in, and several windows have been filled in entirely. The main entrance at the chamfered corner has been generally altered by the addition of a three-sided pavilion with a profiled cornice.

*P3b Resource Attributes: HP6 – two-story 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 northeast
June 2009

*P6. Date Constructed/Age and Source: ■ Historic ☐ Prehistoric ☐ Both
1919-20; published building notice

*P7. Owner and Address:
LEVY LEONARD J TRUST
3890 CLAY ST
SAN FRANCISCO CA 94118

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

*P9. Date Recorded: March 2010

*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, 2009.

*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)

View looking north along Van Ness Avenue from Pacific, in 1926. 2100 Van Ness is at far right. In this photo, the chamfered corner is flat (and thus lacks the three-sided entrance pavilion that has since been added). This corner appears to be devoted to a window (instead of an entrance, as at present) with a transom (since filled in), and is topped by a cartouche with swags (since removed). Transoms can be found at the top of the other window openings as well (these have also since been filled in). The cornice and parapet in this photo seem to be the same as at present. From the San Francisco Public Library, photo AAB-5680.

BUILDING, STRUCTURE, AND OBJECT RECORD

***NRHP Status Code** 7

***Resource Name or #** (Assigned by recorder) 2100 Van Ness Avenue

B1. Historic Name: Grison's Steak and Chop House
B2. Common Name: Harris Restaurant
B3. Original Use: auto showroom B4. Present Use: restaurant
***B5. Architectural Style:** Classical Revival
***B6. Construction History:** (Construction date, alterations, and date of alterations)
Built in 1919-1920. Windows and entrance altered in 1940 for Grison's restaurant.

***B7. Moved?** ■ **No** ☐ **Yes** ☐ **Unknown** **Date:** _____ **Original Location:** _____
***B8. Related Features:**
none

B9a. Architect: Alfred Henry Jacobs b. Builder: W. D. Henderson
***B10. Significance: Theme** automobile industry **Area** San Francisco
Period of Significance n/a **Property Type** auto showroom **Applicable Criteria** n/a
(Discuss importance in terms of historical or architectural context as defined by theme, period, and geographic scope. Also address integrity.)

History – Introduction, construction, architect

This building was built in 1919-1920 for owner M. L. Levy as an investment, for intended use as an automobile showroom, to designs by architect Alfred Henry Jacobs. It is unclear whether a tenant for the building was lined up before construction began, as was often the case with showrooms on Van Ness Avenue, but in December 1919, when the building was one month away from completion, the White-Humphries Motor Company was announced as the tenant. Auto showrooms, a public garage, and an auto repair shop occupied the building during its first fourteen years of existence (1920-1934). The subsequent use of the building, from 1936 to the present, has been as a restaurant. In 1940 the entrance and windows of this building were altered for Grison's Steak and Chop House, bringing the exterior of the building to, probably, its present appearance.

The original (1919) architect, Alfred Henry Jacobs, had an office in San Francisco from 1907 through at least the 1940s. He is best known for designing the Curran Theater (1922); the almost equally elaborate California Theater, at 4th and Market (1917; demolished); a school and temple for Congregation Emanu-el at 1335 and 1337 Sutter (1918 and 1912); and the Hotel Herald at 308 Eddy (1910).

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

***B12. References:**
Building and Engineering News, Sept. 19, 1919, 17:2
Crocker-Langley and Polk's city directory, and PT&T reverse directory listings for occupants of this building, 1921-1953
Building permit 1940 re: alterations to windows and entrance; available at Dept. of Building Inspections, 1650 Mission Street.
References continued on page 8.

B13. Remarks:

***B14. Evaluator:** William Kostura
Date of Evaluation: March 2010

(This space reserved for official comments.)

(Sketch map with north arrow required)

History – Occupants

1920-1934: Automobile-related occupants

Jan. 1920-June 1921: White-Humphries Motor Company, sales of Standard and Commonwealth autos

The first occupant of this building was the White-Humphries Motor Company, which formed in 1919 to acquire the northern California and Nevada distributorship for two automobile brands, Standard and Commonwealth. The company opened for business in January 1920 while the finishing touches were being made to the building at 2100 Van Ness.

Both of these auto brands were extremely obscure and were little-known even in their own time. The "Standard Eight" automobile came in seven models and was made near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania by the Standard Steel Car Company. White-Humphries frequently advertised this brand in an effort to bring attention to it to the public, confessing in one ad that "Today the Standard Eight is not so widely known as other cars," but insisting that it was a leader in its price class. Some background on this brand can be gleaned from a Wikipedia entry on the city of Butler, Pennsylvania. It appears that the Standard Steel Car Company was founded in 1902 as a maker of railroad cars by the famous financier "Diamond Jim" Brady. Auto manufacturing must have been one of its sidelines. White-Humphries sold this auto at 2100 Van Ness for eighteen months, through June 1921.

White-Humphries sold autos of the Commonwealth Motors Company of Chicago for an even briefer period, perhaps only during January-May 1920. In one ad it claimed the auto was "priced hundreds of dollars below" other autos of similar quality. Today it would seem that the most notable aspect of Commonwealth's history is that it was purchased just as it was going bankrupt in 1924, and was then merged with another business to form the Checker Cab Company.

Judging from newspaper articles and display ads in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (found via the ProQuest website), it appears that White-Humphries officers were energetic in promoting these brands, but the brands' obscurity, the company's location at the extreme north end of the city's Auto Row, and the recession of the early 1920s worked against them. If the history of other San Francisco auto dealers of the period is any guide, White-Humphries probably hoped to make a big enough splash at 2100 Van Ness to attract a more promising auto brand later, and to move to a larger building in the center of Auto Row. It didn't work out that way, and White-Humphries went out of business eighteen months after it opened.

1922-1934: The Van Ness Garage, the Winton Company, and Madison and Richards auto repair

Being located far from the center of Auto Row, close to where Nob Hill, Russian Hill, and Pacific Heights meet, this building site was probably better suited to use as a public garage than as an auto showroom, and it is not surprising that it was converted to this use after White-Humphries left. The Van Ness Garage occupied part of this building from 1922-1934.

(Continued next page.)

History – Occupants (continued)

During 1923-1924 it shared the building with the local factory branch of the Winton Company, an auto manufacturer. Incorporated in Cleveland, Ohio in 1897, it was one of the country's earliest auto makers, and according to Wikipedia was the best-selling maker of gasoline autos in 1899, with sales that year of over one hundred hand-made autos. In 1903 Winton became the first auto to make a coast-to-coast trip. It was a successful maker of high-priced cars through the 1910s, but like many auto manufacturers struggled in the early 1920s, perhaps in part due to the recession of those years. It went out of business in 1924, and thus was sold at 2100 Van Ness during its last years of existence.

From 1924 to 1931 the auto repair shop of Madson and Richards shared this building with the Van Ness Garage. Their address was variously given as 1674 and 1698 Pacific Avenue.

In sum, this building was occupied by auto-related uses for fourteen years.

1936-1980s: Grison's Steak and Chop House

During the years 1929-1938 four former auto showrooms at the north end of "Auto Row" were converted into restaurants. These three included 2050 Van Ness (in 1929), 2100 Van Ness (in 1936), 1906 Van Ness (by 1938), and 1946-1960 Van Ness (1938). The most prestigious restaurant among this group was the one at 2100 Van Ness.

2100 Van Ness became Grison's Steak and Chop House on February 27, 1936.* The partners were Robert Grison (1903-1998; variously said to have been born in Switzerland and Italy) and Charles Morosin (of Italy). Grison had apprenticed at restaurants in France, Belgium, and Spain. He moved to the United States at age 20 and worked at fine restaurants in New York City, Daytona Beach, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Chicago before settling in San Francisco in 1930. Here he managed the Bal Tabarin night club in North Beach for four years, briefly owned the well-known roadhouse Uncle Tom's Cabin in San Bruno, and then opened Grison's Steak and Chop House.

The restaurant dining room seated 150, had high wainscoting of polished white pine, and pine booths covered with blue leather; and a kitchen opened onto full view of the dining room. Corn-fed beef imported from the Midwest, broiled lamb chops, trout, and baked or whipped potatoes were among the specialties. This restaurant closed during 1942-1945 because Midwestern beef became unavailable during the war, but re-opened afterward. Robert Grison owned Grison's Steak House until 1984, when he retired, and another steak house, Harris' Restaurant, took its place at 2100 Van Ness.

Grison's was recommended in various books on San Francisco restaurants and guidebooks from the 1930s to the 1960s. Ruth Thompson wrote on Grison's at length (along with 109 other restaurants) in

(Continued next page.)

* According to Grison's obituary (J. L. Pimsleur, "Bob Grison, Legendary S.F. Restaurateur," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 23, 1998), Herb Caen ate at Grison's on its opening night and became a regular there afterward.

History – Occupants (continued)

her book *Eating Around San Francisco* (1937; pp. 237-240) and praised it highly. Long before people were concerned about the cruelty of feeding grains (instead of their natural diet of grass) to cows she wrote "There's nothing like corn-fed beef! Its flavor, enhanced by perfect broiling, is very different from the ordinary steak." Katherine Kerry, in *Look What's Cooking!* (1950), included Grison's among 54 San Francisco restaurants she wrote about, writing "their fame is almost world-wide because of the consistent high quality of the food served…. To both Robert Grison and Charles Morosin, the owners, should go an accolade as perfectionists in their art." *Herb Caen's Guide to San Francisco* (1957, p. 78) profiled Grison's Steak House among 66 restaurants that he reviewed, writing "Grison's is a first-rate restaurant that has maintained a consistently high standard for many years." Doris Muscatine, in *A Cook's Tour of San Francisco* (1963, pp. 346-347), profiled Grison's among 68 San Francisco restaurants. She stated that the steaks came from Kansas City, and she gave the restaurant's recipe for brook trout. Ben Adams' *San Francisco: An Informal Guide* (1961, revised 1968; p. 105) was much less effusive than the other books, writing "San Francisco is not a haven for steak lovers. Its steak houses do not on the whole compare with those of New York, Chicago, or even – let's face it – Los Angeles. But there are some restaurants that specialize in serving a pretty good steak…," and it listed Grison's as one of three.

The books named above are more descriptive than seriously critical; some are chatty and boosterish; but from them one can get a very good idea of which restaurants were the most popular, and perhaps the best, in San Francisco during the 1930s-1960s.

Only a few restaurant sites are included in all five of these books. Besides 2100 Van Ness, they include 243 O'Farrell (originally Charles Fashion Grill, later Bardelli's) and 886 Broadway (Alfred's; since altered). Many other restaurants are listed in three or four of these five books. For another side of San Francisco's restaurants, see Richard A. Lewis' *Poor Richard's Guide to Non-Tourist San Francisco* (1958). It does not mention Grison's, which one probably would not go to if one was poor. For a description of San Francisco restaurants in 1914, see Clarence E. Edwords' *Bohemian San Francisco.* More than a few of the restaurants it wrote about lasted into later decades, and some of the buildings they were in still stand today.

Robert Grison was also the proprietor of Grison's Chicken House, across the street at 2050 Van Ness, from 1938 to the 1970s. This restaurant was also mentioned in some of the books mentioned above. In addition, he was the first president of the Golden Gate Restaurant Association, from 1938-1946, according to that organization's website.

Integrity

This building retains integrity of location and setting for all periods since its construction. Because of the alterations to the entrance area, the filling in of all of the window transoms, and the filling in of several windows, it has greatly diminished integrity of design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and

(Continued next page.)

History – Occupants (continued)

association for the period through 1940, when these alterations were made for Grison's. For the period since these alterations were made in 1940, the building has, as far as is known, integrity in all areas. A closer examination of the permit record than has so far been made may help to clarify knowledge of integrity for the period since 1940.

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.*

Criterion 1

Automobile use

Completed in 1920, this is a moderately early example of an automobile showroom. With 14 years of such use in its history, it has moderate longevity in this use. The auto dealerships that located in this building during its early years were minor; and the longest lasting auto-related business in this building's history was the Van Ness Garage, which occupied part of the building for twelve years. Integrity for the 1920s and 1930s, when this building was devoted to auto uses, is fairly low. For these reasons, the building does not appear to be eligible for the California Register of Historical Resources under Criterion 1, for its auto-related use.

Restaurant use

This building was occupied by a restaurant, Grison's Steak and Chop House (later, Grison's Restaurant) from 1936 to 1984, and it appears to have high integrity for the period since 1940. This was clearly a popular and well-known restaurant that was generally considered to be of high quality; this restaurant also had great longevity. How it compares in importance to other buildings that held restaurants through the early 1960s is difficult to say at present. At least a few restaurant buildings that still stand with good integrity date to the 1910s and 1920s. This does not preclude later restaurant buildings such as 2100 Van Ness from being eligible for the California Register. In sum, a historic context for San Francisco restaurant buildings should be developed before 2100 Van Ness can be properly evaluated for its significance for its restaurant history. This building has high potential for California Register eligibility under this theme, but lacking a historic context, it is too difficult to say that it is eligible at present.

(Continued next page.)

Evaluation (continued)

Criterion 2

The only business proprietor at this location that might be historically important under this criterion was Robert Grison. He was the proprietor of two popular and highly regarded San Francisco restaurants, Grison's Steak and Chop House and Grison's Chicken House, over a period of 48 years (1936-1984) and was the first president (for eight years, 1938-1946) of the Golden Gate Restaurant Association. As with Criterion 1, above, a historic context should be developed on restaurants before this building can be properly evaluated under this criterion.

Criterion 3

Architecturally, this building lacks distinction, especially after its alterations of 1940. Accordingly, it does not appear to be eligible for the California Register under Criterion 3.

Status code

Because this building cannot be evaluated for its restaurant use until research is performed on the restaurant industry in San Francisco, and a historic context on the subject is developed, this building is given a status code of 7, meaning "not evaluated."

References (continued from page 3.)

"New Distributing Firm Opens," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 14, 1919, p. A-3. Regarding White-Humphries, soon to open at 2100 Van Ness.

"Handsome Quarters for New Motor Cars…," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 11, 1920. White-Humphries opens at 2100 Van Ness.

Display ads in the *San Francisco Chronicle* 1920-1921 by the White-Humphries Motor Company, dealers of Standard-Eight and Commonwealth autos, found via the ProQuest website. See especially Jan. 11, 1920, p. A-5 (opening day); Sept. 26, 1920, p. A-7; Feb. 20, 1921; and June 2, 1921 (last known ad by this company).

J. L. Pimsleur, "Bob Grison, Legendary S.F. Restaurateur," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 23, 1998. Obituary.

Malcom Glover, "San Francisco Restaurateur, Bob Grison," *San Francisco Examiner*, November 24, 1984. Obituary.

Wikipedia entries on Butler, Pennsylvania (re: Standard Steel Car Company) and Winton Motor Carriage Co.