

San Francisco's City Lights Celebrates 25 Years

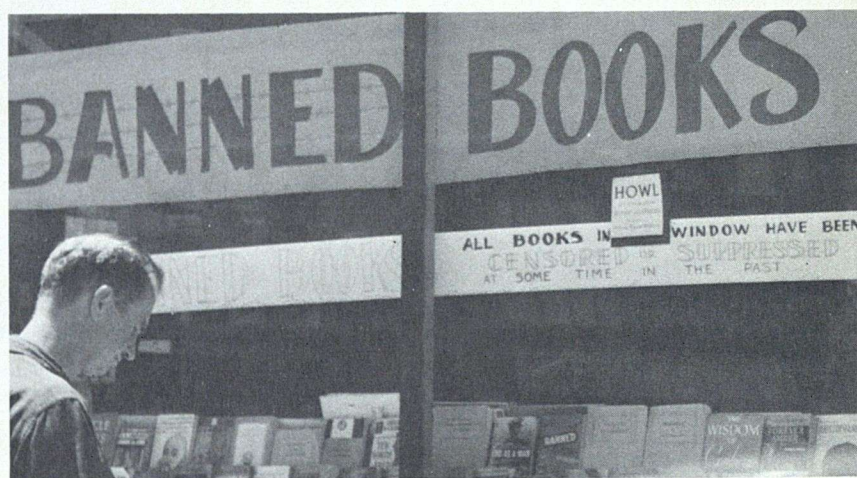
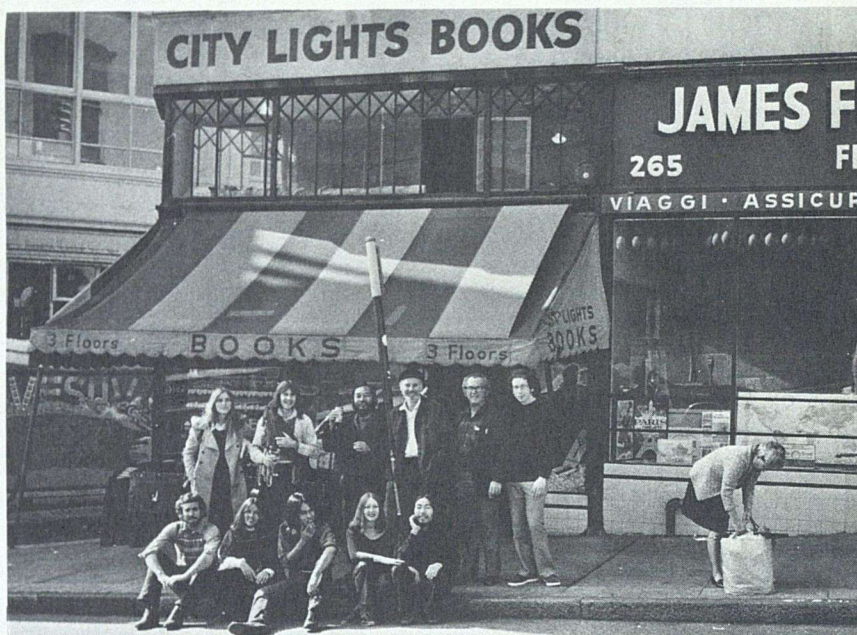
by Patricia Holt

THIS year the bookseller/publisher firm of City Lights Books of San Francisco celebrates its 25th anniversary, an occasion for many in the West to reflect upon the historical effect of this famed small press on publishing as both industry and cause célèbre.

Established in 1953 with a \$500 nest egg supplied by poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, City Lights was one of the first paperback bookstores to open its doors at a time when serious readers of San Francisco's North Beach scene were desperate for inexpensive classical and experimental literature. Like Cody's in Berkeley and Kepler's in Palo Alto (with which Ferlinghetti once ran joint ads in the *San Francisco Chronicle*), City Lights was regarded with some hostility by the more traditional hardcover booksellers in the area, but not by the soon-to-be-called "Beat Generation": "As soon as we got the door open we literally couldn't get it closed," Ferlinghetti told *PW* in a recent conversation.

Open until midnight seven days a week, the store quickly became a central focus for many of the poets of North Beach. "In the tradition of booksellers and unpublished poets everywhere," Ferlinghetti began publishing out of the cellar office, first his own work—"Pictures of a Gone World," which is still in print—then books by Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Michael McClure, Gregory Corso, William Burroughs, Diane Di Prima, Neal Cassidy and, later, Charles Bukowski, Gary Snyder, Alan Watts, Huey Newton, Stefan Brecht (son of Bertold) and even love poems by Karl Marx and "Thoughts of Jerry Brown."

In those days North Beach was not the center of topless joints and nude-encounter massage parlors that it later became; it was a multidimensional collection of such places as the Jazz Workshop, Hungry i, Coexistence Bagel Shop and The Scene coffee house and bar, where a scruffy-looking bunch of poets led by "Big Daddy" Eric Nord read aloud in back rooms, warning the straight society of the '50s and



At top, the store and its staff in 1975; today, for the first time in its 25-year history, City Lights has expanded by 600 sq. ft. into an adjacent space. The bottom picture, taken in 1958, demonstrates one instance when the store used its windows to take a political stand

the House Un-American Activities Committee about the bomb, the Cold War and the Silent Generation. For them, City Lights was the end of Jack Kerouac's road, and every poet from the basements of Greenwich Village to the bistros of the Left Bank knew it. But it

was not until the mid-'50s, when police arrested Shigeyoshi (Shig) Muraio, Ferlinghetti's lifelong friend and partner, for selling copies of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," which they identified as obscene literature, that the world was to discover City Lights as the leader of

