

SAN FRANCISCO

30 years a doorman — a legend in one night

By *Carl Nolte*

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Tom Sweeney, the famous doorman at the Sir Francis Drake Hotel has shaken hands with five presidents of the United States and six mayors of San Francisco, and he's posed for thousands of pictures. Now, after 30 years on the job, he is an official San Francisco institution.

Sweeney, 49, was toasted with champagne and cheered like a rock star at a curbside ceremony

Tuesday night to unveil a plaque in his honor in front of the Powell Street hotel.

The plaque hails him as a legend in raised brass letters — pretty good for a kid who signed on for a temporary job as one of the hotel's three doormen in December of 1976. Then 19, Sweeney thought it would be a passing fancy. His real love was the San Francisco Fire Department or maybe the Police Department.

He put on the red Beefeaters costume, modeled after the uni-



Photos by KATY RADDATZ / The Chronicle

Famous doorman Tom Sweeney listens raptly as former Mayor Willie Brown honors him at the Sir Francis Drake Hotel.

form of the guards at the Tower of London and stayed for 30 years, greeting millions of guests.

"I'm a ringmaster, a greeter, a constable, a guide, a porter and a valet," he said once.

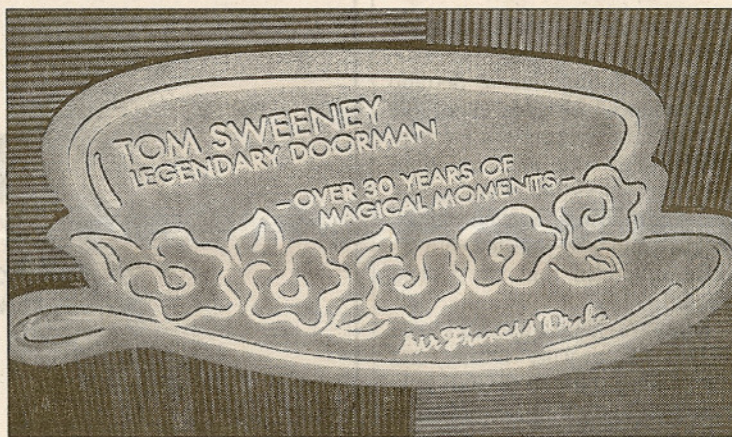
"An ambassador," he said Tuesday night. "How do you like my office?"

His office, of course, is the street, where he seems to know everyone — passing cable car crews, returning guests (he's a whiz at names), and ordinary San Franciscans.

"He is everybody's friend," said Vincent Page, who spent three years working with Sweeney. "He has a smile for everybody. Even the bums off the street.

"After the Golden Gate Bridge and the cable cars, he's a San Francisco institution," Page said.

It must have been hard to get



A memorial plaque honoring Tom Sweeney's 30th anniversary will be put in the sidewalk in front of the Sir Francis Drake Hotel.

a cab at a San Francisco hotel Tuesday night, since at least two dozen doormen from the city's top hotels, each wearing his own costume, showed up to honor Sweeney. He's the best in the

business. "Tom," said Sir Francis Drake doorman Eddie Strickland, "has raised the bar."

Sweeney arrived for the party in Rescue One, the San Francisco Fire Department's biggest and

best emergency unit. "He's a real buff," said Fire Chief Joanne Hayes-White, who was on hand. "He knows all the bells and all the apparatus," she said.

Sweeney also seemed to know all the firefighters, many of whom turned out in helmets and turnout coats to hug him and wish him well.

"This has worked out best for him," said Hayes-White.

The secret of his success? "Staying calm," Sweeney said. "And you have to love dealing with the public."

But even an institution cannot always win at City Hall. The hotel can't mount the plaque honoring Sweeney in the Powell Street sidewalk just yet. "We couldn't get the permit in time," said a hotel official.

E-mail Carl Nolte at cnolte@sfchronicle.com.