

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

May 6, 1952

The Seemly Impossible

On Admission Day of 1884 the cornerstone of Pioneer Hall in San Francisco was laid on Fourth street. A 20 foot strip purchased from the Flood family and an additional 20 feet from the Lick trustees, enabled the Society of California Pioneers to dedicate an open court and a "cul de sac" as "Pioneer Place."

The cornerstone contained a total of 65 items, among them the Society's membership list and seal, a photograph of James Lick and an account of an excursion to Carmel which members of the society had made previous to the cornerstone laying, an autograph of James W. Marshall, who had been elected an honorary member of the Society because of his discovery of gold in California, a copy of Elizabeth Branham's speech upon the occasion of her presentation of the Pioneer Ladies' flag in 1853 and a roll of the San Francisco police department on Admission Day, 1884.

Because of the large number of descendants of pioneers of California – those who arrived before 1850 – it might be well to repeat from an oration by Willard Farwell at the 1884 occasion: "For all of those who belong to our ranks the work which we inaugurate today is destined to be the palladium of their hope; the beginning of an enterprise under the auspices of this Society which is to secure for them comfort, protection, home and happiness during all the rest of their declining years ...

"For no higher, no more tender or affectionate duty remains to be performed by the Society of California Pioneers than to care for and protect in their declining years such of the original pioneers as may unfortunately, need that care and protection, and to the accomplishment of this purpose every other one of the declared projects of this organization, and ought to be, subservient."

At the first election held in this new hall there was a grand attendance and the banquet which followed it was a rousing affair.

Unexpectedly, General Sherman turned up. After shaking hands all around for half an hour he was escorted to the banquet table and greeted with a full five minutes of thunderous applause. In response he

spoke to his fellow Pioneers about the old days and started reminiscences that lasted far into the night.

"As an old Pioneer I am proud to be here with you tonight," he told them. "It was in 1847 that I first came to this place. I would not have given \$25 for the whole of San Francisco, then Yerba Buena. That shows how much the judgment of a weary man riding a mule can be warped..."

"Pioneers, you may go to Paris and London, and the great centers of learning and civilization, and you cannot find a body of men who have accomplished as much as you have in so short a time. You were the leaders in the early days, and you are the leaders now... May you and your children who will succeed you, still continue in this progress..."

When a partial list of the historical items belonging to the Pioneers and exhibited in Pioneer Hall is read it is with a note of deep regret, for all were destroyed in the subsequent fire and earthquake. Undaunted by the many catastrophes which had assailed them the Pioneers lived on and built their present building on McAllister Street.

Among the notable additions in the 1880's to the historical collection were: the diary kept by Sutter and his clerks, presented by John Bidwell; a diary written by Henry W. Bigler on the day that Marshall discovered gold – at that time, the only known authentication of the date of that memorable occurrence – and many other important items.

On March 24, 1906, William White Hobart, the president, called to order the regular monthly meeting of the Society of California Pioneers Board of Directors. The board voted the sum of \$100 toward the purchase of a silver service for the new battleship "California." The entire membership approved the contribution of April 2.

"In the early morning hours of April 18, 1906, the seemingly impossible came to pass," Hobart later stated in his annual report, "and in a few brief hours our magnificent building on Fourth Street was a mass of blackened brick and twisted iron and its contents, aside from records in its vault, were ashes."