

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **The Germ of a New State**

"We have practically completed our hall on Pioneer Place, which, with furniture, will cost us \$54,000," reported President William White Hobart, the Society of California Pioneers' 48<sup>th</sup> president, in July of 1907, a bit more than a year after the great San Francisco earthquake and fire of April 1906.

The building was completed on October 18, 1907. The new furniture was installed, and the contents of the large brick vault which had survived the fire was brought to the third Pioneer Hall. The vault had been allowed to cool for more than two weeks before it was opened and even then there was no certainty that the valued records stored there had not been baked to ashes. Consequently, great was the relief when the contents were found safe, according to an item in "The Sudden Empire – California." The writer of this historic epic also reported that in the charred ruins of the old hall there remained intact the Society's most precious possessions; its minute books and records from 1850 down, its constitution with the signature of all the members, the biographical data which finally had been gathered, the New Helvetia diary, the Bigler diary page. These formed the nucleus of the Society's new collection.

Early in 1908 historical objects, pictures, books, papers began coming in from undamaged areas. For an astonishing number of lost items there were duplicates or counterparts. The first recorded donation was a lithograph of the bill which admitted California to the Union, presented by Albert M. Smith of Oroville.

A few months later the society voted as future policy to confine its library purchases to books of California history. When the Associated Pioneers of the Territorial Days in California, with headquarters in New York, decided to disband, they sent the society all their records and books.

In 1913, John J. Lermen became the society's first second-generation, California born president. During the depression in 1936 the Society of California Pioneers were on the verge of losing their property through lack of payments on their indebtedness. Lerman asked for and received a 30-day extension. At the end of 10 days he gave the bank a contract of

purchase of the Fourth Street property by the Santa Fe Railroad. With the money received the debt on Pioneer Hall was paid and the society, once again solvent, purchased the fourth Pioneer Hall, a two-story steel and concrete structure with a full basement, located across McAllister from the City Hall. The California Historical Society moved in as tenant to occupy part of the building and so by 1938 both historical societies were established there.

In 1939 the last of the original Pioneers died and brought to an end an era. In 1939 all "mail descendants of persons who were residents of California prior to the first day of January 1850" became eligible for membership.

It was in 1924 that the first Historical Quarterly was published, carrying a brief history of the society and an article titled "Recollections of Gold Digging." The second issue was devoted to a biography of James M. Lick and a related account of early San Francisco lands.

Among the most interesting and valuable collections now owned by the Society of California Pioneers and in safe keeping in the McAllister Street Hall are: The Turrill collection of several thousand negatives of pictures of California and especially of San Francisco from 1776 to the years following the fire; the Drum collection of pictorial material including many rare letter sheets as well as paintings, colored lithographs, etchings, broadsides, and maps; the Sherman collection presented by Fred Sherman, a unique body of San Francisco theatrical and musical material – play bills and sheet music dating principally from the 1850s to the end of that century.

The motto of the society still is, as it was in the first constitution of the group 100 years ago: " ... To collect and preserve information connected with the early settlement and conquest of the country, and to perpetuate the memory of those whose sagacity, enterprise, and love of independence induced them to settle in the wilderness and become the germ of a new state.