

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

August 25, 1961

### **Lillie's Story**

One of the most famous' and beloved of all fire engines in California is at present on display in headquarters of the California Pioneer Society in San Francisco.

Knickerbocker No. 5, the members of which were former New Yorkers (hence the name), was founded In October 1850.

Having bought, for \$3,000 what was described as a "small-sized piano-box engine Van Ness patent," the group established headquarters on Merchant street; then, after being burned out there on the night of Nov. 9, 1853, they built the quarters on Sacramento street between Sansome and Leidesdorff, which they continued to occupy until the volunteer companies disbanded in 1866.

In 1863 the Knickerbockers adopted as their official mascot a young girl named Lillie Hitchcock (Coit), daughter of a prominent physician.

Oscar Lewis tells the rest of the story in the California Book Club's Keepsakes for 1961.

"Thereafter Lillie faithfully attended every fire and cheered her company on to greater efforts. Her loyalty to No. 5 - and to all the city's volunteer firemen - persisted as long as she lived, and both their memory and her own are perpetuated by her gift to the city of the Coit Tower atop Telegraph Hill. The site is quite appropriate, as Lillie was, very proud of the achievement of Knickerbocker No. 5, the only engine to make the steep grade when the 'Castle' on Telegraph Hill burned In 1903."

Knickerbocker No. 5 was sold to Carson City, but after Mrs. Coit's death a few friends bought it and it was placed in the de Young Museum, until loaned to the Pioneer Society.

Helen F. Giffen, librarian for the Society of California Pioneers and a former resident of Nevada City, wrote the folder containing the history of the Nevada Hose Company.

Nevada City had its first fire on March 11, 1851, when the town was laid bare. Within the next seven years five more fires took toll of life and property. Still nothing was done about organizing of a volunteer fire company. In 1860 the Nevada Hose Company No. 1 came into

being. This was followed by Protection Hook and Ladder Company No. 1 and Pennsylvania Company No. 2.

Of these three companies the buildings of two are still standing. It still has a great deal of historic interest, for the museum of the Nevada County Historical Society is established there. The other, a brick building that housed the Pennsylvania Company No. 2, is located at 100 Broad street, and still is actively associated with the present Nevada City Fire Department, for it houses the modern rescue equipment. The old fire bell still swings in the tower and still clangs out the alarm.

Nevada City was first known as Deer Creek Diggings, then as Caldwell's Upper Store, and finally as Nevada, the "City" being added after Nevada Territory was formed. Gold was discovered on Gold Run, adjacent to Deer Creek, in September of 1849, and by the time October had passed quite a settlement of miners' tents had sprung up housing some thousand people, Mrs. Griffen noted.