

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

August 30, 1961

Salute To Columbia

Columbia, the gem of the southern mines, and its fire-fighting equipment of the 1850s is the subject of one folder in the Keepsake Series of "Early California Firehouses and Equipment" printed by Lawton Kennedy for the Book Club of California and sent out to the membership this month.

Aubrey Neasham, secretary of Western Heritage, Inc., and former state historian for the Division of Beaches and Parks, wrote the text for the article dealing with the history of the Columbia firefighters and equipment.

Columbia had many fires which destroyed numerous old buildings but men in search for gold also were destructive. Fires occurred in 1854, 1857, 1859, 1861, 1865, and 1866. Fortunately, some of the buildings were constructed specifically to resist fire, and they remain as evidence of the pioneer instinct to build permanently. These are now incorporated in the Columbia Historical State Park which is an outstanding example of California's historic scene and will not be relegated to the status of a ghost town. "Not the least of her historic atmosphere in this living community will be the firehouses and their ancient equipment," Dr. Neasham declares.

Two of these firehouses remain. One, used today by the Columbia Fire Department which is largely a volunteer organization aided by state personnel and modern equipment, situated here as early as 1862. It is Victorian in appearance, being a tin-covered frame building, which all visitors to Columbia visit.

But there is more interest in the old brick fire house constructed for Tuolumne Engine Company No. 1 in 1861, which has been restored to its original appearance. "This is a museum piece," Dr. Neasham writes, Not only does it house the first engine used in California, called "Papeete," constructed in 1852 and purchased in 1859 for Tuolumne Engine Company No. 1, but, also, "The Monumental," purchased in 1859 for the Tuolumne Engine Company No. 2 at a cost of \$2,500. Two hose carts and miscellaneous early equipment complete the exhibit.

Credit is due May W. Perry, executive secretary of the Placer County Historical Society, for the history of the Auburn volunteer firefighters and firehouses. She

reports "Auburn started when gold was discovered in the ravine, May 16, 1848, by Claude Chana and his party on their way to Coloma, and by 1850 Auburn had become the gateway through which many early-day gold seekers entered the rich gold regions to the north and along the American River. In another year it became the county seat of Placer County."

During the first few years Auburn had just a bucket brigade to fight fires. A public meeting was later held, and three fire wardens were appointed. On Nov. 8, 1852, they organized the hook and ladder company.

By July 1853 there were 14 volunteer firemen, in the fall of 1853 there was a town watchman at night and a reservoir was built on the hill. The next year a grand ball was given, and money was raised to buy more equipment. In 1855 the town was almost completely destroyed by fire, after which all businesses were ordered to keep barrels of water for use in case of fire. After more fires, iron pipe and hydrants were installed.

The city gave the Company No. 2 a piece of public ground and the firemen started to build in September 1891. The formal dedication took place on May 21, 1892. Later the building was rededicated, after the state moved the firehouse in 1959.

"First in Danger and Always Ready" is the motto inscribed in elegant hand tooling on the silver trumpet which Sacramento Engine Company No. 3 presented to its unit foreman, George B. Gammans, in 1853, according to Hero Eugene Rensch, author and historian of Sacramento.

Of six glamorous brick firehouses which sheltered the six-volunteer fire-fighting companies of Sacramento in the 1850s and 1860s, only one remains, Engine House No. 3. It was built in the summer of 1853 and is at present being restored by an alert Sacramento citizen, Newton A. Cope. It will be preserved after the manner of 1855 and 1857 prints of the old building found in the state library.

Sacramento's first fire company - and "the first fire company of the Pacific Coast" was organized on Feb. 5, 1850, under the name Mutual Hook and Ladder Company No. 1 (and known as the "Silk Stockings.") With the motto "On Hand," it became the nucleus of Sacramento's Volunteer Fire Department.