

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Excitement of Fire-fighting Is Revived

Brien T. Thompson Phoenix Club of San Francisco and fire commissioner of Castro Valley, and Paul M. Dierkes, expert on fire-fighting equipment write of firehouses and special equipment for the recent issue of the Keepsakes of the Book Club of California, presented to the membership for 1961.

The entertaining article begins with a description of the buildings, inside and outside. Various types of structures housed these early fire companies. Some were imposing buildings several stories high, surmounted by a cupola with a bell. Others were frame buildings of modest circumstances; some were mere sheds. The first floor of the larger buildings was given to housing of the engine, hose, and tools. The second was given over to meeting and social rooms.

The largest rooms were furnished with the finest carpets, drapes, and furniture available. Upon the walls were pictures of the company assembled in full uniform with the engine, past foremen, and mementoes of visits of other companies or to commemorate events.

The authors of the histories of Firehouses and Equipment state that many of the early fire companies were named for Eastern ones by former members, the names Knickerbocker, Phoenix, Crescent and Empire bear testimony of that fact. Some were named for individuals, as Weber of Stockton and Broderick of San Francisco. At times local names were used, such as Butte Engine of Oroville and Alisal Hose of Salinas.

The most affluent companies had a spare engine. These engines were at first hand - powered and they were built by many manufacturers. They were decorated with silver and gold inlay. All were painted and varnished with gold leaf decorations and had silver name plates.

Some had brakes on the ends, as designed by Hunneman of Boston. Agnew of Philadelphia had a double set of brakes on either end, necessitating a platform or double deck. Many, including the Knickerbocker 5, had brakes on the side.

Understandably, the authors write, such engines were the most spectacular things in town, and it was small wonder that rivalries grew up among fire companies to outmatch each other in magnificent vehicles and

equipment and dramatic first arrivals at the scenes of fires.

In some areas, we are told, the companies, as the Myrtle Hose of Eureka, still continue. Many communities still keep the volunteer systems: the Warren Engine of Carson City, which will celebrate its centennial in 1963, is an example.

Apart from the engines, perhaps the most dramatic piece of equipment was the fire trumpet. The fire trumpet appeared on the American scene about 1750, the Keepsake series tells us. It was part of the standard equipment of the day, along with leather buckets for the use of the bucket brigade, hooks for pulling off thatched roofs, and ladders.

The primary function of the trumpet was that of voice projection, and the carrying power was remarkable. They were first made of tin, then brass, plated metal, German silver, solid silver and silver inlaid with gold.

Other firehouses and equipment described in the Keepsake series of the Book Club of California are: Old Weber Firehouse in Stockton as described by V. Covert Martin, historian and author of Stockton and R. Coke Wood, executive secretary Callerenc of California Historical Societies, University of the Pacific; the

Bodie Volunteer Fire Department by Donald I. Segerstrom, trustee California Historical Society, Sonora; San Diego Firehouses and Rigs as compiled by Jerry MacMullen director, Junipero Serra Museum, San Diego; the Old Plaza Engine House as described by Robert Foster, collector and historian of Early Fire-Fighting, Los Angeles; and Glenn W. Price, Western Americana Library, University of the Pacific.

The old firehouse at Bodie was destroyed by fire in 1932, but much of the equipment was saved. In 1933, the building was reconstructed as a WPA project, more as a monument to a determined group of volunteer firemen than for anything else.

"The little firehouse, minus the bell, which has been stored away, has weathered peacefully in the brilliant Bodie sun, a reminder that pure guts can keep a gold camp going but that it takes a civic conscience to keep it alive," writes Segerstrom.