

DEVASTATING FIRES THREATENED EARLY TIBURON

By Susan Cluff

Fire in early Tiburon was always a danger – whether from a shattered oil lamp, dropped embers from a stove, smoking, or arson. So most residences and businesses kept a row of leather fire buckets in the front hall with their names painted on them. If there was a fire, they'd throw them out in the street so people could use them and retrieve them afterwards.

The first Tiburon fire company was organized in the Donahue rail yards in the 1880s with a water tank, hose reel and hand pump in a shed near the waterfront. Hot sparks from wood-burning steam locomotives could cause spot fires and spread to wooden passenger and freight cars, so every train carried a tank water car and most railroad buildings had water barrels mounted on the roof. Whenever the fire whistle sounded, volunteer firefighters would stop what they were doing, grab hoses and equipment, set up bucket brigades, and start fighting the fire.

On November 13, 1890, a fire broke out in the kitchen of the Tiburon Hotel on Main Street, razing all the buildings downtown except two. Bucket brigades carrying water to and from the bay made little difference in high winds, and the San Francisco fire tug and ferries at the dock couldn't assist because of low tides. More than 150 people made homeless by the fire were housed in railroad boxcars and ferries until downtown Tiburon could be rebuilt.

In December 1899, fire broke out again, the result of arson by a store owner which led to the creation of a professional fire department under Chief Charles McNeill. On February 27, 1900, the San Francisco Call reported "the new fire department is now prepared for any

emergency." Over 1,300 feet of underground pipe had been installed by the railroad along with "a first-class pumping system."

That emergency came on September 13, 1906, when a fire sparked from the chimney of R. Paul's Bakery, jumped to the saloon roof next door and spread quickly through Tiburon's downtown. As the new pipe system was out of order, bucket brigades were set up once again, including a group of society women from Belvedere and a detachment of soldiers from Angel Island. Railroad employees ran hoses from the steamers "Lagunitas" and "Tamalpais" to keep the fire from the roundhouse and the car shops.

Still the wind-fueled fire continued to spread and within two hours burned all the buildings downtown, leaving just the railroad yards and buildings, the Corinthian Yacht Club and a few homes on the hillside. Fire losses were estimated at \$50,000-100,000; only a few buildings were insured. Over 200 people were rendered homeless, some of them housed temporarily in the old steamship "James M. Donahue." The townspeople rebuilt downtown once again.

The last serious fire in Tiburon was in 1921 and demolished businesses on the lagoon side of Main Street. Most of the historic buildings date from that time.



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Above: Antique fire extinguisher at the Tiburon Railroad & Ferry Museum.

Below: Tiburon's Main Street on September 14, 1906, the day after a wind-swept fire had burned most of the buildings. Viewed from the entrance to Corinthian Yacht Club, this was the front page photo of the San Francisco Call.



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