



Old homes destroyed

The Castle was completely destroyed and only two exterior walls of the Salt Box remain following an early morning fire last Thursday. An investigation into the causes of the fire is being conducted by the fire department's arson squad. Residents in the Heritage Square area said the old homes had been the site of late night gatherings by young adults.

Blame arsonists for fire that destroyed old homes

By Frank Gonzalez

Vandals did in minutes what neglect was unable to do in years when fire burned to the ground two historic mansions, the Salt Box and the Castle, last Thursday morning.

The fire, which broke out at 2:30 a.m. in the Castle's lower floors, completely destroyed the ginger-bread style mansion and forced the demolition of what remained of the Salt Box.

A spokesman for the Municipal Arts Commission said the buildings were not insured and the loss was complete.

An estimate of the damage was set at \$40,000, the cost of saving and moving the buildings, but Frank Taylor of the arts commission said the value of the buildings were historical and a price could not be set on them.

HOMES THREATENED

Both homes, moved in March from Bunker Hill, to their new Heritage Square home at the deadend of Homer Street near the Pasadena Freeway and Avenue 43, were so completely involved in flames when the first fire units arrived that

firemen were hard pressed to save six nearby homes that were threatened by the blaze.

Battalion Commander George Pinkney, who was in charge of the fire fighters, said that the rapid spread of the fire "indicates to me that they were touched off — you know, suspicious."

Evidence of inflammatory agents such as gasoline were undetected said Pinkney, but not ruled out, since the intense fires would probably have consumed all traces of such fluids.

Arson investigators were checking on reports by neighbors in the area that the Square was the favorite haunt of young juveniles and that drug parties were reported to have taken place there on several occasions.

FIRE WITNESSES

Mrs. Frances Garcia, of 4138

Homer St., one of the first to report the fire, said she had looked down from her home a few hundred yards away and had seen a glow in the front porch area of the Castle and then a large blaze.

She was unable to say whether the Salt Box was on fire at the time or not, but Rigo Rodriguez of 3822 Homer St., who lives closer, said the blaze definitely began in the Castle and heat from the fire set off the Salt Box.

Both witnesses, long-time residents of the area, said the place had been poorly patrolled and the hang-out of juveniles and transients.

Mrs. Garcia said earlier reports that "hippy type individuals" frequented the area were untrue. "I'd call them 15-year-old dope-heads," she

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Fire takes old home

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said of the type of juveniles that chose the area for meetings.

JUVENILES' HANG-OUT

"I can't say it's always been the same gang all the time — they've been different ones, and, of course, there's been bums sleeping around the place, too," she explained.

John Hunter, owner of Hunter Construction Co. and the man who uprooted and transported the homes from their downtown Bunker Hill site, is definite the fire is the work of young vandals who have committed thefts and damage at the Square in the past months.

A certain amount of controversy rests on whether the homes were properly guarded or not. A guard employed by Hunter left after he told Hunter he had been beaten up on several occasions by young thugs. The city installed a street lamp at the end of Homer Street after the last reported beating.

NO FENCE

An allocation of \$13,820 in January by the city to pay for the moving and installation of the houses, was also supposed to cover the cost of guarding and fencing the square.

Hunter, who has handled the project since the homes were uprooted from Bunker Hill in October of 1968, said the fence was going to be installed as soon as the buildings were lowered onto their foundations.

He said he had expected to lower the houses this week but had to wait for city approval and the crane operator. The fences, he said, couldn't be installed until the large cranes had done their job.

Friday morning board of public works members expressed concern about a possible Halloween bonfire if youngsters were to use the kindling left over from the ruins of the two structures in Heritage Square.

The board instructed the bureau of street maintenance to immediately remove all debris and eliminate what might become an attractive nuisance.

Hunter first took on the job in October of 1968 when the homes were threatened with demolition in the wake of urban renewal on Bunker Hill.

OUTSTANDING EXAMPLES

The homes, considered by architects and historians as outstanding examples of the Gay 90's era, obtained permanent historic sites through the efforts of two men.

Carl S. Dentzel, director of the local Southwest Museum and president of the Cultural Heritage Board, and Councilman Arthur K. Snyder convinced the city to contribute to the move to Highland Park.

The city council approved a grant of \$20,000 and the Community Redevelopment Agency contributed \$10,000 to pay for the relocation of the buildings to their Highland Park home.

Another \$13,320 had been allocated in January of this year to pay for the sectioning of the buildings. The two houses had to be cut into smaller sections in order to make the trip, which involved going under power lines.

The homes were finally moved to their location at the Square, an extension of the Arroyo Seco Park, in March and the foundations for the buildings were installed last August.

The land belongs to the department of recreations and parks and permission to develop the land into a Heritage

Square was approved by the parks commission in October of 1968.

At that time the commission had set a deadline of two years from the date the buildings were moved to the time they were installed and refurbished at their site.

A spokesman with the department of recreation and parks said the commission would probably alter its two-year deadline.

"Of course it's almost impossible to say what the commission will decide but they were sympathetic to Heritage Square before and I think they will continue to be."

The department has no development plans for the Square, explained the spokesman, and will probably let the Heritage Board continue with their plans and bring in other houses.

Ray Phillips, president of the non-profit Cultural Heritage Foundation, Inc., said the foundation has every intention of going ahead with the Heritage Square program.

He said Thursday that the foundation has other buildings in mind for the square, "and while they may not have the same sentimental value to some as the Castle and the Salt Box, they are in better condition, not badly vandalized, and will be more authentic and less costly to restore."

"Plans are under way," said Dr. Carl S. Dentzel, "to replace these vandalized buildings with others equally symbolic of that phase of life and growth of our city."

The annual meeting of the Cultural Heritage Foundation will take place, as scheduled, at the Lummis House in Highland Park next Thursday, at which time future plans for the development of the site will be discussed.