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PLAZA FIREHOUSE

CENTENNIAL

Cal. VF

BY JUDSON GRENIER



The centennial of the Plaza Firehouse, an historical landmark, will be celebrated on Saturday afternoon, October 13, with a public ceremony and festivities including traditional contests between teams of fire-fighters.

Construction began in the month of May 100 years ago. The firehouse, the city's first, was built on what was thought to be a city-owned lot on the southeast corner of the Plaza, not far from the Pico House (a hotel) and across the square from Queen of the Angels Church and Olvera Street.

The working life of the building as a station was only 13 years (1884-1897), but it spanned the transition of the Los Angeles Fire Department from a voluntary to a professional force.

The city's first fire department, created in 1871, consisted almost entirely of volunteers -- Engine Company No. 1 (the "38s", named after the number of members), Confidence Engine Company No. 2, both equipped with Amoskeag steam engines purchased jointly by the city council and the county board of supervisors, and two smaller companies. All occupied rented quarters, except the 38s, who operated from a city-owned shed on Spring street. Its dilapidated condition led to public pressure for construction of a new station.

The council determined to erect the firehouse on a public street or small square next to the Plaza, and it hired young architect William A. Boring to design the structure. He modeled it after the fashion then current in his native Illinois, with the horses which drew the engines stabled inside the station, as they were in colder climes. A unique turntable made it unnecessary for the horses to be backed in.

Local builder Dennis Hennessy used Boring's specifications and erected the two-story firehouse remarkably quickly. The structure was in place by mid-August, 1884. Early in September, the council voted to connect the gas and water, and volunteer Engine Co. No. 1 moved in. Chief Engineer Walter S. Moore took particular pride in this first engine house, for which he had doggedly pushed during his years as a member of the council.

1884 ★★★★★ 1984

The Plaza Firehouse served as the staging area for the parades, holiday fireworks displays, monthly inspections and periodic musters in which the department participated. It helped stimulate the civic pride which led, on December 1, 1885, to creation of the city's first paid fire department, directed by a new Board of Fire Commissioners. Engine Co. No. 1 was inducted into the department as professionals, with the chief, foremen, and other leaders now salaried. The second floor of the firehouse was remodeled to provide new sleeping quarters.

But ownership of the lot on which the firehouse was erected was in dispute. Some private individuals claimed that the land had not belonged to the city, and they filed suit. After a lengthy trial, the local Superior Court ruled that co-owners of the lot were a Mrs. L.M. Bigelow and Griffin Johnston, and enjoined the department from interfering in their possession. The Supreme Court confirmed the decision early in 1891.

So the land on which the city's firehouse stood was in private hands. Bigelow and Johnston offered to rent it to the department, but at exorbitant rates for the time, and the department decided not to oblige. Chief Moore, in particular, was miffed by the litigation and the result. He found rented quarters nearby and abandoned the firehouse in the summer of 1891.

After the lot-owners discovered that the uses to which they could put a vacant firehouse were limited and antagonisms between them and the city subsided, the department decided to re-occupy the station with its new Chemical Engine Co. No. 1. The chemical unit moved in in late October, 1892, under a five-year lease (at a much lower rent), and the Plaza Firehouse regained something of its former glory.

By the time the lease expired, Walter Moore, once again serving as chief, was disenchanted with the use of rented quarters. He was supported by the citizenry, who voted a bond issue to build new municipally-owned stations. The Plaza Firehouse was vacated for the last time on October 1, 1897.

The structure then was subdivided and rented out for various purposes appropriate to the neighborhood in which it stood. In it were a saloon, a cigar store, a poolroom. After prohibition it served as a restaurant and a rather seedy hotel, then as a Chinese market, and as a saloon again. By the late 40s it had degenerated into a flop house on the top floor, with a drug store below.

In the early 1950's the state of California joined with the city and county to create El Pueblo State Historic Park, of which the Firehouse was to be a part. At the time of its purchase from private ownership on January 5, 1954, the structure had badly deteriorated, but its walls and beams were still intact. The state division of architecture reconstructed all of the distinct features of the original building, including the turntable. The fire department, under leadership of Capt. Robert Foster, and the Box 15 Club then undertook a massive drive to find equipment and furniture which matched the original.

The building was dedicated as California Historical Landmark No. 730 on October 1, 1960, with speeches, a jazz band, and the department's barbershop quartet. Since then it has been open to the public as a museum during regular park visiting hours and is supported largely by volunteer effort.

