

**THE TRONA PLANT - THE RAW SALT STORAGE AT FORT MACARTHUR****REFERENCE ONLY** By Flora Baker

The Trona Plant at Fort MacArthur represents an impressive example of an early West Coast building in its use of exposed timber construction. The open wood structural frame characterizes one of the dominant architectural traditions of that time. The interior space of 301 feet 10 inches by 87 feet 6 inches presents one of the largest still existing wood structural spaces to be found in West Coast industrial buildings.

It was constructed in 1916-1917 by the American Trona Corporation of California which was owned by (Baron) Alfred de Ropp who had discovered a method of separating potash and soda from the brine of Searles Lake in eastern San Bernardino County. It was intended for the process and storage of salt potash to produce soda and potash for agricultural fertilizer. The building contained crushers, separators and an elaborate network of above and below ground conveyor belts.

Some say that the facility never went into full operation because a new method was discovered to process the brine, on location, at Searles Lake. Others speculate that the plant's true purpose was the manufacture of munitions gunpowder and not the process of brine, though there is no evidence to support this contention. During the 1920's and the 1930's the Trona Plant was used as a saw mill and as a warehouse. In 1942 it was acquired by the U.S. Army and was added to the middle reservation of Fort MacArthur.

The 48 1/2 foot high building is sheathed in heavy cement stucco which terminates at the parapet by overlapping bands of galvanized metal. There was a double-ramped delivery entrance with a counterbalanced loading platform. Delivery to and from the interior was made to adjoining railroad tracts to the east, covered with a structure similar to that of the interior including an elaborate system of catwalks. This structure was removed in 1982.

The interior has two floors, the ground level 14 feet 6 inches high and the upper level 25 feet 6 inches high. The foundation and interior walls of the first floor are of reinforced concrete. The entire upper section includes walls and a roof of heavy timbered wood. The long walls are divided into 20 bays separated by built-up wood piers. The framing between the piers is composed of horizontally placed two by sixes which are further strengthened by criss-cross bracing. The structural culmination of the interior is that of an elaborate system of wood trusses and supports which supported the roof, catwalks and a conveyor system. The



interior open truss system still remains. The modular structural system of the building is open and dramatically apparent within but the external modularism is now difficult to make out. There have been numerous remodelings of the interior over the years none of which have appreciably compromised the strong expressive structuralism of the high second level space.

The Trona Building was acquired by the U.S. Air Force in October of 1982, along with the rest of Fort MacArthur middle reservation. Plans are to utilize the interior for various community services including a chapel. The historic open truss system is to be retained.

The Trona Building is located inside Fort MacArthur, east of Pacific Avenue, between 28th and 29th Streets. Access is by special permission only. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

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Article adapted from the text of the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, prepared by David Gebhard, Lauren Bricker and David Bricker