

DASHING ROMANCE OF THE DAUGHTER OF THE FIRE LADDIES.

BOOM! Boom! Clang-clang-clang! then a vivid glare in the fog-hung sky and the blood-quickening cry of "Fire, Fire!" as the bell of the old City Hall at Washington and Kearny streets rang out its fearsome message.

Then the rush of many feet, shouts and the light of lanterns; the sound of clanking brass and wheels, and the good city folk of that time would tumble out of bed to see Knickerbocker Engine Company No. 5 dash by on a run. Frequently the watchers would see the strange sight of a fair-haired girl clad in fireman's hat and coat tugging along at the ropes of the engine or running with the men, shouting words of encouragement.

Many would say as they gazed, "Well, Lillie's with 'em to-night," or "Look, there goes Lillie Hitchcock, the daughter of the fire laddies." For in those days, in the last half of the fifties and in the sixties, Lillie Hitchcock was truly the gallant comrade and informally recognized member of Knickerbocker Company No. 5. She had her key to the engine house on Sacramento street and to the meeting-room the same as any other brave fireman.

She was the daughter of Dr. Hitchcock, an old resident of San Francisco; a gentleman of the old regime from South Carolina, who served as a surgeon in the Confederate army. When the little one arrived he was disappointed, for he had set his heart on the girl being a boy, but he is reported to have said: "Well, never mind, we'll do the best we can to make her a boy." So Lillie came honestly by the taste for masculine sports and pursuits, which she developed from a child.

Engine No. 5 was not her first love in the shape of a fire engine. Across the street from the Oriental Hotel at Battery and Bush streets, where the Hitchcocks made their home when she was a tiny girl, was the engine house of No. 4.

This engine had a great fascination for Lillie and another girl friend, also of the irrepressible sort, and who is still living in San Francisco, and together they planned to get on the right side of the firemen. They did it successfully, and there never was an alarm of fire in that vicinity but these two small women would put on red shirts kept for the occasion and start for the engine house in the hope of getting a ride on the engine, which they sometimes would accomplish.

But the best of friends must part, and great was the wailing when the second small girl was big enough and mischievous enough to be sent to a San Jose convent. Then Lillie's mother sought to help in the land her daughter's love for the life of a daring fire laddie, but as well try to stop the wind from blowing. The little miss used to pass on her way to school the engine house at 519 Sacramento street, still standing, then the home of No. 2, the redoubtable engine of the Knickerbocker Fire Company.

There she used to stop and look with longing eyes at the brass of the machine; once she stopped and asked a question and the knowledge and bright interest she displayed won the hearts of the firemen of No. 5, and she has held them to this day. One of the members of the company then drove an omnibus for the old People's line, and would often give the little would-be fireman a lift on the way to school.

After this confidential basis was established the fire bell would never ring at any hour but the men of No. 5 knew that Lillie Hitchcock would be on the streets somewhere, watching for them. They all grew to have a great interest and pride in their young comrade, and as the years went on the attachment increased and has never decreased on either side.

This continued for some years and the little girl had grown to the threshold of sweet sixteen perhaps, when it is said a gallant fireman, a dashing young fellow, showed symptoms of having designs upon the heart of "the daughter of the fire laddies." Then she was promptly sent to join the other girl, who had been missing all the fires for so long a time at the San Jose convent.

But this girl, who hunted and rode like a boy on her father's ranch at St. Helena, and handled a gun with the best of them, was not the young person to endure such seclusion without a protest. She very promptly tried the method of starving herself. This succeeded, and she was brought home to the Occidental Hotel, where her parents were then living.

As she grew nearer to the estate of a full-fledged young lady, her interest in her "fireboys," as she called them, grew to be more and more a part of her life. She kept her fireman's hat and belt upon a hook or any other convenient piece of furniture in her room where she could snatch it up and be off at the first sound of the fire alarm. More than that, she secured a badge permitting her within the lines at a fire.

It was a hobby carried to extremes with her, perhaps, but in those days it was considered the thing for ladies to be honorary members of fire companies. The Sanson hook and ladder was a grand affair, numbering among its members all the young bloods of the town. When they gave a grand ball at Music Hall it was a social event long to be remembered.

"Number 4" carried for many years on their engine in parades an apron of red white and blue silk thrown to them one Fourth of July by a lady whom they cheered for wearing it.

On August 17, 1863, a member's fee of \$100 was paid by the chairman of a meeting of the members of Knickerbocker Engine Company No. 5, at which Lillie Hitchcock was formally made an honorary member of the company. The amount of the fee was contributed afterward by the members of the company and returned to the chairman. That was an event which she who was thus honored looks back upon as one of the pleasantest of her life, and the anniversary of which has been suitably recognized by her ever since. On Christmas day, 1882, a beautifully engrossed certificate of membership, costing the company \$50, was presented to "the daughter of the fire laddies" in her mother's rooms at the Occidental Hotel by Assistant Foreman Stephen Bonner of No. 5, who is now sergeant of police here.

This made her more than even the idol of No. 5, and if she could not go to a fire with them in any other way, she would often take a carriage and have the engine ropes attached to it, and then bid the driver in her hearty way: "Get up and drive like a good one, John." And off to the fire they would go, the carriage, the engine and the cheering firemen rushing along in its wake.

The one or two firemen who are left alive as original members of Knickerbocker Engine Company No. 5 never tire of telling the story of how one night, when a

big fire was blazing at Post and Market streets, Lillie Hitchcock came flying up the street, distancing her escort, and clad in evening dress and opera cloak, fresh from her box at the Grand Opera-house. She wanted a frolic and she got it. She insisted that she be allowed to hold the hose pipe, if only for a moment. The firemen could refuse their loyal comrade and well-wisher nothing, when suddenly the air chamber of the engine burst, and the "firewoman," clad in purple and fine linen, was thoroughly drenched.

But that was a small happening to this most original of women, who was always hale fellow well met in her manner to all her friends. Even as a girl she had a way of meeting a fireman, slapping him on the back cordially and singing out to him, "Why, hello, Jim, how are you?" Many a time if even the humblest member of her beloved No. 5 got into any trouble she was ready to help him, even to paying a fine if need be, though she was never allowed to do so.

Many a time too at a fire, after the firemen's duty was done, did she have coffee and eatables furnished for them at her expense at a nearby restaurant. Her interest extended to the families of the men, and many have been the thoughtful and kind acts they have on record of her. Thoughtfulness had always been one of her characteristics, and all her favors were done in no begrudging way, from the flowers for the sick girl, sent in a handsome case as a keepsake, to the generous check sent as a Christmas gift for a sick "fire laddie."

In 1868, Lillie Hitchcock was married to Howard Colt, a fine looking young fellow, afterward prior to the Board of Brokers. Owing to parental opposition they were married secretly in this city, and then went to New York to visit friends. But with her marriage she did not lose her interest in fires and her beloved "No. 5," and

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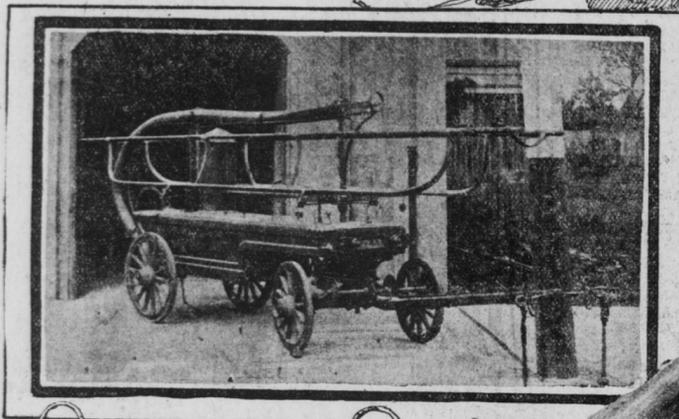
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San Francisco's first Fire Lassie



LILLIE HITCHCOCK AS A DASHING FIRE LASSIE

PHOTO BY JHEW



"KNICKERBOCKER" ENGINE NO. 5.

PHOTO BY HEALEY PETALUMA



on her wedding day she wore the small jeweled pin, a number five in diamonds, which no one ever remembers seeing her without, at home or abroad. In her diary and on her letters she always signed her name thus: "Lillie Hitchcock Colt-5." For years after her husband's death, which took place many years ago, Mrs. Colt lived with her mother at the Palace Hotel, where the boys of No. 5 always found a warm welcome.

Always on the occasion of anniversary or other parades, "the daughter of the fire laddies" would appear at her window, clad in her fireman's coat and hat, and give the salute to the tramping boys below. One of the most prominent decorations of her drawing room was a large painting representing the world. On the top of the globe sat the "daughter of the fire laddies" in a fireman's scarlet coat, and reaching out from everywhere were men with wine glasses in their outstretched hands, offering the toast, "To the woman in the world." Some of the most prominent citizens of San Francisco of that day were recognizable in the painting, which was presented to Mrs. Colt. A suitable verse of presentation was written below the picture.

At the yearly banquets of "No. 5" Lillie Hitchcock would always honor the boys with at least a brief presence, and if that were impossible, no matter where in the world she might be, she sent a floral token of her thought and a letter beginning: "Dear Number Five."

But engine "Number 5" and her beloved daughter are widely separated now. Lillie Hitchcock Colt is in Paris and is not in good health, while the once busy engine is living a life of honorable idleness at Petaluma, having been sold to that city many years ago, where it also saw some active service. All that remain of the sixty-five men who were at different times on the roster of Number 5 are about thirty-three men constituting the Knickerbocker Engine Company Association, with headquarters at the rooms of the Veteran Firemen's Association on Fourth street.

Perhaps the two most cherished objects in the possession of these remaining "Knickerbockers" are the large gilt bus of Lillie Hitchcock presented to the association eight or ten years ago by Dr. MacCallister, and the time-stained, cracked oil painting of the old engine itself.

The Knickerbocker Engine Company No. 5 was organized on October 17, 1852, by New Yorkers, whence it received its name, Harry Wheeler, E. B. Vreeland and P. Burns are the only men now living who belonged to the company in the first year or so after its organization. James H. Cutter, a New Yorker who then had a store on Front street, was the prime organizer and the first foreman of the company.

They must have been great lady-killers, those firemen of the early days, for one may read on their records of 1853 of their sending an immense bouquet together with their good wishes to "Kate" Hayes, the favorite concert singer of the time. The lady sent back a very pretty note which was framed as a memento, and now hangs on the walls at the Association rooms. In 1851 occurred the big fire that swept so much before it, and the engine house of Number 5, then on Merchant street, was burned.

Then they went to the engine-house on

Sacramento street, whence dates their adoption of the "daughter of the fire laddies."

"No. 5" is a side-stroke engine built by James Smith of New York and sent to the waiting "Knickerbockers" by way of Cape Horn. The second engine in the service of the company was also a Smith engine, called the "silver engine," and was afterward sold to Carson City.

Knickerbocker Company No. 5 was disbanded on May 11, 1858, by the Board of Supervisors for disobeying the orders of the Chief Engineer of the Fire Department, F. E. R. Whitney. The company employed Messrs. McDougall and Sharp, crack lawyers of the day, to defend them,

and took the matter into court. Judge Norton decided that the Board of Delegates of the Fire Department, a governing body, was the only body having authority to disband them. They were out of service for two or three weeks and deprived of engine-house and appurtenances. But for two years afterward they continued contrary, and had to pay all their own expenses and do everything themselves, even to greasing their own hose, on account of refusing to recognize Whitney, for whom they had some objection.

In 1854, the company, 110 strong, visited Sacramento, taking along engine No. 5 and a band. In 1856 No. 1 of Sacramento

returned the visit and was entertained in San Francisco.

In the election of Chief Engineer David Scannell, in 1860 the company cast a full vote, numbering sixty-five, the only company known to cast a full vote. In September, Stephen Bunner, now sergeant of police, who was then second assistant foreman of the company, was presented by J. H. Reynolds with a handsome gold watch and chain. E. B. Vreeland and E. J. Chase are the two surviving foremen of the company.

Knickerbocker Engine Company No. 5 once challenged Howard Company No. 3 to play a match against them for \$500

to \$1000 a side, half forfeit. The Howards were afraid to meet the doughty Knickerbockers, and got out of it, whereat the papers of that day came out with cartoons representing the Howard boys as lads of No. 5 dressed as devils, with a big hose pipe washing them overboard.

On September 19, 1859, the members of No. 5 presented W. B. Fairman, the last retiring foreman, with a handsome gold watch and chain. E. B. Vreeland and E. J. Chase are the two surviving foremen of the company.

On December 30, 1866, the gallant No. 5 and her men went out of active service. It is a remarkable fact that from the

ranks of Knickerbocker Engine Company No. 5 have been furnished men who have filled almost every prominent position within the gift of the people, with the exception of President of the United States and Vice President. Some of the members thus honored are as follows:

John McDougal, Governor and United States Senator; Dr. S. R. Harris, Mayor, and later Coroner; Treasurer, William H. Talmage; Supervisors—A. H. Titcomb (famously called "Doc"), T. McCarty, James Kenny, Joe Roberts and Messrs. Fairman, Reynolds and Flaherty; H. G. Worthington, Congressman and State Senator; C. C. Kenner, Horace Kent; Assemblymen, Messrs. Reed and Chase.