

# Portable Houses Had Been Built of Portable Houses

BY FREDERICK WRIGHT

What would have resulted had San Francisco been built of portable houses at the time of the big fire?

Perhaps the only change in the city in that event would have been the shifting of the site a little farther west and the baffled fire would have been hunting around the lower district for something to set its red fangs into. The citizens of the portable town that might have been would simply have thrown their domiciles over their backs and hiked for the park and the beach like so many tortoises and resembling in the aggregate the army that marched from Birnam Wood.

The question of what might have happened in San Francisco when the fire came had the city been one of portable houses is aroused by the fact that the collapsible building is making its appearance here now. Right on the heels of the conflagration it has made its way across States and rivers and a continent and settled down comfortably to be a part of the great upbuilding scheme. Besides this it is becoming such a general factor in building all over the country that the time has arrived when it must be recognized. The flippant can no longer look with disdain on one of these magnified umbrellas that can cover whole families and house emporiums of trade and say "chicken-coop." The portable house has won its spurs. Longfellow might say today, "Told their portable houses like the refugees and hiked for the dunes" if only the meter were right.

Of the number of these buildings that have come to this city since the fire—some have been sent all the way from Canada—one of the finest samples can be seen at the corner of Van Ness avenue and Eddy street. Graceful in outline, gleaming white with the new coat of paint that sadly enough will soon lose its glint under the dust that is flying. It throws back its answer of airy elegance to those who would sneer at its kind as a "flimsy shack." It has a roomy interior, ornamental roof and, in front, a comfortable porch with graceful white pillars, after the South-Sea style. It is one of those that crossed the continent from Canada and while hammers were ringing out their deafening din and the saws were ripping lumber to pieces in a staccato that set the nerves buzzing, it quietly and gracefully took its place on the corner assigned much after the fashion in which the lawn-clad summer girl sinks into a rustic seat to enjoy a love story. When a burly brick or stone structure comes along to occupy the site of a building—always ready to undertake a journey. It is the rover of the domicile family.

The portable house helped San Francisco to grow in 1849. It is helping it to grow now, but there is evolution of all things, and the building that is delivered in sections to be put together just as dresses are mailed in pieces to women who have time to do their own sewing has kept pace with the development of other American institutions. As the old road engine has grown into the beautiful tonneau, so the portable house has grown from an unstable box into a complete structure pleasing to look at and comfortable to occupy.

"You'll have to stack up their houses and get out a few blocks farther," the cavalryman or policeman would have shouted in portable San Francisco when the flames began to creep up from the front, and the householder with a building too big to carry on his back would have got out the set of wheels that would naturally have gone with such houses in a real ready-made city, uncreaked the bolts that held his castle together, thrown the flattened structure on the wheels with his effects on top of it and set out for a safer place with his good wife and his youngsters tugging with him on the rope.

Maybe it would have only been necessary to move a block-wide strip of houses from in front of the fire, and if this had been the case the neighbors from farther out would have hurried in to help drag the loads, with many expressions of sympathy and perhaps six hints at the obligation of being imposed on while thinking slyly that their efforts were also putting their own property in safety.

"I'll lend you our screwdriver, and you can build right on the back of it and stay there until your own lot cools off," a cheery woman can be heard saying to an acquaintance as he comes along the street with his flattened house, all the bigger children tugging at the rope and the baby and the cat scratching each other gleefully on top of the load.

"Your kitchen was twisted in taking it down? Well, now, you just uncreak that west bedroom that's on our house and put it on the back of yours. We never use it, and cooking in it for a time won't hurt it."

"We're going to take our house down some day next week and air it. I believe these fogs make a house damp inside. I don't see how people in those old-fashioned houses that you can never lay out in the sun keep well. They'd think it was dreadful if they didn't sun their bedclothing often. You know we have two basements, and we use one six months and then move the house over on the other. That keeps them both in a better sanitary state."

You can see the small boy of the family being pushed back the six blocks to get the diagram "key" to the building, which had been accidentally left in a discarded bureau when the hasty exodus was made, and imagine the consternation that reigned when he returned with the information that the bureau had been burned. That family probably slept in the dew for four nights while playing the block puzzle of getting all the sections of that house fitting into their proper places.

Out on the bay you would see families seated on their collapsed houses, the father and the eldest son paddling with broom and shovel for the Marin shore, there to turn their raft into a house again after it had been spread out to dry in the sun and live comfortably until the normal conditions had been restored in the city they had fled from. Combination rafts would probably have been made by groups of families, as such conditions always establish a feeling of brotherhood, and their occupants would have had a pleasant outing while watching the spectacle of the flames eating such buildings as were not of the telescope kind.

You might have seen a man sitting on a doorstep far from the site where his home had been, mopping his brow and denouncing the manufacturers while he gazed angrily on two bulging and heavy grips resting beside him. "You'll always get done if you listen to the glib creation of an agent," you hear him say. "That fellow told me the house he sold me would easily go in one grip if I ever had to get away in a hurry, and here I've filled two and then had to leave the folding bathtub. If I hadn't got those telescoping door frames in my coat pockets I'd have had to leave them, and then what chance would I have had to get out of the zephyrs tonight? It'd be just my luck that that armpit wouldn't work and I can't blow up those rubber columns to keep the oiled silk roof on. If there don't happen to be any rocks to anchor to out where I'm going I'll be up against it anyway."

"Help, help," are the cries one surrying from the flames snapping at his patent leathers might have heard, and recovering from his panic long enough to give aid if possible to some suffering unfortunate he would probably have witnessed a strange scene.

"Help, help," come the cries, and the hurrying throng drop their habitations for the time and run to a bunch of lumber and door frames lying inside a neat fence.

There is a man inside of the pile of wooden debris and as he hears the flames crackling outside he yells more frantically.

"Where are you? What's the matter?" are the questions put by a policeman who comes running up.

Disdaining to reply to questions the answers to which must be obvious, the man in the lumber yells:

"Get me out of here, I'm choking." "How'd you get into it?" demands the policeman. "The earthquake didn't do anything like that, did it?"

"Earthquake, nothing!" yells back the man in the ruins. "I touched the spring too soon."

"Dynamite," ventured the policeman. "Confound it, no!" comes back the answer. "Dynamite couldn't do anything like this, either. Can't you see this is one of those patent spring folding rapid-action portables? I got ready to get out, and while I was moving the stove I jammed that spring you are supposed to reach through the window and push on when you want to fold up your house and take it over to the next block. I've been in a folding bed squeeze, but this thing is worse. If some plowman hadn't dropped on my head I'd be dead."

"Get some axes," shouts the policeman, "and we'll chop him out." "Don't you do it," cried the caged man excitedly. "This house cost me \$400. Get at it and pull it into place again."

The crowd falls on the house, but they don't understand the combination. The danger becomes more imminent. A drayman comes along, and the policeman orders man, house and all thrown on the vehicle.

"How'll I get my pay?" demands the teamster.

"Hold him in the thing till his friends come and bail him out," yells the policeman, who has learned a few things in the Police Court.

What a time the insurance companies would have had with any clients who might have been dishonest.

"My home was burned," the policyholder would say, and it wouldn't pay the insurance man to go in search of a wandering house that might be out at the seaside or on the slope of Twin Peaks. It would have been a game in which the man with the policy would have had the insurance companies worrying more than they are now worrying the people over the quake losses.

"This is an emergency in which we can't save everything," a useful householder with a large dwelling might have said, "we'll at least have a shelter. We'll fold up the parlor, a bedroom and the kitchen and let the rest go."

"If we don't have to move out too far, pa," suggests the willing elder boy of the brood, "we can come back and take away the dining-room and the preserve closet, too."

"All right, son; you come back and get them," replies the head of the household. "If you want all the comforts of a palatial residence at times when the chicken coop looks as good as Buckingham Palace, just take the monkeywrench and go to work. I like to see a boy ambitious."

New conditions are going to come with the foothold the portable house is gaining in San Francisco since the calamity. It is conducive to simplifying a great many of the affairs of existence, and it is sure to relieve a great deal of worry that people now have about getting their dwellings finished. Strikes can't hurt. It is sure to add a great deal to Cupid's business. It makes marriage so easy. There is no long period of saving, no long watching of carpenters and plumbers as the turtle doves await the period of nesting if they had the portable habit. They just make up their minds to get married and then send on specifications to the man for something within their means that has hooks to hang additional rooms on as the babies come.

"We want a house for a blonde haired girl with dark eyes and a tall man who can stoop so a door five feet nine inches high will do. If the cost is not more than \$20 an inch make the house with six-foot doors. We prefer your No. 20 in the catalogue, with hammock built the vines on the porch, and will grow our own vines. Be sure to

build the extra bedroom so we can fold and put it away, as we don't want any visitors for a long time, and the young lady's mother has said she would go to see her darling child often. Please let us know what another small room will cost next year."

Delay in pulling off the ceremony because the bungalow with the red geraniums in front isn't ready in time won't lose their sweethearts to unfortunate wooers now that the portable house is here.

"I knew my one-and-only liked another fellow pretty well even after she had promised to be mine," said a young real estate man who has become a house agent since the fire, "and he was hanging around, despite the fact that he knew I had closed negotiations for a life term contract. I told her my business affairs made it necessary that we get married right away and she said she would wed until she could go to a home of her own in the country. Well, that was easy. I went to a portable agent and then got a lot down to the lot, where the sections of the house had been delivered, and, with the assistance of one man, she and I put the building up ourselves. It puffed her to think she had helped build her own house. She's saving money now to send for a ready-made chicken-coop with blue shutters that she thinks will look just lovely in the back yard."

"The next day after our marriage my rival came around and gave me a contract for the sale of a block of town lots. He said I was the greatest hustler he knew in the business. It was more than that. He was in a tight situation, though, not my genius."

"These portable houses are going to drive us crazy if they don't drive us out of business," said a bill collector.

"The chronics are taking to them and we've made the second call, or are threatening court proceedings, and blacklisting and every other dire thing we know, we find only a vacant lot. When they learn that we know their walls and lease another piece of ground

for about \$2 a month somewhere else. I trailed one fellow that I had it in for to seven different locations and finally cornered him out in the woods by Inglewood. When I sent a deputy sheriff with attachment papers on his house he touched a spring and the darned thing snapped up into a rustic bench. He sat there grinning at the deputy, for, of course, an attachment for a house couldn't be levied on a piece of al fresco furniture."

The portable house is a thing of beauty, but it comes so suddenly sometimes that it brings the same feeling as green lizards and frog-headed humming-birds, or, if you know nothing about them, as a ghost story in a lonely wood. You gaze on a vacant spot from your window at breakfast time and when you come home for dinner there is a pretentious-looking house smiling at you through its summer colors and white columns.

The portable house is proving quite valuable to people who wish to spend their summers at different places and cannot own a dozen houses. Such a house can be used at the seaside one year and in the mountains the next.

South America is one of the best customers for the portable house companies. In the tropics light, cool houses are desired and besides there is little skilled labor or any other kind that is any good to build houses.

A great many ready-made structures have been sent to the canal zone by the United States Government. Pretentious dwellings are not wanted there and it is cheaper to ship the ready-made house than to send lumber and build.

Hunters and campers sometimes purchase a house 7x9, built expressly for them. It weighs but 800 pounds, can be carried in thirty minutes and will accommodate four persons. People who buy lots in summer resorts are becoming good customers for the portable houses.

One ambitious firm has contracted to supply a pretty, portable church to a South American town, with only a lease on land, the price to be \$3000.

Count von Waldsee, the German commander, carried a dozen small portable houses with him when he marched with the relief column to Peking.

# WHEN THE OTHER MAN HOLDS FOUR KINGS

"One o' the most amazing things in this world o' merracles," said old man Greenhut, "is the way some men is misguided. Catch a full house, they will on the draw, when the dealer, as is known to be skillful, has took one card, an' they'll raise an' raise like they thought there wa'n't nothin' in the deck to beat a full. O' course, a full house is a good thing to have at the proper time, but 'tain't no manner o' use when 'tother man has fours."

"There's a yap 'em th' Ozarks 't blows in here here about once a year, as is a bright an' shinin' specimen o' this 'pticular sort o' chump. 'Peaks like he's nigh about due to show up again."

"First off there ain't nothin' 'p'ccolar about Silé Hankins, which is th' way I'm talkin' about. Just a big, sprawlin', rawboned gazabo, such as they grows up in th' Ozarks, long o' the trees 'n' rocks bein' so big 't a small man wouldn't stand no show gettin' after the game. They tell me they use th' old six foot rifles up there yet, bein' as they reckon a short one won't carry. Simlar they breed six foot men an' some over, 'f fear smaller ones 'd come short."

"That same bein' common sense," said Jake Winterbottom, solemnly. "If a man was to be less'n six foot he'd nachully come short."

nor a big barnful o' bran mash." It 'd devote as much effort to cultivatin' intellect as he does to tobacco they'd prosper better."

"As I was sayin', afore there was flip interruptions made," he went on, "this here Silé Hankins ain't nothin' unusual to look at. Maybe you mought size him up 'fr 'aw'ard, which he sure be. 's fur's walkin' goes, but he ain't none 'aw'ard when it comes to handlin' things. I seen him handle a roustanout onct on the ganjplank o' th' Robert E. Lee, some like Basset mought he did it."

"This here nigger bumped into Silé Hankins carelesslike an' didn't make no start for 't 'pologize. Hankins just looked at him on th' little minute an' then, when the nigger was walkin' along, he just reached out one hand—'peared like he reached nigh about ten foot—an' caught the nigger by the back o' the neck. Then he drawed him up 'fr 'aw'ard, not slow, but deliberate-like, till he got him nigh enough to bite if he'd 'a' been bittin' niggers. Then he grabbed him by the slack o' the breeches, with the other hand an' heaved him up in the air like he'd been a baby an' throwed him sompin' like fifteen feet, sprawlin' in the river."

"He c'n handle cards, too, more'n respectable. There's them has seen him onct in with some o' the slickest players on the river an' they say he don't lose none to speak o', an' gets his full share o' the pots, special when it comes his deal."

"'Peaks like a man like that had ought for to be rich an' respected. Stands to reason he wa'n't borned 'ith no such gifts as them. They was cultivated. An' the fact o' him cultivatin' 'em showed he had moral character. If ever a man was marked out by a overvullin' providence for to be successful Silé Hankins was that man."

"Well, Hankins, he spoke easy an' pleasant, an' he says a freeze-out'll do to kill time, so him an' Waters set in. Waters were a good average player them days. He wa'n't no such expert as he come to be later on, but there wa'n't nobody here 't thought 'fr a minute but what he c'd get away with any such proposition 's Hankins looked to be."

"They played 'fr mebbe half a hour, an' then they come out o' the back room together, an' it were Hankins 't called 'fr the drinks. Waters stood by an' said nothin', an' when Hankins had set 'em up a couple o' times an' went out he kep' on sayin' nothin' an' lookin' sort o' shamed."

"When I seen he wa'n't goin' to speak I ast him what the matter was, an' he cussed a little, sort o' discouraged like, an' he says, 'That yap ain't no such greenhorn as he looks.' He win over three hundred, an' I reckon he'd 'a' win more if I'd had it with me. He c'n hold more nine spots an' more frequent 'n any player I ever see."

"We all see plain enough then what a mistake it were not to have made up a game, or else put to a more reliable player 'n Waters ag'in him, but there wa'n't no nothin' leavin' that night, an' Joe Bassett figgered it out 't more 'n likely there'd be a game on the next night."

"There ain't no yahoo like him goin' to leave town 'th' more'n \$300 o' good Arkansas City money in his jeans," he says, "not while I'm Sheriff an' there's due process o' law to be took 'em."

"I reckon it must be a dozen year since he blowed in here to Arkansas City first off. He were some aw'ard an' more ongrainly-like them days nor he is now, which is sayin' considerable."

"Howbe, that's what Silé Hankins just was. There hadn't nobody heerd o' him then more'n to know 't he were a settlin' hisself up to know some about draw poker. 'Peared like most any one o' the boys c'd trim him easy enough, an' there didn't 'pear to be no call for 't 'pen a full game. So Bill Waters were he said he reckoned he mought 'commode the stranger with a freeze-out, if he was reely blue moudlin' 'fr a play."

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