

# Childhood in San Francisco California Was Shifted to the Union

## A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION

By Emeline North Whitcomb

In the early days of San Francisco nobody was young—even the babies were born old; things happened so quickly, growth was but of a day. Houses sprang up in a night; where one could pass on the one day, on the next one would find a thriving business of some kind; everything bore the spirit of "move on," and of course the children of that day were imbued with the same spirit.

What has always impressed me in my early acquaintance with the friends of my father was that there was nothing I could ask them but that they could tell me; so in my early experiences I, as well as every other child, felt—and I haven't gotten over it—that everybody was a friend, and that a fellow feeling made everybody kind. This, I think, shows the root of that state pride which we all have, and which is so easily recognized by all outsiders, who will say, as we meet them in travel, "Oh, you are a Californian, are you not?" About the first thing I can remember is the rattles of tin pails hanging from the ends of the barrel water carts. Mother used to say, "I hope, Mr. Locke (who by the way, was one of seven brothers of the same name), you will not forget to fill up the cask tomorrow." As 10 cents had to be paid for every pail of water, it behooved the house mother to keep watch on the water barrel and see that it was well covered, and the rats used to swarm from under the plank sidewalk and it was no uncommon circumstance to find one who, in his haste to take a drink, had involuntarily committed suicide. This circumstance would immediately result in having to go to some neighbor to get a kettler of water for the morning coffee. I can well remember how careful mother was about the rain water, and not only she, but all the neighbors thought father a jewel of the first water because he always had an extra cask to hold rain water for some one who could not get a cask easily. You see everybody had the old pioneer spirit of helpfulness; we know what that is now as we look back to the days following the "late unpleasantness." But as soon as the Bensley water company the water mains laid the picturesque water cart was a thing of the past.

We used to delight to hear the fire bell ring. If father were home there was a sudden rattle over his shoulder; then down would come his old brass trumpet—that was my delight—and away he would rush. If mother weren't watching pretty closely away would run my father, holding to the heels of his footstools. Often we were sent ignominiously home by one of the firemen, and were heartbroken; but it was worse still to see old Monumental engine, or St. Francis Hotel, and consider God flying down the streets so fast that Ed and I couldn't possibly hear father's orders to "Man the brakes." We thought there never was such a magnificent sight as the old engine tearing down the streets with, as we well knew, the very best men in the city—for weren't father and uncle and Ed and I, and weren't they the very best—holding to the horns or "manning the brakes." Then one would see the great stream of water rise high in the air and hear the mighty cheer and shout when the blackened shells would fall and the steam and smoke would rise.

### A Hero of the Fire

Even though many a year has passed since those glorious days, when people lived, I can still feel the thrill of excitement that would shiver me as it were, when we saw father return, wet, exhausted, cold, but grateful that perhaps he had helped to save somebody's home. How glad we were and how proud when we were called to the school next day to have some boy say: "Hi, there; your father is a jim dandy; he saved a fellow's life yesterday." Oh, the days that are gone! Then, again, a memory of the meared tramp of men on Sunday, just in front of the First Congregational church, then situated at the corner of Dupont and California streets. It was about 2 o'clock and time for Sunday school, but there was something in the air, and every one of the youngsters was out on the high steps—waiting—for what? All at once there came a sound that in its awful intensity, its set stillness, its seemingly ordered purpose, made even our young faces blanch. Then I recognized in one of those silent, masked, marching figures my father; I shouted, "Oh, there's my father!" I had gotten this far when I was grasped in the arms of a big man and hustled into the church with the admonition to "hold my tongue or it would be the worse for me." I rushed home to my mother, but the solemn hush that pervaded everything will never be effaced from my mind, and when Ed and I stole out of the house and in the distance saw something in the semblance of humanity hanging high on a building between earth and heaven, we gazed at one another and felt that here, indeed, was something we could not understand. In after years when the grim story of the vigilance committee was told we realized where father was that day and what we saw and why. Not long after that Ed and I were sent on an errand, and along about Clay street near Battery we saw a number of men hastening across to Sacramento street. Of course, we must see what it was all about. Suddenly there was a shout, and, on looking up, there, dangling from the end of a rope, hanging from a piece of timber shoved out from a window of what was the American salt company before the fire, hung the figure of a man. We raced home and with trembling voices told what we had seen to the dear mother, and were immediately sent to bed to ruminate upon the wickedness of not attending to our own business, while mother and Aunt Sally went out to hear the particulars of that awful work. This, too, was a vigilante experience at Fort Gunnybags, where that noted (in that day) fighter, Yankee Sullivan, met his death.

But Sunday was our nicest day when father came in from sea. All the boys and girls in the neighborhood (they were easily counted) knew when Captain Anderson was home, because the flag was always run up. They would all come over to our house, and father would take me on his shoulder if I was tired, and we would all start for the Mission Dolores to see the vaqueros lasso the horses or to see the bull fight. Of course, mother didn't know anything about that, nor did we tell anything, as we didn't want to draw down trouble. As

we sat by the roadside in the beautiful, clean sand, father would tell us about that wonderful man, Junipero Serra, the Catholic father, who used the celebrated "pious fund" to equip the discoverers of the peninsula of San Francisco. Its bay, its mission, its presidio were named by him. As early as 1768 Father Serra reminded the visitor general that no mission was called later St. Francis, the founder of the Franciscan order. The visitor general replied (so history says): "If our good Father St. Francis wants a mission dedicated to him let him show us that good port beyond Monterey, and we will build him a mission there."

Father Serra urged the importance of making new explorations to the northward, and in 1775 his activity led to the discovery of the bay and peninsula of San Francisco and in 1772 of the east side of the bay, now known as Alameda county. In 1774 another expedition reached Point Lobos, where it is said a cross was planted the Prayer Book cross in the park

shows the spot where the first church service was held. Others claim that the cross was erected near the fortification, as General Vallejo declares he saw it there. In 1775 the historic ship San Carlos, carrying provisions for the settlers, entered the bay of San Francisco. This was the first time on record that a vessel ever passed through the Golden Gate, so named at a later date by General Fremont. In 1776 a final successful attempt was made to found a colony and the Presidio was dedicated September, 1776, and the mission in October, 1776. It is probable that the missionaries built their first dwelling somewhere near the corner of Valencia and Seventeenth streets, because the old history says they encamped on high ground a short distance from the present site of the mission and to the east of the lakelet known as "Dolores." "Dolores" dried up and became the well known Willows garden. With such stories as these father would while away the long tramp, or else we would go up on the plaza, and the omnibus ride out to the Presidio and eat tortillas and chile con carne with the lazy, dirty, smoking but perfectly delightful Chilenos, Mexicano-Spaniards, or go and watch the long line of people who were standing in front of the postoffice on the plaza, waiting for letters from the states; where that we were neither known nor cared, as San Francisco was our very pleasant heaven.

On the Glorious Fourth But, bless you, then came along the fourth of July, one of the days we lived for. Oh, what a day! Everybody turned out, and everybody knew everybody else. All the girls wore white dresses with red or blue sashes, sometimes made of muslin or flannel because there was not ribbon enough in town to go around the girls' waists, and they were made to do double duty, for on other days they were curtains hung at the windows, but on this day they hung round our waists. Then the boys came down to our house to ask mother and father what they were doing, and then they would be busy sewing these buttons on the fronts of the small red flannel shirts, and then we would all ride on the fire engines, which the men would draw or drive in the great procession, and the girls would sing school songs and the boys would shout and the men would cheer, all for the honor of the day and the glory of our loved city. Oh, what a tired lot of little folks we were at the close of the day; but what a good time we had. The old Rasette house always gave us a lunch, and I tell you the glory can never be measured that we expected that day. It is these boys and these girls grown to manhood and womanhood, who are building their birthplace over again today; fathers and mothers have passed on to their reward, but we are here, and, to paraphrase the latest, "We would rather be a 'busted' lamppost in the burned district than the Waldorf-Astoria in New York." Can anybody here remember that grand procession—old Monumental and Howard and St. Francis—the old volunteer fire department of San Francisco, noble men, every one giants? I used to think it a very heaven of delight to go out to Russ' garden, situated somewhere about Seventh and Harrison streets. All the schools went



out there on the first of May, and with what pomp and majesty of power were the Queen of May and the Bishop endowed. I was the Bishop one year, and though I have earned many an honor since then, yet never have I felt as I did that day. The triumphs of it will last me a lifetime. Then there were those noble people, John Swett, James Denman and Ellis Holmes, in all their youthful bloom. Ah, the days that are past; childhood days in dear old San Francisco; what stories they hold! One day I heard my father tell my mother that it was possible to talk under water through a big, copper wire. I regarded that story just as I regarded other wonderful stories that I had heard on board ship about the sea serpent, or the monster turtle, or the mermaid; those had been daily pabulum. But when we were told in school that there would be a wonderful procession to commemorate this great achievement, then all San Francisco children knew that the Atlantic cable telegraph was an accomplished fact. I can just remember the flags and the fire engines, because my brother and I rode on Crescent No. 10, and Ed fell off and another boy came, and I told him that it was a nice day, and he never said a word back. You'd know him if I told you his name—he talks fast enough now; and then I remember the great grizzly bear that followed her wagon in the procession, who would uprear and roar every now and again to the sniveling delight of all the juvenile population who were marching. James Capen Adams was one of our adored, because he owned the Pacific museum, the first in San Francisco, and I can just remember the flags and the fire engines, because my brother and I rode on Crescent No. 10, and Ed fell off and another boy came, and I told him that it was a nice day, and he never said a word back. 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