

Of Atomic Vault

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Mostly about People By Wally Traling



No, mam, there are no atomic bombs stored in San Lorenzo Valley.

"I know, mam, there's a sign in Laytonville that says, 'Western States Atomic Vault.'"

The sign refers to an old Southern Pacific railroad tunnel, converted into the "world's safest storage for personal and business documents and valuables."

For years, the old tunnel, built in the 1870's, hadn't heard a whistle louder than a foot step's, and it sat there gathering darkness until someone with some imagination wandered into its darkness and said, "Hi."

And by 1954, when the ribbon cutting was over, there stood a massive concrete and steel fortress 341 feet long.

It is advertised as being bomb-proof, fireproof, earthquakeproof, burglarproof and presumably trespassproof.

Which makes it just about 100 proof.

You ring a bell at the face of the tunnel and more than likely Fred J. Armbrust, a retired army top kick, 1st chief guard, will peer out and ask your business.

The doors get thicker and heavier as you walk toward the storage area, the ultimate being a three-ton steel time vault that won't even open for "sesame."

Things seem very secure here. Armbrust is an artillery trained man, although there were no 88's in sight, and guards Frank Ernst and Dave Lorenzana, are both ex-firemen. Clerks Esther Armbrust and Fern Cummins help pretty up the place.

The two storied interior is under 92 feet of mountain. Redwood trees 150 feet tall grow up there.

Cement walls a yard thick keep a captive temperature of 62-63 degrees with a humidity of 45 to 55 which helps the longevity of just about anything.

A narrow corridor extends through the vault, seemingly into a slow curving infinity, between silver gridded cells where the documents are kept.

Practically everything is micro-filmed. All the business records for Disneyland are kept here. IBM has a cell. Over half the counties of California keep its past paper work in the shelter.

The state of California has

destroyed its birth, death, marriages and other vital statistics dating back to the 1870s in the vault. Which means you are there.

Armbrust explained. Each tiny file drawer contained, for example, 50 rolls of 16 millimeter film 100 feet long. Each roll carries from 2000 to 3000 documents.

A candy factory may microfilm its precious recipes and store them here so that should the factory be destroyed it can re-establish it self fast so as to not interrupt Crest toothpaste's cavity tests among the school kids.

Special machines are available which can speedily reproduce the filmed information back on paper again, or reproduce portions of the film itself for study at the home plant.

Armbrust said an etching of "Benjamin Franklin in the Court of France," insured for \$50,000 was recently kept in the vault.

There are classified sections in the tunnel where no visitors are allowed, and Armbrust is very tight lipped about the contents therein.

If you want to visit the place, best you call ahead and make an appointment.

It might save you from being squinted at suspiciously by a guard.

In case you're sensitive.