

Atomic vault: Where your documents will be safe, even after a nuclear war

By LAURIE SLOTHOWER
Sentinel Staff Writer

WHAT DO the original prints of Disney Studio's "Steamboat Willie," employee time cards for Kings County, and the negatives from past cover photographs of "Rolling Stone" magazine have in common? Answer: they are all stored for

posterity in the Western States Atomic Vault in Zayante, a giant steel storage locker five miles from Felton.

The only underground storage facility of its kind west of the Mississippi, the vault was built during the height of the Cold War era. Hence the noun "atomic" in the title.

"It's bomb-proof, you know," says custodian Norm Larsen. Like most of the employees of the vault,

including the guards, Larsen is retired from another profession.

When the vault opened in 1954, "people used to store food here," he notes. "But after the scare they came took it all back."

While the company's founders hinted that the vault might be the only way to protect records from possible nuclear destruction, its biggest selling point today is how well it protects documents and microfilm from aging, not radiation.

Billed by owners as "the safest storage place in the world," the vault is a 214-foot-long steel-reinforced cylinder built under a mountain in an abandoned Southern Pacific Railroad tunnel.

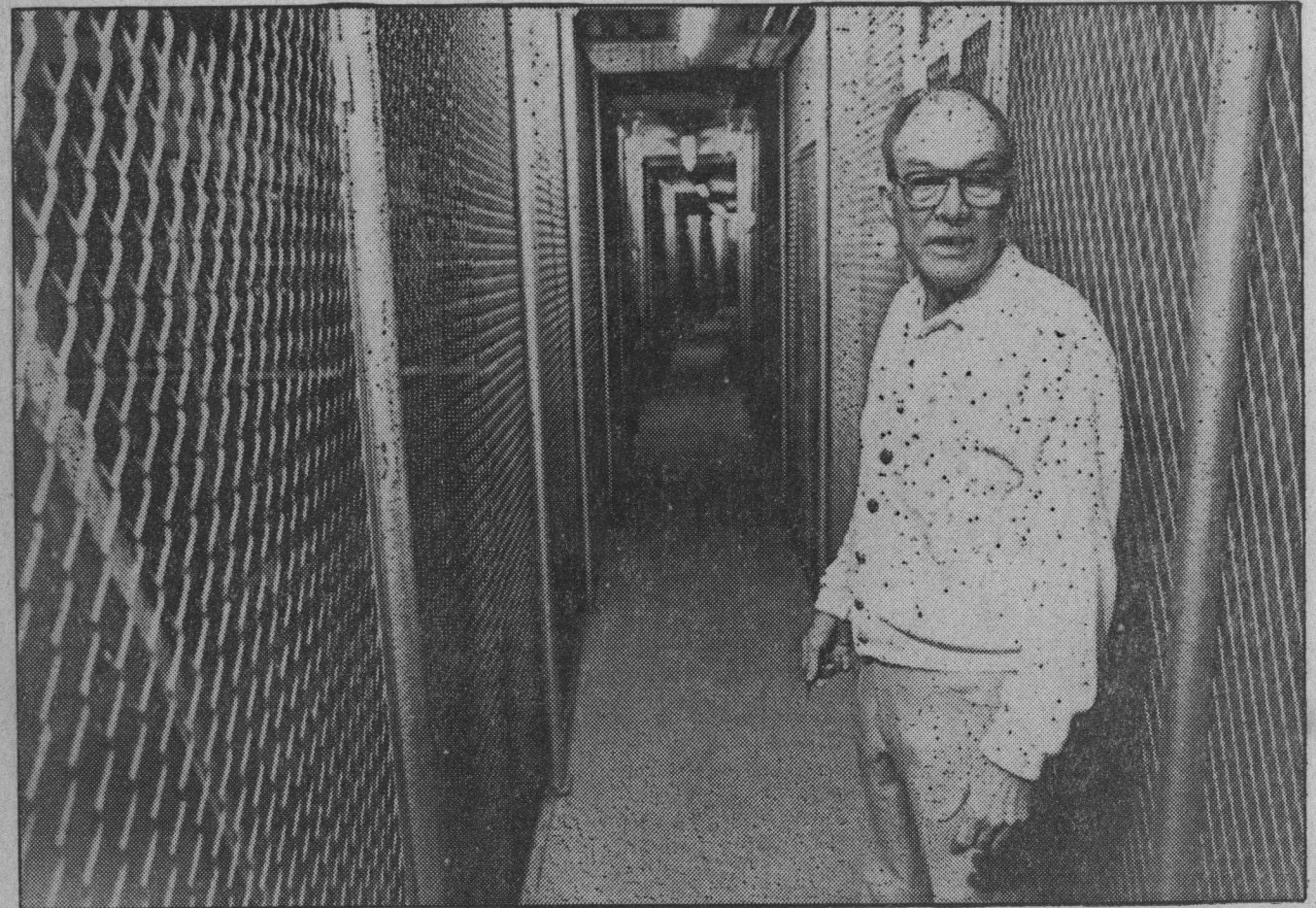
Temperature is set at a chilly 62 degrees and the humidity is similarly monitored to preserve documents. Located about 100 feet underground, it is, its owners like to say, fireproof, earthquake-proof, and theft-proof.

Getting a tour of the place is like walking through a deserted jail. Three-foot-thick concrete and steel walls surround the storage area. The main door into the cell area is protected by a four-foot-thick Hermann combination vault door whose gismos and wheels are reminiscent of a Rube Goldberg cartoon. A fourth vault door at the end of the corridor shields the storage area with top-secret documents.

The cell area is a winding corridor with wire mesh cages. Except for the one or two customers who come by to pick up documents, there's hardly a soul around — and



Jules Charbneau (center, no hair) at the 1954 grand opening of the vault



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Custodian Norm Larsen outside the storage area of the Western States Atomic Vault

the vault is not exactly what you would call a big tourist attraction.

Inside are more than 40,000 rolls of microfilm and microfiche, although few of the items have quite the popular interest of the Walt Disney films or Rolling Stone pictures.

Some 33 counties in California store official documents there. So do banks, insurance companies, savings and loans, credit unions, and newspapers.

The records include deeds, blueprints, mortgages, electrical drawings, patent papers, income tax returns, social security records, census listings and the occasional piece of jewelry.

Clients include Carnation Foods, Blue Shield, E.F. Hutton and Co., Metropolitan Life Insurance Co., IBM, and General Electric.

The company's most recent client was County Bank of Santa Cruz.

Why store records in a vault, albeit an "atomic" one?

Even with computers, companies still need to save their records, says Larsen, and renting a drawer at the

vault is often cheaper than renting a safety deposit box at a bank. "Last year was the first time we raised our prices since 1954," he says.

And one of the problems faced by businesses after the 1906 earthquake was the destruction of all title deeds, trusts, and related documents.

The Western States Vault was the brainchild of Jules Charbneau, once known as "the world's top collector of miniatures" for his 33,000 piece collection.

The story goes that Charbneau was looking for a foolproof storage place for his collection of minuitae, which included the world's smallest pipe organ and 3000 miniature gold spoons.

However, it would be more accurate to say he was looking for a way to make money. Dan Tinney, company resident and one of the last original stockholders of Western States, said Charbneau got the idea from a man in New York City who had converted profits from a farm into a string of storage vaults, and made a tidy profit.

Charbneau contacted Tinney, a former railroad employee, who steered him towards Zayante.

Charbneau was a resident of San Francisco and had considered drilling an underground tunnel in the Twin Peaks area, but it cost too much.

It took one year to remodel the tunnel. The finished product contains 100,000 cubic feet of vault space in a 241-foot by 23-foot, two-story building.

And oh yes, the "atomic" connection. According to Tinney, that word was slapped on by one of the firm's earlier partners, a public relations man who felt it would garner the firm free publicity.

Which it did, in spades. The first promotional literature even carried pictures of a mushroom cloud.

At Tinney's request the next sales literature deleted the mushrooms clouds, but even today, the brochure warns, "Although the United States has been spared the menace of enemy aggression, the threat grows with each year. Western cities are regarded as primary targets for atom bomb-laden planes. In contrast, (the) Civil Defense (officials) do not regard isolated mountain areas as targets." But at least your records will be safe.