

# A Hotel of Yesteryear . . .

By MARGARET KOCH  
Sentinel Staff Writer

One of downtown Santa Cruz's oldest remaining hotels on Pacific Avenue closed its doors to roomers on November 1.

The Alexander Hotel, on the southwest corner of Locust Street at Pacific, was built in 1868-69 by Alexander McPherson, great-grandfather of Fred D. McPherson Jr. who is president of The Sentinel Corporation.

The history of the old brick building is inextricably interwoven with the story of The Sentinel itself, for during a certain period of time, the newspaper was housed in the hotel structure.

The Sentinel arrived in Santa Cruz in 1856 via boat, floating across Monterey Bay from the City of Monterey.

Owners of the newspaper came and went with rapidity for some years, but young Duncan McPherson, son of Alexander, acquired a half interest in 1864.

Duncan had been born on April 13, 1839, at Riga, a small town in upstate New York. Alexander McPherson was a lumberman and merchant at Riga. He brought his family to Santa Cruz in 1856 after brief stays at Placerville and Michigan Bluff where he tried a bit of

gold mining and hotel keeping.

Duncan's education, described as "meager" when the family arrived here, was remedied when he enrolled for two years at University of Pacific in San Jose. He earned his way waiting tables and working as a janitor.

When the combined full-time work and study routine began to undermine Duncan's health, he left college to take a job with a trading expedition to the Frazer River Mines.

Returning to Santa Cruz, Duncan borrowed \$200, bought three teams of oxen and went into business as a teamster. In later years, after he had been honored statewide as a senior newspaperman, Duncan still enjoyed showing a photograph of himself driving an ox team down Pacific Avenue.

In 1864 Duncan acquired his half interest in The Sentinel, then valued at \$900. At that time the newspaper was a four-page, seven-column weekly. In 1871 he sold his interest for \$2000 and purchased the San Mateo Gazette in Redwood City and operated it until 1874. While there he worked hard to push the proposed construction of the Dumbarton Bridge.

When Duncan came back to Santa Cruz in 1874 he



Duncan McPherson, the bullteam driver who established his newspaper on the second floor of the hotel.

bought a two-thirds interest in The Sentinel and remained its editor and publisher until he died in 1921.

When Duncan died he was recognized as one of California's foremost journalistic innovators and a "fearless and competent writer," according to Darwin A. Allen.

"He junked an efficient waterwheel for an electric motor to power the newspaper press...but his crowning achievement was the installation of that mechanical marvel — the Linotype..."

The Sentinel's linotype

was one of the first in the State of California, acquired in 1896 for \$3700.

After floating to Santa Cruz, the newspaper occupied several downtown locations before it was established upstairs in what is now the Alexander Hotel. It shared the second floor with the Odd Fellows Lodge.

In 1913 the plant was moved downstairs to a building behind the hotel. By that time it was a daily — had been since 1884, and had campaigned for street railways in Santa Cruz and for a system of good roads and bridges in Santa Cruz

County. Duncan personally was instrumental in the building of the Boulder-Pescadero stage road and his son Harold was the assemblyman who introduced in 1903 in Sacramento the bill authorizing construction of the Pacheco Pass Road.

One of Editor Duncan McPherson's greatest campaigns was that of having Big Basin area preserved as a State Park. Logging operations in the late 1890's threatened the existence of the great Sequoia sempervirens forests north of Boulder Creek. In 1902 his battle ended successfully.

In 1938 The Sentinel moved out of the Alexander Hotel area and over to its "new" plant on Church Street. The site is now under the middle of Cedar Street on the east side of the present Sentinel building.

Sometime in the past years, a third story was added to the Alexander Hotel and it became a rooming house. Downstairs it has housed various merchants over the years. One of the longest-lived is Melvin McRae who operates Melvin's Drugstore. He opened there in 1925.

Interesting sidelights: Duncan McPherson once tried to sell his half-interest in The Sentinel for \$600 but there were no takers...

In 1873 the plant expanded



The Alexander Hotel closed its doors to roomers because of fire and safety regulations.

to the Alexander Hotel cross Locust Street from the Whidden Building which stood where later the Farmers and Merchants Bank was constructed, then Wells Fargo was established, and finally now the Ice Cream Bank is there. 1873 also marked the end of the old Washington hand press and the introduction (for \$1000) of a Fairhaven press

— "a crank turned by a strong man..."

In 1893 hard times hit California and The Sentinel reduced its publication from daily to three times a week.

When Duncan died in 1921, his son Fred McPherson Sr. took over as publisher; at Fred McPherson Sr.'s death in 1940 his son, Fred McPherson Jr. carried on. The Sentinel is the second

oldest family owned newspaper in California that has been continuously published daily. (Sacramento Bee is oldest.)

And so, with the closing of an old rooming house, a whole train of thought opens up another page of the past. Information for this "page" is through the courtesy of Lillian McPherson Rouse of Watsonville.