

Santa Cruz Yesterdays



FRONT STREET RUINS AFTER STUNNING 1894 CONFLAGRATION

(From the Preston Sawyer Collection)

Sixty years ago this month Santa Cruz was visited by the worst fire ever to hit the community. "Devastation", screamed a one-column heading in the "Sentinel", followed by: "Business Block Reduced To Ashes", and "Court House Burned."

Most of the large block bounded by Cooper street, Pacific avenue and Front street went, including all of the north side of Cooper and the Court House across the street (same location as today).

At 10:40 Saturday night April 14, 1894, the old fire bell, on its tower back of the then Front street city hall, clamored the alarm which marked a splash of destruction beyond precedent here. Within minutes flames were seen mounting in the rear of buildings at the northeast corner of Cooper and Front streets. The Werner Finkelday grocery was on the corner and adjoining was the E. L. Williams real estate office. Both faced on Cooper.

Water Force Down

The fire department responded promptly, but there was no force of water available as the city's mains had broken Saturday after-

noon, and the water had been turned off. An attachment was made onto a Hihn company hydrant on Front street and soon a stream was playing on the zooming blaze.

But a north wind fanned the flames which spread rapidly, racing west on Cooper and north on Front. Fire and smoke rose high in the air, the wind carrying sparks which spread much destruction.

City-owned water was flowing again soon after midnight, and with the aid of fire companies arriving from outlying points plus the Hihn water, the west side of Pacific avenue was saved.

The Whidden building at Locust street, where stands today the Farmers & Merchants bank, was saved with the aid of wet sacks and blankets, but the roof caught fire several times.

Scene Of Desolation

Come daylight Sunday morning the burned district was revealed in all its disheartening aspects. What twenty-four hours before had been the pride of the city (of 7000) was a gloomy sight. Only a fraction of the important large business block remained. All the rest was

debris, hot ashes and ruins. A few sections of brick wall marked the spot where the new 3-story Hoteling building had stood. Rebuilt, the Hotel St. George now marks the site.

Along Front the fire had also swept clean the east side of the street from near Cooper north to the vacant Fair lot at Water street, now the site of the Post Office. The block had for some years included the local Chinatown, a row of ancient wooden buildings, first erected in the early fifties when Front street was the main business section.

The picture, taken from near the site of the Garibaldi hotel of today, overlooks this area in the foreground toward the west side of Pacific avenue across the burned area. The Italian hotel had itself gone up in the same fire, to be re-erected in its present location, back from the street.

Only one brick shell remains on the east side of Front. Directly behind this can be seen the original "flat iron" Hugo Huhn building, built about 1860. It was sole structure unharmed by the holocaust

and remains today a sturdy landmark of the past, at the plaza junction of Front and Pacific.

Remains of three pioneer brick structures stand on the west side of Front street. At the extreme left, in the background is the old wooden Whidden block, badly scorched, but destined to face another decade and a half.