

# When hose carts fought fires

By MARGARET KOCH  
Sentinel Correspondent

**I**N THE old days, before the turn of the century (a term looked upon fondly by historians who hate to be pinned down to dates), everyone in Santa Cruz knew when something caught fire. Something important enough to call out the volunteers. The town fire bell rang the alarm far and wide.

And immediately, the Alerts or one of the other hose cart teams was on the job. The Alert Hose Company was Number One, Santa Cruz's top fire fighting team. It also was the team that came close to winning and keeping the diamond belt.

In the early 1850s when Santa Cruz was a village, friends and neighbors depended on each other to form bucket brigades and shovel lines to fight fires with water and dirt.

But in 1857, the first volunteer hook-and-ladder team was formed, and it wasn't until 1877 that the first hose-cart team was in business.

Twenty young men volunteered for duty and called themselves the Alert Hose Company Number One. Fire fighters were picked for their speed and endurance as well as their courage. They practiced regularly, every move at a fire was planned and orchestrated until they

had it down to minutes. Young Harry Cowell served as the Alerts' lead sprinter for several years.

Fire fighters leaped into action at the call of the bell, gathering where the hose cart was stored between fires, pulling it out and racing with it to the scene of the conflagration. Each team had two hydrant men and two nozzle men. Early hose carts were equipped with several hundred feet of hose wound on a huge reel, leather water buckets and ladders. Later, regulations specified at least 350 feet of hose on a reel with standard couplings. A hose cart fully outfitted could weigh about a thousand pounds.

As the town grew, other hose cart teams were formed and by 1887 there were five: the Alerts, Pogonips, Kirbys, Reliefs and Pilots. The fire bell was located on a wood tower on Front Street. Later it was moved to a fire house located where Leask's shoe department is today on Church Street.

In the spring of the early 1890s, regular tournaments were staged for several days, with hose-cart teams coming from other cities and counties to compete. They were timed officially by the State Firemen's Association which sponsored the event.

Twelve men made up each running team; they wore tights and low running slippers. The distance covered was 1,200 feet, to a hydrant where the hose had to be unreeled and coupled.

The Alerts won and set a state record which stood for years: one minute and 11 seconds. They brought home \$650 in prize money and the diamond belt. However, the belt had to be won three times in order to gain permanent possession.

Watsonville won it the last time, just before the competitions were discontinued and the belt was last there, a symbol of the fleetest foot and greatest endurance. The Alerts had won it twice.

All the hose-cart teams sponsored fund raising dances and parties, but the Pilots were considered the town's most social group. They established a system of fire-alarm boxes which were taken over by the city in the 1890s, when the municipal fire department was formed.

The hose-cart companies passed into oblivion with the formation of Santa Cruz Hook and Ladder with its horse-drawn vehicles. By 1894 only one remained: the Pogonips out on River Street. Their hose-cart house, which had been given to them by the Kron family, tannery owners, was dismantled in the 1950s.



It was the end of an era when the famed Sea Beach Hotel burned on June 12, 1912. Citizens came from all over Santa Cruz to watch the huge hostelry go down into ashes. Many sat on the beach below it, as shown here, to watch the spectacle.