



City of San Bernardino Historical and Pioneer Society P.O. Box 875, San Bernardino, CA 92402

LIBRARY NEWS September 2007

By Richard D. Thompson, Librarian

Well, I confess I don't have any library news for this issue because I took off August and part of July. I did write a history of the Planing Mill fire, which came close to wiping out San Bernardino in 1897 (starts on page 2). This was written primarily from newspaper accounts. I liked the subject because the Society was recently given a fire hydrant from the 1890s by the City of SB.

Also, I found a news release on Vana Olson issued at the time of her appointment as director of Public Works. She will be leading our October 11 tour of San Bernardino waterways. I worked directly for her back in the 1990s, and she is my candidate as the smartest woman in San Bernardino. Here is the story:

Vana Olson appointed County Public Works director

Vana Olson, an assistant director with the County Public Works Department who has worked for the department for 28 years, was appointed Public Works director today. Ms. Olson was selected following a lengthy statewide recruitment process that attracted a number of highly qualified applicants from both within and outside of the County organization. The County began the recruitment process several months ago when former Director Pat Mead announced he would retire. Mr. Mead retired on Jan. 19 after many years of service to the County. "Vana Olson brings many years of experience and institutional memory to this important leadership position, so her appointment should provide for a very smooth transition for the department and the County organization," said Board of Supervisors Chairman Paul Biane.

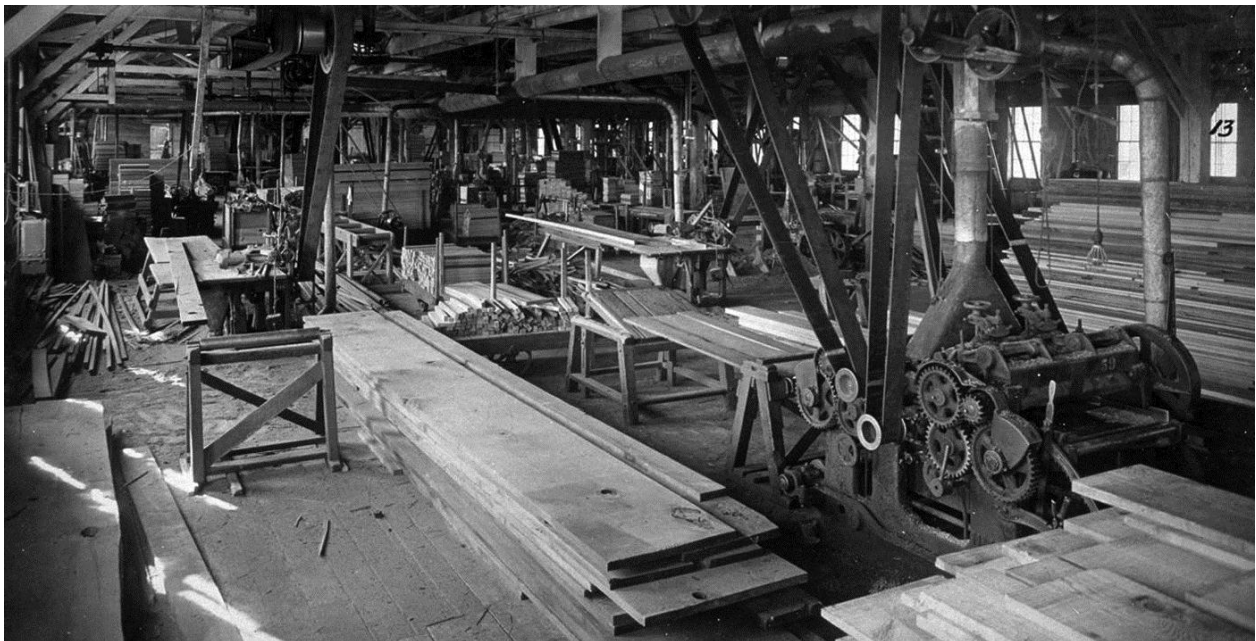
The Public Works Department, including the Flood Control District, employs 707 public service professionals and operates on an annual budget of \$404,699,673. The department is responsible for a wide range of vital public services in the areas of road construction and maintenance, traffic, land surveying, solid waste management, and flood control. The department operates and maintains 2,830 miles of roads, six regional landfills, eight solid waste transfer stations, post-closure maintenance of 27 inactive landfills, and a wide range of flood control facilities.

Ms. Olson has served as the Public Works Department's assistant director for transportation and flood control project development during the past six years. She began her career with the County as an engineering technician in 1973, and was promoted several times until 1981, when she temporarily left the County during budgetary layoffs. Ms. Olson worked for several prominent engineering firms until 1986, when she returned to the County as a public works engineer. She was made a division chief in 1988, and was promoted to assistant director in 2000. Ms. Olson holds a registered California Civil Engineering License after studying at San Bernardino Valley College and Cal Poly Pomona. "Her combination of County tenure, private sector experience, and knowledge of the organization provides Vana with a solid background to assume the director's duties," said Norman Kanold, Assistant County Administrator overseeing the County's Public and Support Services Group, which includes Public Works.

FIRE DEPARTMENT SAVES THE CITY OF SAN BERNARDINO

Late in the afternoon on December 29, 1897, a workman in J. J. Whitney's planing mill tipped over a lamp, thereby starting a blaze that came close to burning down the town of San Bernardino. Several newspapers covered the conflagration, but the local *Weekly Times-Index* used the most descriptive language: "Fire and Wind Leave Desolation in Their Wake," reads one headline. Another announced, "At One Time It Seemed As Though the Whole of the Business Portion of the City Was Doomed." The "fire fiend" held sway in the city, according to the writer.

Dramatic language, but it came pretty close to describing the situation. Window sashes, frames and doors are made at planing mills, but Whitney's also specialized in making furniture. There was always a good deal of lumber stacked about, along with layers of wood chips and sawdust.



PLANING MILL INTERIOR

Lamps were used in the mill for heating glue pots, and at 4:20 in the afternoon, the accident occurred. A lamp was knocked over, and in two minutes the fire spread and became uncontrollable. A whistle on the premises, provided for just such an emergency, sounded the alarm, and a Mrs. J. L. Jones who lived nearby contacted the Fire Department, who arrived promptly. Unfortunately, a high wind was blowing that day, fanning the flames to great heights. The gifted *Times-Index* reporter was eloquent in describing the event:

The great funnel of jet black smoke first seen circling up from Whitney's planing mill and then careering to the southward over the city was almost immediately transformed into a seething mass of flame. Its great tongues sprang into the air a hundred feet or more, and then taking the wind, swooped down, encircling everything around in its fiery winding sheet. While the norther passing on carried bits of blazing charcoal, sparks and embers to the outermost limits of the city. This emblem of hell seemed to delight in the destruction of the beautiful, and especially was its fury evinced when it sent to eternity the Episcopal Church where heretofore the forces of the underworld have been met and defeated.

The 1901 Souvenir Fire Department book referred to the planing mill fire and called the wind a “gale,” probably what we today call a “Santa Ana” wind.

William Greenwood Wright, who built the planing mill in the early 1870s and who still owned the building, lived next door, and his house, brick shop, and “curios” were all destroyed. These were the only structures affected north of the mill. Wright was an extensive traveler, and he collected a wide variety of objects during his travels. His main hobby was butterflies. Although an amateur, his collection of butterflies and his writings on the subject were, and still are, widely admired by botanists and lepidopterists. Originally it was thought that his extensive butterfly collection was destroyed, but it survived and upon his death in 1912 was donated to the California Academy of Science in San Francisco, where it remains to this day.



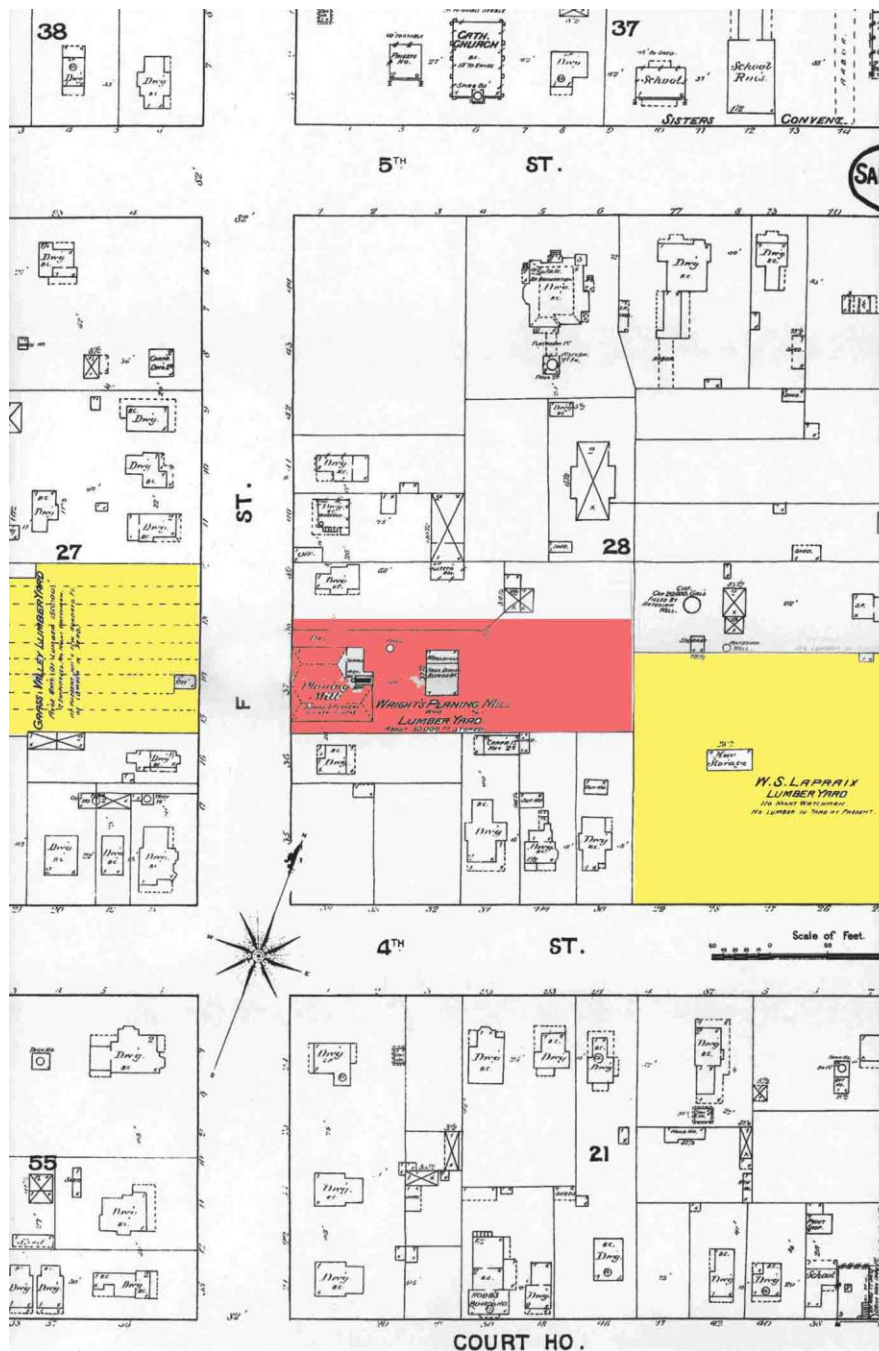
1903 planing mill in Orange, CA, similar in size and purpose to the San Bernardino mill

After burning St. John’s Episcopal Church, adjacent to the south of the planing mill, the fire rapidly advanced into the largely residential block of Fourth Street between E and F Streets. H. C. Rolfe, Jr., lived next to the church and his building was soon in flames. Then came James Murray’s home, one of the nicer houses on the block. Next to Murray was A. G. Kendall, and then the Greene estate, occupied by Joseph Marks. The homes were all substantial structures located in a nice area of San Bernardino.

On the northwest corner of Fourth and E Streets was James Fleming’s lumberyard. A quantity of lumber was destroyed but there were no structures involved.

Within half an hour of the fire’s onset eight large buildings on F Street were ablaze, and at five o’clock a call for help went out to the Fire Departments of adjoining cities. The Santa Fe Railroad dispatched special flat cars to neighboring cities. The cars were quickly loaded with equipment and personnel and returned to the burning city. Colton was the first to arrive, followed soon by Redlands and Riverside. In Redlands, the firemen had reported to the firehouse within four minutes of the alarm. A hose cart, 640

feet of hose, 20 firemen, three reporters and several persons with property interests in San Bernardino, were loaded and transported to the E Street depot. They reached their destination at 5:33 p.m., and everything and everybody was unloaded. Ten minutes later, after hauling the hose cart by hand, the boys were throwing huge streams of water onto the fire.



Sanborn's 1888 Fire Insurance Map showing the planing mill lumberyard (in red), and its proximity to two other nearby lumberyards (yellow)

The fire had jumped a half block and was burning along Court Street, where a big warehouse on the corner of Court and F Streets, owned by Wilcox and Rose, was quickly consumed. The warehouse was full of wagons, farming equipment, horseshoes, nails, and general supplies. The residences along Court Street were more modest than the Fourth Street houses, referred to by the newspapers as cottages, and several of these burned.

At the height of the fire, pieces of debris floated through the air giving off showers of sparks. These pieces included two-by-four scantlings, several feet in length, some of which flew as far as 150 feet. Sparks and blazing shingles were carried by the high winds throughout the main business district on Third Street. Some of the residents brought out their fine furniture. Several pianos were seen along the streets, but these were soon covered with sparks and set ablaze. The workers at Whitney's mill were able to get some of the furniture out and placed upwind (north) of the fire. Accordingly these were saved, although the destruction of the mill and everything left in it was complete.

Dr. G. B. Rowell's house, together with that of J. D. R. Browne, the rector of St. John's, were in great danger but survived, even though severely scorched. Hundreds of men took to rooftops, using buckets of water and private hoses to combat the flames, and were kept busy putting out falling embers. Special efforts were made to save the Stewart Hotel at Third and E Streets. The original hotel, the finest in the city, had burned five years previously, and great care was taken to protect its successor.

Around five o'clock the sun sank down below the horizon and shortly after the wind died down. With the arrival of the firemen from neighboring cities, the combined forces were able to bring the fire under control.

Four newspaper stories (the December 30, 1897, *Los Angeles Times*, which ran two separate stories; the December 31 *San Bernardino Weekly Times-Index*; and the January 1, 1898, *Redlands Citrograph*) all devoted a high percentage of their coverage to describing the individual structures burned, how much they were worth and how much insurance coverage was carried. The big loser was J. J. Whitney, who lost all of his lumber stock, mill machinery, and most of his furniture. He was completely uninsured. Likewise W. G. Wright, who originally built the mill and still owned the building, carried no insurance. Thus it was that the two men whose business was to work around open fires with sawdust and kindling piled all about, were unprepared for the consequences of a fire. It seems a bit odd since both were probably in the best financial position to purchase fire protection.

The four news articles gave minimal coverage on the activities of the firefighters. The *Citrograph* did ladle out a bit of praise, but only to the Redlands men. Most stories carried only a line or two about the out-of-town firemen, and the local boys did not get a mention. The *San Bernardino Weekly Times-Index* should at least have acknowledged its community's own brave men, plus lauded the advances that had been made in fire fighting by the city's Fire Department.

The San Bernardino Fire Department was established in 1878 and manned by volunteers. In 1889 Chief David Wixom reorganized the department. He became a full-time professional fire chief and hired a full-time fireman. The latter acted as a driver of the LaFrance Steam Pumper, and also took care of the team of horses purchased by the city. New equipment (including a horse-drawn ladder truck equipped with a full compliment of ladders), plus training of the firefighters made for a much-improved Fire Department. In April 1891, the first electric alarm system was installed. It consisted of a tower bell, house gong, indicator, and six street boxes. O. M. Stevenson was chief of the Fire Department at the time of the planing mill fire.

The latter part of 1890 brought about changes to the water system and Fire Department equipment that substantially improved the operation and efficiency of the Fire Department.

At the beginning of 1890, the San Bernardino Fire Department had one station at the corner of Third and C (now Arrowhead). Their equipment consisted of:

Pioneer # 1 (hand-drawn hose cart)

Pioneer # 2 (hand-drawn hose cart)

Alert #1 (horse-drawn ladder truck)
One horse-drawn steam pumper

Later that year the city water system underwent a major change. It previously consisted of wells, streams, cisterns and other natural water sources, and a small system of pipes. The city changed to a gravity-fed, high-pressure system using pumps, over 20 miles of pipes and strategically placed hydrants throughout the city. The water supply was piped from a large reservoir, situated four miles northwest of the city. The system worked so well that the Fire Department didn't need the steam pumper any longer to boost water pressure. All the firemen needed now was more hose, and a better way to get it to a fire.



In the early 1900s, firemen tested the newly installed hydrants with 16 large hoses. This picture, looking west on Third Street, is from a lantern slide, and was probably shown in movie theaters. It was colorized, and dramatized by adding flames to the image of the Stewart Hotel.

At a town meeting, the city trustees agreed to purchase a horse-drawn wagon to carry hose. The Allen Iron Works on Third Street received the contract to build the wagon. When it was completed, Al Glatz was chosen to be the driver. Two thoroughbred horses, named Frank and Sam, were purchased to pull the wagon, which carried over 2,800 feet of hose, more than a modern fire engine. The Fire Department was creating a feeling of security for the city inhabitants.

Of the three newspapers, only the Los Angeles *Times* mentioned the water system, stating. “Numerous streams of water from convenient fire hydrants under 200-foot pressure, to say nothing of private fire hose, played upon the flames and flying embers, and proved speedily victorious.”

Surely it must have been obvious that without the pressurized water system, the entire town of San Bernardino would have been destroyed. It is understandable that the out-of-town reporters would not

dwell on the subject, but it seems that the San Bernardino paper should have given it some coverage. Was the editor only interested in sensational headlines? This should have been one of the paper's shining moments, instilling civic pride in how the city's Fire Department and its equipment, the local fire fighters, and the new water system with its pressurized hydrants, all came together to save the town from being completely razed by fire.

Recently the City of San Bernardino donated a historic fire hydrant to the City of San Bernardino Historical and Pioneer Society. After the artifact was cleaned, it was discovered that it was manufactured in 1898, shortly after the fire that almost destroyed San Bernardino. The hydrant was removed from Third Street, approximately 60 feet west of D Street. The date of 1898 indicates that the fire chief, after the fire of 1897, felt that new hydrants were still needed to protect the town, and Third and D made the list. This hydrant is a fitting addition to the Society's artifacts of the city. It is a memorial to the early days of the San Bernardino City Fire Department and to the men who risked their lives to save the town of San Bernardino in December 1897.