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Columbia Fire Engine #1

In the town of Columbia, there is a little fire engine on display just off the main street. Its history goes back to 1852.

Tuolumne County diggings had been producing gold for many months before that March 1850 day when a fortuitous cloudburst sent an avalanche of water cascading down the hillside and uncovered a rich deposit almost at the feet of the Rev. Thaddeus Hildreth, who huddled, wet and uncomfortable, under an old oak tree.

The place was first called Hildreth's Diggings, and later became known as American Camp. When a townsite was laid out in 1852, it became Columbia, because American Camp sounded too temporary. Columbia's incorporation two years later was marked by the first of two catastrophic fires.

A cook in a canvas-sided restaurant, his attention divided between the meal he was preparing and an ever present bottle of some special medicinal brew, knocked over a skillet of grease. The wood stove flared up. The canvas disappeared in a puff of smoke. Flames spread through the town's flimsy shacks and tents. In two hours time the destruction of the camp was complete.

The reconstruction job was begun while the rubble was still smoking. Solid logs and heavy planking replaced, to a great extent, the canvas and slab board used by the first settlers. Then, the boys got together and bought a fire engine of sorts, and Columbia was lulled into a false sense of security.

In 1857 however, when a conflagration which started when a small backyard weeny roast got out of control, the Columbians found that they had overlooked a couple of minor things. The logs and planks burned just as merrily as the canvas and slab. AND, their little fire engine was not worth a hoot because there was not enough water available.

The town was wiped out for a second time, despite the best efforts of the entire population. Columbia learned a valuable, if not expensive, lesson. Again, the town was rebuilt, this time, with fireproof brick and iron fire doors. Many buildings survived their builders and still stand today as venerable lures for tourists from all over the world.

But the Columbians, proud as they were of their new town, decided to take no more chances. They built a series of cisterns designed to hold enough water to quell any major conflagration. Then, they sent a committee to San Francisco with instructions to purchase the finest fire engine that could be found.

As it happened, out in the South Pacific, the Society Islands had purchased fire engine #452 from Hunneman & Company of Boston, Massachusetts. They originally built this engine for the Brooklyn Fire Department, as Phenix Engine #12 in 1852, but Engine 12 found that they needed a much larger pump, so they returned it to Hunneman in 1855. By the time #452 was placed aboard a ship, and sent around Cape Horn, over a year had passed.

By this time, the Society Islands, what is now called Tahiti, had purchased another fire engine, and no longer needed #452, which they had named "Papeete" after their capital city. They had it painted with gold striping and trim, and had adorned it with polished brass mountings and ornaments, two

magnificent lamps, a brass bell, brass adorned buckets and axes, and paintings of naked island women swimming.

Since they no longer needed this fine engine, the King of the Sandwich Islands, King Kamahamaha IV decided to purchase it, complete with its fanciful paint job. The King, of what we now call Hawaii, had become enamored with Yankee ways and customs. His islands were regular ports of call for ships engaged in whaling and Asian trade. He had seen photos of these fine fire engines, and like any genuine American boy, he wanted one.

"Papeete" survived the perilous journey around the Horn, and arrived in San Francisco safely. Unfortunately, the ship's Captain and crew abandoned her, and the ship, for the gold fields and of course, most certain riches that awaited them there.

She was parked on an Embarcadero wharf, awaiting loading for the trip across the Pacific. A San Francisco fireman chanced to see Papeete, and he and some of his fellows "borrowed" her for when a nearby building caught fire. While they were entranced by her beautiful red paint, shiny gold pump, and fanciful paintings, they were also very impressed with her water throwing abilities. But, the streets of San Francisco were too steep for easy operation. The fire lads, unwilling to part with such a beautiful lady, hid her under a tarpaulin in their station house.

Meanwhile, the Columbians, on their shopping trip, ran across the Royal pumper. They, too, were captivated by her beauty, and there began a series of negotiations in which all parties concerned agreed that such an exquisite piece of machinery was far too fine for "a fat heathen Sandwicher". There was monetary consideration to be certain, and probably much alcohol fueled deliberation, but the details of the deal were never publicly revealed. All that is known is that

the San Franciscans, unwilling to let Kamahamaha have his shiny new toy, turned it over to the Columbians.

Papeete was hauled to Stockton, for free, by the Steam Navigation Company, and then Fox & Company loaded her on a big wagon and hauled her the rest of the way to Columbia. She arrived on October 22, 1859, to the tooting of a brass band, and the booming voices of the town's best orators. She must have brought luck to the lusty mining camp, because there was never another serious fire, and the extravagant fire wagon was seldom used for the purpose it was built. But, every May 4th, at the Columbia Fireman's Muster, the red and black clad volunteers of Company #1 pull her up and down the street to the cheers of the adoring populace.

However, upon her arrival in October 1859, there was much consternation among the Columbians. They were just not sure what to make of the nude women bathing figures, so they had nice screens fitted over the paintings to obscure them from the view of Columbia's delicate eyes. Papeete has since then had her paintings restored, complete with the lustful island ladies and their great big ...personalities. They aren't swimming, they are just laying on their backs eating grapes.

As an update to this report, (which was originally given in March 2023) this past weekend I found out about a disturbing turn of events. Sadly, Papeete is not on display in Columbia's firehouse any longer. Nor is she pushed and pulled up the street on May 4 any longer. When the glorious State of California took over Columbia in 1945 and made it a State Park, the original agreement was that they would lease the old firehouse to the Company #1 volunteers for \$1 a year.

As time marched forward, someone at Company #1 forgot to pay the \$1 per year lease. Eventually, some jellybean counter at the State determined that Company #1 was behind

in their payments and notified them of such. Eager to please, they attempted to pay the back lease fees.

“Not so fast,” the Parks Department said. “We will now be your partners and will have half ownership of Papeete, the other antique engine, and all the devices and contraptions that made up the display at the firehouse.” “Piss off,” said Company #1, and they moved all of their equipment out of the firehouse and have it in storage at their newer firehouse on Bigler St.

Unfortunately, some of the volunteers of Company #1 have gone on to the Golden Hills, and the rest are now a bunch of old men. They have great difficulty moving and displaying their precious Papeete, so she rarely sees the light of day. She sits lonely, in obscurity, while thousands of visitors stare into a now completely empty original firehouse just two streets away. My heart aches for her.