



THE ELECTROLIER

Illuminating St. Helena's History

A Publication of the St. Helena Historical Society

Fall 2011, Volume 9, Number 3

FOOTPRINTS IN TIME

Early History of the St. Helena Fire Department

BY MARIAM HANSEN

Once a year the fire department opens its doors to the public. This year's **Open House** will be held on **Sunday, October 16, 11:00 am-3:00 pm**. Fire chief John Sorenson and St. Helena's cadre of volunteer firemen will be on hand to answer questions, give demonstrations, show off the vehicles and equipment, and give rides up and down the street in the beautifully restored *Schneer* fire truck. The following article sheds some light on the early years of volunteer fire-fighting efforts in St. Helena.

The Water Infrastructure

First came the new water reservoir located on Spring Mountain. Then came water hydrants installed all over town. A day to remember in St. Helena was August 20, 1878, when water began to flow from the reservoir through underground pipes to St. Helena's new fire hydrants. The town had ten hydrants in all, six on Main Street, two on Spring Street, and one on Charter Oak Avenue. The head of water from a hydrant was strong enough to force a stream over the highest building (two stories) in town.



Hose Company No. 1

Just a week later, on August 28th, W. T. Simmons (who had received a congressional Medal of Honor for bravery in the Civil War) called a meeting with the goal of forming a town fire company. From this and future sessions, Hose Company No. 1 was quickly formed in fall 1878, 133 years ago. The firemen not only volunteered their time, but also raised the funds for buildings and equipment.

Five officers were elected: chief engineer, foreman, assistant foreman, treasurer, and secretary; there were also four leading hose men, four spanner men, and two axe men. By 1881, the company had grown to 22 members, by 1885, 23 members.



Before the availability of hose carts—and most likely for a while afterward—a hastily organized bucket brigade was the most conventional means of putting out a fire.

The first hose cart, loaded with 600 feet of hose and arriving in 1878, had to be pulled to a fire by the firemen unless a horse and buggy could be commandeered (for a \$1 fee). The hose depended on gravity for water to flow from the hydrants. This photo was taken in 1884.

At first, besides the hose cart and hose, “appliances” consisted of ladders, lanterns, axes, and miscellaneous paraphernalia. By 1885, the town had acquired another 1,000-foot hose and cart, and fund-



raisers had provided enough money for uniforms and a hose carriage. Firemen wore red shirts, black pants, and black helmets. Their black belts were imprinted with “St.HHCo. No.1” in white letters.

Hose Company No. 1 was first headquartered in a small, rented building on Spring Street behind Bulotti's Grocery Store (now NV Vintage Home, on Main and Spring Streets). No known photo exists.

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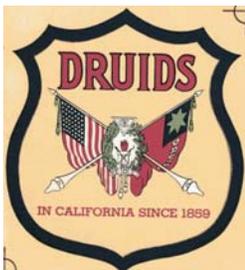
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Selected Cemetery Plots

Some of the plots you'll be visiting during the *Spirits of St. Helena Discovery Walk at the St. Helena Cemetery* were set aside for the Druids and the Societa Operaia. Here is a little background on each organization, to whet your curiosity, so you'll want to find out more on the tour.

The United Ancient Order of Druids (UAOD) was a social and benevolent order. Founded on April 4, 1885, St. Helena Grove No. 41 had 38 charter members, mostly Italian. On the tour you may view the minutes of the first meeting. The last minutes were taken in 1966.



The "sisterhood," St. Helena Olive Circle No. 8, was organized on January 8, 1892. Possibly the last arch druidess, Emma Salvestrin, was elected in 1965.

To become a druid, a man had to be between 18 and 55, be in perfect health and have immunity from hereditary or chronic mental and bodily disorders, have the ability and disposition to earn an honest living for self and family, have temperate and industrious habits, and be of good moral character and untarnished reputation.



The "Costituzione" (Bylaws) of the *Societa Operaia* are written in Italian. Translated, the title page states in part: "Italian-Swiss Workers Mutual Aid Society, Founded March 6, 1887." The group provided disability and death payments, plus proper burials. This was long before state disability and social security. The group folded in 1963.

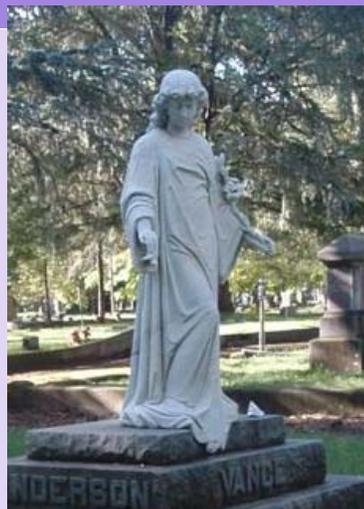
New to the Collection

The Collections Committee has been accessioning the contents of five boxes of photos, documents, and other items dating from the 1870s that mostly concern the Lemme and Crane families. A future article will provide some background and historical context. Many thanks to Bonnie Lemme Barker for giving the society this treasure trove of information about these prominent St. Helena families and the times they lived in.



Spirits of St. Helena

A Cemetery Discovery Walk
Celebrating 155 Years of Rest



Date and Time: Sunday, October 1st, 1:00–3:00 pm

Cemetery location: 2461 Spring Street, St. Helena

During this ninth annual *Spirits of St. Helena*, docents from the St. Helena Historical Society will answer such fascinating questions as the following (questions you never knew you had and many more):

- ♦ Who were the people first buried here, and how did it come about?
- ♦ Who have been laid to rest in the plots reserved for the Civil Veterans' Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), the Druids, the *Societa Operaia*, the Masons, the Oddfellows, and the American Legion?
- ♦ Who occupies the field of numbered markers near Sulphur Creek?
- ♦ How have the "occupants" changed over time?
- ♦ What are some of the stories about selected folks who were buried here?
- ♦ What is the projected future of this well-used cemetery?

Tours will depart from the cemetery gate at 1:30, 1:45, and 2:00 pm. Expect each docent-led tour to last about an hour. Historical cemetery records will also be on display in the cemetery office. Be sure to wear your walking shoes! The tours will take place come rain or come shine. If it rains, the tour will move inside; signs will direct you.

The entire community is invited to come to this event and learn more about St. Helena's past citizens. A \$10 donation is suggested. Children under 16 are free. RSVPs are not necessary. For more information, contact SHHS at 707-967-5502 or email shstory@shstory.org.

The Fire Department, continued from page 1

We do know that in August 1979 a fire bell was installed at the top of a 20-foot tower built in front of the building, an addition financed by a group of businessmen. From then on, the “hoodlum bell” was rung every night at 7:45 to signal curfew for youths.



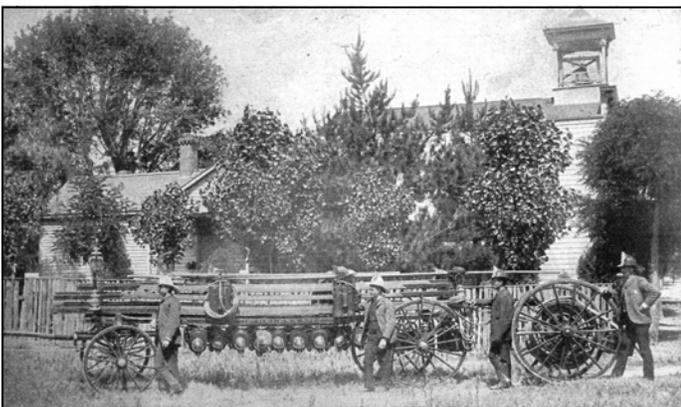
This photo of the new building for town offices and fire equipment was taken in 1883 before the “hoodlum bell” had been moved to the tower, shown here, on the north-west side of the building. The bell is currently mounted on Pine Street in front of the fire house.

Another Town Hall & Another Company

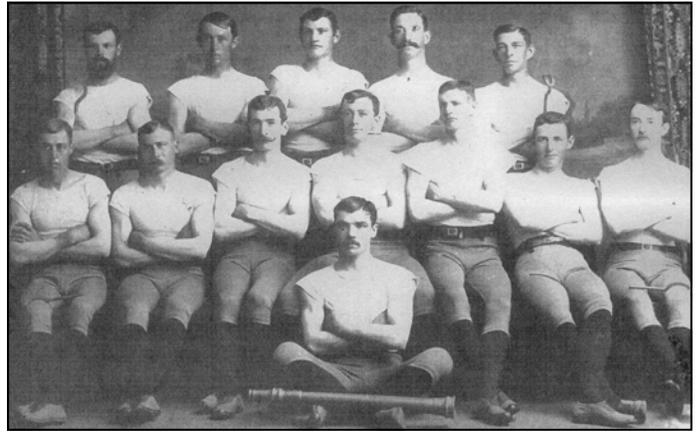
In early 1883, a new town hall was built in the front part of the jail yard (where St. Helena Catholic School, at Oak Avenue and Tainter Streets, is now located). In 1884, another fire company joined the volunteer effort, simply called the Hook & Ladder Company.

Americus Hose Company No. 2

The next company to be formed, only two years later in 1886, was called Americus Hose Company No. 2. This company was quartered on Main Street across from Odd Fellows Hall, between the Model Shoe



Members of the newly formed Hook & Ladder Company pose with some of the fire equipment. In the background is the new town hall/fire house on Oak Avenue.



Store (Model Bakery) and Rexall Drugs (Market Restaurant). That same year, Americus Hose purchased its own hose cart, which had 74-inch wheels and cost \$375. *The photo above, circa 1887, shows the company’s “racing team.”*

Three into One

No records have been found that tell much about how three separate fire companies structured their fire responses. But all confusion came to an end on February 28, 1911, when the three fire companies combined into one unit, located under one roof at city hall, which had by then relocated to the west side of Main Street north of Adams Street (a parking lot today). Although St. Helena now boasted only one fire department, the “companies” retained their names, along with their own foremen and captains.



Seen here being proudly steered in a parade down Main Street in 1954 is the 1918 Schneer fire truck, purchased by the city in late 1917. Powered by a combustible engine, it instantly became—and has remained—the pride and joy of firemen and all the kids in town. You can take a ride in it at the Open House!

Today, the fire department, with its chief and 25 volunteer fire fighters, is structured much the same way as it was in 1911, except with state-of-the-art equipment.

Information was taken from Star articles, 1878-1965.

fall/winter calendar

OCTOBER

1 (Saturday), 1:00-3:00 pm
Spirits of St. Helena: Cemetery
Discovery Walk

16 (Sunday), 11:00 am-3:00 pm
St. Helena Fire Department
Open House

22 (Saturday), Noon-4:00 pm
Harvest Festival Booth &
Wine Auction

NOVEMBER

10 (Thursday), 7:00 pm
Soldiers of St. Helena. Program
co-sponsored by the St. Helena
Public Library

DECEMBER

6 (Saturday), 5:00-7:00 pm
Holiday Social at Sunny Acres

Cornerstone

By Skip Lane, President



Bill Savidge

On behalf of the directors, I'd like to welcome Bill Savidge to the board. Bill and his wife, Charlotte, have lived in St. Helena since 1972, where he was a real estate broker until his retirement. He is a longtime member of the Kiwanis Club and is a member of the *St. Helena Star* editorial board as well as the Rianda House board. Along with his community involvement, Bill walks daily and is trying his hand at writing poetry, fiction, and a memoir. Thanks for serving!

The last *Electrolier* contained an article about longtime member Babe Learned. Babe donated a collection of McCormick Ranch artifacts to the society, including a beautifully restored carriage. We have just learned that Babe bequeathed \$10,000 to the society. If she were here, she'd know how very much her thoughtfulness and generosity are appreciated!

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HARVEST FESTIVAL Wine Tasting & Auction

**Saturday, October 22nd,
Noon-4:00 pm**

Oak Avenue Parking Lot

Like last year, two worthy St. Helena causes, SHHS and the Boys & Girls Club of St. Helena, have joined forces to raise needed funds at the Harvest Festival. This is SHHS's major fundraiser of the year, so we encourage you to bid on a wonderful array of wines at this jointly organized wine auction. Some wines can only be obtained



through the auction. A number of wineries have donated to the auction already, but more bottles or lots are always welcome. To learn how to donate wines, please call Skip Lane at 967-6210. In any event, you'll want to visit the parking lot tent for some tastes!



You'll also want to visit the Historical Society's booth to view a never-before-seen video taken of the Vintage Festival Parade held in 1934. The photo above shows the winning float in the 1934 parade celebrating the end of Prohibition in a big way!

Come and see the tents purchased with last year's proceeds.

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