BERKELEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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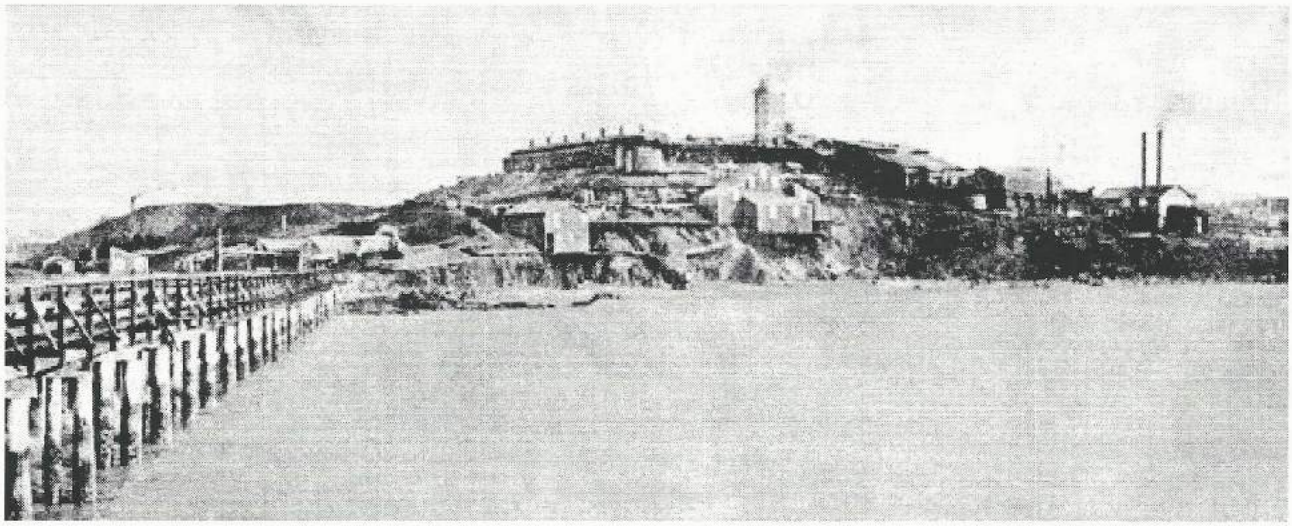
EXACTLY OPPOSITE

The Newsletter of the Berkeley Historical Society

Volume 30,Number 3 WINTER, 2012

The Giant Powder Company



The Giant Powder Plant at Fleming Point, 1880 - Photo courtesy Albany Historical Society

The history of the Giant Powder Company in Berkeley is part of the exhibit "Vanished" at the Berkeley Historical Society. After another blast in San Francisco in 1879, they found a new place for their factory at the Fleming Point in what was then unincorporated West Berkeley (now the Golden Gate Fields in Albany). Moving the factory did not stop the blasts. There were more blasts and continued damage to Berkeley and surrounding areas. On April 16, 1880, 24 workers were killed. There were more blasts with lives lost in 1883, 1886, and 1887.

In 1892, the blast was so large, that most of the plate glass windows were broken in Berkeley and at the University. At the exhibit we mounted the two plus pages of coverage of the "San Francisco Call Bulletin" of that fateful day. Here in the newsletter, we wanted to share the scientific description of the destruction by the Astronomical Society of the Pacific (9/1892).

Powder Explosion at West Berkeley, July 9, 1892. Author: Edward S. Holden The following account of the great explosion is copied from Industry for August, 1892:

"The Giant Powder Works plant, near West Berkeley, a suburban place on the northeastern coast of the bay, about eight miles from San Francisco, was blown up at nine o'clock A. M. on the ninth of July, and it is believed to be the most extensive explosion of the kind that has ever happened. Being situated on a spit of land projecting out into the bay there was a free course for air disturbance to the city, and other surroundings on the southern and western side of the bay, and windows were crushed for a distance of ten miles where no elevated land intervened. The air disturbance followed channels where the physical formation permitted horizontal flow, and even streets in the city seemed to have guided the lines of greatest effect.

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The History Center is located in the Veterans Memorial Building
1931 Center St.,Berkeley, CA 94704
Mailing Address PO Box 1190
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Hours: 1-4 pm Thursday - Saturday
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President's Message

We're at the end of another year, and I'm happy to report that your Berkeley Historical Society is active and engaged. We've had three solid exhibits during the year, and another one is under preparation.

The exhibits have been accompanied by well-received talks, panels, and other events, both at the History Center and other venues. Our program committee is rejuvenated under the leadership of new board member Phyllis Gale, who has also taken the lead on two of the exhibits. Our Oral History Committee is engaged in several interesting projects.

The hardworking BHS walking tour committee has put on several popular tours. The latest, as December began, brought more than 50 people, despite the rain, to a special tour of Berkeley's newest old historic structure, California Memorial Stadium, and the adjacent International House. And, of course, our reliable volunteer corps continues to staff the History Center three afternoons a week and field a wide variety of historical and reference inquiries.

This is not to say there isn't more we could do, or more help we could use in 2013. Additional volunteers for the History Center, individuals interested in finding tour topics and guides, assisting with archival tasks or Center housekeeping work, or researching and planning exhibits and programs would all be most welcome.

Do drop by the History Center to look at the exhibits, and keep an eye out for BHS event announcements in the coming year. And if you haven't yet shared an e-mail address with us, please consider doing so, so we can quickly get information to you about upcoming programs.

We wish you an enjoyable holiday season, and a productive and pleasant 2013.
Steven Finacom. President

Oral History Committee

We welcome anyone who is interested in doing oral histories of remarkable (by various criteria) Berkeley residents or significant Berkeley phenomena, including the motifs we are developing currently, such as the history of Anne Crowden and her innovative music school; Berkeley in the Fifties: Those Who Made a Difference; The Berkeley Sanctuary Movement; and an oral history of Berkeley story tellers.

BHS celebrated the Duncan dance tradition at capacity crowd event in the Hillside Club on September 6, 2012. Margareta Mitchell shared her scholarship on the Temple of Wings and Isadora Duncan. This was followed with the presentation of her multimedia show, Dance For Life, with colorful photographs of decades of young dancers at the Temple of Wings. Lois Flood graced the stage with six Duncan dances passed on to her by prominent Duncan dance masters. The presentation was followed by a reception, especially meaningful for those in the audience who danced at the Temple during their youth and childhood.

The Walking Tour Committee is busy planning the BHS Spring Walks. Suggestions for new walks are welcome. Call BHS at 848-0181

OUR THANKS TO THESE GENEROUS CONTRIBUTORS

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Thank you for paying your dues& contributions
BHS Depends on these for its activities.

Giant Powder Company - Continued from page 1

The loss of life was happily very slight compared with what might be expected, most of the people after the first explosion making their way to some distance, so that the force of the explosion passed over them. The number reported killed is less than ten, of whom all but three were Chinamen. It requires only a short time, and a little distance, to get without the active circle of explosions, which act upward at an angle of ten to twenty degrees, principally because of the material being partially below the surface of the ground, as in the case of magazines, also because the first effect is to excavate a pit the walls of which act as directing angles.

"The amount of material finished and in process is not known, but was certainly not less than one hundred tons, some reports say several hundred tons."

In what follows I have collected and condensed a few typical accounts of the effects of the explosion. From these it is quite clear that the chief damage was done by an air-wave and that the wave transmitted through the ground was comparatively feeble. Dr. Becker of the U. S. Geological Survey makes the very pregnant suggestion that the air-wave was reflected from the surface of the water of the San Francisco Bay and thus deflected upwards against the face of the high hills on which the city is built. The powder works were themselves built on high bluffs. The explosion of anything like this amount of dynamite, if it had been buried in the ground, would have produced an earth- wave which would have been felt at Mount Hamilton. But with all the explosives above ground, as they were, no such effect could be expected. The wave-front of the air-wave must have contained an enormous energy, but when this wave-front reached the summit of Mount Hamilton it was so enlarged that no certain record of its passage can be found on our self-recording barometer sheets. I have, as yet, seen no notice of barometric observations of the air-wave in San Francisco and adjacent points though such may have been secured. The Technical Society of the Pacific Coast has considered this explosion at its meeting in July and reference is made to the Transactions of this Society (which I have not seen at the time of writing) for details. The present note is chiefly designed to record the fact that no effects from this tremendous explosion were felt at Mount Hamilton.

San Francisco. It is more than eight miles from Fleming's Point to San Francisco, the line joining the two points being mostly over water. At least five distinct shocks were felt in the city and so severe were they that hundreds of panes of heavy plate glass were broken in the lower portion of the town. Im- mense iron-doors of warehouses were forced open. Buildings swayed to and fro sufficiently to frighten their occupants. Two of the iron doors of the Mint were twisted from their hinges. Every gas-light in the City Jail (and in other buildings) was extinguished by the rush of air after the last explosion.

Oakland Pier. The explosion was witnessed in part by one of our astronomers who was a passenger on the overland train, just entering Oakland Pier. The first explosion was comparatively slight

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but at a distance of seven miles there was a sharp report and at the same instant the heavy Pullman car was rocked sidewise. Emerging from behind an obstruction, Fleming's Point was in clear view across the Bay. Suddenly a sheet of flame rose at least 100 feet, and about 20 or 25 seconds later the report reached the train, the car was very violently rocked, and the windows rattled. The last two shocks occurred a few minutes later, when the passengers were on the boat in the slip. Their intensity was very much greater than that of the first shocks. The reports were sharp and strong, the buildings creaked under the great strain, and the ferry boat rocked very perceptibly though it was protected by the buildings from the direct air-wave.
In all cases the report and the shock were simultaneous, showing that the shock was transmitted by the air and not through the water.

Oakland is about 8 miles distant. Thousands of panes of window-glass were shattered in private houses, but no serious damage was done to buildings or persons. At the Chabot Observatory, Mr. Burckhalter's earthquake instrument gave a small mark like a v. An earthquake giving a mark like this would be a small affair.

Berkeley. The State University is 4 miles distant. Nearly all the window-glass in the college buildings was destroyed. As it was vacation-time the earthquake instruments were not (I believe) in operation and no record of the disturbance was obtained.

East Oakland. Mr. Blinn's earthquake instrument had its pen thrown entirely off the glass plate. A pipe lying on a shelf in his observatory was thrown to the floor. Mr. Blinn writes that 'a great air-wave accompanied the explosion, though no mention of this appears in the papers. I was told of a man in " East Berkeley who was working on a lumber-pile, which was " thrown down with him, and he says the air- wave threw it over " and not the shock of the ground."

Healdsburg is 55 miles distant. A distinct shock was felt here, which was unlike that of an earthquake. It was called an "air-wave" in the first telegrams.

Sonoma is 25 miles distant. Panes of window-glass were broken here. Sacramento is 60 miles distant. No damage was reported, though the shock was sufficiently severe to cause persons to rush out of the very substantial Capitol building in terror.

San Rafael is 13 miles distant. Buildings were slightly damaged. Duncan's Mills is 50 miles distant. The shocks were distinct and were supposed to be earthquakes.

Mount Hamilton is 50 miles distant and 4200 feet higher, with many ranges of hills lying between. No record appeared on the large Ewing seismograph. The duplex instrument shows a very small mark which is possibly due at least in part, to the explosion. It is, however, so small that it may be entirely due to the shifting of the pen by temperature, etc. I have examined the sheets of the Draper Self- Registering Barometer and find an exceedingly small change in the pencil line a little after 3 pm, but it is very doubtful if this change corresponds to the arrival of the air-wave, since there are other such marks on the same sheet at other times of this day."

After this blast, the Giant Powder Company decided they needed to look for a more rural location where less damage can be done. They re-located to Point Pinole where they produced dynamite until sometime after World War II.

Contributed Philip L. Gale
Reprinted by Permission of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific
http://astrosociety.org/ Courtesy of JST

Program Committee Report

We are growing our Program Committee and are looking for folks that will enjoy researching and support exhibits and events to the History Center. Our current exhibit Vanished has been quite a success. The largest part of the exhibit is dedicated to the "J.F. Hink and Son Department Store". We will report more about the Hink's Department store in another article in this Newsletter.We are currently completing a 3-4 year exhibit plan for the History Center. We are identifying topics, other organizations to partner with, and setting a tentative schedule. We hope to publish our tentative schedule in the next newsletter.
If you would like to volunteer for the committee, and exhibit, research, etc, please give me a call.

Phyllis Gale - Program Committee Chair Phone: 510-548-0591 - Email: p2gale@gmail.com

Happy Holidays from your BHS volunteer docents and archivests

Steve, Margot, Buzz, John U. Lisa, John A. Mary, Tim, Inga, Elaine, Judy, Shelly, Mark, Allison and Bill.

Hink's Department Store from a Writer's Point of View

The J.F. Hink Department Store (Hink's) part of the "Vanished" exhibit has struck a chord with the Berkeley Historical Society members and the public. Since the exhibit, opened, we have had a tour for Hink family members, donations of a store prop and a picture of the Hink's store front in Eureka. When we researched the Hink's, we also found that a number of writers were quite fond of Hink's:

> Philip K. Dick lived in Berkeley and graduated from Berkeley High. In 1947 he lived at 2208 McKinley. The house was known at the S.J. Sill's house with a stable in the back. The stable was used by the Hink's Department Store to house it horses and vans in the early years of the store.[1]
>
> Author Kris Saknussemm wrote that "I miss my grandmother taking me to the old Hinks department store on Shattuck and then out to Edy's where she'd have Lakeshore Tea and I'd have a strawberry milkshake and a grilled cheese sandwich. Progress is a funny thing" in a recent blog article.2 Kris Saknussemm, born in Berkeley in 1951, he is a cult author and multimedia artist. He currently lives abroad.[2]
>
> In Ron Silman's recent blog, commented that "When I was a boy, I watched just how alienated & even stunned my grandfather used to seem on Shattuck Avenue, where not one business there in the 1960s was what he'd grown up with during the first decade of the 20th century. Now I'm getting the Comes Around-Goes Around echo effect of the same phenomenon. Schumpeter's "creative destruction" includes my world as well & should I live long enough, I reckon I will get to watch the rest dissolve into air as well. We visited a program that we're thinking about for one of our kids that has offices in what I still think of as Hinks, a department store that has not existed on Shattuck in Berkeley for decades."3 Ron Silman grew up in Berkeley and attended Cal. He currently teaches at the University of Pennsylvania[3].

Recent books such as **Bamboo Garden** by Susan Austin and Meredith Maran's first novel, a **Theory of Small Earthquakes** includes mentions of the Hink's Department Store. For more books set in Berkeley, you can go online to the Berkeley History Room on the Berkeley Public Library website and click on "Fiction Set in Berkeley" prepared by Sayre Van Young (http://lgdata.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/docs/1119/366402/Fiction_Set_in_BerkeleyPDF2012.pdf)

An update on the Hink's Contest and other exhibit related news will appear in the next newsletter.

By Phyllis M. Housel Gale

1 Excerpted in part from the McGee-Spaulding-Hardy Historic Interest Group/Biographies webpage (http://www.mshhig.com/biographies.php)

2 Kris Saknussemm, Lost in Time and Out of Season: Growing Up in 1960's Berkeley (September 14, 2012) Downloaded from The Rumpus.Net

3 Ron Silliman Blog (http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2012/05/returning-to-bay-area-after-gap-of-few.html)

A BHS Docent orientation class is being planned for this Spring. If interested in being a docent, Call BHS at 848-0181.

BHS EVENTS CALENDAR

* December 10 - BHS Board Meeting @ 7:00 pm - the History Center
* December 27 - Program Committee Meeting @ 7:30 pm - The Gale's Home, call 524-1416 for directions
* January 14 - BHS Board Meeting @ 7:00 pm - the History Center
* January 17 - Oral History Committee Meeting @7:15 pm – the History Center
* January 20 – Vanished Exhibit Speaker: "Berkeley's Lost Movie Houses and Music Halls -- David Weinstein, author of "It Came from Berkeley" @ 2:00 – 4:00 pm – the History Center
* January 22, - Program Committee Meeting @ 7:30 pm - The Gale's Home, call 524-1416 for directions
* February 8 - BHS Board Meeting @ 7:00 pm - the History Center
* February 15 – Deadline for articles to be included in the March 1st Edition of Exactly Opposite. Contact John Aronovici at johnturtle@aol.com if you are planning to submit an article
* February 16 – Vanished Exhibit Speaker: "Berkeley's Vanished Steam Train and Street Car System" - Phil Gale @ 2:00 – 4:00 pm -the History Center
* February 21 - Oral History Meeting @7:15 pm – the History Center
* February 26 - Program Committee Meeting @ 7:30 pm - The Gale's Home, call 524-1416 for directions

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Membership Application

I would like to enroll as a member:
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☐Contributor $50 ☐Business $100
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☐I am interested in being in a volunteer.
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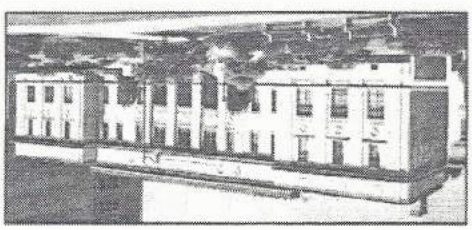

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