The Great Fire of 1891
Looking Back - Marin’s Fire Equipment
From the Collection
American Distillery Fire
San Rafael - Firemen and Fires

Corte Madera’s First Firehouse
Tiburon’s Fires of 1921
A “Rendezvous for San Francisco Club Men” Burned
Charles Russell Reilley, Jr.
The Marin History Museum

Founded in 1935, the Marin History Museum celebrates the traditions of innovation and creativity of the people of Marin County. Through exhibitions and educational programs, the Museum inspires honor for the past, an understanding of the present and an imagination of the future.

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The Bulletin - Volume XXXV
The Bulletin is a publication created by the Marin History Museum.

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Collections & Research Center

The Marin History Museum collects and preserves a wide range of artifacts, photographs and archival materials chronicling Marin County’s rich and diverse history. In total, the Museum cares for over 25,000 artifacts and 200,000 photographs in the Craemer Family Collections & Research Facility in Novato. Objects in the collection are conserved for their historical and educational relevance and serve as the cornerstone of the Museum’s exhibitions.

This facility also houses the Museum’s Research Library where visitors may research any aspect of Marin’s history. The Research Library contains rare manuscripts, maps, newspapers, directories, ephemera and a reference collection of over 1,000 books.

To make an appointment, email research@marinhistory.org or call 415-382-1182

In Dedication

The Marin History Museum dedicates the Summer 2019 Bulletin to Marin’s firefighters. We give our thanks to the men and women, both volunteer and professional, who protect our lives, homes, businesses and natural beauty in the past, present and future.

We offer special thanks to the Marin Fire History Project (MarinFireHistory.org) from which we took inspiration for this issue.
Hello Friends,

With your support, the staff, volunteers and board members continue to push hard to meet the Museum’s mission for three years and counting.

**Collections** - We continue to accept and care for dozens of new donations each year. So far this year we have received these wonderful objects:
- Collection of textbooks, c. 1900, once owned by the Klyce family of Mill Valley
- Collection of gold pins and awards from San Rafael High School, c. 1940
- December 1943 issue of *The Architectural Forum* with feature article on the development of Marin City

**Programs** - The monthly Speaker’s Series continues to be one of our proudest outreach programs. This year we re-initiated our classroom visits and have received charming artwork from 3rd and 4th grade classes as a thank you.

**Exhibits** - We are looking forward to collaborating with Dominican University who graciously offered to host an exhibition in their space this fall. Stay tuned for more information on this front.

These three elements are the cornerstone of the Museum’s mission but they require financial support. To that end, we invite you to become a member. Not only will you receive wonderful benefits, but your contribution will underwrite these efforts and help preserve our history.

Your membership, donations and attendance at events provides stability for the Museum. Please continue to support MHM.

Kind regards,
Al Boro

President, MHM Board of Directors

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**Here You Can**

♦ CHECK THE CALENDAR
♦ READ OUR PUBLICATIONS
♦ SEARCH THE COLLECTION
♦ JOIN THE MUSEUM
♦ DONATE AND VOLUNTEER
The last week of June 1891 was a scorcher. Temperatures had been around 110 degrees for three days. At 4:00 in the afternoon of Monday the 29th, a horseman galloped into San Rafael and reported a large fire had broken out on Mount Tamalpais near Tucker’s Camp. There was fear it would spread to Larkspur and Corte Madera. A group of volunteers headed up into the hills. A telephone call notified the San Rafael Water Company, which operated a dam and flume in nearby Bill Williams Gulch. They quickly sent out a crew of 15.

A number of large homes were endangered, including the magnificent estate of Albert E. Kent, a Chicago millionaire. Unluckily, the Kents had moved to Marin in 1871 following the 1871 Chicago Fire. The landowners offered five dollars a day to any man who would fight the fire, five more if they worked through the night — roughly $250 in today’s money. Scores of men turned up to join the fight.

The fire had already burned 70 acres of hay and was advancing on two ranches. The firefighters cut fire lines and set backfires, saving both ranches. Their work was hampered by the extreme heat. Because it was early in the dry season, the chaparral burned fiercely, creating thick oily, smoke and sending flames leaping into the treetops. A newspaper reporter arrived but his party fled for their lives when the fire leaped across the canyon, “roaring like an express train.” “She’s gone,” shouted a policeman. “There’s nothing to stop those flames now from wiping out everything this side of San Quentin!”

The men fought all night. On Tuesday morning, some of Kent’s outbuildings were burned, but the crews managed to stop the fire’s advance to the north. It then curled around to the east side of the mountain and threatened Mill Valley. By Wednesday morning they declared the fire under control, but a strong wind came up and it broke out again. More volunteers poured in from around the Bay Area.

On Thursday the wind died away, and by that afternoon the fire was fully contained. In its three days of terror, the great fire had burned from Bolinas nearly to Larkspur. An estimated 20 square miles of forest had been destroyed, but no major structures were damaged, and no lives were lost. A few days later an unseasonal rainstorm finally put out one of the worst fires in Marin history.
In the early 1900s, Marin’s firemen pulled their equipment to fires by hand. Some carts carried hoses to connect to local water sources, while others carried a fire-quenching mix often made of vinegar and baking soda.

The introduction of horse-drawn fire engines vastly improved response times to fires. San Rafael and San Anselmo acquired horse teams — Tom and Jerry and Major and Colonel, respectively — to tow their apparatus. San Anselmo provided a lovely retirement for their fire horses in 1915 when a new chemical wagon replaced their duties.

In 1910, the Ross Fire Department saved the home of John Martin, described by the Sausalito News as a “well known resident of Ross who never does anything by halves.” In gratitude, Martin donated a $5,500 combination chemical and hose wagon — thought to be one of the first on the West Coast. The lucky fireman who drove the new engine was the only salaried member of the department.

The Marin County Journal reported on December 8, 1921, that San Rafael purchased a 1922 Stutz Fire Engine costing $12,750. The sale included pneumatic cord tires. Other engines were usually delivered with solid rubber tires. The Stutz’s appearance retired fire horses Tom and Jerry to their new careers towing a coal wagon in San Anselmo. San Rafael’s first pumping engine remained in service until 1949.

Many years later, Robert and Marty Marcucci located, purchased and restored San Rafael’s 1922 engine to showroom condition. Second-generation firemen, the two had fond memories of hiding on the floor of their father’s car as he, the San Anselmo Fire Chief, raced to fires.
From the Collection
By Heather Powell

In a county as old and brittle-dry as Marin, a long history of structure and wildfires is not unexpected. The Marin History Museum is honored to be the custodian of our county’s fire-related artifacts. Here are a few of our favorite pieces.

September 27, 1904, was a special day for James Rasmus-sen. After “having served the term of five years as requested by the Laws of the State of California, James was duly elected an Active Member of the San Rafael Fire Department.”

Unfortunately undated, this jaunty blue felt and black leather cap must have perched proudly on the head of a San Rafael fire fighter. It’s fun to imagine James Rasmus-sen tossing his hat in the air upon receiving his Active Member certificate.

On July 29, 1928, an angry employee set the Hotel Rafael on fire. Built in 1888, the 200-room structure burned in three hours. Bank of Italy Club members attending a convention lost furs and jewelry, but none of the 150 guests lost their lives. The Museum’s collection includes another fire survivor: a spoon engraved Hotel Rafael.
We are grateful to Chuck Daniels for remembering that today is tomorrow’s past when he donated the turnout coat he wore while serving in the Ross Fire Department. “Turn out gear” is named for how a fireman turns out his pants over his boots.

Sometimes old looks new again. The family of owner Jordan Smith, who acquired the engine when it was retired from service, donated this 1934 Tamalpais Fire District engine to our museum. A bit large for our shelves, the fire truck is on loan to the Marin County Fire Department for safekeeping.
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Please join us at one of the following levels by going to marinhistory.org or calling 415-382-1182. Your membership will help us to grow and fulfill the Museum’s mission.

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On May 4, 1963, the American Distilling Company on the west side of Bridgeway near Nevada Street caught fire. Employing 225 workers and producing 60,000 cases of high-grade alcohol a month, it was the largest independent liquor producer west of the Mississippi when sparks from faulty wiring turned the four-acre building complex into a raging inferno. “Explosions and flames hundreds of feet high devoured about 167,000 gallons of bourbon, scotch and tequila plus an undetermined amount of other types of liquors and high-grade whiskeys,” wrote the Marin Independent Journal. “For two hours, the (fire) roared and boomed out of control like a crashed bomber. Even after sun-up today, the occasional whiskey barrel exploded like cannon.”

More than 175 firemen fought the flames from 11:30 p.m. until daybreak. Because of the heat, they had to stay back 50 feet, making it difficult to get close with their hoses. Over 200 residents were evacuated, jumping into cars and taking their valuables with them. A dozen other fire units were sent from as far away as San Francisco, coordinated by Sausalito Fire Chief “Matts” Perry.

Local accounts say the stench of raw and exploding alcohol that night, and for days after, was overwhelming. Rivers of alcohol burned with a blue flame and could be seen as far away as the Oakland hills. Some even claimed seagulls flew crooked for weeks, drunk on wafting alcohol fumes.

In the end, the fire consumed two large buildings and their contents plus a maintenance shop, the wholesale premises, and three storage warehouses. Spared were the main six-story building, a brick warehouse containing thousands of gallons of 195 proof alcohol, and four empty fermenters.

Plant superintendent Fred Schmidt reported losses of $2.5 million, later recalculated as $550,000 plus the loss of government taxes on the liquor — the largest fire loss in Sausalito history.

The company resumed operations at the site producing gin and grain alcohol until 1965 when they shut down and consolidated their operations in the East Bay. The distillery and 13 acres were then sold for about $1.1 million to a San Francisco firm that planned to transform the old buildings, once the old Mason Distillery, into a development similar to Ghirardelli Square. But plans and ownership changed and in 1970 the last buildings were torn down. Eight years later, 215 townhouses and condominiums were built at “Whiskey Springs.”
A notice in the December 3, 1874, issue of the Marin Journal, between reports of public drunkenness and boys sledding on wet grass, sought volunteers for a new San Rafael fire company. A week later, the newspaper listed the 27 members of San Rafael Hose Co., No 1 under the command of James Tunstead, County Sheriff.

Four years later, the renamed San Rafael Hose and Hook and Ladder Company No. 1 pulled their hose cart in the 1878 St. Patrick’s Day parade. “The San Rafael Firemen never looked so well,” reported the Marin Journal. While we don’t have photographs of those early firemen, the 1895 company looks mighty smart indeed!

Later in 1878, the fire company announced their fourth annual New Year’s Eve Ball. Tickets were one dollar and the firemen hoped “our citizens will buy the tickets, whether they wish to go or not.” A charity ball you don’t have to attend is an innovation whose time should come again.

In early 1915, a few of the San Rafael Fire Department’s “Gallant Hundred” posed in front of their fire truck for a souvenir brochure. A few months later, on June 28, the firemen were tested when a fire started in the rear of the Kozy Kitchen restaurant on B Street.

The blaze swept down B Street damaging four shops and their second-floor apartments. Losses were estimated at $9,000 ($226,000 in current dollars). At one point, with water pressure failing, it was feared the fire would destroy the entire block bordered by A, B, Third and Fourth streets. When the pressure was restored, Chief Schneider and his lieutenants, who had climbed to the buildings’ roofs, directed seven streams of water onto the flames. Responding to screams, Under-Sheriff Charles Redding rescued a young woman paralyzed with fear in an upstairs apartment, carrying the struggling woman to safety. The firemen’s skill and courage, as well as the day’s lack of wind, saved San Rafael’s downtown core.
On July 29, 1957, 29 years to the day after the Hotel Rafael burned at the kerosene-slick hands of a disgruntled employee, San Rafael’s Fourth Street between D and E streets met a similar fate.

The fire started with a “whoosh” around 7 p.m. in a garage warehouse. At its peak, flame and smoke were visible from Sonoma and San Francisco. Melted light poles sagged like licorice sticks. Flames destroyed nearly 20 businesses at losses of over $2 million ($18 million in current dollars).

The flammable materials stored at Morwear’s Paint Store proved to be the most difficult to extinguish. “It was the most disastrous business district fire I have ever seen in 33 years with the fire department,” said Fire Chief Johansen.

“Very kind people” mobilized to help residents in the fire’s path. Mrs. Thornhill was drying dishes when a sheet of flames roared toward her kitchen. She grabbed what she could while volunteers collected furniture and bedding. Two minutes later, her house was fully engulfed.

Other volunteers moved Miss Margaret Rose’s possessions, including a television set and typewriter, from her apartment above the Cottage Bookshop to the Marin Orthopedia Company. Shortly thereafter, an enormous tongue of flame licked across Fourth Street, consuming the Orthopedia offices and all of Margaret’s belongings.

Vic Koll, absorbed in the Floyd Patterson – Tommy Jackson heavyweight boxing match, ignored the sirens until alerted by volunteers that he “better get out; the place is on fire!” He escaped with a coat, trousers and a pair of shoes. Apparently, boxing is best watched bare-chested. (For the record, Gentleman Floyd Patterson won the title bout.)

Glass cuts, a sprained ankle and a nail-punctured foot were the only injuries suffered by four of the hundreds of firemen, volunteers, police and servicemen from Marin, Oakland and San Francisco who fought the blaze. “We were lucky,” said Dr. Rafael G. Dufficy.

Not everyone found destruction in the flames. Heat popped open Fourth Street’s parking meters, pouring hot nickels and pennies onto the sidewalk and gutter. “Moppets” dodged fire hoses and risked burnt fingers to collect their treasure.
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Corte Madera’s First Firehouse, 1930
By Patricia L. Keats

Corte Madera, begun as a summer cottage community, had many year-round residents in the early 20th century. In 1908, a volunteer fire department was formed, operating with a chemical engine and two hose-carts.

Chemical engines, common in 19th century firefighting, were basically a large fire extinguisher mounted on a cart. The engine and one hose-cart were kept in a station built for $214 adjacent to Mahood’s Store, on Redwood Avenue beyond Menke Park and the Gazebo. The other hose-cart was kept at Roberts’ Garage on Redwood Avenue at Morningside Drive. The department’s first fire truck was a small Chevrolet Pope Hartford, purchased in 1916. A bond issue in 1928 allowed the purchase of a large American LaFrance 500 gpm (gallons per minute) pumper — the pride of the department for years.

Incorporated in 1930, volunteers began to collect the $8,000 needed to build a new fire station. They were spurred by the new LaFrance truck, as well as the devastating 1929 Mt. Tamalpais and Mill Valley fire, which destroyed the Tam O’Shanter Inn at the top of the Corte Madera Grade. The volunteers raised funds through operating the concession stand at The Larkspur Rose Bowl, the dance operated for decades by The Larkspur Volunteer Fire Department.

Volunteer firemen constructed the new building under the supervision of local builder W.F. Wegner. The station included office space for the police chief and town clerk, and an assembly hall for local groups. The Corte Madera firehouse, located at Willow and First streets, now Tamalpais Drive, was dedicated on January 18, 1931, by the Larkspur fire department and other local civic groups.

The firehouse was sold to the town of Corte Madera in September 1953 and is still in use today as the town hall, where you can recognize the arches which were entrances to the firehouse. In 1965, the fire department moved to new quarters on the adjacent lot to the east, their current location – on the corner of Pixley and Tamalpais drives.

A film of the volunteers building their firehouse, believed to have been shot by George Nivena, a Larkspur businessman who lived in Corte Madera, is available at vimeo.com/205730987 and at MarinFireHistory.org. Keep an eye out for the photobombing goat and don’t miss how the firefighters smoked like, well, a house ablaze!
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TEST YOURSELF:
HOW WELL DID YOU READ THE ARTICLES?

1. What Sausalito neighborhood stands in the same location as the American Distilling Co.?
2. Which Marin fire chief founded the county’s volunteer fire departments?
3. The Corte Madera Town Hall was once a ____________?
4. What is “turn out gear”?
5. Besides water, what did Marin’s 1900s firefighters use to extinguish flames?
6. Did the 1891 Bill Williams Gulch fire destroy Albert E. Kent’s estate?
7. What year was San Rafael’s first fire company formed?
8. What Tiburon building, now a pizza parlor, survived the April 1921 fire?
9. In 1913, an Italian mobster from San Francisco bought what soon-to-burn hotel?

Answers on p.23
Fires in 1890 and 1906 destroyed Tiburon’s business district on Main Street, but the two fires in 1921 caused the greatest loss.

The first fire, on February 24, 1921, burned the Northwestern Pacific Railroad’s machine and car shops. In addition to the shop buildings, one passenger coach, one electric motor coach and two flat cars under repair in the car shop were destroyed.

On April 4, 1921, the business section on Main Street was destroyed for the fourth time in 31 years. The fire started in Sullivan’s Pool Hall — a facility known as Sullivan’s Saloon and Pool Hall before the town “went dry” with Prohibition.

Nine-year-old Marjorie McNeil noticed the fire when a bright light woke her at 2 a.m. Marjorie ran through the neighborhood rousing those still asleep.

With the fire out of control, Tiburon sent for help from San Francisco. When San Francisco Fire Department Chief Thomas Murphy reported that his fire boats were out of service but he would send help if transport could be provided, the ferryboat Tamalpais was dispatched. Engine Company 12, including eight men, a motor-driven engine and hose wagon, arrived in Tiburon too late to save the buildings on Main Street — 11 commercial buildings and six dwellings were destroyed.

The fires shared a common victim — the infamous saloons. That the saloons remained in clandestine operation during Prohibition was one of the worst kept secrets in Marin. In the Prohibition era, boats loaded with illicit liquor motored under the buildings and liquor was brought up through trap doors. Some say the McNeil Building, re-built after the 1906 fire and still standing today, was saved by the firemen in 1921 because they knew that was where the booze was stored.
A “Rendezvous for San Francisco Club Men” Burned
By Claire Hendren

The Tocaloma Hotel might not sound familiar today. But in the late 1890s, the hotel, a couple miles east of Olema on the banks of Lagunitas Creek, was a popular vacation spot. The Northern Pacific Coast Railroad serviced the area beginning in 1875, attracting hunters, fishermen and bikers seeking escape from San Francisco.

In 1879, John Lycurgus built a two-story hotel called the Tocaloma House. Only three years later, Lycurgus passed the business to Joseph Adams before the building underwent its first fire in 1885. Owing to the hotel’s success, Joseph Bertrand oversaw the hotel’s $25,000 reconstruction, resulting in the reopening of a vast 42-room, three-story guesthouse in 1889. Under Bertrand’s management, the Tocaloma Hotel became a destination hotspot, offering weekly rates ranging from $8 to $12 and a public restaurant and bar, where it hosted grand balls and Thanksgiving events.

In 1913, Caesar Ronchi, associated with an ill-famed Italian mob in San Francisco and looking to flee potential harm from his past associates, eagerly purchased the hotel. Three years later, on December 26, 1916 at 3 a.m., the Tocaloma burned down. Luckily, only five people, including Ronchi and his wife, were staying at the hotel that night. All managed to escape the building with minor injuries. The Mill Valley Record recorded the “fire presumably was caused by a defective flue.”

Newspapers all over the area spread the word about the fire. A December 30, 1916 article from the Mill Valley Record called Tocaloma Hotel “a landmark of Marin County” and a “onetime famous resort, a rendezvous for San Francisco club men on their way to the Pacific Union Club’s summer quarters in Marin County.” The Petaluma Argus-Courier informed readers that once the fire broke, cases of champagne were removed from the bar and put next to the railroad stop, in the hopes of saving some of the celebratory beverage. Unfortunately, the bottles “were exploded by the terrific heat.”

While plans to build a “modern villa” on the site were briefly mentioned, the replacement consisted only of a $15,000 tavern that lacked the hotel rooms of the institution’s grander days. The hotel became a private residence that was later abandoned.
Charles Reilley Jr. (Charlie) was born in Victor, Colorado, the second of Charles and Mary Ellen Reilley’s six children.

The Reilley family moved to Goldfield, Nevada, in 1904. By 1905, Charlie, his younger brother and his mother were all who survived. He delivered newspapers to help support his family. At age 15, he quit school to start an electrician’s apprenticeship program paying two dollars a day.

Charlie enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1917 and fought in France and Belgium during World War I. On November 1st, Sgt. Reilley voluntarily accompanied a patrol into the enemy-occupied city of Audenarde. For his bravery, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and the World War I Victory Medal with three Campaign bars.

After the war, Charlie returned to Nevada and worked as an electrician before moving to Marin. He married Alice Fountain on St. Patrick’s Day in 1923 and settled in Point Reyes. In 1930, he became a member of the Point Reyes Volunteer Fire Department and later joined the neighboring Olema Volunteer Fire Department.

Charlie was hired in 1945 as a Fire Warden in Point Reyes for the four-year-old Marin County Fire Department (MCFD) and became Deputy Sheriff in 1950. Charlie was promoted to acting MCFD Fire Chief in 1951. As Chief, he faced public controversy throughout the 1950s, including over deciding whether fighting vegetation or structure fires were at the heart of MCFD’s mission.

While we think of fire seasons stretching longer now, a December 10, 1959, Mill Valley Record article noted that Chief Reilley had obtained from the Board of Supervisors an extension of the dry-season controls until the rains came. Other evidence of Charlie’s ability to work with the Board of Supervisors included obtaining $25,000 for a substation on Mount Tamalpais and $4,000 in standby pay for firemen.

Among many notable acts, Charlie supported the formation of volunteer fire departments, including the Strawberry Fire Department, to form a fire district with adequate equipment and staff to provide local protection.

Charlie quietly rebuilt the MCFD until 1962 when illness forced his retirement at age 65. He distinguished himself both as a fire chief and a leader in Marin County.
THANK YOU TO OUR MHM MEMBERS!

The Marin History Museum would like to recognize the following individuals and families who have recently joined or renewed their membership.
MEET OUR BULLETIN WRITERS

Thank you for Sharing your time and talent with the Marin History Museum

Susan Cluff is a freelance writer and speech coach who’s lived in Marin since 1980. She also writes historical mysteries and flash fiction.

Brian K. Crawford is a retired computer programmer who spends his time doing historical and genealogical research, writing books, and building trails.

Jo Haraf quilts, gardens, hikes, and trains Betty (her precocious terrier-mix) when not writing about Marin County history.

Robert L. Harrison has been writing articles on Marin history for the past two years. He enjoys relating local history as a docent in the Tiburon Railroad and Ferry Depot Museum.

Claire Hendren graduated with a M.A. in Art and Museum Studies from Georgetown University and received her PhD in Art History from Université Paris Nanterre.

Pat Keats, with degrees in history, art history, and library science, has worked at libraries since 1974. She is currently the Library Director at The Society of California Pioneers.

Jean Mansen is an editor and writer who, when not at her desk, can be found hiking Marin’s trails with her dog and listening to audiobooks.

TRIVIA ANSWERS

1. Whiskey Springs
2. Chief Charlie Reilley Jr.
3. Fire station
4. Firefighters’ protective uniforms
5. A mix of vinegar and baking soda.
6. No. Kent paid volunteers $250 a day (current dollars) to protect his home.
7. 1874
8. The McNeil Building
9. The Tocaloma Hotel

Heather Powell is the Collections Manager at MHM. She holds a M. A. in Museum Studies from John F. Kennedy University and a B. A. in Photography from San Francisco State University.
COMING EVENTS

Marin History Summer Awards Celebration

Marin County 2nd Historian Award
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