

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan
Livermore City Historian

THE LIVERMORE FLAGPOLE

The 1904 Livermore committee that was organized to raise funds for the town's Fourth of July celebration had an excess of \$596.86 after the holiday and decided to buy a flagpole for the town. Local chapters of the Foresters and Sons and Daughters of the Golden West volunteered to buy the flag. The committee bought a pole made from a Douglas fir, 126 feet tall and 18 inches in diameter at its base, from a San Francisco firm for \$207. It weighed 5,300 pounds. When the lodges learned of the pole's size, they returned the 25-foot flag they had ordered in exchange for a 40-foot one.

The railroad refused to ship the pole to Livermore, saying that it was too long for the narrow turns, so David and Alex McDonald hauled it from Oakland with two long timber wagons pulled by an eight-mule team. John "Jack" E. Jensen remembered hearing about "the trouble the drivers had negotiating the turns through Dublin Canyon, and all the fancy maneuvering the huge pole made necessary." The trip took two days; the procession arrived in Livermore on Sunday afternoon, 26 August 1905.

That week's Thursday issue of the *Echo* noted that the pole was being given two coats of oil and several coats of white paint down near the railroad depot. Presumably, the pole was rigged for the flag in the same location. After much discussion, the intersection of Lizzie (now S. Liver-

more Avenue) and First Streets at Mill Square had been chosen for the site. Charles Lefever, an oil well rigger, dug a 10-foot-deep hole in the middle of the intersection. He raised the flagpole into position with four draft horses and cemented it into place at 4:40 on Tuesday afternoon 5 September 1905. Livermore is 487 feet above sea level at the flagpole site. A gilded ball eighteen inches in diameter was placed on the top of the pole.

The dedication of the flagpole took place on California's Admission Day, September 9, with a gala town celebration. First in the order of events was a mid-morning parade from the city hall at First and McLeod to the new flagpole. Marchers included the Livermore Band, National Guard Company I, war veterans, and members of many local lodges. After the parade, the crowd in Mill Square heard the playing of reveille and a salute from the town cannon. As the flag rose for the first time, the town band played "The Star Spangled Banner." James W. Clarke, a member of the Fourth of July committee, gave a presentation speech: "The people of Livermore have done far more today than raise a pole and float a flag. They have erected a monument to the love they bear their country that will ever remain beautiful to them. ... There is not a man in this town, or in this valley—no, nor a stranger within our gates—who

walks on our streets and gazes on that flag but will be a better citizen and a truer man. ... As in days of old, 'All roads lead to Rome,' so we have placed it here, where all roads join—from north and east and south and west, they may see it as they come." Livermore Mayor Thomas E. Knox said a few words, accepting the flagpole and flag on behalf of the town. A vaudeville entertainment followed in the afternoon and a grand ball with about 200 couples attending in the evening, both held at the Sweeney Opera House.

The pole was moved only once, about 15 feet southwest to a traffic island when the state reconfigured the intersection in 1959. Workers cut the pole off at its base and sank it into a new 14-foot hole. There had been a controversy about the flagpole's height. It was measured at this time at 120 feet before it was re-buried. According to records kept by Police Chief Johnny Michelis, automobile traffic hit the pole 61 times between 1931 and 1972.

In the early life of Livermore, the flagpole area was used as a gathering place for orators, for example politicians and suffragists, and their audiences. It was also an ideal spot for band concerts, patriotic exercises, horse show judges. There was talk of creating a permanent bandstand there, but that did not happen. Although now on a little island in the midst

of crowded modern paved streets, the flagpole is still the center of the city, just as James W. Clarke noted. When giving directions, Livermore residents often begin, "Well, you know where the flagpole is. ..."

In 2004 the city had structural engineers evaluate the flagpole. The experts believed it to be structurally unsafe; a strong wind might cause it to break and fall. On October 7 city workers removed the flagpole and discovered that only the bottom 11 feet and the top five feet showed deterioration, but a crack ran the entire length. In December the city council decided to purchase a 120-foot fiberglass pole as a replacement at the cost of \$40,000. The new pole was installed at the same site on 17 June 2005. The pole was dedicated and first flag flown on July 4. Three 20-foot sections of the original wooden pole were saved and pieced together to form a 60-foot flagpole that was installed at the southeast corner of Carnegie Park next to the Veterans Memorial at a centennial celebration on 9 September 2005. It has its original flag-hoisting hardware and is topped with its old gilded globe.

In the Carnegie Building, a display created by an Eagle Scout project in 2010 shows a portion of the original flagpole. You can see the crack in the pole and count the rings to discover the tree's age.

(Readers can reach me at am50homan@yahoo.com.)