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Research Only

The Great Fires Of Livermore

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LIVERMORE'S GREAT FIRES

September 26, 1871, Tuesday - the Great Laddsville Fire

The fire broke out about six o'clock in Knight and Sproul's drugstore and quickly spread through the village. The losses itemized were:

B. Mayer - general merchandise store a total loss, but contents were mostly saved;

C. Minor - vacant building;

Knight and Sproul's drug store was a total loss;

Henry Goetjen general merchandise and Post Office, a portion of stock saved but building was a total loss;

A. J. Alvres - barber shop, stock saved but building was a total loss;

Antone Bardellini - Washington Hotel, portion of the furniture saved but the building a total loss;

Western Union Telegraph office was destroyed including all its equipment;

The buildings were all insured except those of Miner and Goetjen.

Dr. Knight was wounded in the forehead by the explosion of a metallic cartridge.

Total loss was estimated at \$20,000.

Six days later, Jose Flores' unoccupied building burned with a loss estimated at \$300.

(The business section of Laddsville never recovered after the fire because most of the merchants moved to the new town of Livermore, a half-mile away.)

August 8, 1876, Tuesday - Ladd's Hotel

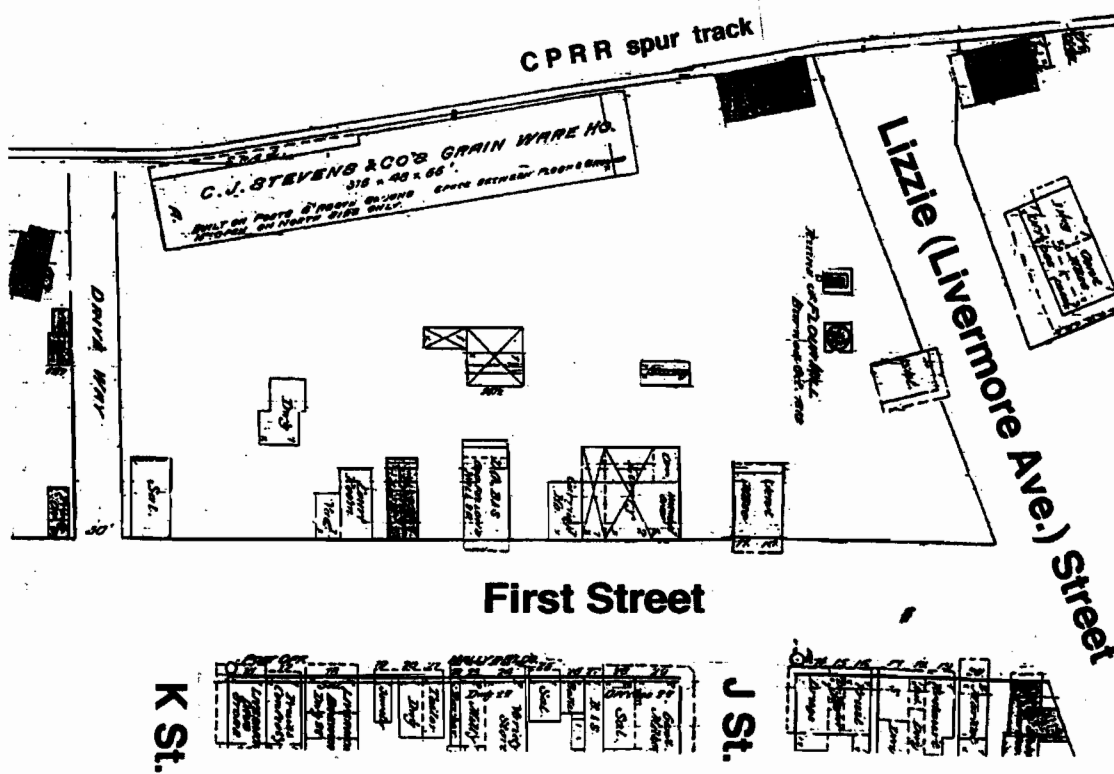
The structure was two stories, part wood and part adobe, and contained nineteen rooms plus a barroom. The fire broke out about five o'clock in the morning in a vacant room in the northeast corner of the building on the second floor. The flames made swift headway because of the tinder-like condition of the old woodwork. Scarcely any furniture was rescued

There were eleven persons in the building, most of whom were still in bed.

They barely had time to put on their clothes and get down stairs.

The Livermore Hook and Ladder Company was slow in coming to the scene, and efforts were hampered by the fact that the double decker hand pumper was not available; it was in the shop undergoing repairs. (This was the pumper that Livermore had bought from Stockton five weeks earlier.)

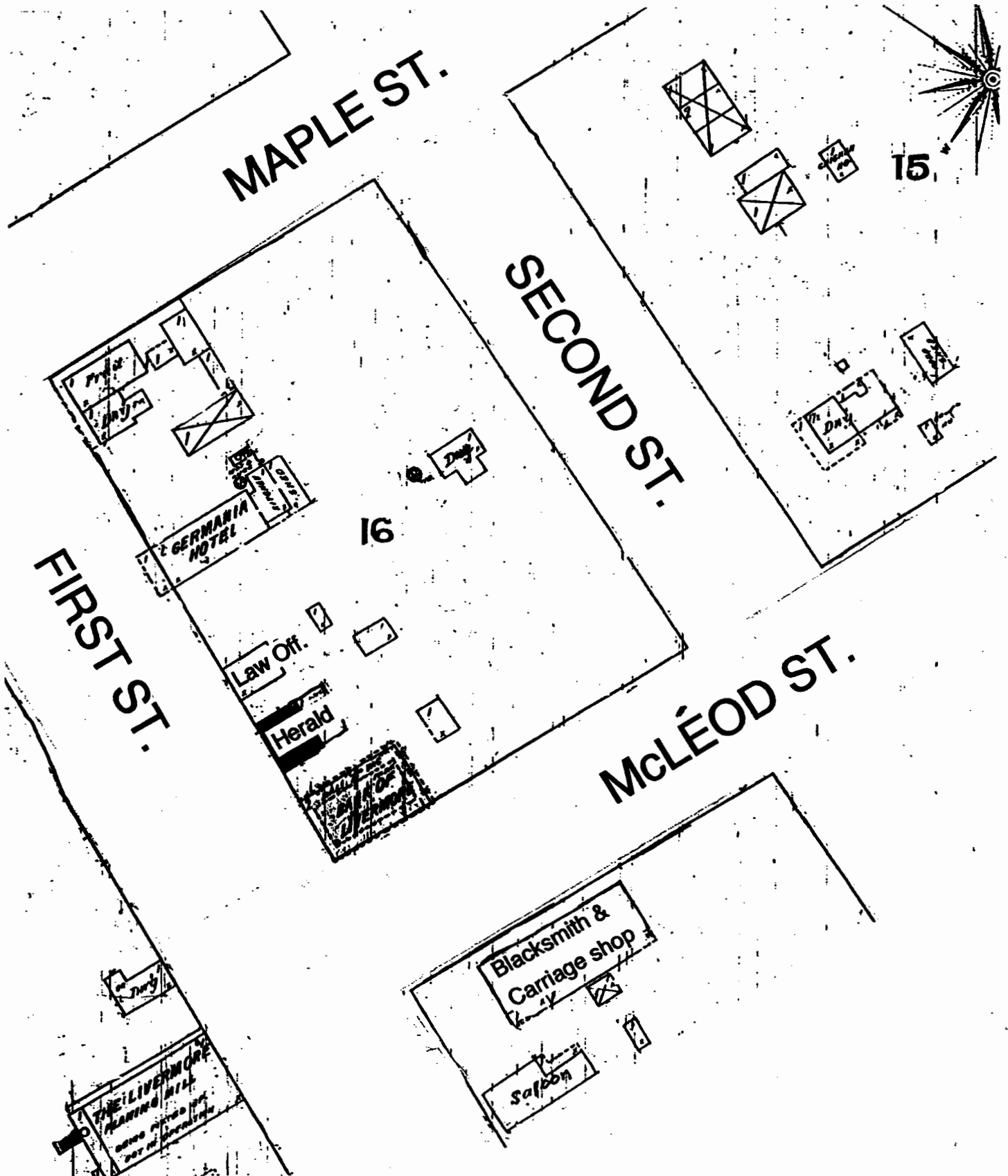
C. J. Stevens' Mill Fire - October 16, 1882



October 16, 1882, Monday - Calvin J. Stevens Livermore Mill

On Monday night, October 16, 1882, Stevens' Flouring Mill burned, and was a complete loss. The mill was sited west of Livermore Avenue and south of the SPRR tracks that ran along the present Railroad Avenue. It was the Town of Livermore's first industry, being established in August, 1869. The mill was never rebuilt.

Livermore Herald fire - Sept. 6, 1891.



September 6, 1891, Sunday - Livermore Herald

At a few minutes past five o'clock last Sunday morning the Herald office was discovered to be in flames, and before the fire department was able to check its progress, the fire had spread to G. W. Langan's law office on one side and the bank building on the other. The *Herald* building and its contents were entirely destroyed, but a small portion of Langan's building was saved. The *Herald* building belonged to W. P. Bartlett, was worth about \$300, and was not insured. The printing plant, the property of Ed J. Livernash, was valued at about \$3,500 and was insured for \$2,200.

G. W. Langan's law library and almost the entire contents of his building were saved. He estimates his loss at \$750, with \$200 insurance. The bank building, owned by J. S. Dungan of San Francisco, was damaged to the extent of about \$3,000, supposed to be covered by insurance. The Bank of Livermore reports a loss, in damage to furniture, etc., of about \$50 only. There has been no interruption of business at the bank, which is going on as usual. The origin of the fire is a mystery, but is supposed to have been the work of an incendiary.

April 3, 1895, Wednesday - First Street Fire

Shortly after 3:00 PM a fire started in Bock's tailor shop on First Street, opposite the intersection of First and K Streets. The flames spread quickly in a westerly direction to Day's Livery Stable the Cosmopolitan Hotel and Thomas Flanagan's saloon, destroying the buildings and endangering the town. Day succeeded in saving his horses and vehicles, but lost a large amount of hay, feed and harness. The buildings on the south side of First Street were scorched and roofs of dwellings several blocks away were set on fire by flying cinders.

The fire department did good service keeping the flames confined to the three buildings destroyed. A strong wind was blowing at the time. Several firemen were injured by a falling chimney, but no one was seriously hurt.

The loss is estimated at over \$8,000. The insurance on the Cosmopolitan Hotel, owned by the Jenkins estate, was \$3,500, on Day's stable, \$700, and on Flanagan's saloon (no amount given). Bock's tailor shop was not insured and that loss was estimated at \$200.

April 3, 1897, Monday - Another Fire - M. F. Mack's Store

A little after 2 o'clock Monday morning Nightwatchman Coughlin discovered flames issuing from the rear of M.F. Mack's store and, together with Norman McLeod, who was at the time writing in his office, gave the alarm by the firing of pistols and, as quickly as possible, the ringing of the fire bell.

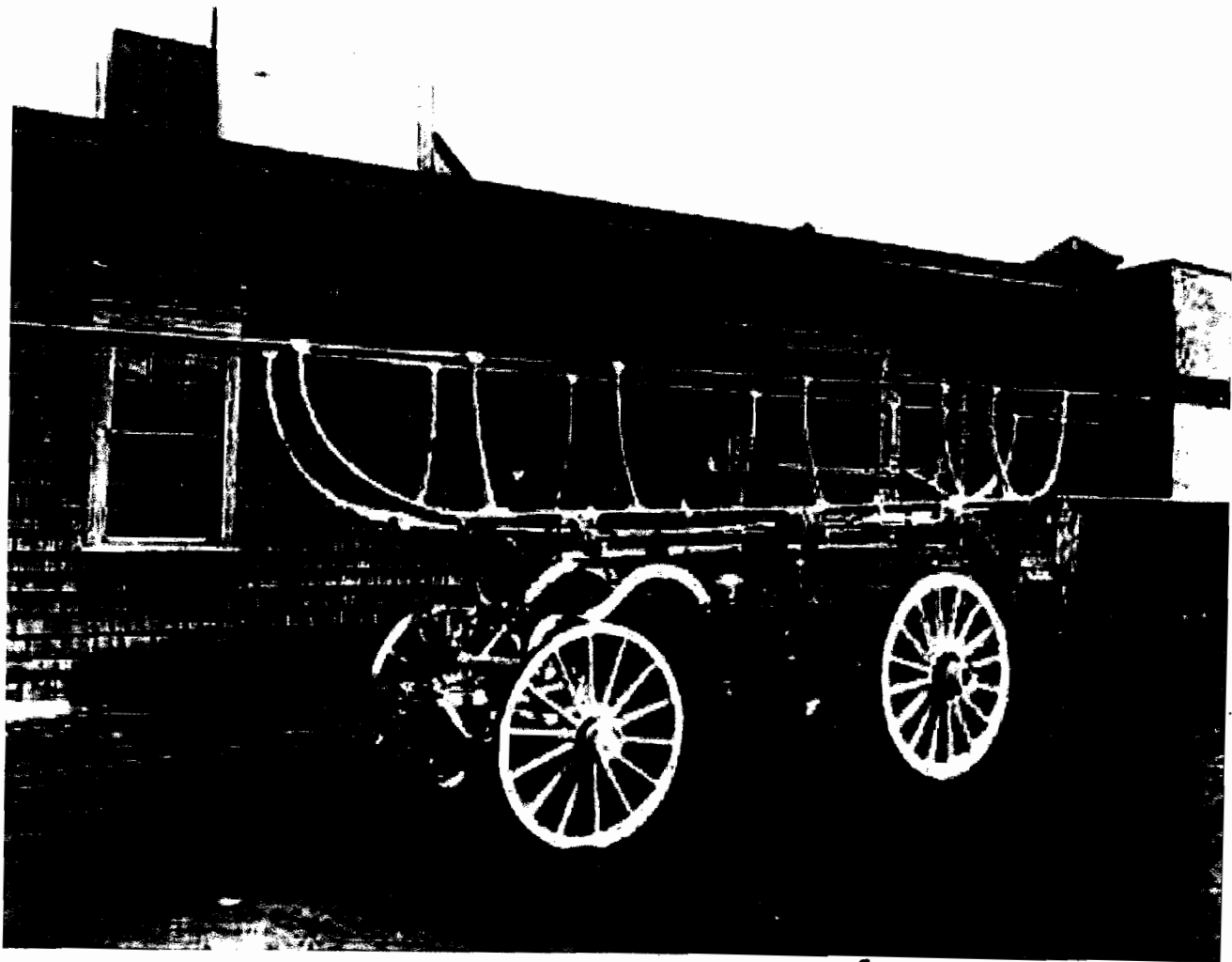
Apparently, the firemen and everybody else must have been sleeping very soundly, for never before were they so slow in turning out. Before the firemen got to work the flames had mounted to the roof of S. Levy's adjoining two-story building, and for a short time the prospect of the destruction of both buildings and possibly others across First Street, was quite alarming. However, Norman McLeod did great work with the chemical fire extinguishers, and when the firemen did get to work no fire was ever extinguished so quickly.

Mr. Mack's stock, which he valued at \$4,200, is almost a total loss, the damage resulting chiefly from water, Insured for \$1000. S. Levy's loss was adjusted at \$75 - \$60 on the building and \$15 on furniture. The building, occupied by Mr. Mack, belongs to James O'Brien, whose loss has been adjusted to his satisfaction, for \$209.87.

June 3, 1903, Saturday - A Disastrous Fire Narrowly Averted - M. F. Mack's Store

Last Saturday evening at 7:20 o'clock a lamp which George Jenkins, an employee in M. F. Mack's store had just lighted in the back end of the store exploded a few moments afterwards, when he was in the front of the store, and after trying in vain to fight out the fire with a sack he ran out of the building just as a large tank near by, partially filled with coal oil, also exploded with a loud report, like a small cannon, that was heard all over town. Dense, black smoke poured out of the building, checking the flames temporarily. The alarm of fire was given, and the fire department quickly responded, For a while it looked as though the Levy block and several adjacent buildings would be destroyed, but luckily there was no wind. Five streams were soon pouring on the fire, and the fire company with the aid of other citizens, did very effective work and had the fire practically extinguished in half an hour.

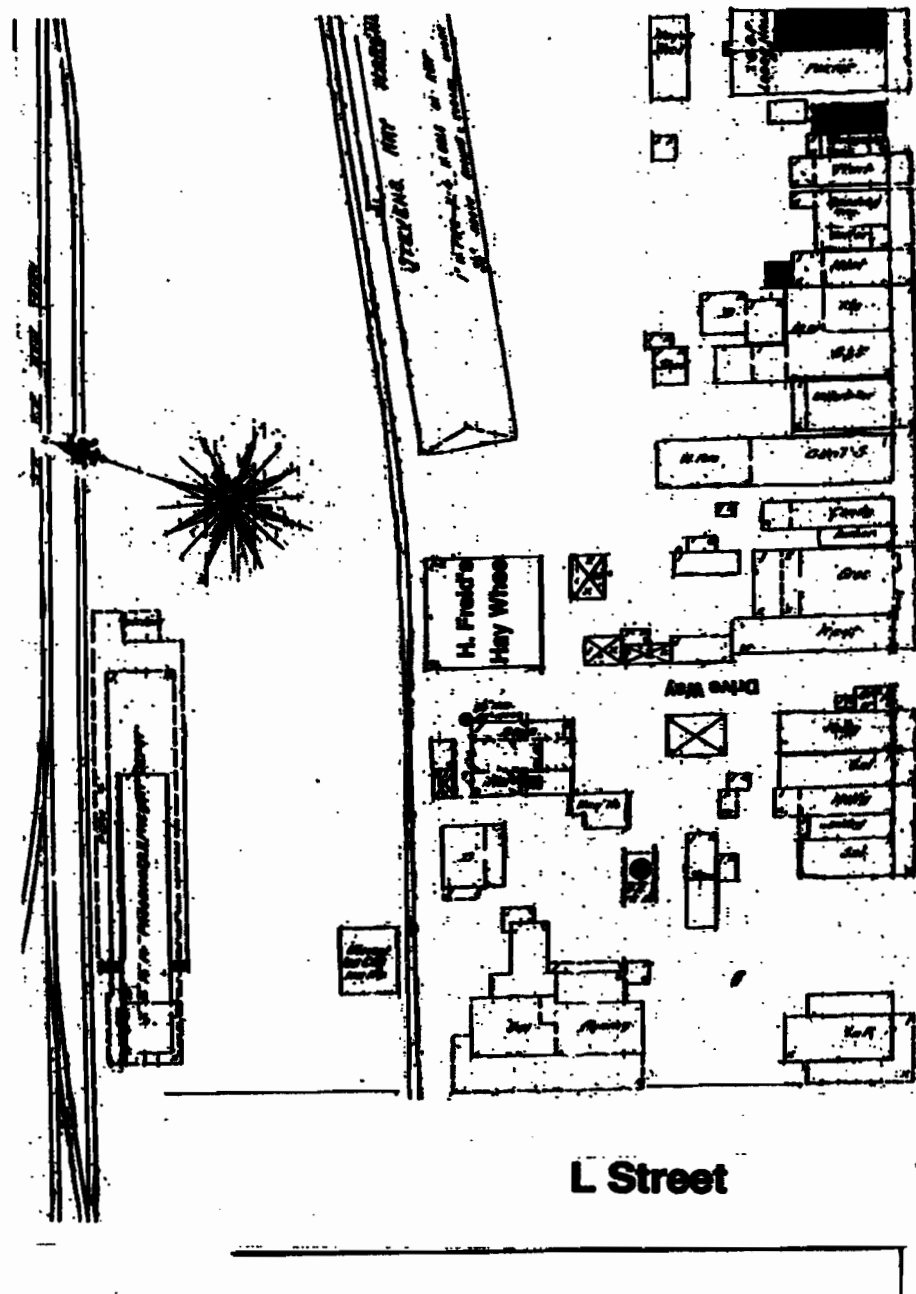
The interior of M. F. Mack's store was entirely wrecked, and he was allowed the full insurance of \$750. The building was also practically a total loss, and for this and a little damage to the rear of L. P. Hansen's shoe store adjoining the owner, Tony Gardella, was allowed \$725. The back end of the Levy building and part of the roof was also badly damaged, and the owner Hans Anderson, who had just had extensive repairs made on it, was allowed \$1250 damages. The water and smoke also damaged the dry goods stock of Johnson and Emminger and the restaurant of John Vukota, in the lower story. The former were the heaviest losers by the fire and were allowed \$2475.56 out of \$3000 and the latter \$168.10 out of \$700.



A Jeffers hand pumper, like that shown above, was Livermore's primary fire fighting equipment from 1875 to 1920. Supplemented by several hose carts, strategically located about the community, it was doubtless used in extinguishing the fires described in this booklet.

The Jeffers pumper was replaced in 1920 by a Seagraves motorized fire engine. The retired pumper languished in the City Corporation yard until about 1930 when it was sold for junk.

Hay Barn Fire - July 25, 1908



First Street

L Street

Wednesday, July 25, 1908 - Hay Barn Fire between First and SPRR Tracks

About 8:00 PM, a passerby noticed a thread of flame creeping up the northeast side of a hay barn located behind the businesses on First Street near K and near the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks. Before the alarm could be given, the whole interior of the barn was in flames. The barn contained between 500 and 600 tons of hay.

When the fire fighters arrived, a huge stack of burning hay had fallen over to the east very close to the west end of the Stevens warehouse. If that caught fire, because the warehouse was about two blocks long, there was concern that the entire business district might go.

The firemen endured the heat of the blaze by being wrapped in wet cloths and by having a stream from a garden hose continuously played on them.

The Fire Department managed to keep the fire from spreading to the barn behind Charles Livermore's First Street market. Several outbuildings and sheds were lost. The wall of a cottage behind the Farmers' Exchange Hotel to the west on L Street was charred.

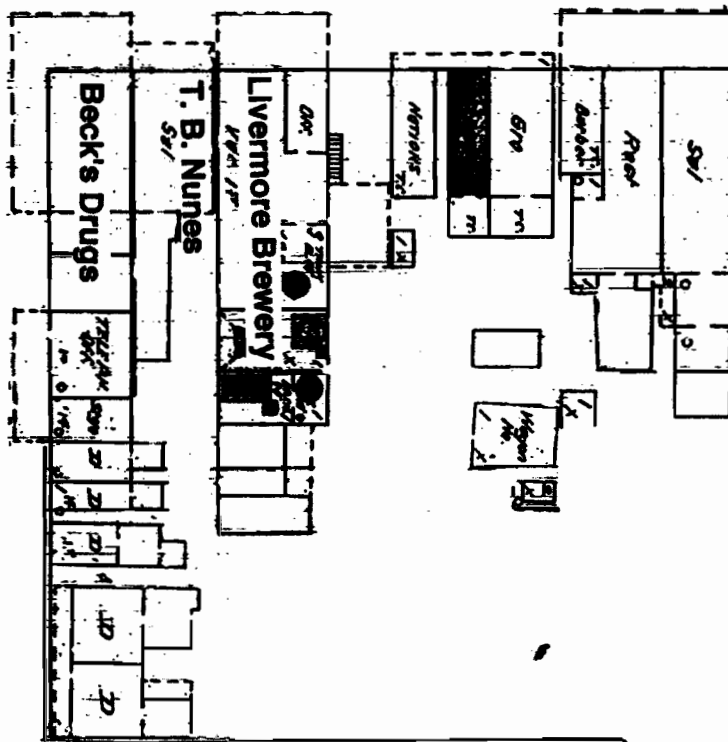
The SPRR sent their yard fire engine and a crew from Tracy, but the blaze was under control before it arrived.

By 10:00 PM the fire was contained, although the hay smoldered for several more days. The loss of the hay barn and contents was estimated at \$9,000, and the contents were only partially covered by insurance.

(It was about this time that the town Board of Trustees passed an ordinance limiting the number of tons of hay that could be stored in any one structure.)

Livermore Brewery Fire - November 6, 1908

First Street



K Street

Second Street

November 6, 1908, Saturday - Livermore Brewery Fire

The fire at Livermore Brewery was discovered at 3:45 AM. A tenant who occupied a room at the rear of the second floor was awakened by the crackling of flames. He rushed to warn the occupants in the front part of the building, Dennis Bernal and his family. The fire spread so rapidly that the Bernals were able to escape with only their night clothes. Bernal was, however, able to save his account books and papers, but all the family's possessions were destroyed in the fire.

The fire destroyed not only the brewery, but T. B. Nunes' saloon, next door to the west, and damaged the next building, the Beck Drug Store, that stood on the corner of First and K Streets.

The Livermore *Herald* had a follow-on item on the front page: "(Bernal) was discussing the loss of his brewery with his wife at breakfast and was naturally despondent. She told him to cheer up as the situation was not as bad as he represented, as she had accumulated a sum of money, the amount of which she did not know or at least failed to disclose, and that she had hidden it away in a receptacle behind a chimney for a rainy day and that at least the melted gold would be found."

"Mr. Bernal dug in the debris as directed and expected to find a few dollars. To his utter astonishment he found something over \$2000 in gold coin which was only slightly discolored. It appears that the good wife had for years been saving each week a portion of her generous household allowance."

September 8, 1905, Sunday - Peter McKeany's Barn

"An alarm of fire at one o'clock Sunday morning was for the burning of a barn in P. McKeany's stock corral on the block between Third and Fourth, J and K Streets, but although the Fire Department quickly responded, nothing could be done to save the building, and as it was in the center of the block by itself, there was no danger to other buildings. The barn was partly filled with hay, and Mr. McKeany estimates his total loss at \$600, there being no insurance. The building was an old landmark, having stood there for some 30 years. Some tramp sleeping in the barn is supposed to have been the cause of the fire. Mr. McKeany is undecided whether he will rebuild or not."

(The site of Peter McKeany's barn is now the location of Livermore's Carnegie Library, constructed in 1911. The building houses the Livermore Heritage Guild History Center and the Livermore Art Association Art Gallery.)

J. S. Williams Clothing Store Fire - January 11, 1916

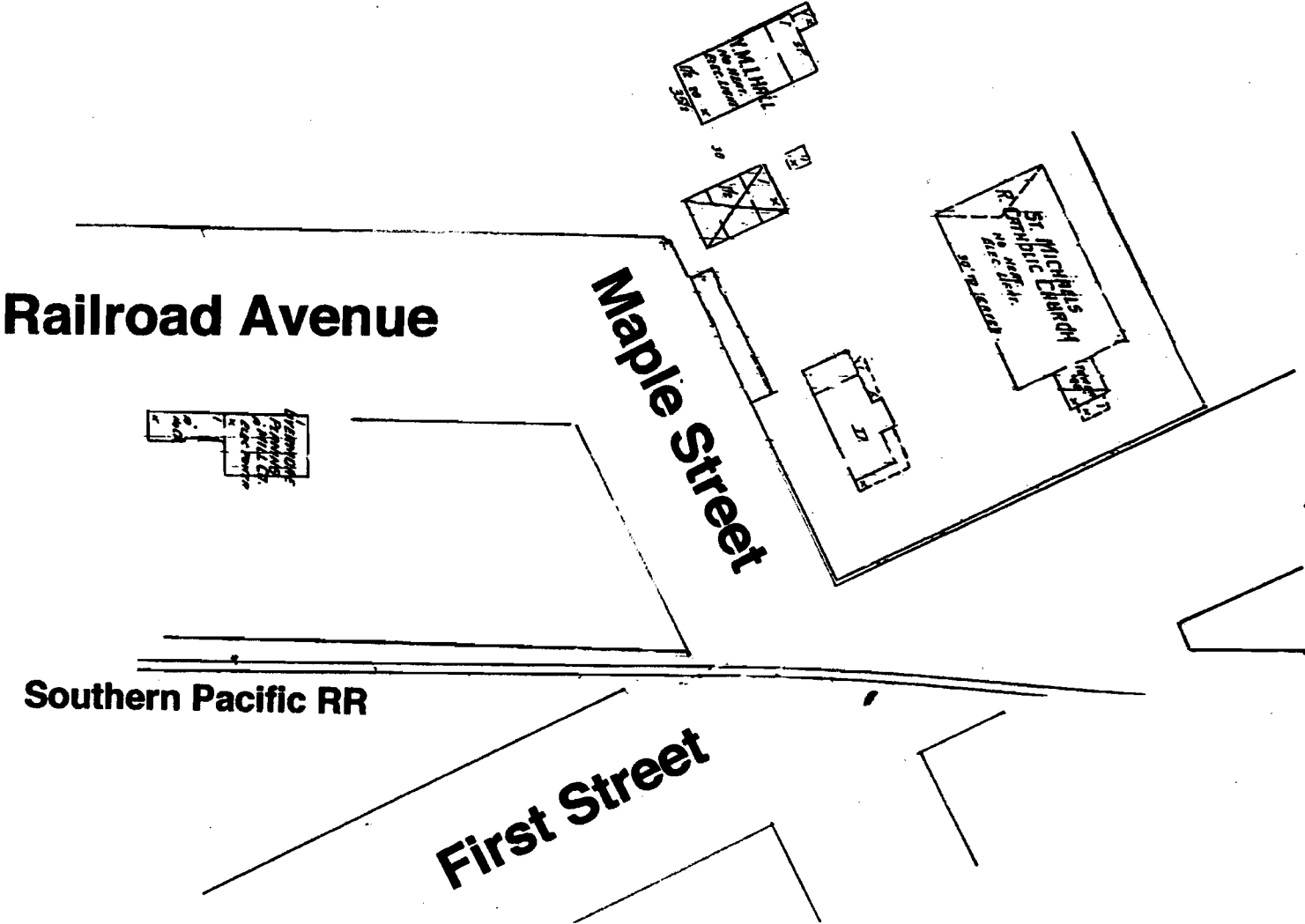
Two boys turned in the alarm to report a fire at the J. S. Williams Company, a clothing and furnishings store located on the north side of First Street midway between J and K Streets. It was about 5:30PM when the firemen arrived. The fire apparently started at the rear of the store where a heating stove was located. Before it was checked the conflagration had almost completely reduced the building to ashes and badly damaged two adjacent businesses, Barney Harron's shoe store and P. J. Murphy's meat market.

The store manager said he was in the building about noon that day and the stove was cold at that time. He advanced a theory that the fire could have been started by a cigar butt. There were two broken places in the corner of the room where the fire started, caused by the wheels of a heavy safe breaking through the flooring. He suggested that litter dropping through the holes into the basement when the store was last swept could have included a cigar thrown away by a customer earlier in the day that smoldered, catching trash on fire. His theory was bolstered by the fact that a large hole was burned in the floor near the stove.

The Williams Company suffered a \$5000 loss of which only \$1500 was covered by insurance. Several insurance adjusters were in town the next day satisfying the claims of Harron and Murphy.

This was another case of the town's good luck with fires that had the potential of devastating the downtown area. That luck was enforced by the fact that it was a rainy day, that no wind was blowing, and by hard work by the firemen.

St. Michaels' Catholic Church Fire - August 4, 1916



August 4, 1916, Friday - St. Michael's Catholic Church

A fire broke out about 1:30 PM at Horton and Kennedy's planing mill that was located a short distance west of St. Michaels' Church. Firemen responded promptly to the alarm but could do nothing to keep the blaze from spreading to the lumber sheds.

The fire started near an enclosed electric motor. By the time Israel Horton, one of the owners, could call one of the employees to run to the engine house to sound the alarm, the whole building was on fire. The mill dust was explosive when it came in contact with fire.

In the meantime, burning shingles were carried by a strong west wind towards St Michaels' Church and rectory. Soon embers lodged in several places on the church roof, but the stream of water from the hand pumper engine could not reach the burning places. Even the ladders from the hook and ladder truck were not long enough to reach the eaves of the roof so that a bucket brigade could be formed.

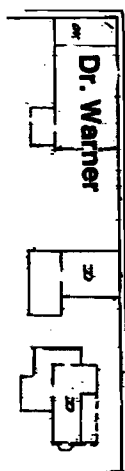
In a few minutes the entire roof was a mass of flames and the building was doomed. The rectory caught fire several times but was saved by hard work.

A dozen roofs caught fire in the Laddsville area, and grass fires were started by burning embers, threatening buildings on all sides. Hundreds of citizen volunteers joined the Fire Department working with hose, buckets and wet sacks.

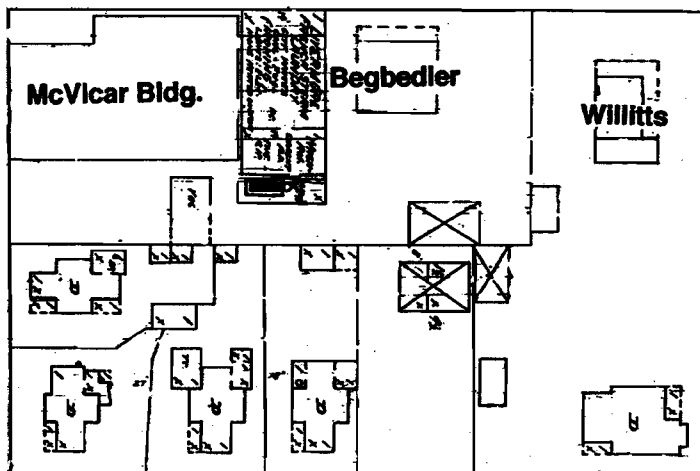
Several lessons were learned from this fire: 1) the town's fire-fighting apparatus is woefully inadequate, and should be replaced with a modern fire engine capable of throwing a good stream of water; 2) town authorities should require property owners to burn off grass before it gets too high; 3) the Fire Department learned that they can't connect two fire hoses to a 4" main and expect adequate water pressure.

McVicar Building Fire - August 24, 1919

Second Street



J Street



Third Street

August 24, 1919, Sunday - Second Street Fire

A fire which broke out about 4:00 PM was apparently started by some boys who were seen leaving the McVicar Building at the southeast corner of Second and J Streets shortly before the fire broke out. It quickly swept east along Second Street to Livermore Avenue, taking with it not only the McVicar Building but the Livermore French Steam Laundry, Frank Begbedier, the laundry owner's residence and a residence of Mrs. Nancy Willitts.

The firemen were handicapped by lack of an engine. It was reported that nothing could have saved the McVicar Building and the laundry, but the residences could have been saved with a good stream of water. The firemen had two lines of hose so long that friction reduced the water pressure so that the streams were both feeble.

A blaze at the stable in the rear of the laundry was extinguished several times during the conflagration, which probably saved the homes on Third Street although the residents all removed their furniture as a precaution

Dr. J. K. Warner's office at the southwest corner of the J/Second intersection, across the street from the McVicar Building, was charred and would have caught fire without liberal applications of water.

The insurance losses were estimated at \$30,000. The McVicar Building loss was estimated at \$3,000, but was covered by only \$1,000 in insurance. Begbedier's laundry and residence were insured for \$24,000. He also had an additional loss of \$1,000 in cash in his home. The Willitts residence loss was estimated at \$1,200, but was covered by only \$800 in insurance.