

THE FAMOUS CLIFF HOUSE IS TOTALLY DESTROYED BY FIRE: FORMER LESSEE IS ...

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THE FAMOUS CLIFF HOUSE IS TOTALLY DESTROYED BY FIRE

FORMER LESSEE IS DRAGGED FROM BUILDING

John Wilkins Risks His Life to
Save the Structure He
Loved.

POLICEMAN ALSO OVERCOME

Spectacular Blaze Attracts a
Large Crowd to the
Beach.

THE Cliff House is burned. Its ending was as spectacular as its history is romantic. A tower of flames on the rock, that lit up the waves and tinged the sea with its redness, and then a mass of charred timbers on the brow of the cliff and the waters beneath blackened by the dead embers. At 4:36 o'clock yesterday afternoon the watchman noticed smoke coming from the basement, and an hour afterward the work of the flames was complete. In the gray light of the late afternoon, with the fog clouds rolling in from the horizon, the reflection of the burning landmark was sung seaward over the reddened water to where a steamer slowly approaching the entrance of the harbor seemed to hang motionless on the tide. One of the portals of the harbor's entrance was a seething pillar of fire reaching for hundreds of feet from the high cliff, like a giant beacon fire on the headland.

How the fire originated remains a matter of mystery. Workmen engaged in remodeling the building had left early, as it was Saturday afternoon, and the only persons in the house at the time were John Wilkins, the former lessee, who was talking with Watchman Owen Mulvaney on the south porch, and a couple of Japanese, who were in the basement. Although the smoke was seen first coming from an opening in the floor of the south porch, the fire started on the north side. Steamfitters had left the basement an hour before, and the theory is that they left a fire pot unextinguished.

However it started, the progress of the fire was swift. Breaching through the lower windows and sweeping upward through the wooden structure, it burst from the roof until a great mass of fire rose high in the air.

A FINE SPECTACLE.

Flung high in the air, the flames swept against the cliff and Sutro Heights, where they were caught by the wind and turned seaward. Crowds on the beach watched the spectacle, and in a short time the boulevard along the beach was lined with automobiles loaded with passengers, who had been attracted by the flames, which could be seen from the Park.

On the rock in front of the cliff the seals raised their heads and barked at the flames, but their barking had as much effect on the flames as had the efforts of fire engines on the landward side of the blaze. Fire engines and seals were both compelled to move on, when the heat drove them back, and the seals, with a final barking, plunged into the water.

John Tait, who had secured a lease of the Cliff House in April, and under whose management the place was being overhauled at an expenditure of \$50,000, had been at the hotel an hour before. When he returned an hour later the familiar sight of the red-gabled house on the cliff was gone, and all that remained was the glowing embers on the rock. Even the chimneys had fallen.

It had been planned to reopen the Cliff House on September 20th. Invitations were being printed for the opening night, and the workmen were completing the remodeling of the building. The new plumbing and wiring were complete, and the painters had been at work until noon. Other workmen, engaged in widening the driveway from the beach so that automobiles

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CLIFF HOUSE IS DESTROYED BY FIRE

Famous Resort Burned to Ground. Was Nearly Ready to Reopen.

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might pass on their way to the house, had left a few minutes before the fire broke out. Had the workmen been there at the time, however, they could have done little to stay the flames.

The loss is estimated at \$100,000. The Sutro estate valued the building at \$55,000, and Tait says that \$50,000 represents his investment, but that the furniture, which he had purchased, had not been installed in the house. His insurance is \$30,000, and the Sutro estate had \$35,000 insurance on the building.

LIFE SAVERS TO RESCUE.

The life saving crew came to the scene of the fire in a lifeboat, thinking that if the rooms were occupied, those caught in the fire might jump to the water. They stood by for some time, but happily their services were not required. Afterward, coming ashore, they worked with the firemen.

At 5:25 o'clock an explosion of powder, stored in the basement, blew out the burning walls. The powder had been placed there by the road makers, who had been using it in blasting the rock to widen the driveway from the beach.

Engine companies 21, 22, 23, 26, 30 and 36; truck companies 5 and 6, and chemical company 8 answered the alarms. J. M. Wilkins, former lessee of the Cliff House, telephoned in the first alarm. This was sent to the chemical company, the headquarters of which are on the hill just above the Cliff House. Captain Kelly of this company telephoned to Chief Wells, who ordered companies 30 and 36 to respond. He started for the scene, and upon his arrival sent in a second alarm that brought out the other companies, and with them Chief Shaughnessy. Engine company 36 was the first to arrive, as it has the shortest run. It was followed by company 30, and the others came later.

WILKINS IS OVERCOME.

J. M. Wilkins was severely burned and overcome by smoke. He went into the building to talk with John Tait, the present lessee of the property. After Tait left he saw smoke coming through a small hole in the south end of the porch. He called the attention of the watchman to this smoke, and then ran to the telephone to send in an alarm. His call was at once responded to by the chemical company on the hill. Captain W. E. Kelly of this company and Fireman Fred Klatzl went into the building to string out the hose with which the place is provided.

As they reached the hall they met Wilkins staggering out. He appeared to be dazed and partially overcome by smoke. He asked how to get out, and the firemen told him to follow the hose line to the door. He evidently became confused, for he reappeared shortly afterward in a worse condition than before. Klatzl then undertook to assist the dazed man to the outer air. As they were going out both were overcome and fell to the floor.

H. M. Tucker was in the Sutro baths at the time the fire broke out. He hurried into his clothes and ran to the entrance of the building, from which the smoke was pouring in dense volumes. He was joined by Arthur Harrison, and the two stumbled over the bodies of Wilkins and Klatzl. They raised the bodies and carried them out into the road. About this time the flames broke out and the heat became so intense that they could no longer remain in the road. They picked Wilkins up and carried him to his residence, which is opposite the Sutro baths and adjacent to the Sutro Heights property. Klatzl recovered meantime and returned to his duties.

Wilkins' hair and beard are singed off, his hands are burned and he fears that the heat has injured his lungs. He said:

"I was formerly the lessee of the Cliff House. I was passing there just before the fire broke out, and, seeing Mr. Tait coming out, went up to speak to him. After he left I saw the smoke coming out of a hole at the south end of the porch. I spoke about it, and then went into the building to turn in an alarm. While inside I was overcome and didn't know anything more until I was carried home. I cannot understand how the fire could have started. There was no one in the building except myself, a watchman named Mulvaney and two Japanese. There was no fire in the building, and it is a mystery to me how it started."

THE WATCHMAN'S STORY.

Watchman Mulvaney said:

"I was standing on the south porch with J. M. Wilkins at about 4:30 o'clock, when we saw smoke coming through a trapdoor in the floor. How it caught I cannot imagine. Wilkins ran round to the north side of the house to a telephone and very nearly got shut off by the flames. A Japanese and his wife were living in the basement, but they got out. The last of the workmen to leave for the day were three or four steam fitters. They left about 3 o'clock. I went down after they had gone and shut the doors. There was no sign of fire then. I think there was too much electricity in the building. They had been putting in all sorts of wires."

John Tait said: "I had invested \$50,000 in restoring the Cliff House, and we were nearly ready for the opening, which was to have been on September 20th. The invitations were being prepared. The furniture for the house had been ordered but had not yet arrived. The kitchen was complete, and the new bathrooms were finished. The house had been newly wired, and the painters were at work up to noon yesterday."

"I had left the building only an hour before, and had just reached Van Ness avenue, when some one rang me up on the telephone and told me that the Cliff House was burning. I could

hardly believe it. We returned in an automobile and found it was true enough; there was nothing left but a pile of blazing timbers on the rocks.

"The only people in the house at the time were Mulvaney, the watchman, Wilkins and a Japanese, who was with his wife in the basement. The workmen had all left, and I am sure that there was no loss of life. I cannot account for the fire. I think someone must have thrown a cigarette into the new garage, as the fire seems to have been first seen at that end of the building. There is a fine opportunity for some one to build a magnificent new house on the cliff, but not for me."

AN OLD LANDMARK.

Probably no resort in the country was so widely known as the Cliff House of San Francisco. To passengers coming to the city by sea it had been a landmark at the harbor's entrance, and it is probable that many more persons had heard of the "Cliff House" than had ever seen it, as it stood high on the rocky headland overlooking the ocean. It had been dramatized, and the picture postal cards had added to its fame. It had no press agent, and seemed to need none. Romance has associated with its name, and in the East it had wider fame than the more substantial hotels of the city.

The old Cliff House, which was burned a dozen years ago, was a single story structure, of more graceful appearance than the high wooden building which replaced it and was burned yesterday. But it was the "Cliff House" still, and visitors for a day in the city seldom left, without seeing the seal rocks from its windows. Both structures had been the scene of entertainments given to distinguished guests, and each had played its part in the bohemian life of the town.

A PLUCKY ENGINEER.

Although the flames from the garage and the north side of the Cliff House burned within a few feet of him, Engineer Temple of engine No. 36 stood gamely at his post and kept the engine going. The wheels of the engine were scorched and the large hose connecting the engine with the hydrant was nearly burnt through by the fire, but Temple stuck to his post. His company was the first engine to respond to the first alarm. The engine dashed down the hill to the hydrant which is located about thirty feet from the corner of the Cliff House. It is directly in front of the garage.

When engine company No. 36 reached the fire the flames were hurrying from every window on the north side. The wind was blowing toward the garage, and the corner of that building had already caught fire. The heat at the hydrant was so fierce that Temple was compelled to turn his back toward the fire to protect his face while he coupled up the hose to the hydrant. A few minutes after the company got a stream on the Cliff House an explosion occurred which blew out the north wall. Sheets of flame shot toward the engine where Temple was working. He never flinched, but kept on piling on the coal and oiling the machinery. To his heroic work is due in great measure the saving of the Sutro baths.

Police Sergeant William Ferguson was one of the first on the scene. The flames were leaping from every portion of the Cliff House when he arrived. Fearing that there might be some one in the building, he rushed in the front entrance through the blinding smoke. Just as he reached the stairs leading to the second floor the explosion occurred. A blinding flame shot up in front of him.

He was struck on the head by a piece of gas pipe about a foot long. The pipe grazed the left temple and caused a severe bruise. Dazed and almost blinded with smoke, the police sergeant continued to search the rooms for any one that might be there. He just managed to get to the entrance before he was overcome by smoke. He was removed to a safe place and recovered in a few minutes.