

“Till Burnes”

A man named Wilbur, who had been a deputy constable under Rice, had part of his nose bitten off yesterday morning by the bear, the property of Till A. Burns. He was in front of the animal's cage at the time, allowing it to lick his face, when the brute relieved him of a part of his nasal protuberance.

--San Diego Union, April 27, 1886.

Till Burnes and his bear frequently made news in San Diego of the late 1800s. Burnes' sidewalk “menagerie” and his frequent scrapes with the law made the 5th Street saloon keeper a memorable pioneer San Diegan.

A native of Arkansas, Tillman A. Burnes came west with his family in 1853 in a wagon train over the Oregon Trail. It was a grim journey for Till, age six. His four-year-old sister, Susan, fell from a wagon, and was run over and killed. She was buried at Fort Kearny, Nebraska, and the family traveled on to Portland, Oregon.

After a year in Portland, the Burnes family moved to San Francisco where young Till learned the engraving business. By age nineteen, he owned his own print shop. But his health failed and when the family doctor recommended a change in climate, Burnes took a steamship south to investigate San Diego. He stayed a year before returning to San Francisco. Ill-health struck again, and Burnes returned to San Diego, this time bringing his wife, Mary.

On January 13, 1875, a newspaper advertisement in the *Union* announced the opening of Till Burnes' Phoenix Saloon--“best wines, liquors and cigars”--at the corner of 5th and K Streets. For the next thirty years, Till Burnes would be a popular fixture in downtown San Diego.

Burnes' fascination with animals appeared about this time. A centennial celebration in San Diego in July 1876 featured a parade down 5th Street. “Mr. Till A. Burnes' menagerie,” noted the *Union*; “was a uniquely arranged affair, with the numerous singular animals chained on a platform [on his wagon]; it attracted much attention.”

Burnes' zoo animals resided on the sidewalk in front of his saloon, but there were occasional runaways. “Till Burns' bear created another sensation yesterday evening,” reported the *Union* on August 6, 1881. “It appears that the restive quadruped broke his chain, and went wandering . . . it was finally determined to ‘lass’ him, which was accomplished after several ‘hairbreadth ‘scapes.’” Several people were bitten before the bear was secured by chain to a post.

After the bear made another race for liberty up 5th Street, Burnes confined the animal to a large cage—“a decidedly much safer way of keeping bruin within bounds,” a reporter concluded. “The bear is essentially a vicious animal and to be made perfectly safe must be kept in such a place as to be unable to do damage to passers-by.” But confining Burnes' pet did not stop the drunken “man named Wilbur” from losing his nose to the bear in 1886.

Burnes had safer luck with the rest of his caged pets, which included, at various times: a coyote, several monkeys, a vampire bat, a Gila monster, and assorted rabbits, pigeons, quail, and mocking birds. Occasionally, the newspapers would mourn the passing of a favorite animal: “The baby leopard seal at Till Burnes' menagerie ‘gave up the ghost’ on Thursday afternoon.

The little fellow took cold during the rain, and it is supposed that it died of quick consumption. Its demise has thrown a gloom over the lower end of Fifth Street.”



The “White House,” later renamed the Acme. Photo courtesy of the family of Christina Burnes Crosthwaite, granddaughter of Till Burnes.

In 1883, Burnes moved his bar and menagerie to “The White House,” his new saloon at 151 5th Street. As always, Burnes advertised the “Finest Brands of Liquors and Cigars,” adding the “new Monarch Billiard Table . . . make it the Most Attractive Saloon in town.

Burnes apparently had modest political ambitions. He ran for town constable in 1875 and 1879, but won neither time. He did serve as a volunteer fireman, acting as foreman of San Diego Engine Company No. 1. And for many years, Burnes operated a stage line, running four-horse coaches to El Cajon and Baja California.

Despite his interest in constable work, Burnes had several run-ins with the law. In 1888 he was indicted by the grand jury for allowing gambling in his saloon. Burnes responded by leaving town for an extended vacation. After several weeks of “basking in the sunshine and fattening on the cocoanut milk of Hawaii,” Burnes returned to San Diego, where a Superior Court judge dismissed the charges on a technicality.

Burnes had less success with a judge three years later when he was convicted of selling drinks in his bar without paying the city’s \$25 a month license fee. Years of ignoring the “saloon tax” cost Burnes a fine of \$360 dollars.

But his biggest scrape occurred in 1881 in a bar shooting the *Union* announced with the headline: “Bloody Affray—Two Men Mortally Shot.” Headed home after closing his saloon at 4:00 a.m., Burnes stopped at a saloon on the next block to play his guitar at the invitation of the proprietor. Three men entered the bar and began drinking, then fighting. The stocky, five-foot six-inch Burnes physically separated the drunken combatants and chased them from the saloon.

Minutes later, one of the men--a man named Phillips--charged through the door firing a gun. Burnes pulled his own gun--a “self-cocking English bull-dog of the largest calibre,”--and returned the fire. Two men were shot: Phillips and a hapless customer named Pedro Verdal.

Burnes returned to his own saloon, and then waited for the constable. Fortunately, both Phillips and Verdal survived their wounds. Burnes was never charged with a crime.

The White House saloon continued to prosper but eventually Burnes changed the name to the Acme. His son Tillman Jr. worked as a bartender. The Burnes home, where Till and his wife Mary raised their son, and a daughter, Maude, was at 7th and B. On January 1, 1905, the *Union* announced the passing of “an old landmark.” Three months after the death of his wife, Till Burns died of “apoplexy” at age 57.



Till Burnes (left) in front of his Acme Saloon on Fifth Street. Photo courtesy of the family of Christina Burnes Crosthwaite, granddaughter of Till Burnes.

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