

“Cast Iron Nottage”

In San Diego of the mid-1800s, successful townspeople were individuals with ambition, community spirit, and valued frontier skills. Few pioneers typified these traits better than Edward W. Nottage—a man little remembered today but well-known to San Diegans of his day as “Cast Iron Nottage.”

The son of a Massachusetts tin-smith, Nottage came west in the early 1850s. He settled first in San Francisco, where the 1854 city directory listed him as a member of the city’s leading volunteer fire department—“Empire Engine Co. No. 1.” Sometime later, he moved south and set up a tin-ship shop on the plaza of Old Town San Diego.

The inaugural issue of the weekly *San Diego Union*, on October 10, 1868, carried a modest advertisement listing Nottage as a dealer in stoves, pumps, hardware, and iron pipe, and promising “All Kinds of Jobbing and Repairing Done on Short Notice.” Business was good for the hardware man; the next issue of the *Union* carried a wanted ad for a journeyman tin-smith.

Perhaps the journeyman gave Nottage time to explore other ventures—such as the commercial possibilities of local sea food. The *Union* reported in August 1869: “E. W. Nottage has favored us with a lot of excellent oysters taken from the head of the bay.” The newspaper added, a few weeks later: “This office is under obligations to Mr. E. W. Nottage for a bucket of fresh oysters in the shell. Our Devil [apprentice printer] suspended work to go for the bucket.”

Fish was a minor avocation. It was politics that interested Nottage the most. After serving terms as City Marshal and foreman of the County Grand Jury, he was elected president of the San Diego County chapter of the Democratic Party, and then nominated at the local Democratic Convention as state assemblyman in 1871. Nottage thundered to the conventioners that he “stood by the settlers and small farmers; endorsed the ‘no fence’ pledges,” and boasted “he had voted an unscratched Democratic ticket for 31 years; was a straight out and out Democrat and could not be bought nor sold.”

Unfortunately for Nottage, his nomination did not survive the convention. Possibly as a consolation, he instead received the nomination for the local office of county Public Administrator. But he lost the September 1871 race to the Republican candidate, 726 votes to 495.

Undiscouraged, Nottage tried for Justice of the Peace in the fall of 1873. The *Union*, which consistently endorsed Republican candidates, noted the odds were against him. “Our ancient friend, E. W. Nottage, is in the field for Justice of the Peace. Now Nottage has been a steadfast

E. W. NOTTAGE,
Gas Fitter & Plumber,
—AND—
METAL ROOFER,
Fourth Street, near H.

WILL DO ALL KINDS OF GAS FIT-
ing, Plumbing, Metal Roofing, etc., in
a style second to none.

Hot and Cold Water Pipes in houses, Bath-
Tubs, Wash-Bowls, etc., a specialty.

Give Me a Call.

San Diego Union, May 28, 1881.

old-line Democrat,--‘cast iron’--but then he would by no means make a bad Justice. Go in Nottage, and may the best man win.” Once again, Nottage lost to a Republican.

The restless politician briefly changed occupations the next year. “The indefatigable Nottage is in the field again,” the *Union* wrote. “He has abandoned for the time being the tinware business, and instead of making pots to boil beef in, is selling beef to boil in the pots. He has opened a butcher shop in New Town, where choice cuts may be had at all times.”

The butcher shop experiment lasted less than two years. Nottage soon returned to the hardware trade, opening a “plumbing and gas fitting establishment” on G Street, between Fourth and Fifth. Months later the city Board of Trustees elected him Chief Engineer of the Fire Department—a volunteer position.

Despite conspicuous failure in the political area, Cast Iron Nottage was a well-liked public figure. On the nation’s two most celebrated holidays: Washington’s birthday and the Fourth of July, Nottage was the popular choice to fire noisy salutes from the downtown plaza with anvils.

Before the widespread introduction of fireworks, “firing the anvils” was the patriotic salute of choice. Nottage would place a large, cast iron anvil on the ground, upside down. Black powder was poured into the exposed bottom of the anvil and a smaller anvil mounted above it. Nottage lit the powder from a fuse. The resulting explosion was deafening and sent the smaller, “flyer” anvil soaring in the air.

Year after year, Nottage would salute July 4th at sunrise, follow with the national salute at noon, and, if the powder held out, repeat the earsplitting business at sunset.

In January 1882, Nottage and his wife retired to Portland, Oregon, to live with their son, a physician. The move lasted only six months. “The familiar face of our old friend and townsman, E. W. Nottage, was seen in town again yesterday,” the *Union* announced. “Mrs. Nottage is in very feeble health. They return to San Diego in the hope that she may be benefited.”

Mrs. Nottage soon passed away but her husband remained in San Diego. Cast Iron Nottage suffered a stroke at age 73 and died at the county hospital on November 7, 1891. Eulogizing the “member of the Pioneer society” of San Diego, the *Union* noted “older residents will remember him as having fired the anvils on the plaza at every Fourth of July and Washington’s birthday for years, he having considered it a part of his religion to perform that patriotic duty.”

There is a modern-day postscript to Cast Iron Nottage. In 1998, chef and restaurateur Joseph Melluso researched a site in Old Town San Diego as the possible location for a fish restaurant. He discovered that the property had been owned long ago by a hardware man and tin-smith, who on occasion, also sold fish. Melluso decided to honor the pioneer by naming his eatery “The E. W. Nottage Tin Shop Museum Restaurant”—a cumbersome name, perhaps, but shortened today as the popular restaurant chain “The Tin Fish.”

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