

The Civic Auditorium Fire

All those old exposition buildings are nothing but fire traps. I go to bed every night afraid that I will wake up in the morning to see the park buildings wiped out and with them collections of materials that could not be replaced for less than \$1,000,000 [and] several years of hard work.

--Joseph W. Sefton, Jr., president, Natural History Museum.

Sefton's nightmare nearly came true on Thanksgiving Eve of 1925 as flames erupted from an oil-fed furnace and destroyed San Diego's Civic Auditorium on the East Prado of Balboa Park.

The historic building was built as the Southern Counties Building for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition. Like most Exposition buildings, the structure was meant to be temporary, with a life-span of just a few years. But San Diegans were reluctant to dismantle the frame and plaster buildings—particularly one designed by the renowned architect Carleton Monroe Winslow and popularly considered the most beautiful building in Balboa Park.

Instead, the structure was given new life after the fair as the city's first large municipal auditorium. A rehabilitation in 1922 installed new flooring, modern furnaces, and five kitchens—all for the purpose of hosting large social activities. A new roof was added and walls and floors were shored up with a "kindling forest" of wood braces, struts, and posts.



The Civic Auditorium was the former Southern California Counties Building, built for the Panama--California Exposition of 1915. *San Diego Public Library*

By remarkable coincidence, the fire that destroyed the Civic Auditorium occurred on the night the building was set to host the 16th Annual Fireman's Ball. *Union* reporter Jerry MacMullen recalled the preparations for the evening of Wednesday, November 25:

All that day, off-duty firemen toiled, decorating it with a choice collection of old belts and helmets and lanterns from San Diego's volunteer firemen days, and with festoons of some 500 feet of brand-new hose, borrowed for the occasion. About the time that they went home for supper and to shower and shave and put on their very best blues, the janitor got the furnace going, the weather being a bit on the chilly side.

About 7:30 p.m., shortly before the ball was set to begin, alarms sounded in downtown fire stations. Three fire companies sped for Balboa Park. Battalion Chief Charlie Lambert was one of

the first to arrive. Opening the main door of the auditorium, Lambert could not see any visible flames but he heard strange hissing and an ominous rumbling behind the walls. "It's down below!" a janitor said, pointing to the basement. Lambert immediately ordered more fire companies.

Minutes later, as firemen pulled water hoses into the building, the first flames appeared. Rising from faulty furnace in the basement, the fire climbed quickly through walls and into the attic. A newsman covering the fire for the *San Diego Tribune* reported:

In an incredibly short time the roof was in flames, and great sections of the ceiling began to fall onto the heads of the firemen. The heat became intense, and the interior of the building was rapidly becoming untenable. Fighting back foot by foot, the firemen were forced to the outside.

Firemen from nine companies—many them attired for the ball in their dress blue uniforms--surrounded the building and poured water on the flames. An aerial ladder was used to direct water through the roof until it caught fire and had to be wet down. Water pressure seemed to be problem. But the hot fire burned itself out quickly and the towers and walls toppled into the pit of the auditorium.

There were several close calls for the firemen as they dodged falling bricks and timbers. A collapsing wall on the building's west side nearly struck a mass of onlookers who had pressed too close to the blaze: "the crowd, horror stricken, surged back, as the clouds of embers settled."

People from all over San Diego converged on Balboa Park to see the big fire. The Police Department mobilized for crowd control, and a group of Boy Scouts helped the police hold the spectators behind the fire lines.

A total loss, the building had been valued at \$120,000. San Diegans were shocked to learn that the auditorium was insured for only \$12,000.

Recriminations came quickly. Fire Chief Louis Almgren declared the water supply in the park had "failed dismally" and only the "purest luck" prevented the loss of every building in the park. City Manager Fred Rhodes denied the charge and declared "enough water was available to put out any fire had the firemen been there on time." Tardiness in sounding the alarm, thought Rhodes, was to blame for the lost building.

Examining the ruins the next day, City Building Inspector Oscar Knecht said the fire had been predictable. Dangerous electrical wiring and patchwork bracing of the structure had made the auditorium hazardous. "In another year the building would have been condemned for structural reasons."

Amazingly, there were no serious injuries. And the timing of the blaze was no less than miraculous. Had the fire erupted only an hour later, it would have caught hundreds of dancing couples on the auditorium floor. "It was our good fortune, not our good management," the *Union* editorialized, "that prevented a terrible loss of life in the auditorium fire."

On the site of the Civic Auditorium, the San Diego Natural History Museum would rise in 1932, designed by architect William Templeton Johnson and funded, in large measure, by La Jolla philanthropist Ellen Browning Scripps.

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