

The House Movers

Palmer & Son created some interest yesterday by driving a house through the streets, mounted on an improvised truck. In about two hours the building was hauled not less than ten blocks. Telegraph and telephone lines along the route were demoralized.

--San Diego Union, September 23, 1885

Rarely seen today, house moving became a common sight in San Diego once the Palmer family came to town. In the late 19th century, moving a building often made more economic sense than razing the structure and starting over with new materials. In San Diego, the house moving franchise of the Palmer family moved buildings around town for over half a century.

John D. Palmer came to San Diego in May 1884 with his wife, eight children, and \$16 in his pocket. A Civil War veteran from Ohio, Palmer ran a saw mill in his home state for fourteen years. After a flood carried away his mill, J. D. decided to start over in California. The family took a train to Los Angeles, and then embarked for San Diego on the side-wheeler steamship *Orizaba*.

In San Diego, he was greeted by his father, Oscar, who had come to San Diego in 1868. Oscar managed the small Palmer House hotel—an addition, really--to the much larger Horton House, at 5th and D Streets (Broadway). Another son, Isaac L. Palmer, was a city constable. But J. D. would be the family “mover” and shaker, and patriarch to a large, community-minded family.

On July 6, 1884, only weeks after Palmer’s arrival in town, the *Union* noted that “the work of moving E. Stewart’s tin shop commenced yesterday under the supervision of J. D. Palmer, who has constructed a new apparatus for doing the work.” It took Palmer and his crew three days to move the structure up 5th Street. Within a week he was at work again, moving a building on 6th Street onto the spot vacated by Stewart’s hardware store. The former furniture store evidently had some size. “Nearly all the telephone wires that cross Fifth Street between E and F streets will have to be cut in order to let it pass,” reported the *Union*.

Palmer’s “new apparatus” for moving buildings is unknown. But he undoubtedly employed techniques that had been used in America since the early century. Typically, heavy wooden beams were inserted below the structure, which was then carefully raised by screw jacks. The building would then be lowered onto a wooden carriage, which was pulled by horses or oxen and in later years by steam-powered tractors, and eventually heavy trucks.

Palmer Brothers (John D., with sons William, Scott, Oscar, and Edgar) moved anything, anywhere. On several occasions, houses were moved to the waterfront, mounted on barges, and floated to Coronado Island. Russ High School was once picked up and moved two hundred feet to clear lot space in front of the school. Brick structures moved as easily as wood; the four-story Palmer House, known as “the addition” was separated and moved from the Horton House in 1905, when the larger hotel was being demolished—a job also handled by the Palmers.

But a small move proved controversial. In 1893, San Diegans decided to represent their city at the Chicago World's Fair by sending the fair an historic palm tree, popularly believed to have been planted by Father Junípero Serra himself. The Palmers excavated the fifty-foot tree on Taylor Street in Mission Valley, loaded it on rollers, and moved it to the Santa Fe depot, where two flat cars took it to Chicago. The tree soon died there, according to a witness, Don Stewart, who called the affair "an extreme mental lapse," on the part of promoters who destroyed "one of San Diego's most historical and most interesting landmarks."

The year 1893 also brought a personal injury lawsuit that nearly destroyed Palmer Brothers. Boys playing see-saw on an 87-foot skid at a moving site on 16th and I, knocked the timber loose, which fell and crushed the leg of seven-year-old Tommy West. The leg had to be amputated. The West family sued the Palmers to collect damages for injuries received "as a result of the defendant's carelessness in leaving heavy timbers in the street." The court awarded the family \$5,000. To satisfy the claim, the Palmers were forced to sell at public auction "four draft horses, two heavy wagons, express and light wagons, harness, timbers, blocks, tackle, etc."

The next month, J. D. Palmer & Co. was declared insolvent by a Superior Court judge. But the family business would successfully reorganize and soon prosper again. William Palmer took over the firm in 1906 when John D. died suddenly from heart disease at age 63. Other family members took an active part in the business, including contractor Walter J. Fulkerson, the husband of John's daughter, Maggie.

In the early 1900s the family branched out to other enterprises. Scott and his brother-in-law Walter managed the Pickwick and Savoy theaters and brought bigtime vaudeville to San Diego. William, an active sportsman, stirred interest in professional baseball in San Diego, and also served two terms as a City councilman. Moving houses continued to be a Palmer family specialty with the youngest son Edgar running the business until the late 1940s.

From Richard W. Crawford, *The Way We Were in San Diego* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011), p. 43-45.