

BURN

From Page 1A

with marshmallows and long toasting sticks.

There were dozens of Instamatics and Nikons, some wielded by fire buffs and others by longtime Pinole residents wanting one last shot of the old building.

Tony Francis, 79, was there to pay his last respects.

Francis was only a youth when the first bar — called the Hunter's Inn — was built shortly after World War I.

During Prohibition it became a "bootleg joint," recalled Francis.

"They had gambling, they had a little bit of everything," said Gil Aeschbacher, who operated the bar from 1969 to 1979.

In the 1930's, a robber killed bartender Bob Morgan in the bar and

seriously wounded his wife, Joyce, recalled Francis.

Spectators talked about the murder — and the time in the early 1940s when a tornado lifted off the roof of the building — as they watched wave after wave of firefighters enter the building.

Finally, the building was allowed to burn to the ground.

Orange flames shot from doors and windows and roared toward spectators from the roof, driving them back to San Pablo Avenue with searing heat. To one side of the building, spectators stood in shadow as black smoke blotted out the sun.

Soon only the stucco facade was left. A strong stream of water directed from a Pinole fire engine knocked over part of the remaining

wall.

Pinole Fire Chief Alex Clark said the training fire — which involved firefighters from Pinole, Rodeo, El Cerrito, Kensington and Richmond — was planned in detail a month in advance.

Before the exercise began Clark and training officer Mike Arnold planned the type and location of each fire to be set. To give each firefighter experience inside the building, fires were set, doused and set again.

The training involved a number of experienced firefighters as well as volunteers and "rookies."

"We're teaching them how to save their own lives when they go into a building such as this," said Clark. Groups of firefighters learned about rescuing victims trapped in the building, proper use of water and methods to control the fire with the least loss of property.

Clark, who remained outside the building, worked with several chief officers who would be in command if a similar fire occurred in their jurisdictions.

"We sent four rookie firefighters out here and felt they got some useful experience," said Dennis Morgan, acting battalion chief for the Richmond Fire Department.

All four had been in several building fires, Morgan explained, but it's difficult to train someone in the middle of a real fire.

John Donkonics, who donates the building to the Pinole Fire Department for training, said he plans to use the lot for part of a shopping center to be built over the next few years.

Pinole 'hot spot' razed for training

By Judy Ronningen
Times staff writer

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PINOLE — The Wagon Wheel bar, a Prohibition-era bootleg joint and the scene of many a convivial Friday night, was reduced to a pile of ashes Saturday to make way for a shopping center.

For about 40 firefighters, it was a chance to practice their skills, thanks to the host Pinole Fire Department.

But to the large crowd which gathered to see the building torched, it was pure entertainment — with a touch of nostalgia.

"I wouldn't miss it," reflected Jim Brock, bartender at the Wagon Wheel for 11 years.

"This is the end of an 11-year party."

Adults swigged beer and little boys threw rocks as black smoke billowed from the roof. Scott Hankins of Pinole came prepared

Please see BURN, Page 2A