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WHEN THE SKY BURNED AT SAN DIEGO. . .

Of course, there are no alumni of The Great Standard Oil Fire Of 1913 still in the active ranks of the San Diego Fire Department, and for that matter, precious few of them on the retired list -- but when veterans and fire-buffs gather at Pioneer Hook & Ladder's excellent little fire museum, the subject still comes up, and the photos of that epic "worker" are viewed with interest and respect.

It lacked a few minutes of noon on Sunday, October 5, 1913 when the gongs in San Diego's then modest dozen or so fire stations began to clang the number of a box near Standard Oil's tank-farm on the bay side of Logan Heights. Downtown, firemen struggled with the hand cranks of motorized equipment, still something of a novelty, and hoped that there would be no back-fire to maim them with the flailing crank. In the station at Sicard and Kearny, however, it was simpler; stall-chains dropped, the horses trotted out and were quickly harnessed, and the "first due" company, a combination hose and chemical wagon, lurched out into the street. There was no doubt in anyone's mind where they were going, for already, ahead of them, an ugly blue-black column of smoke was rising into a cloudless sky, and its base was shot through with orange-colored flame.

Just how it had started is still being argued. Static electricity was blamed by some, while others hinted at a spark from a passing locomotive, but at any rate a 250,000-tank of distillate had let go, hurling