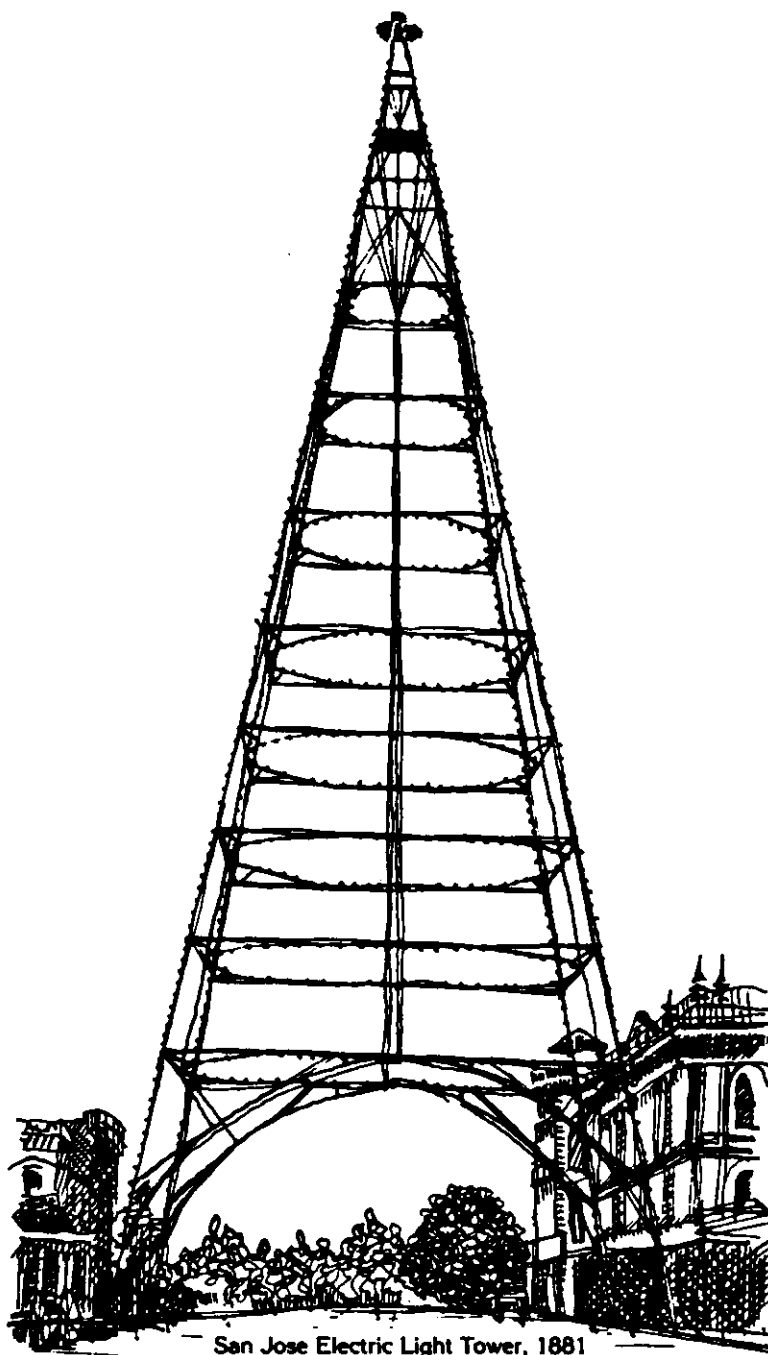


Silver Creek High School
Mrs. Makashima - Advisor

KIBIBI S. SPRINGS
1323 Mardene Court
San Jose, CA 95121
(408) 972-5084

San Jose Electric Light Tower



California Pioneers of Santa Clara County
1991 Essay Contest

Silver Creek High School
Mrs. Makashima - Advisor

KIBIBI S. SPRINGS
1323 Mardene Court
San Jose, CA 95121
(408) 972-5084

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Preface

I visited the San Jose Historical Museum for the first time on a family outing about two years ago. It was a very interesting and sometimes amusing tour of old world San Jose. The streets are lined with lamp poles, some of the sidewalks are wooden, the work tools and decorative articles are all in tune with the 19th century. As we toured the grounds, I came face to face with an imposing steel structure which is the replica of Owen's Electric Tower, *San Jose's first electric light source*. The tower makes its point as a stark reminder of the day in 1881 when San Jose was the spotlight of the world. We were then called: ***THE CITY OF THE TOWER; THE BEACON OF THE WEST!***

Imagine San Jose in 1881. It was a thriving little agricultural center of about 20,000 residents. It was a San Jose of plush and plentiful orchards, respected Lick Observatory on Mt. Hamilton, with Alum Rock Park as a luxury park and bath center for the elite. San Jose was an important tourist center then and every visitor planned a nights stay here. From the time the Electric Tower was built in 1881 until it fell in 1915, it was one of the things that every traveler on the Pacific Coast planned to see at night. The Electric Tower was truly a spectacle.



James Jerome Owen or "J. J." as he was called was responsible for bringing about the creation of the Electric Tower in San Jose. Owen was founder of the San Jose Mercury Weekly Newspaper. He was one of the greatest and most respected men among Western journalists. Owen was unsurpassed in his day as a writer of "pertinent paragraphs and sermonettes". He was active in the affairs of the state and was elected to the California Assembly. When Owen returned back from the St. Louis Exposition in 1880, he was dazzled by the possibility of the new-fangled electric light for civic illumination. He was caught in the national controversy as to whether *high-lighting* or *low-lighting* would be the common thing. Owen flat footedly agreed for high-lighting. In 1879, San Francisco had built the first electrical lighting station in the world which used arc lights. The success of this project so impressed Owen that he wrote an editorial suggesting San Jose be lighted with electrical lights atop a huge tower. The editorial was published in July, 1881 and the idea caught the public fancy. The tower was constructed from spontaneous voluntary reader contributions and subscriptions ranging from .25 cents to \$25.00 until they totaled \$3456.75 and the tower was inaugurated into use by December of that same year. During the construction of the tower Owen continued to publish articles designed to remind readers that the electric light tower would show the rest of the world that San Jose could not only keep pace with new development, but pioneer them as well.

The idea of the Electric Tower was not received well by San Jose's huge monopoly, the Gas company. There was much ridicule of Owen's experiment and was the tower was referred to by some city officials and businessmen as "Owen's Folly". Competition was understandably fierce for rights to light the city and George Roe's San Jose Brush Company was chosen to supply the direct current used to power the arc lights of the Electric Tower.

The public was captivated by the idea of the Electric Tower. San Jose architect John Gash was selected to supervise the construction and bids for construction were opened in his office on Saturday, June 18, 1881. Ground was broken on August 11, 1881 by J.D. Campbell, one of the builders of the San Jose Normal School (now San Jose University) and he served as the contractor for the project.



San Jose's Electric Tower was a tubular structure, the tower itself was 207 feet high with a 30 foot flagpole. Its 24,000 candlepower system of lights was the brightest in the United States and the third brightest in the world. Except for a much smaller type of tower in Akron, Ohio there was nothing else like it. The Akron tower was also built in 1881 of boiler iron surmounted with arc lamps. It had collapsed when the supporting cables broke. Learning of this mistake, Owen planned San Jose's with a wide base that straddled the intersection, making supporting cables unnecessary. The only rival of Owen's tower was the Tower of Jewels at the San Francisco fair in 1915.

On December 13, 1881 at 6:00 p.m. an electric employee climbed the tower and lit the arc lights and the power was turned on. It was a great day for San Jose. One reporter in the audience commented, "The fact that most impressed itself on the mind, after the first view of the light, was the steadiness, purity and softness of its glow". Another article boasted, "The Mercury office last evening was thronged with some of our best known and most substantial businessmen, who all, without exception, gave impression of their delight at so successful an experiment, and congratulated Mr. Owen upon the happy result of his persistent labors." City Assessor and Clerk William F. Ellis who lived at the corner of Eleventh and Empire streets, over a mile from the tower and several blocks from the nearest gas street lamp, noted that the light of the electric tower was sufficient to read a small diary when he stood on the street in front of his home. In Normal School Square a man claimed that he could "read a newspaper without difficulty". The tower was written up in Harper's Weekly in 1882. The picture shown in Harper's was painted by San Josean, H.G. Peelor, and the added office buildings and lush landscaping were painted in at the request of Owen's to depict San Jose as the growing city that it was.

As time passed and as with all things, enthusiasm about the tower began to wane. Saturday night drunks made a habit of climbing the tower and displayed their acrobatic prowess. Wild geese and ducks, blinded by the lights flew into the tower breaking their necks and falling to the ground. But the real complaint, much to the satisfaction of the gas company officials, was the crown of six arc floodlights failed to illuminate the whole city as Owen anticipated. *The light cast upward to the sky and not downward on the street.* Competition was at a peak with George Roe's San Jose Brush Company, which was later re-organized as San Jose Brush Electric Light Company and they continually fought with the Electric Improvement Company over rights to light the city. The tower had cost \$5969.41 and subscriptions did not continue after it was built. Many labor liens were placed on it so Owen sold it to the the San Jose Brush Electric Light Company for \$1,000 in 1882. The tower started with only six huge light clusters at the top and eventually thousands of incandescent light bulbs lined the uprights and cross members of the tower to add to the direct light.

For 34 years, from 1881 - 1915, the four legs of the Electric Tower anchored a corner of the busy intersection at Market and Santa Clara Streets. Street cars and buggies passed underneath it daily. Business establishments took the name of the tower - Tower Grocery, Tower Cigar Store, Tower Cleaners, Tower Saloon. Only the Tower Saloon remains, owned by the family of our past Mayor Tom McEnery, which is now called the Tower Inn Cafe.

There was always considerable sway to the tower - not much being known in those days about proper bracing of such high structures, and finally the joints crystallized. The tower was weakened by a severe storm in February, 1915 and before money could be raised by the public to repair it, the tower fell permanently on December 3, 1915 in the worst storm since 1886. On account of the rain, there were few people on the street and no workmen on the structure.

J. J. Owen sold his interest in the San Jose Mercury Weekly News in 1884 and moved to San Francisco. He died in 1895 as the great visionary who brought the **Beacon of the West** to San Jose.

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Mrs. Makashima - Advisor

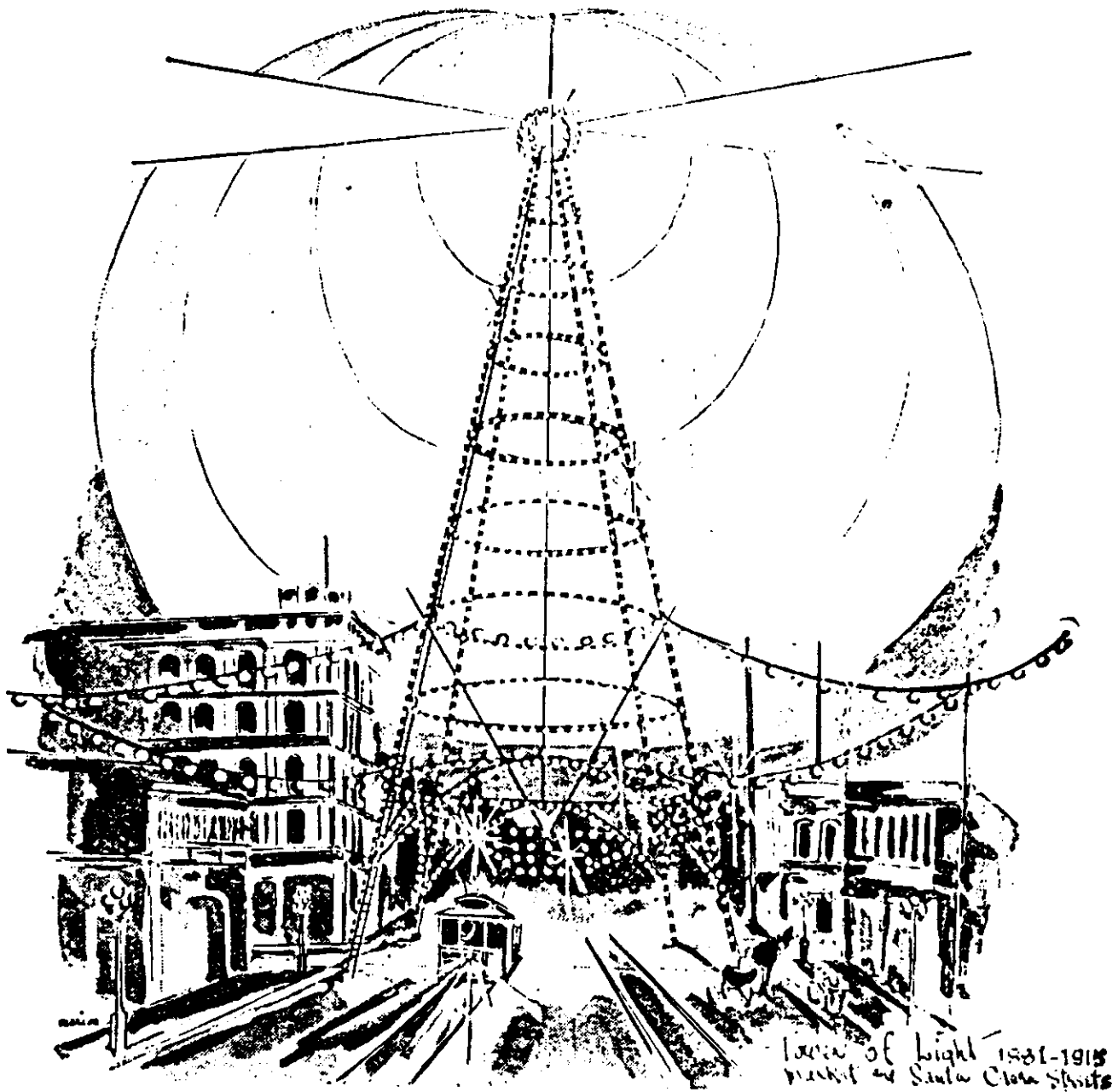
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1323 Mardene Court
San Jose, CA 95121
(408) 972-5084



This sketch of L.L. Owen accompanied his obituary in the
San Jose Daily Mercury, January 16, 1895.

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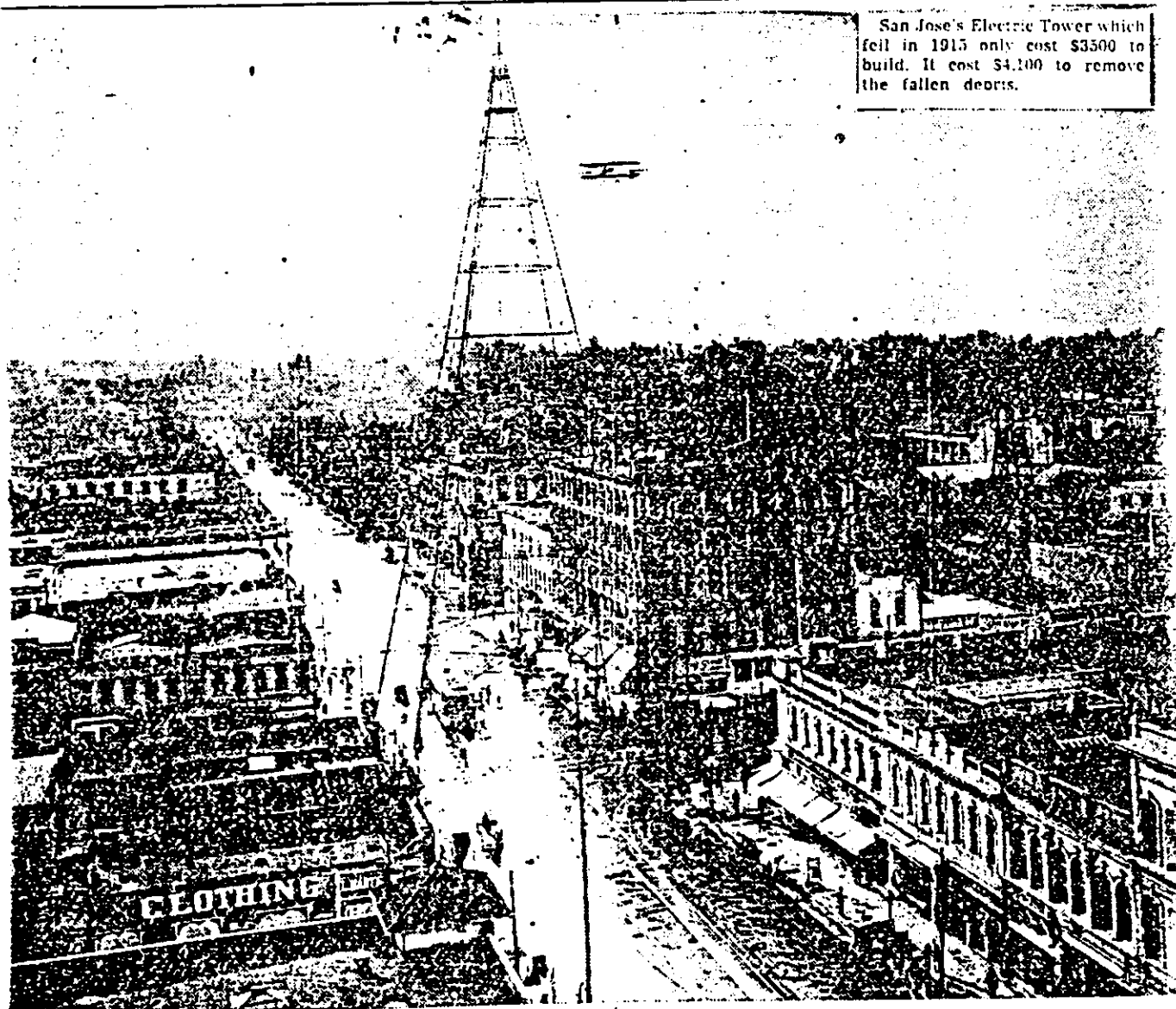
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CURY HERALD: SUNDAY MORNING, JANUARY 17, 1937.

RETROSPECTACLES

Tower Still Had Five Years To Stand W
Plane Flew Over Street Without Autos F

San Jose's Electric Tower which
fell in 1915 only cost \$3500 to
build. It cost \$4,100 to remove
the fallen debris.



One of the first pictures from the top of the First National Bank building when it was but recently built, a quarter of a century ago, looking out West Santa Clara street shows the tremendous progress here even with that short time. Autos were rare then—only a half dozen in town—and not one of them to be seen this rainy day. The Electric Tower was to straddle Market and Santa Clara streets five more years after this picture was taken. Still rarer sight of that day is the Curtiss biplane soaring over town. Where the De Anza hotel now stands was the park-like surroundings of Notre Dame college then. And where have all those trees gone out in the industrial district in the distance?

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Sources

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San Jose Public Library