

The San Jose Electric
Light Tower:
Its Pride and Its Perils

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The great San Jose Electric Light Tower, with all its pride and glory, suffered many buffetings throughout its thirtyfour years seving San Jose. The tower was plagued with many troubles and was weakened by many storms. the tower had also suffered many financial difficulties, and changed ownership many times due to these troubles.

Although the tower had faced many difficulties, it served many social purposes to the city. It wasa city landmark, as well as a symbol, and was used to welcome distinguished guests to San Jose, many who came just to see the famed tower. The tower had held many banners, anouncing county fairs and other important events. All in all, the San Jose Electric Light Tower gave San Jose something to be proud of.

Somewhere, in a thriving little agricultural town, nestled in the Santa Clara Valley, a young man is dreaming. That young man is James Jerome Owen, and his dream is that of a great light tower, a tower so noble that it would light all of San Jose, if not all of Santa Clara Valley and beyond. It was this dream that would spark many triumphs, along with many controversies, and even death.

It was Owen's dream that would lead to a remarkable legacy, ending in a tragic demise. Owen had come to California in 1850, as did many Americans, hoping to find many fortunes in the California gold fields. "J.J." Owen, as he was called by many around him, was said to be "one of the greatest and most respected men among western journalists" and "was unsurpassed in his day as a writer."¹ He soon became the publisher and editor of the San Jose Mercury News.

In 1879, Owen was greatly impressed by San Francisco's central lighting station, which was the world's first arc lamp facility. Owen, who had always liked to experiment with electrical gadgets, had come up with the idea to light the whole town with four towers. Owen had believed that "San Jose could be lit by six four-thousand candle power lights, if that amount of light were raised high enough over the city."²

In 1881, J.J. Owen had publicly urged citizens, in an editorial for the San Jose Mercury News, to fund the tower, through public subscription. Owen had claimed that the tower's bright light would "make crime shrink away and leave

San Jose."³ Owen had also claimed that the tower would "defy the elements, cheat gravitation and all its enemies."⁴

In came the public subscriptions, but, even with all the public support and encouragement, it was not enough to pay for the tower. The cost had been estimated to total around four thousand five hundred dollars, but actually, the final cost totaled at about five thousand five hundred dollars.

Media publicity helped contribute to the popularity and the success of the tower. Local newspapers promoted Owen's idea of a tower and helped to void any doubts in public minds. The idea of a tower was greatly celebrated due to the fact that the tower would be the second one of its kind, the first located in Akron, Ohio. This tower, reaching about 210 feet in height, did not provide gratifying results.

On August 11, 1881, foundations for the tower were laid on Santa Clara and Market Streets, in downtown San Jose, by M. Kenney, a local brick mason. The original plans for the tower were submitted John Cash, a San Jose architect, and engineered by John H. Pieper. All construction work was done by J.D. Cambell, a local contractor and one of the builders of San Jose State University. Wiring was done by Harry Laughlin.

There were relatively few problems during construction. Workers were supported by a labrynth of scaffolding, as construction continued on the tower. One problem that the tower had faced was a broken cross-rod, causing the entire wrought-iron structure to twist on its base. This incident had

sent San Joseans running, and had put a strong doubt in all minds. Owen himself had ordered all cross-rods be double braced, and construction resumed.

By December 3, 1881, the tower was almost complete and was greatly anticipated by many townspeople. Lighting ceremonies were set to be held on December 13, 1881, at precisely 6:30pm. As these ceremonies grew nearer, newspapers had begun to publish pessimistic views about the tower, so as not to build up the townspeople's hopes and expectations. Many newspapers began to doubt the intensity and effectiveness of the tower, along with J.J. Owen. On December 13, 1881, the day of the lighting, the San Jose Mercury News had published an article about the tower stating:

We have never promised a greater than half moonlight effect, from one tower, and that not to exceed an area of a mile. Those who think this one light would be sufficient enough to light the country, including Milpitas and Mt. Hamilton, will be doomed to disappointment.⁵

The San Jose Mercury News had also warned that "the public must not expect much of the light, even at its best," and were worried that someone would cut the wires leading to the tower prior to the official lighting.⁶

On December 13, 1881, at 6:30pm, the San Jose Electric Light Tower, once known as "Owen's Folly," lit the night skies over Santa Clara Valley.⁷

Not only did light shine from the tower, but many stories came also. Some had said that a rancher in the east foothills could read a newspaper by the light of the tower, although others had claimed it was impossible to read a mile away from the tower. There were also stories from a Los Gatos and Gilroy man who had complained that the bright lights stopped his chickens from roosting. In later years, The Tower Saloon, located at one corner of the intersection, had received a letter from a German which was addressed to the owner and sent to "Under the Tower, U.S.A."⁸

Not all that came from the tower was glory, though. Financial troubles had afflicted the tower since the moment plans were drawn up. J.J. Owen had failed to collect enough money for the tower through public subscription, and was forced to sell the tower to cover the debts. In 1882, the tower was sold to the San Jose Brush Electric Company, which assumed a debt of approximately two thousand dollars.

But the troubles did not end there. Local gas companies had greatly opposed the building of the tower. At that time, gas street lamps were the primary source of city lighting. But with the completion of the tower, about one-third of downtown gas lamps were eliminated, simply because they were no longer needed. The rivalry between the San Jose Brush Electric Company and the Garden City Gas Company, a former owner of the tower, had increased when the San Jose Brush Electric Company had erected a dozen 150-foot masts equipped with arc lamps. These masts were to aid the tower in lighting the

downtown area, but eventually burned out. This rivalry ended in 1889 when the two companies merged to form the San Jose Light and Power Company.

New troubles arose when the Electric Improvement Company was formed. The Company had won a franchise to street lighting, but the San Jose Light and Power Company had refused to give permission to use the tower. Due to financial problems and increased company opposition, the tower had remained unlit for two years. In 1891, the Electric Improvement Company argued that the tower was public property and ~~re~~-wired and re-lit the tower in February. Later that year, W.W. Gillespie, secretary of the Electric Improvement Company, took matters into his own hands. At gunpoint, Gillespie had ordered two Light and Power men off the tower. His men then cut all wires to the tower and removed all the lights. Gillespie was then caught and arrested. Service to the tower was then restored.

Competition between the two companies raged, in and out of court, until 1902 when the United Gas and Electric Company had absorbed many utility companies in the area, including the San Jose Light and Power Company and the Electric Improvement Company.

The public on the whole, was quite disappointed with the tower. The safety of the tower was doubted in the minds of many. The tower may have looked impressive, although it did not supply sufficient light to the city. The light from the tower was not as expected or predicted, and did not "fall from the

heavens on places beneath" as promised.⁹

The tower, itself had many faults. After the building of the Tower Saloon, at the base of the tower, policemen often found local drunks swinging on the tower's framework. Birds, attracted by the tower's bright glare, often ran into it. This was sometimes good for the policemen, who picked up the dead birds and sold them to local restaurants. By policemen, it was considered a mixed blessing. In the early 1900s, after the streets had been widened, many ^{water?} cars would run into the foundations, which were in the intersection.

Although many townspeople found the tower with considerable faults and defects, it had been called one of the "seven wonders of the west."¹⁰ During Christmas, the tower had been called a "Christmas tree," and, on the Fourth of July, fireworks generated from the top of the tower.¹¹ On New Year's Eve Will Lake, the Municipal Band leader, climbed the tower every year to sound taps. In later years, the tower was decorated with thousands of fancy incandescent bulbs. Colorful banners announcing County fairs and other important events were strewn all over the tower, along with flags which welcomed distinguished guests and were used for patriotic parades.

The tower's light was said to have cast "a mellow blue light that greatly surpassed gas in brightness" that had shown for a radius of approximately two miles.¹² According to many people, gas "appeared almost as a shadow" compared to the light of the tower, which people were able to read a pocket

watch over a mile away by.¹³ The Light from the tower was able to be seen all over the Santa Clara Valley. Some said it could be seen from Pacheco Pass, and it was possible to read a newspaper in Saratoga.

Double-carbon arc lamps were used to light the tower. Six, four-thousand candle-power lights were stationed at the top, each lasting about fourteen hours before the carbons were needed to be replaced. Each lamp had two carbon filaments that burned one at a time. But throughout the years, arc lamps had become obsolete, with the invention and more widespread use of the incandescent bulb, also known as the "glow lamp."¹⁴

The tower had struggled through many storms and hardships, including the disastrous 1906 earthquake, which devastated much of the entire Bay Area. It was said that the tower's strength was shown by its ability to bend. During wind storms, the tower had been able to sway at least six feet towards each side. Its strongest point was the very top of the tower, even with a few loose cross-rods and bars.

During the latter part of 1915, the tower had been battered by many wind and rainstorms. Golden Gate Iron Works had been hired by the Pacific Gas and Electric Company, who had owned the tower, to repair damages suffered in a storm ten months earlier. In early December, a storm had been brewing around San Jose. It was a cold, blustery day when the tower came tumbling down. The morning of December 3, 1915, was very windy with gusts

reaching up to fifty-six miles per hour. At 11:55am, on December 3, 1915, just ten days before its thirty-fourth anniversary, the San Jose Electric Light Tower went crashing down. Due to the storm, no one had been in the street, and the crew working on the tower had not been working. Only one man had suffered a slight hand injury from a flying piece of steel. The tower had come down with "the crackling and snapping of rods and pipes" and "a warning cry from bystanders."¹⁵ According to Frank Cappa, of Alamo, "The tower had been under repairs as it had been declared unsafe. Repairs for about twenty feet above street level when it fell."¹⁶

For a few years thereafter, the people of San Jose had tried to spark rebuilding efforts, and had even begun to raise money for it. Merchants had raised six thousand dollars to rebuild Owen's tower, but nothing had been done to reconstruct it.

In 1976, plans had been made to build a 112-foot replica of the tower in the San Jose Historical Museum. A re-lighting ceremony was held on May 1, 1977, as a part of San Jose's bicentennial celebration. The cost of the replica was sixty-five thousand dollars.

The San Jose Electric Light Tower suffered many buffetings during its thirty-four years in San Jose. San Jose's city life reflected and was greatly influenced by the success and failure of the tower. Commerce had tremendously increased with the completion of the tower, in fact, new companies were formed just to erect the tower. On the whole,

San Jose's social life was given a well-needed boost that kept going until the tower's tragic fall in December, 1915. The fall had marked the end of James Jerome Owen's dream, a dream which is now being re-lived at the San Jose Historical Museum.

Notes

1. Marion Bailey Kaufman, San Jose Mercury News, March 14, 1965, p.14.
2. Carl Heintze, San Jose Evening News, June 14, 1949, p.11.
3. Edwin A. Beilharz and Donald O. DeMers, Jr., San Jose: California's First City, (Tulsa: Continental Heritage Press, 1980) p.118.
4. Ibid.
5. San Jose Mercury News, December 13, 1881, p.5.
6. Ibid.
7. Jim Larimore, San Jose Mercury News, December 3, 1969, p.7.
8. John Spalding, San Jose Mercury News, September 18, 1984, p.2B.
9. Heintze, Op. Cit., p.11.
10. Let's Go !, Early Spring, 1969, p.8.
11. Kaufman, Op. Cit., p.14.
12. Ibid.
13. Watkins, T.H., American West, Fall, 1966, p.21.
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15. San Jose Mercury News, January 3, 1965, p.31.

16. Ibid.

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