

## **South San Francisco's Civic Center in the 1920s**

By Jacquelyne Kious

When the block between Walnut and Miller Avenues was chosen as the civic center site, a committee of five prominent citizens was appointed to decide how to fund city hall and to choose a design. City leaders were working out of a temporary location at 310 Linden Ave.

The funding turned out to be easier than the design. A bond measure for \$129,000 was put on the ballot in June 1919 and was easily passed by residents. As far as the design, committee members toured the state for inspiration but found no architectural design they could agree on. A Request for Proposals went out. The winning design was submitted by a SF architectural firm and was modeled after Philadelphia's Independence Hall. City Hall was completed in November 1920. Thousands gathered in the rain on Armistice Day for a parade and dedication.

Among those occupying the new city hall were the police and fire departments. The three-member police department occupied half of the first floor. The volunteer fire department occupied the entire basement with the exception of a small area for the jail. The volunteers took turns manning the firehouse during the day but would go home in the evening to be with their families. As the city grew, the need for the firehouse to be manned around the clock became apparent. The solution – have single men with day jobs sleep at the firehouse at night rent free in exchange for responding to calls. Sleepers, as they were known, received weekly training and were paid the same as the volunteers.

In the early days, both the police and fire departments used the city hall's clock tower as a way to communicate. One-way radio communication wasn't available in the mid-1930s and two-way was developed in the late 1940s. Plus, residential telephone service was a luxury. When police assistance was needed the red light in the clock tower was lit. Residents would see the red light and alert officers who would run to the nearest pay phone and call the police department.

When a fire was reported, the volunteers would ring the fire bell in the clock tower and then make their way to the fire. The fire department got its first engine in 1916. Prior to that, volunteer firemen would ring the fire bell at Grand & Linden Avenues and run to the fire pulling the hose and ladder carts.