

Old Davenport Building

Some Recollections Awakened by a Look at a Structure

Archie William's Suicide - His Contest with "Billy" Bruen for Chief Engineer of the Volunteer Fire Department in 1872

Source: Old Newspaper Article

On the west side of Front Street, between Taylor and Yamhill, stands a large two-story wooden building, every exterior and interior appearance of which indicates age. Moss thickly covers the roof, while the sides and ends are stained with age and much faded and weather beaten. In respect to age, the building does not deceive its appearance, for it was erected many years ago. The precise age of the house is not known, but it is safe to say that it was erected over a quarter of a century ago. It has not always occupied the present site, but was moved there some ten or twelve years since. Originally, the building was constructed on First Street near the corner of Morrison. Dr. Isaac A Davenport, the old pioneer physician, who passed away some years ago, was, for a long time, the owner of the building. Upstairs in the front end of the house he had his office and sleeping apartments for many years. The other portion of the upstairs was used for offices and occupied as sleeping rooms. On the first floor was a drug store kept by the late S.G. Skidmore. Prior to 1876, the building was removed to where it now stands to yield place to a more pretentious and enduring structure. For years past the old Davenport house has been used as a place for various kinds of business and been occupied by many different persons. No repairs of any sort have been made for probably twenty years and not even a coat of paint has been added until dinginess and dilapidation seem to hold undisputed possession. But despite its present uninviting aspect, the old building has quite a history and holds not a few memories of the years that are "beyond the flood."

Within its now old and cobwebby walls a ghastly and sickening tragedy was once enacted, and but a few old residents of the city can look at the building without recalling some of the remembrances of the deed. Reference are made to the suicide of Archie A. Williams for it was under the roof of the same aged structure that he took his own life in a frenzy of despair and desperation. This tragedy occurred early in 1872. Williams, who for a long time had been in the employ of the Portland Water Company, occupied a room in the second story. Of the unfortuanate circumstances immediately connected with the affair, or the impelling motive which took possession of the young man and drove him to seek oblivion in death, it is needless to speak at this distant date. The deed was committed early in the afternoon - probably 3 o'clock, and the lifeless body was found soon after. Williams had chosen a safe, speedy and painless method to end his earthly trouble, the instrument selected being a pistol. He had placed the muzzle in his mouth and then fired the fatal shot, the ball ranging up through his brain. Death was instantaneous, of course. From the position of the body when found, Williams must have been kneeling at the side of his bed at the moment he pulled the trigger.

Deceased was a prominent member of the Multnomah Engine Company No. 2 at the time of his death. This was during the old volunteer days and Williams had filled the office of Chief Engineer for the fire department for one term. The remains were taken to the engine house on Second Street and, after lying in state for a day, were conveyed from there to the Firemen's Grounds in Lone Fir, where they now rest (grave N-140). The funeral, which was a very large one, took place from No. 2's house and the floral tributes were very numerous and simply magnificent.

The mention of William's most unhappy end brings vividly to mind an incident which occurred only a few months before (in 1872). Williams had served efficiently as Chief Engineer for one year (1871-72) and his name was presented for re-election. He was young and ambitious and had fully set his heart on being successful in his second candidacy. Among the members of Multnomah No. 2 he was a decided favorite and, as a matter of course, that company ardently supported him in the contest. Besides, he had many warm friends in the department. Against Williams was pitted William O. Bruen, an old member of Columbian Engine Company No. 3 and the idol of that company. The contest was very warm and close and during the day of the election there was manifested more or less personal feeling, especially between the two opposing candidates, and generally among the firemen.

After the polls closed, several hundred eager and excited firemen collected in front of the voting place, on Morrison Street, between First and Second, to await the result of the canvass. So close was the contest that the fire boys had literally "counted noses," had canvassed matters down so fine that they knew just how many votes would be polled in the department and consequently, how many each candidate would require to secure the much-coveted position. Each ballot was called out in a loud, distinct voice so that all could hear. As the canvass proceeded, the interest gradually deepened and as the end approached, became almost breathless. Every fireman had a pencil and slip of paper on which he was recording the tally, and everybody was keeping the number in his mind. Finally Bruen lacked only five, then four, then three. Here every man almost held his breath and eagerly watched and waited. Bruen presently got another vote, and now needed only one more to elect him. Several ballots were called for Williams in succession, and when the judge uttered the word "Bruen" again, he paused significantly a moment and held up the ballot. Shouts and cheers broke from scores of throats and a moment later a hundred or more firemen were to be seen dancing excitedly around, throwing their hats in the air and shaking hands with each other.

Bruen and Williams had stood all during the canvass, side by side, watching and counting every ballot in silence. Just as Bruen received the vote which made him Chief Engineer, he turned to his unsuccessful rival and, holding out his hand, said with a pleasant smile: "Archie, congratulate me, old fellow, I have fairly beaten you and am Chief Engineer. I'm sorry we couldn't both be elected." The gracious and manly spirit which prompted Bruen, and the half regretful tone in which the words were uttered, appealed with irresistible force to every chivalrous instinct in Williams' nature. Everything was forgotten in an instant, every feeling of personal bitterness and

hot rivalry vanished from his heart. Grasping Bruen's hand and shaking it warmly, he said, while his eyes moistened and his lips trembled: "I congratulate you Billy, with all my heart, you have beaten me fairly and, as I can't be Chief Engineer this time, I'm glad you have got it."

But for all that, the pangs of disappointment, ambition, and the humiliation of defeat rankled deeply in his breast and hastened, ifn it did not lead directly, to his tragic fate, which occurred only a short time after. He never lived to be a candidate again. The hands which were joined on that occasion have crumbled back to dust and the tongues which uttered thee words of friendly greeting are stilled forever in death. Some years later, Billy Bruen died and now lies in the firemen's plot (grave N-88) within a few yards of where poor Archie sleeps in his narrow and lowly bed. Yet a passing glance at the ancient, dingy, faded, and dilapidated landmark, as it now stands on Front Street and not as it was steeped in the golden rays of the hot afternoon April of yesteryear, brings back these old memories of the dusty and forgotten past.