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Sourisseau Academy

Smith-Layton Archive presents:

Stairway to Heaven

by Tom Layton

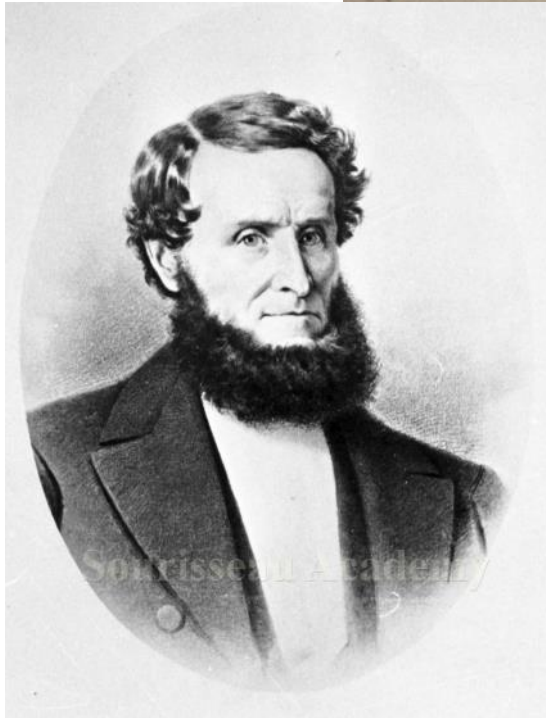
Les Amis (The Friends)

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[1] **A Suitable Bequest** - James Lick, one of the richest men in California, was always interested in science and technology. Born in 1796 to a German-American family from Pennsylvania, he was trained as a piano maker. He made his first fortune building and selling pianos in South America, where he met Domenico Ghirardelli. Arriving in California during the Gold Rush, Lick is credited with bringing Ghirardelli's chocolate to San Francisco.

Lick was one of California's most generous benefactors. He made his home in San Jose, where he built an orphanage and a home for the elderly, among other gifts. Following a crippling stroke, the 78 year-old-bachelor began to list his final philanthropic bequests. A long time friend, the President of the California Academy of Sciences, wisely suggested an observatory atop 4,209-foot Mount Hamilton to house the most powerful telescope in the world.



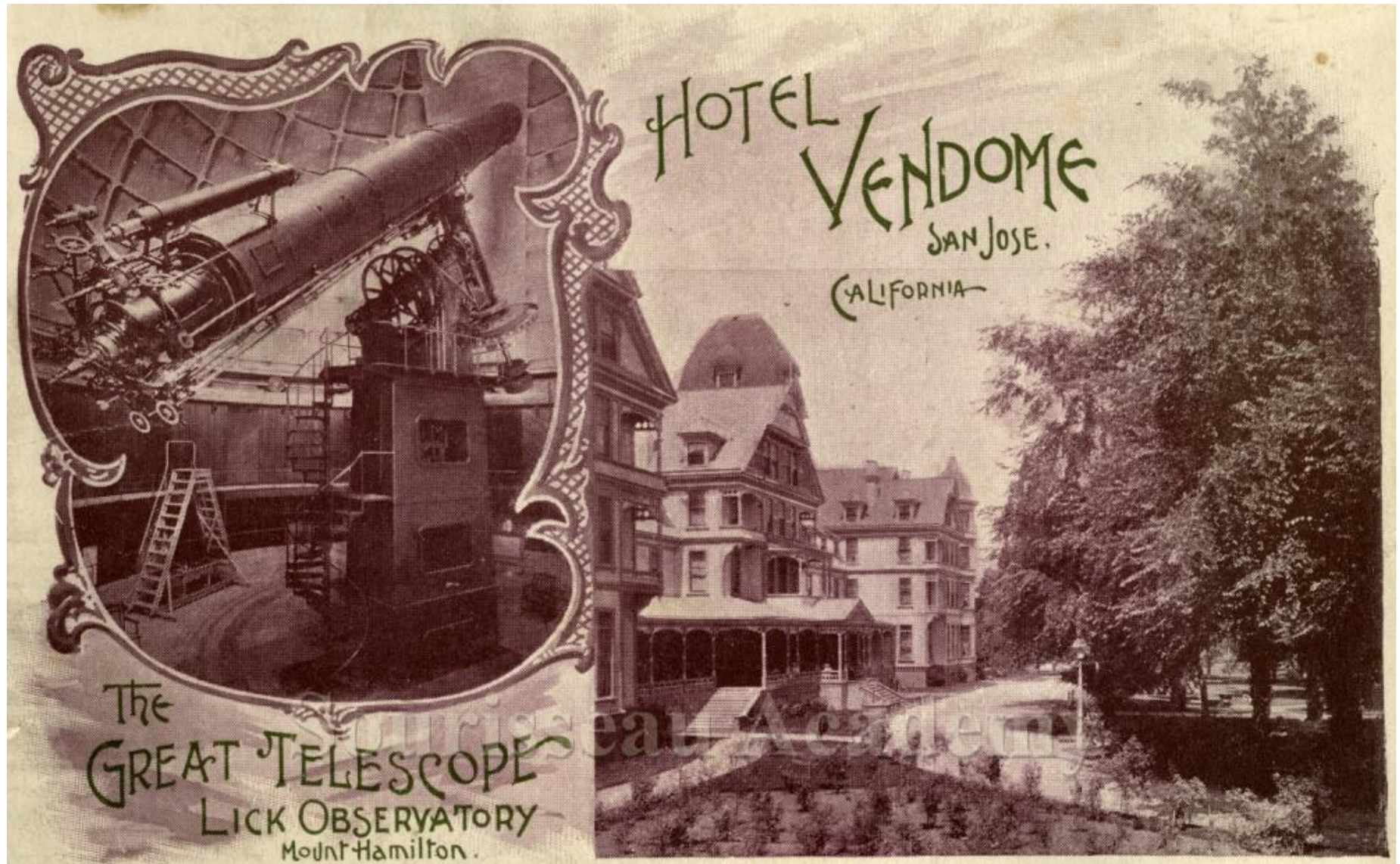
[2] **China Camp** - Lick was interested in all aspects of the sciences. He planned to build a large conservatory in San Jose, but death intervened and it went to San Francisco. Lick agreed to donate an observatory if the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors would build a road to the summit of Mount Hamilton. In 1875, Santa Clara County road construction engineers hired a crew of workmen who set up their camp at the foot of the mountain.



[3] **Moving Tons of Rock and Rubble...** - Despite serious anti-Chinese sentiment in California, experienced Chinese workers began construction. The recent completion of the Union Pacific Railroad (1869) had released hundreds of knowledgeable Chinese for heavy construction projects. For over a year, these skilled workmen snaked their way up the mountain, carving a roadway along dangerous heights, often out of solid rock.



[4] **Resting the Horses ...** - The roadway reputedly incorporated 365 hairpin turns, depending on who was counting. Engineers and surveyors designed the right-of-way with less than a $6\frac{1}{2}\%$ grade so that heavily loaded, horse-drawn wagons could ascend the mountain roadway. Even today, the steep grade and narrow roadway make driving difficult.



[5] **A Tourist Industry** - After nearly ten years, as the road to the Observatory was reaching completion in 1887, the Vendome, a grand hotel, was also under construction in San Jose. Curious Californians wanted to see the only mountain top observatory in the world. And what could be a better tourist draw for the hotel than to offer daily tours, already well advertised in brochures and pamphlets.



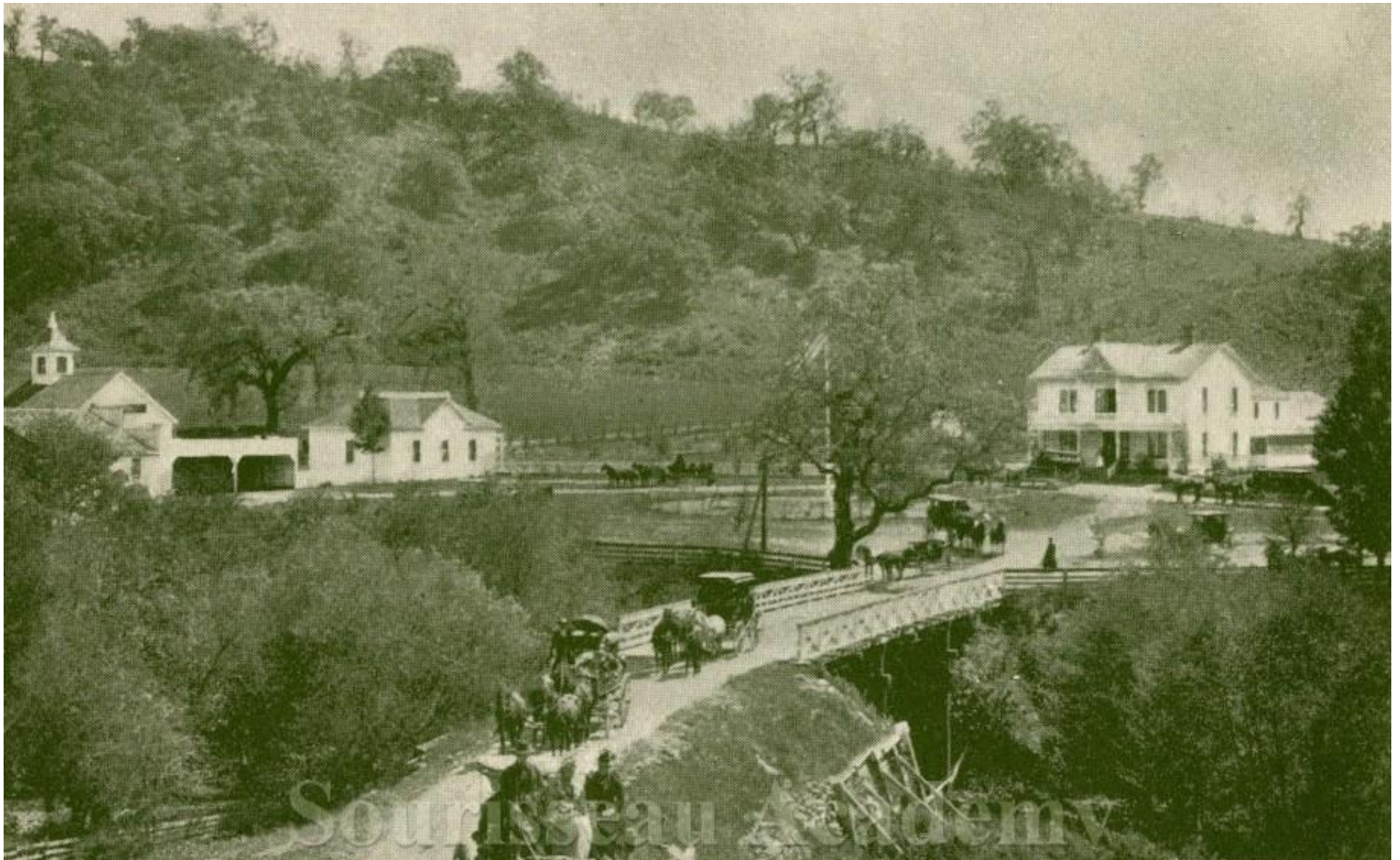
[6] **The Vendome Hotel - Shaded Carriages with Padded Seats** - When the Observatory finally opened in 1887, both the Mount Hamilton Stage Company and Hotel Vendome Stables were providing carriage rides. Day trips to the observatory from their livery stables on the Vendome hotel grounds offered a variety of vehicles. Carriages were available for two, or for a much larger parties.



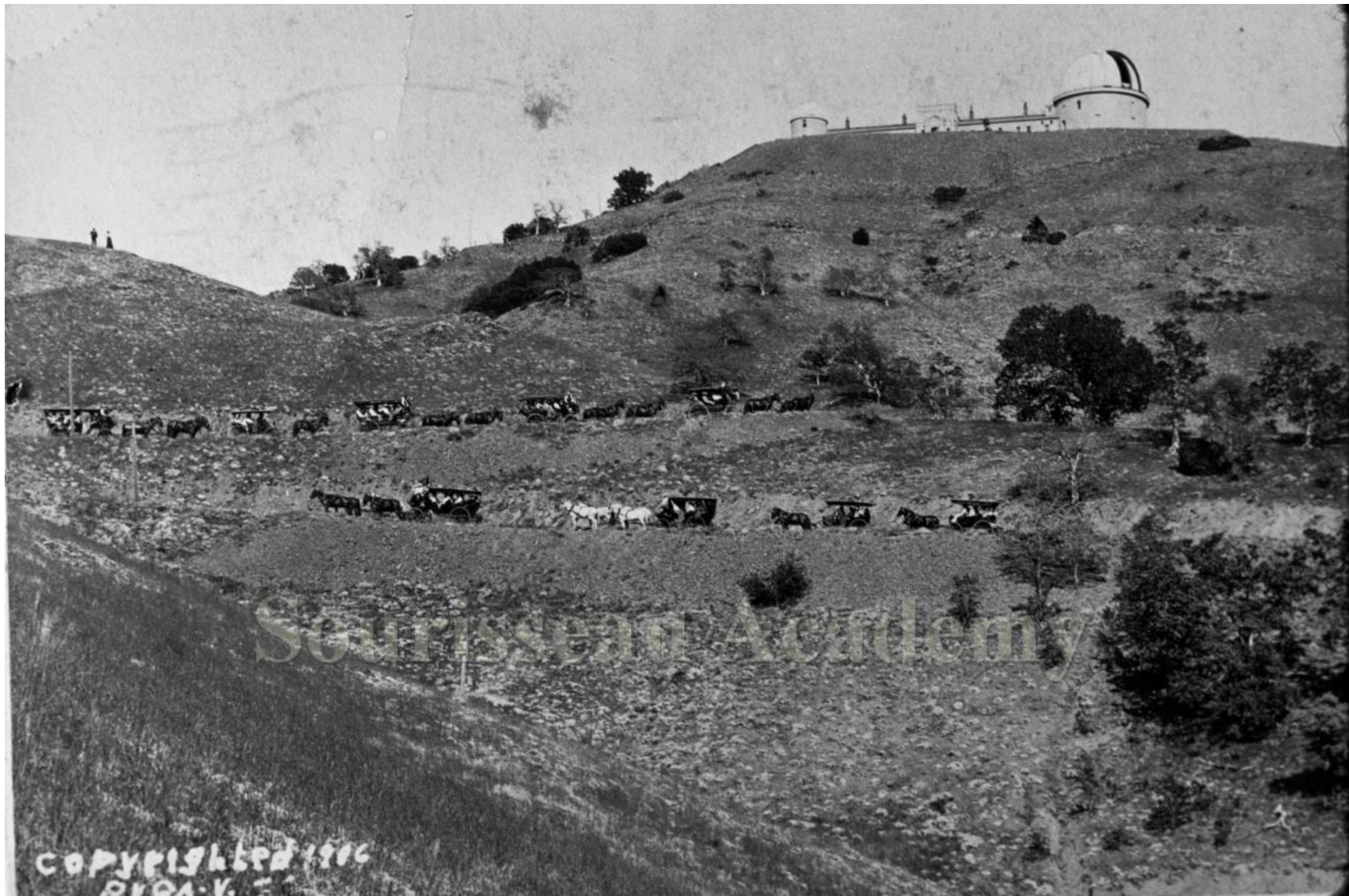
[7] **Horse Power** - The carriage ride from San Jose to the Observatory atop Mount Hamilton was an expensive outing and required two changes of teams, with 4-horses needed for each change. The first change took place at Half-Way House in Halls Valley; the second was at the hotel at Smith Creek, where other teams were stabled.



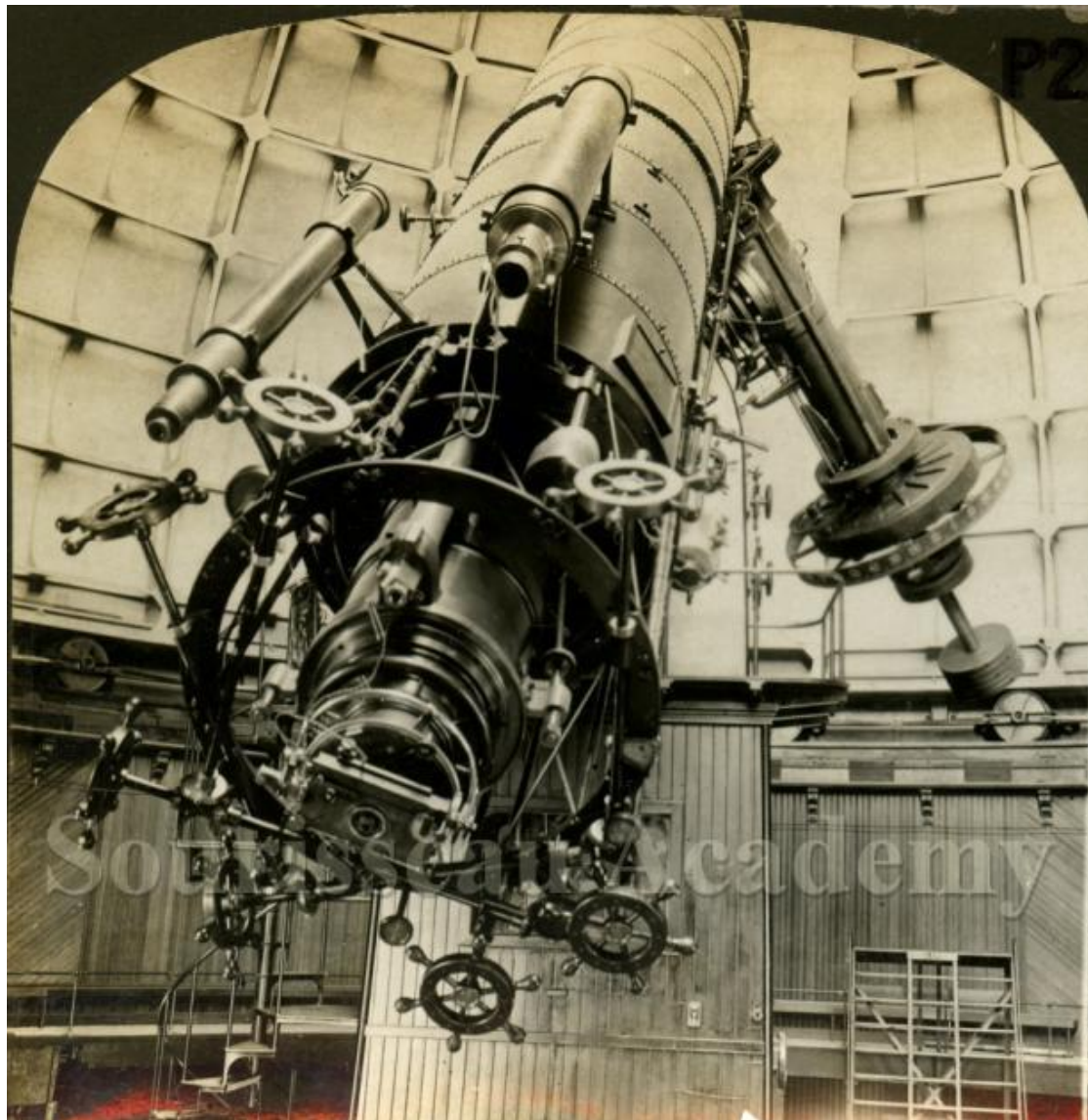
[8] **The Smith Creek Hotel** - The sign on this 1913 photo says Smith Creek Hotel, but the name of this station was changed to the Hotel Santa Ysabel in 1901. Tourists enroute to Mount Hamilton could enjoy lunch, stretch their legs and enjoy the scenery at the Smith Creek Hotel.



[9] **On the Road Again...** - The Smith Creek Hotel, or the Hotel Santa Ysabel at Smith Creek, marked a sort of half-way-point. The route to Mount Hamilton from the Hotel Vendome covered a little over 26 miles. The first six miles along Alum Rock Road to the junction of Mount Hamilton Road were a fairly easy ascent. After that, the road became more challenging. Smith Creek, 12 miles from Mount Hamilton summit, marked the beginning of the steep ascent.



[10] **Nearing the Top...** - On a sunny, summer day, long lines of carriages travel the long route upward towards the Observatory. Along with tourists, the teamsters were hauling all of the food and other supplies needed to sustain the permanent community on top of Mount Hamilton, which sometimes consisted of as many as 200 people.



[11] **The Destination... Moon-Gazing** - Travel difficulties were trivial when the goal was to see the Great Lick Refractor, still the largest operating telescope in the world — 57 feet long and 4 feet in diameter. The instrument was built 1880-1888 and weighed 25,000 lbs. For more than a century, it has been one of the world's most important instruments. Today, Mount Hamilton's scientists use other instruments as well: the Shane 3-meter Reflector, the Nickel 1-meter Reflector (1979), the Katzman Automatic Imaging Telescope (KAIT) and the Automated Planet Finder.



[12] **Mount Hamilton in Winter** - Always a world of its own, the little Mount Hamilton community became much more remote in winter. The astronomers, technicians, mechanics, grounds-keepers and their families formed a small town, often isolated by inclement weather.



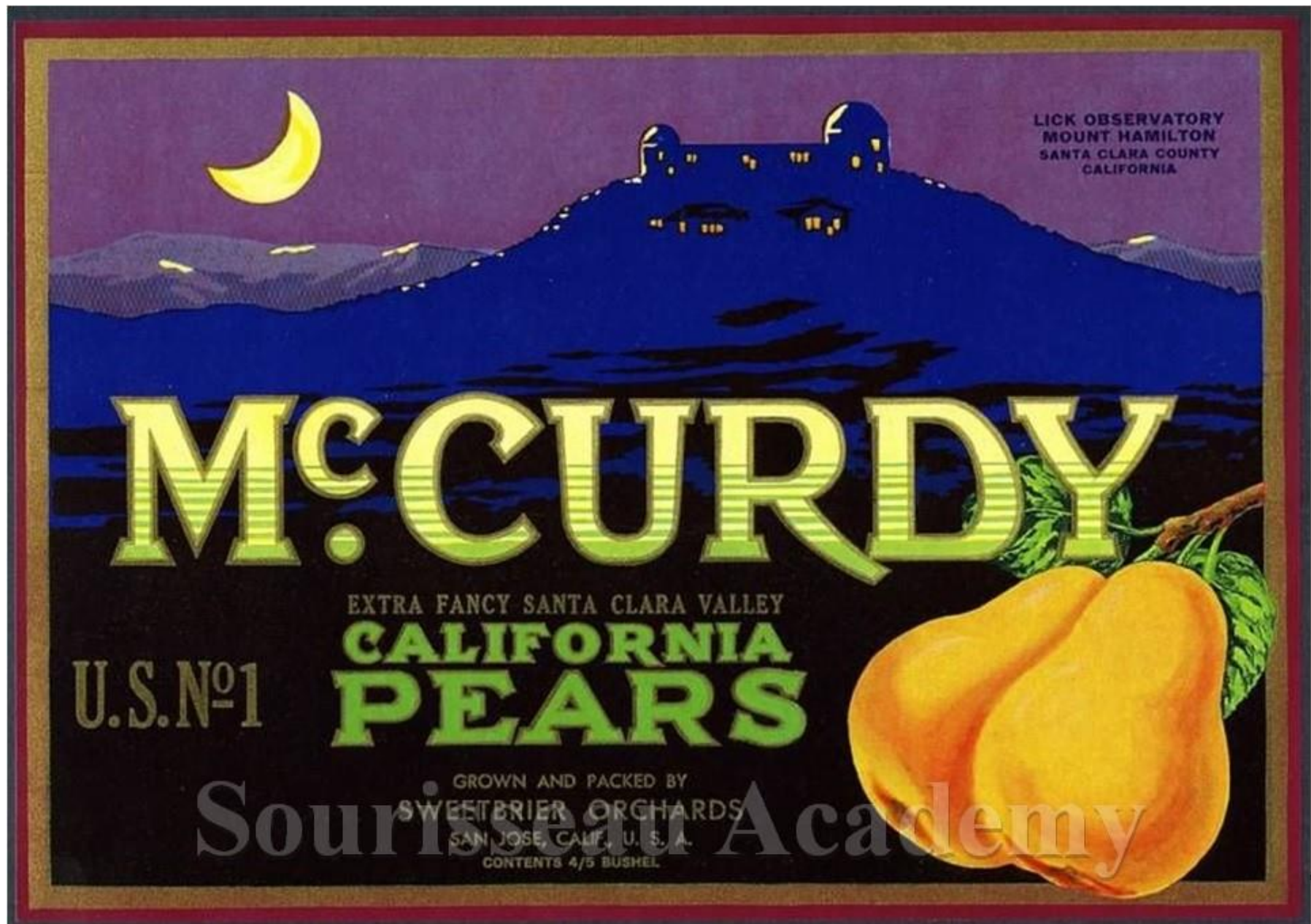
[13] **A View from the Top** - Every tourist reaching the top of Mount Hamilton needed a souvenir of that ascent — and what could be better than a postcard with a Mount Hamilton postmark, mailed from the post office at Mount Hamilton to the folks at home.
(Editor's note: They weren't a penny for long.)



[14] **Disruptive Technology** - The first automobiles appeared in the Valley in 1900, although A. E. Holmes was reported to have taken his Stanley Steamer to the top of Mount Hamilton in 1898. By 1908, automotive horsepower had replaced *Horse Power*. The Santa Clara Automobile Club is parked beside the aging Vendome Stables at Smith Creek. One of the first motor-bus lines in the state was started in 1910 to serve visitors to Mount Hamilton.



[15] **The Largest and the Finest...Tomatoes?** - In addition to being the home of the Great Lick Telescope, the wonders of Mount Hamilton were being advertized worldwide on the labels of Santa Clara Valley canned tomatoes. Santa Clara Valley had many impressive products!



[16] **Pears by Moonlight.** - In the 1920s, San Jose's fruit label artists produced this fantastical and somewhat romantic night-time image of the observatory — a sight possibly seen from the McCurdy family orchards down below.



[17] **Scientific Observations - Then and Now** - When the Lick Observatory was turned over to the Regents of the University of California in 1888, the scientists and technicians at the Lick Observatory were already making historic discoveries.

In the 1900s, astronomers were perfecting deep space photography. In 1922, Lick scientists verified Einstein's Theory of Relativity. In the 1950s, the birth of stars was observed, and in 1969, the actual distance to the moon was accurately measured. Lick scientists continue to make important discoveries. Visit ucolick.org to see what up these days.