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# Hotel Vendome

by Michael Hurley

*Les Amis (The Friends)*  
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[29] **Hotel Vendome, 1889-1930.** For forty years the Hotel Vendome, located on First Street a few blocks north of downtown, was a centerpiece of San José tourism, recreation, and social life.



[30] **Market Street Depot.** With the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, access to California was available in just a few days. By 1889, a new San José depot was constructed on Bassett Street at the end of Market Street, providing easy access to the hotel for visitors from out of town. To promote business and tourism, the newly formed Southern Pacific Railroad built the grand Del Monte Hotel in Monterey in 1880.



[31] **Science . . . and Tourism!** In 1874, James Lick, perhaps California's wealthiest man, was persuaded to bequest funds to the University of California for the construction of an astronomical observatory. The gift was given on the condition that the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors agreed to build a 27-mile road from San José to the preferred site at the top of Mount Hamilton. Road construction was completed in 1876; the observatory was built in 1887. The Lick Observatory was the world's first permanently occupied mountain top observatory. With installation of its 36-inch Great Lick Refractor telescope (at that time the largest in the world) scheduled for 1888, San José civic and business leaders soon realized the observatory's potential for attracting visitors to San José.



[32] **T. S. Montgomery, 1855-1944.** In 1886, Thomas S. Montgomery, pictured here as a young man, was engaged to sell an eleven-acre property on North First Street. Until 1884 the land was the estate of wealthy Josiah Belden, the first mayor of San José. The property was an easy walk to the Market Street Depot. The park-like grounds of the Belden estate had been designed by pioneer landscape architect, Frederick Lowe. After advertising residential lots at \$100-\$185 each, by August 1887 he and a consortium of business leaders bought the Maddox property for \$60,000 for the purpose of building a grand hotel in the style of the Del Monte in Monterey. The new Garden City Bank, organized by Montgomery and several other Hotel Vendome directors, financed the purchase. During the following 50 years, Montgomery went on to become the most significant developer of downtown San José



[33] **Hotel Construction.** The Hotel Vendome Company, incorporated in 1887, immediately engaged the local architectural firm of Jacob Lenzen & Son to design a grand resort hotel in the style of the new Arcadia Hotel in Santa Monica. Jacob Lenzen continued as the general contractor, completing construction by early 1889 at a total cost of \$150,000. Much of Lowe's earlier landscaping from the Belden estate formed the basis for the hotel's grounds.



[34] **Hotel Vendome Facilities.** When it opened on February 7, 1889, the Hotel Vendome had 150 rooms with en suite bathrooms, steam heat, Otis elevators, a ballroom, a barbershop, banquet rooms and kitchens. Transient rates were \$2.50 to \$4.00 per day, with special rates for families and permanent boarders.



**[35]Hotel Vendome Grounds.** San José Mercury News, December 31, 1911, wrote:

*The hotel is surrounded by a magnificent park of considerable extent. It consists of pines, elms live oaks, redwoods, peppers and various other kinds of trees with palms and tropical plants and a wealth of shrubbery, combined with scores of handsome lawns. Walks wind through the park, a maze of delights. All about the grounds, and carrying out the park idea, are tree-lined street and fine residences with well-kept grounds. Bowling alleys and tennis courts furnish amusement to the guests.*

The hotel's greenhouses and sprouting beds had a capacity of 30,000 plants to set out around the hotel grounds.



[36] **Vendome Stables.** The Vendome Stables on the hotel grounds along San Pedro Street housed 40-60 horses of the Mount Hamilton Stage Company, operated by Fred Ross.



[37] **Day & Overnight Trips to Lick Observatory.** The Hotel Vendome and Mount Hamilton Stage Company provided daily trips to the Lick Observatory and also furnished vehicles and drivers for private parties. Daily carriages left the hotel at 7:30 am, returning about 6:00 pm. On Saturdays, stages left at 12:30 pm, returning about 1:00 am early Sunday, allowing visitors brief views of starry skies through the 36" refractor telescope. Overnight trips arrived at the Smith Creek Hotel at the base of Mount Hamilton around 5:00 pm, and continued the remaining seven miles after a brief supper. They returned to the Hotel later that evening, and went back to the Hotel Vendome the next day.



[38] **On the Mount Hamilton Road, 1890s.** Taking a break on the 28-mile journey from the Hotel Vendome to the Lick Observatory in the 1890s.



[39] **Fires!** During its forty years of existence, the Hotel Vendome had several fires. The first, on September 7, 1889, caused only minor damage. The worst fire was on the night of September 26, 1898. Around 10:30 pm, a waiter saw sparks falling from the wing of the hotel containing the main dining room. All guests gathered their belongings and left uninjured, most being taken to the St. James Hotel. The entire fire department responded, battling the blaze through the night and into the next morning. Ten firefighters were on the third floor when a portion of the building collapsed. Three fell into the wreckage. James Nagle and Dick Williamson were injured, but Miles McDermott died — the first San José firefighter to die in the line of duty.



[40] **1906 Earthquake.** In 1903, the Hotel Vendome added a three-story, 34-room Annex, located where the present Losse Court and Rankin Avenues intersect. The earthquake of April 18, 1906 was severe, creating havoc in San José's downtown and destroying the Agnews State Hospital. The main building of the Hotel Vendome was damaged, and the 1903 Annex was completely destroyed. The Annex imprisoned 14 guests. All were brought to safety except Thomas O'Toole, a Gilroy farmer, who died. The hotel remained closed for repairs until May 1, 1907. The Annex was never rebuilt.



[41] **Cahill Station.** For decades the Southern Pacific Railroad held a franchise for its trackage, running through the central business area of San José and down the middle of Fourth Street to the city limits. Several freight trains each day caused traffic disruptions and obstructed emergency services. Negotiation, legislation and litigation forced rerouting the SP mainline after the franchise expired. By 1928, the present route west of downtown had been determined and construction of a new depot on Cahill Street (now Diridon Station) was underway. The location of the new depot was some distance from the Hotel Vendome.



[42] **New Hotels - Montgomery Hotel.** As one of the founders of the Garden City Bank, realtor T. S. Montgomery was instrumental in the creation of the 1889 Hotel Vendome. As president of the Garden City Bank, Montgomery was responsible for financing his Montgomery Hotel, which opened in 1911 at South First and San Antonio Streets. The Hotel Sainte Claire opened in 1926, at the southeast corner of Market and San Carlos Streets. By 1930, the Hotel De Anza at W. Santa Clara Street and Notre Dame Avenue was soon to open. With modern amenities, these new hotels presented significant competition for the aging Hotel Vendome.



[43] **Demise of the Hotel Vendome.** Faced with competition from several modern downtown hotels and a newly relocated depot, the aging Hotel Vendome was sold to a syndicate, headed by local realtor J. Bradley Clayton, on March 26, 1930. The Hotel Vendome doors were closed on April 25, 1930, and the buildings were promptly demolished. The grounds were subdivided for a residential development known as the Vendome Grounds. The site is now the present Ayer Avenue, Losse Court and Rankin Avenues, located adjacent to the present Japantown/Ayer light rail station on North First Street.