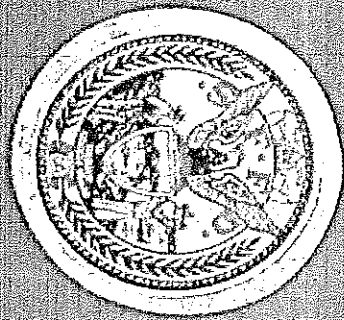


SAN FRANCISCO



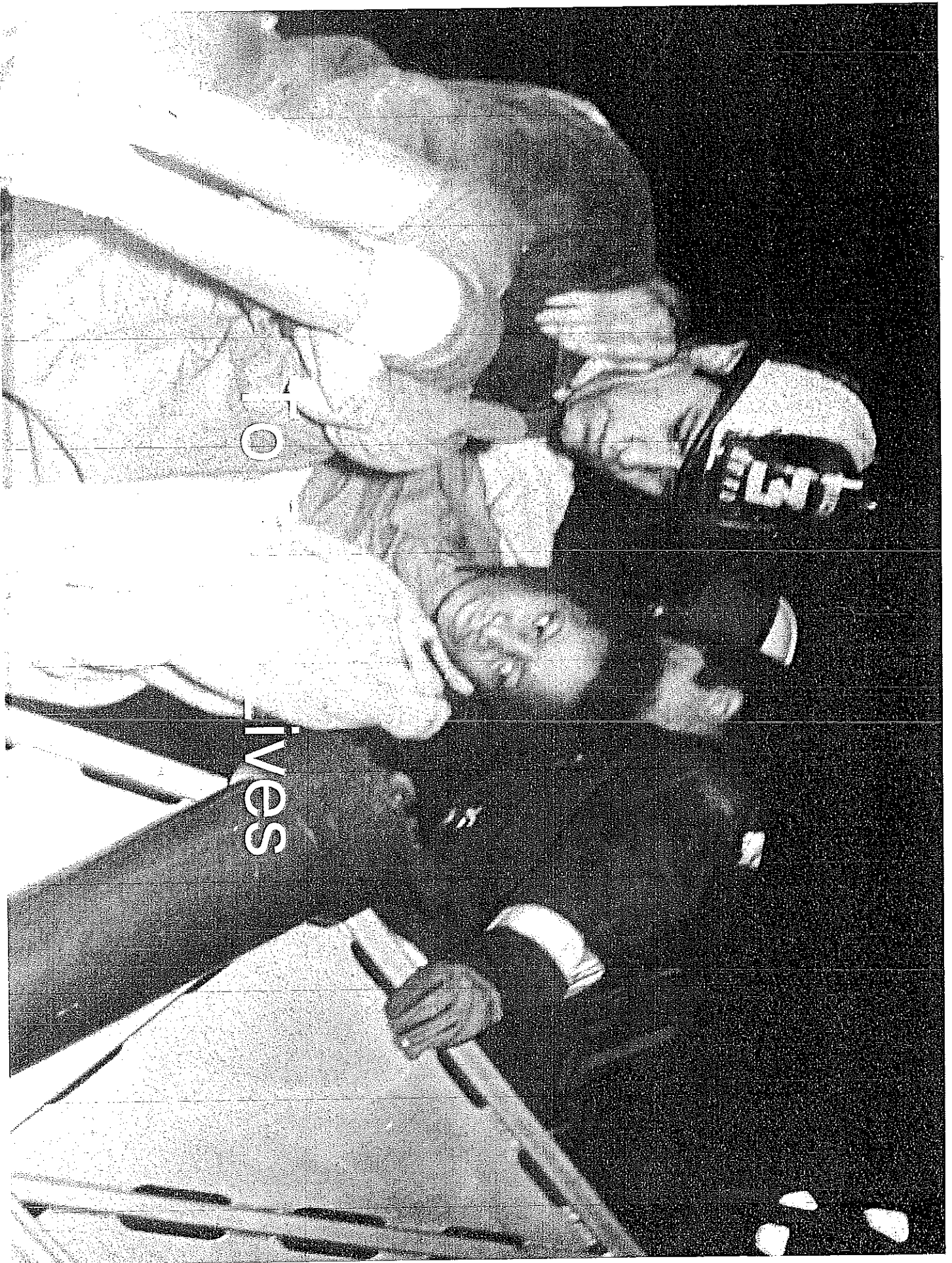
FIRE DEPARTMENT

**History  
of  
Meritorious Awards  
San Francisco  
Fire Department**



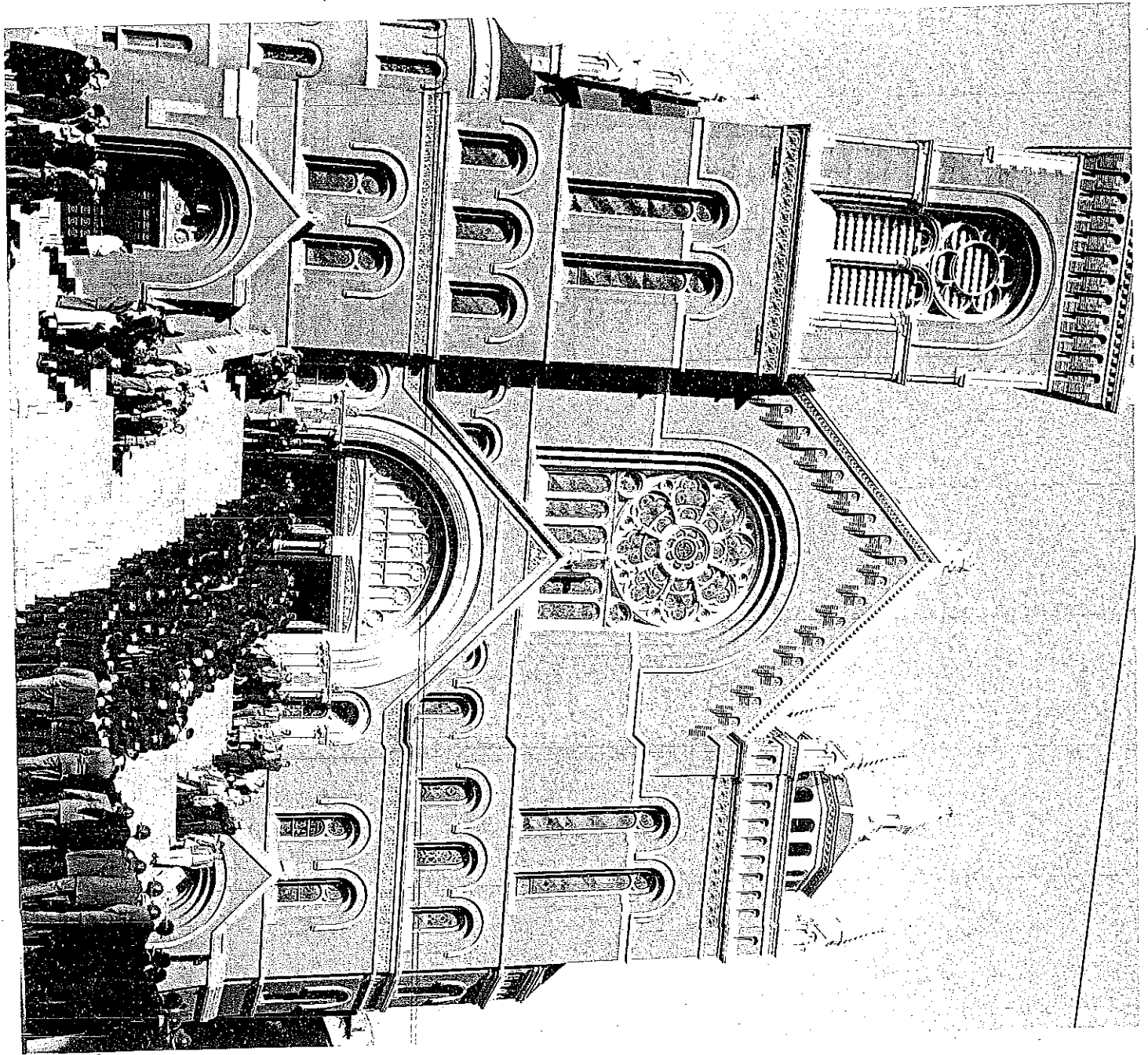
To Protect Property

Ask any firefighter applicant, “What do firefighters do?” and you are likely to hear, “Firefighters save lives, protect property and the environment.”



TO LIVES

And save lives they do. Why firefighters are willing to trade their lives for someone they don't know can't easily be explained but it is a common thread in the fire service and has been so from the beginning.



More than a few of San Francisco's bravest have paid the ultimate price in service to the citizens of our city.





JOHN EDWARD SWEENEY, HERO

**Died  
in the  
Line of Duty  
June 19, 1900**

James Edward Sweeney is the first firefighter entered into the book of merit for a rescue performed in August of 1896. On June 19, 1900 Firefighter Sweeney made paid the ultimate price (and I quote) "For sacrificing his life to save that of Patrick Coyne at the fire of a two story building at 290 11th Street. Upon arrival the company found the first floor fully involved. The company ascertained that Coyne was on the second floor. Sweeney grabbed a coat and rushed through the flames and up the stairs to the room occupied by Coyne whom he took in his arms and carried down the stairs and out of the building. In so doing, Sweeney was severely burned about the head and body, from which injuries he died the next day."

"FOR WHAT CAN A  
MAN DO HELLER,  
THAN LAY DOWN  
HIS LIFE FOR A  
FRIEND."



# EDDYCENTER DREGGAMITE

Benefit Performance

Given in Aid of the

of the  
of the

of the  
of the

the gallant French  
who lost his life in the  
discharge of duty

at the  
of the  
of the  
of the

FRIDAY AFTERNOON

JUNE 29<sup>th</sup> 1900

Under the auspices of

Associated

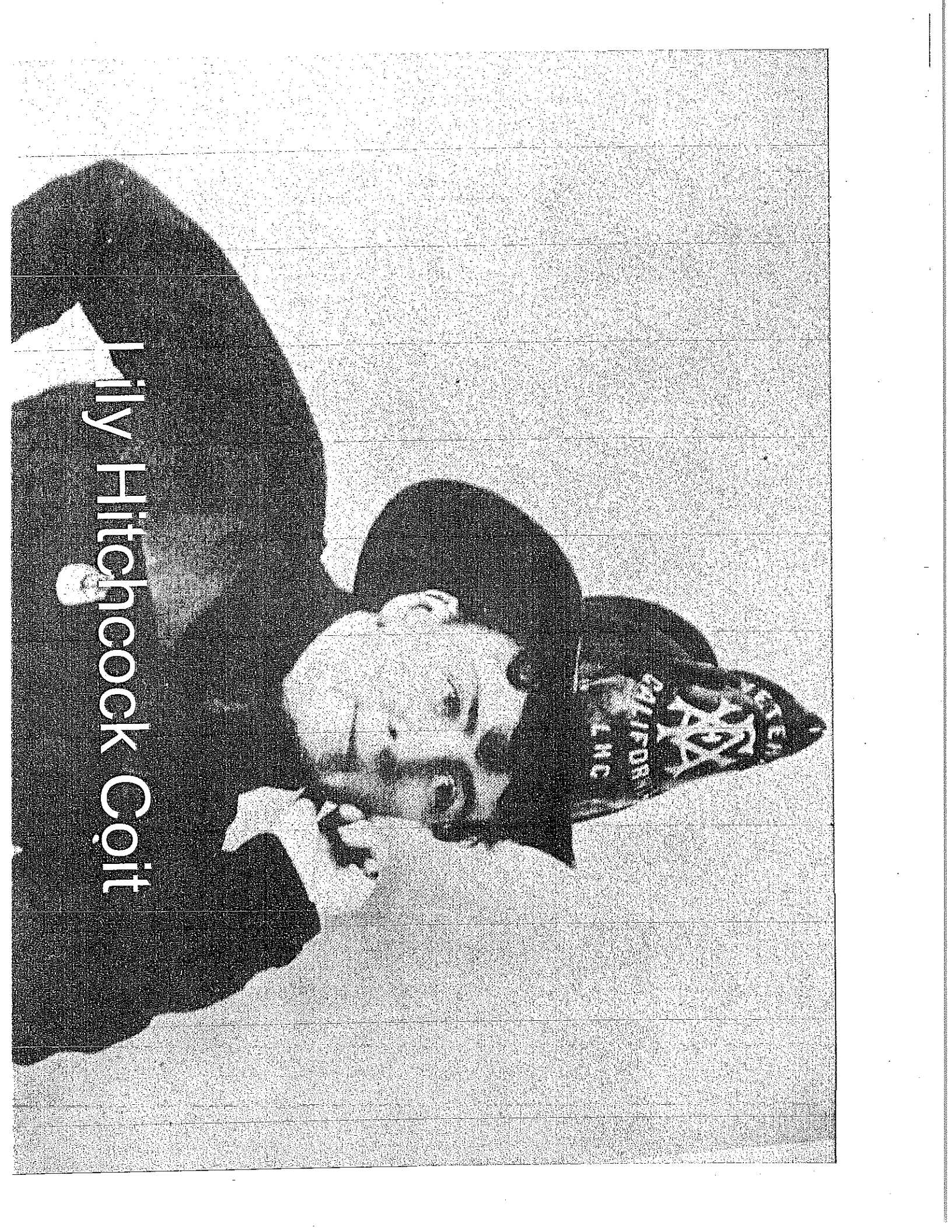
THEATRICAL

MANAGER  
OF  
SAN FRANCISCO.

COLUMBIA, ALFONSO, TIVOLI,  
OPHELIUM, GRAND OPERA HOUSE,  
ALCAZAR, CHUTES,  
ALHAMBRA,  
OLYMPIA.



In honor of Hoseman Sweeney the department awarded his wife and children a pension of \$40 per month. In addition the Press started a fund and the city's theaters came together to perform a concert in his memory. A total of \$16,000 was raised for the family – a sum equivalent to \$800,000 today.



# Kily Hitchcock Cõit

As early as the volunteer days of the 1850s fire fighters risked everything to rescue civilians from the flames.

Lily Hitchcock Coit became so enamored of Knickerbocker Engine 5 because they rescued her from the upper floor of a burning building.



David Scannell

Although it is doubtless that many acts of heroism occurred from the inception of the volunteer department in 1850 to 1893 occurred there was no singular method of honoring acts of valor - or Meritorious Conduct as they are officially known - or of recording them for posterity.

In 1893 Chief Engineer David Scannell passed away while on the job. He had been a volunteer in the 1850s and had been a member of the department for over forty years and chief for 28 years.

In his will he bequeathed \$2000, a significant sum considering an Assistant Chief earned \$1800 per year, in order to endow a medal "which each year ... be given and conferred upon such member of ... the Fire Department ... as they shall consider the most meritorious in performance of ... duty as such member, including gallantry and services in saving human life, and best entitled to such reward of merit."





This medal - three ounces of solid gold - was intended to be awarded annually. However, it was a few years before the first medal was awarded and fewer than 50 have been awarded in 110 years. The first medal was awarded to Assistant Engineer (Battalion Chief) John Wills. Here is an account of his act of valor:

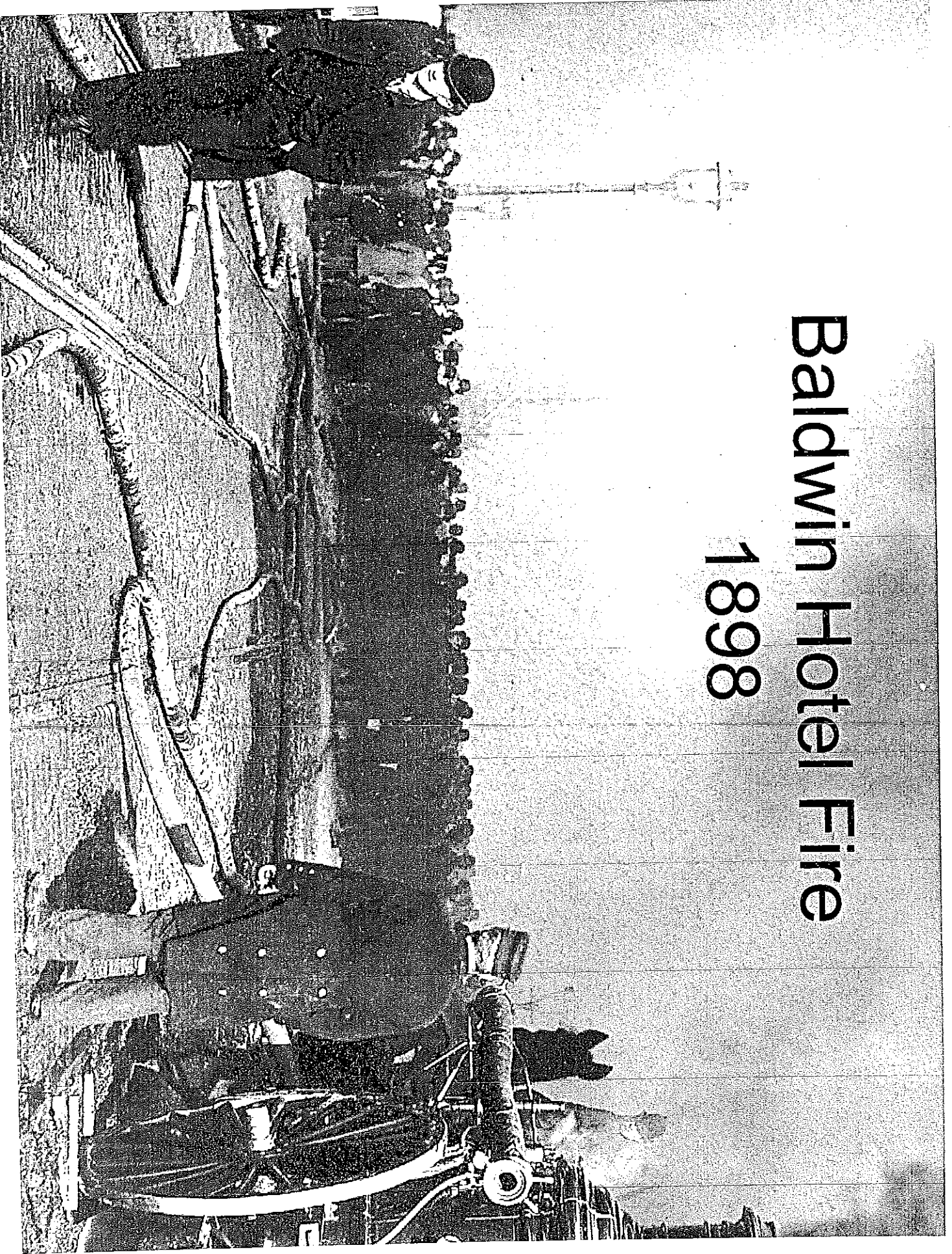
For rescuing 3 victims at the building collapse and fire at Box 47, 22 Fifth Street at Mint Ave. the building used as a restaurant and lodging house collapsed due to carelessness of workers who were replacing the wooden foundation with a brick one. "A number of persons were buried in the ruins. The furnace or range that was used in the restaurant set fire to the ruins and an alarm of fire was turned in from Box 47 which brought the Department to the scene.

"John Wills answered said alarm in his official capacity as Assistant Engineer and on arriving there was informed that a number of persons were buried beneath the remains of said building. He immediately went to work on the 5th St. side of said ruins and crawled thereunder and saw two women pinned down by the timbers. He made an effort to reach them but he was impeded by doing so by his fire hat which he wore and had on at the time. He threw it off and with much difficulty he made his way to where the women were and first rescued Bessie T. Wilson and brought her out safely to the street and then immediately returned after the other. He found her in a dying condition. He took hold of her and carried her out in his arms but when he reached the street she was dead and he then conveyed her to an undertaking establishment next door. This woman's name was Mrs. Ernestine Silverstein. "Mr. Wills then went around to the Mint Ave. side of said ruins and located a man that was buried thereunder: he was pinned down by the timbers, in a very dangerous position and hard to reach. Mr. Wills immediately sent for a saw and cut away the timbers that pinned him down. He then took ahold of him and carried him out to the street. He was still alive and with the assistance of others he placed him in the ambulance wagon and was conveyed to the city Receiving hospital. His name is unknown.

"Great credit is due to Mr. Wills for his heroic deeds and efforts upon this occasion, and as was truthfully and correctly published and stated by the 'Examiner' of the following morning, 'The burden of the battle fell upon the shoulders of District Engineer John Wills. He worked as hard as the humblest member of the Department and led the way from one position of danger to the other.'"

# Baldwin Hotel Fire

1898

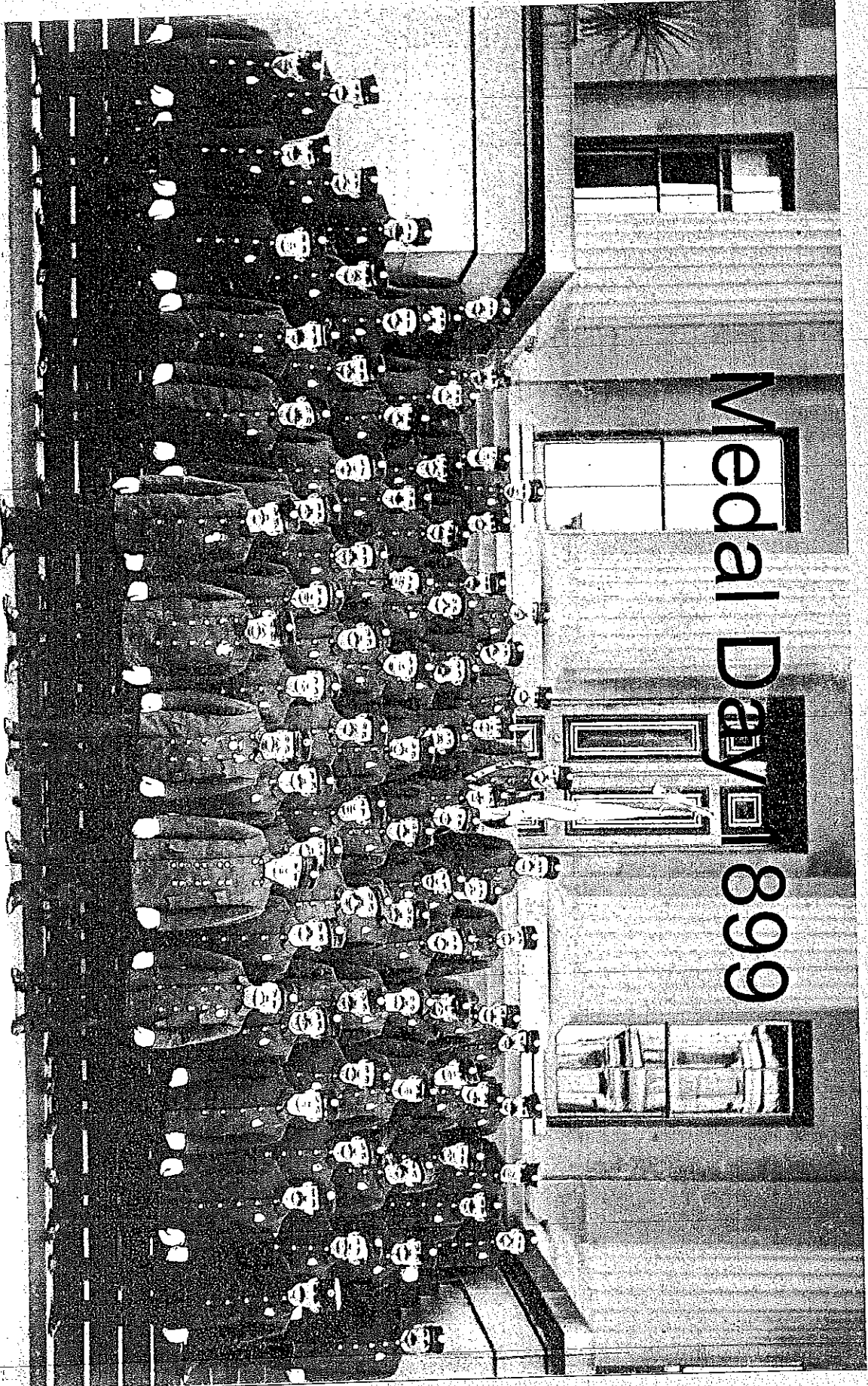


In 1898 San Francisco encountered one of the most spectacular fires involving a single building. The Baldwin Hotel was constructed by Lucky Baldwin, who had made his fortune in the Comstock mines. His Hotel was the largest and most lavish hotel in America at the time.

When fire struck the hotel it soon became a general alarm.

The building was utterly destroyed. Many lives were saved.

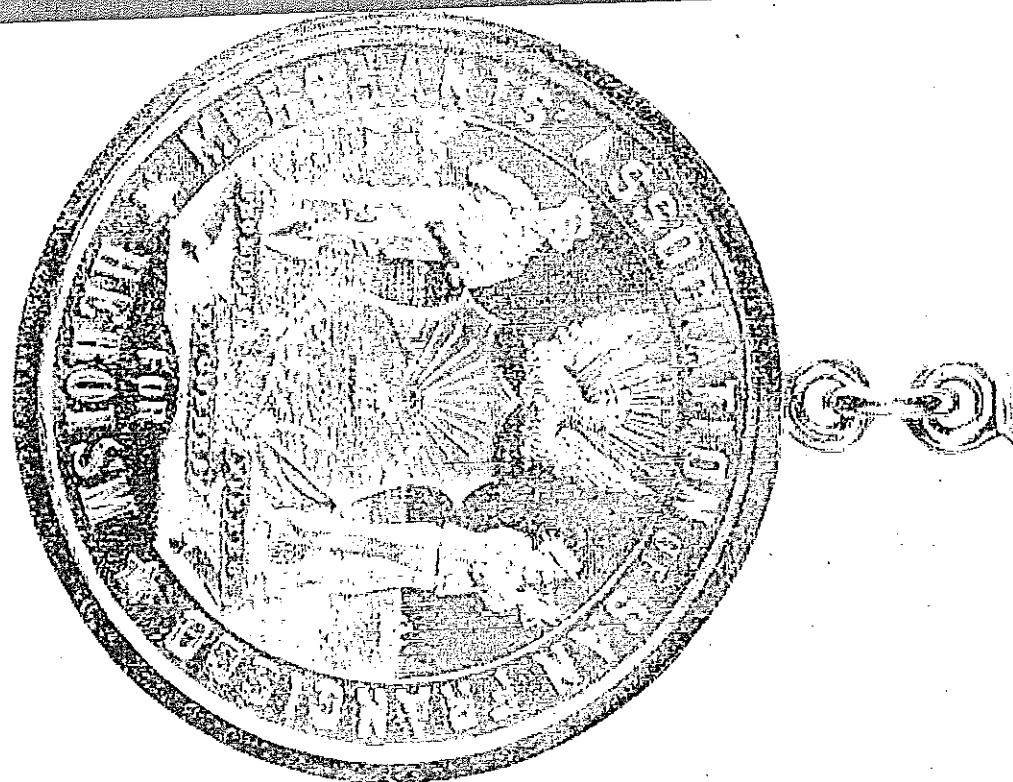
# Medal Day 899



Several rescues were so spectacular in this fire that a total of three medals were awarded.

Assistant Chief Patrick Shaughnessy received the Merchant's medal.

S. F. W. D.



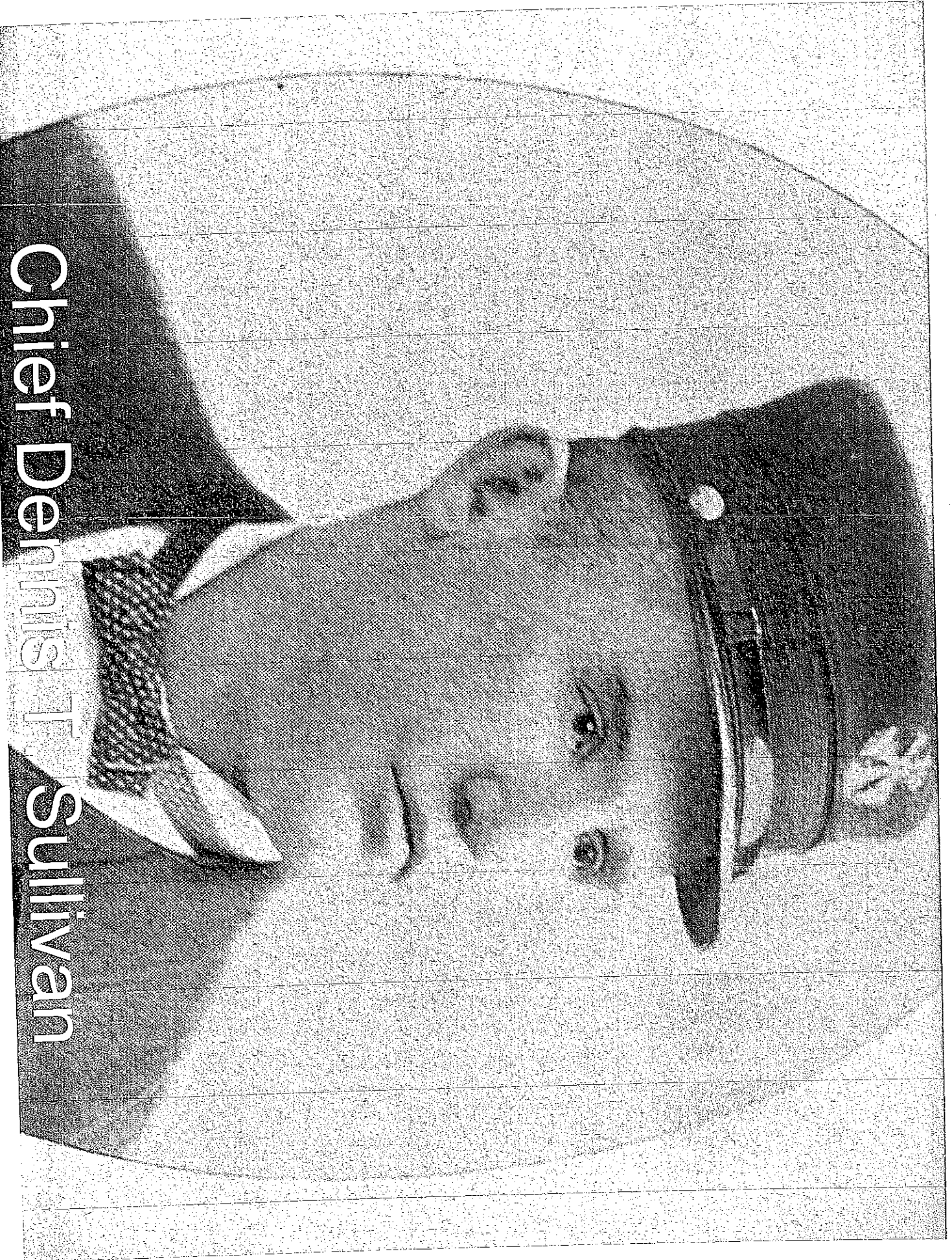
THE MERCHANTS' ASSOCIATION MEDAL

And Assistant Foreman Frederick Sayers and Tillerman James Cuminsky both received the Scannell medal

This is an image of the Merchant's medal which was presented to Assistant Chief Engineer Patrick Shaughnessy.

Assistant Foremen, now Lieutenant, Frederick Sayers received a Sullivan Medal for a spectacular rescue: For rescuing A. H. Christie in a fire at the Baldwin Hotel at Powell St. and Ellis St. Christie had a room on the 5th floor and first found out about the fire "when he saw fire in his room. He went out the window and onto the cornice in one direction. The crowd below directed him to go back in the other direction. Christie went into his room to get a razor in order to end his life. At his time Sayers had ascended the fire escape and come to Christie's window. Sayers assisted him down the fire escape and urged him on. A minute after they made it to safety, the hotel collapsed.





Chief Dennis T. Sullivan

In 1904 Raphael Weill, owner of the White House Department Store, and friend of Chief Dennis T. Sullivan endowed the Sullivan Medal.

This medal was also intended to be presented to the department's bravest firefighter.



The first record of this medal being awarded was to Hoseman James C. Herlihy for the March 11, 1910 in the rescue of Maria Fruner from a fourth floor window without benefit of a ladder. Chief Engineer Shaughnessy - a medal winner - described this meritorious act as "one of the most heroic and dangerous feats in the rescue of human life and the annals of this department."

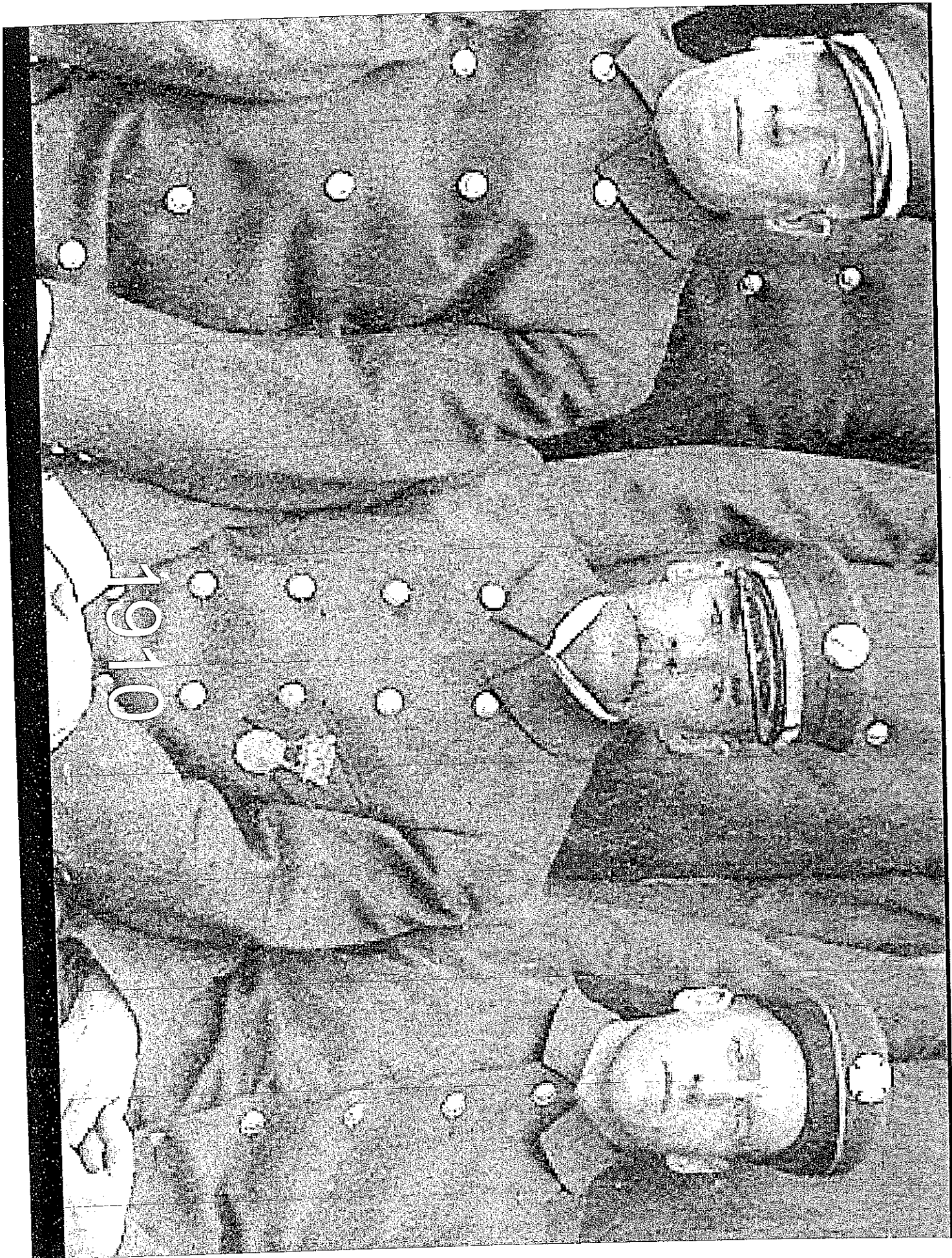
The record of the rescue reads, For rescuing Maria Fruner at an apartment house fire at Hayes St. and Octavia St. Herlihy ascended the fire escape to the 4th floor and climbed along the coping to Fruner's window. She was cut off from escape and would have jumped to her death. Fire was directly behind them in the room and they were obscured from view by smoke. He requested a life net from Truck 3. When it was ready he pushed her out the window and when she was safely on the ground he jumped to the life net.

An eye witness noted, "All the time he was at the window he was in danger of losing his life as the fire was directly behind him and the smoke was so dense as it came out of the window he was obscured from our view when we were getting the net in position to catch him and the woman. The woman owes her life to his wonderful act at the risk of his own life."



In 1907 Mary Rainey, the widow of, Samuel Rainey, former member of the department, former Fire commissioner and a long time friend of the department endowed a third gold medal - the Rainey medal which was intended to be awarded the San Francisco's bravest firefighter

The first record of an awarding of the Rainey Medal was to Lt. George F. Bury for a rescue on December 10, 1909. He rescued Raymond Donahue and son at NW corner of Grove and Octavia. Bury ascended a ladder and walked along the cornice to rescue father and son before they could jump.



1910

Throughout the years, medals for acts of Meritorious Conduct have been prized possessions of firefighters.





Vare  
Firemen 1920

... things that are handed down in families



Rescues occur at fires...





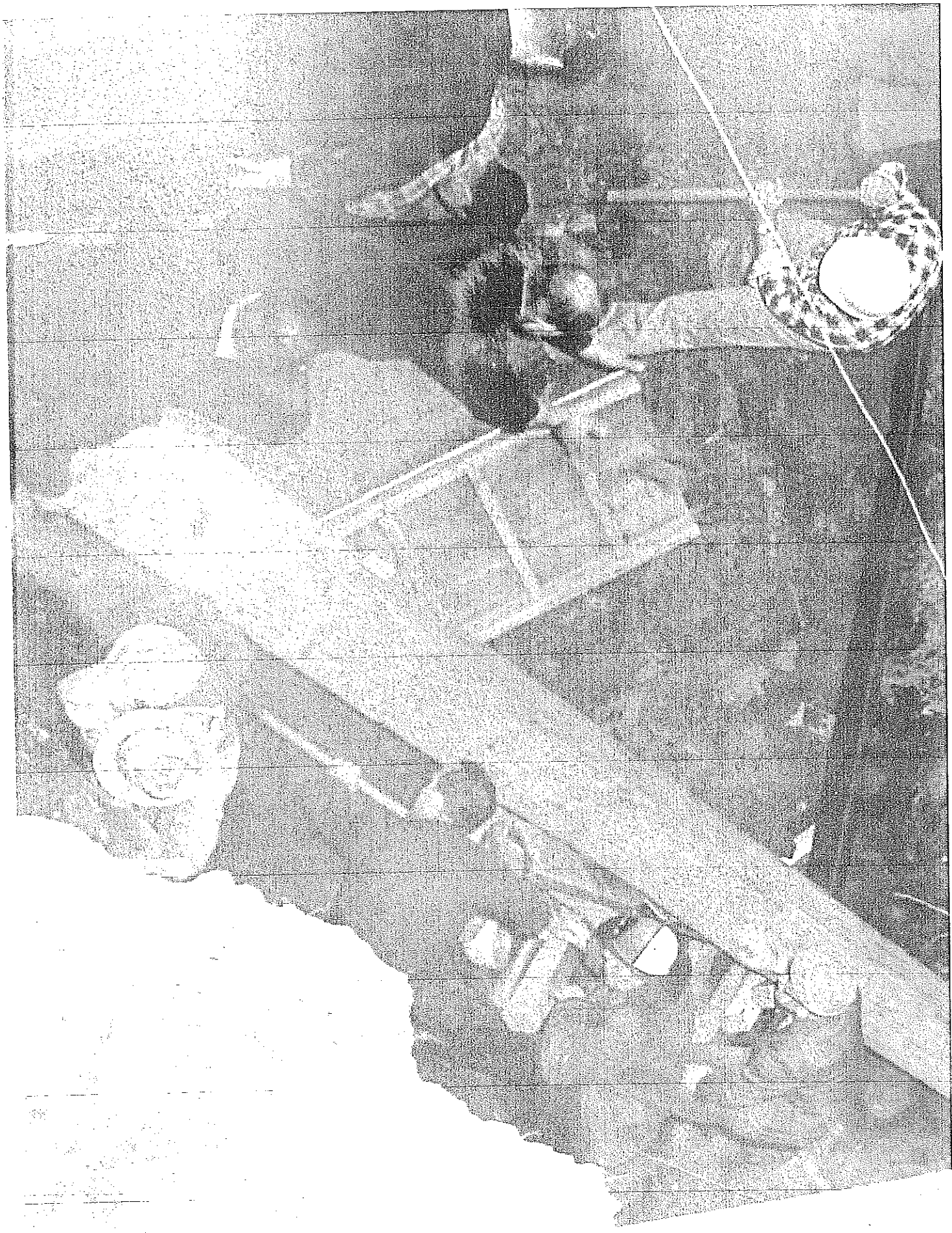
Many notable rescues have been from the holds of ships, from the bay and from the surf outside the bay.



Other rescues have involved trench rescue and confined space rescues.

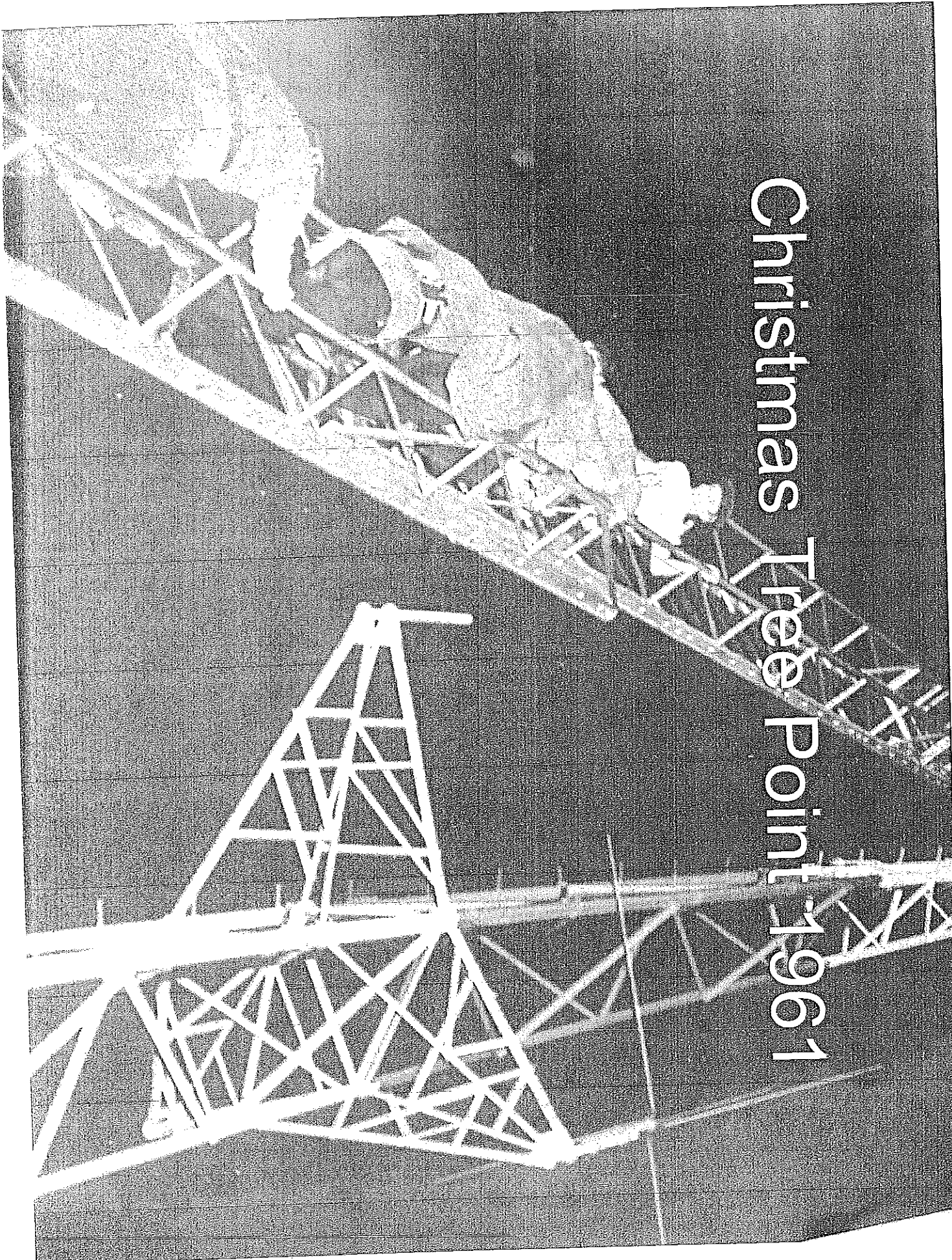
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Some spectacular rescues have involved attempted suicides such as this rescue from the transmission tower at Christmas tree point in 1961 where Chief's Operator Charles White earned a Class A medal.

Christmas Tree Point 1961



The Real



Every  
life  
saved is  
an act of  
grace

# The Ideal



Every life saved is a thing of beauty. If you ask a firefighter why he or she performed such an act of grace and beauty they will simply say, "I was just doing my job."

We are blessed that this is the job they have chosen.

Every  
life  
saved  
is a thing of  
beauty



# Our Sincere Thanks to

- Chief Joanne Hayes White
- San Francisco Fire Commission
- Commission Secretary (Retired) Ray Connors
- **Commission Secretary (Retired) Tania Bauer**
- James Lyons
- Division of Support Services
- Assistant Chief Arthur Kenney



**Produced by**  
**The SFFD Historical Society**

- **Scott Peoples - Board Member**
- **Michael McDowell - Historian**

**Dedicated to those members  
who gave their lives so that  
others may live:**

- John Edward Sweeney
- Andrew Benton
- Cornelius J. Lucey
- Herbert M. Osuna