HENDERSON BROTHERS COMPANY, INC.
NINETY-THREE GOING ON ONE HUNDRED
By Joyce Boda

Henderson Brothers Hardware in Lodi, in the San Joaquin Valley, is exactly what you would expect of a near-one-hundred-year old neighborhood store. It has each tool, screw, nut, and bolt you might need; you'll find worn oak floors and plenty of hardware clerks asking if they can help you find something. There also is the comforting and invigorating smell that is reminiscent of childhood. It's the smell of oiled steel and countless other things that have been taking up space, probably for quite some time. It is, simply, the smell of a down-to-earth old-fashioned hardware store.

"Old-fashioned," as defined in The Random House Dictionary, is reflecting the styles, customs, or methods of the past. This seems to infer that Henderson Brothers Hardware is antiquated or passé’. Not so; they prefer to be known as old-fashioned. By choice they have remained carefully attentive to the needs of rural folk in the area, many whose ancestors were argonauts, pioneers, and colonials.

Hardware items for colonists included articles they had brought to the new world, European imports, and items made locally by blacksmiths. It wasn't until the middle of the seventeenth century that iron products were manufactured. Production increased steadily but did not exceed imports until about 1860. By the turn of the century American hardware exports far surpassed imports. There were few stores specializing in hardware during the eighteenth century; the main outlet for hardware until the middle of the nineteenth century in America, especially rural America, was the general store.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the wide variety of domestic and imported items the storekeepers stocked were purchased either directly or through local jobbers. These middlemen were known as urban commission merchants since they did not own the goods. They usually were acting in the capacity of agents of the producers. Gradually, specialized hardware stores gained an increasing importance during the nineteenth century. They needed a larger variety of goods and services than were available through a commission merchant. This brought about the development of hardware wholesalers that continued to be the main source for hardware dealers. More recently, the advent of non-profit cooperatives such as True Value, Ace, and Sentry have created better prices for the consumer.

After outfitting prospectors during the gold rush tapered off, local hardware stores played a vital part in the settling and cultivating of the valley. Many thousands of acres of tillable lands in the Central California Valley were subdivided and developed by intensive farming. Lodi's growth can be wholly attributed to agriculture. Some of the prominent hardware businesses in operation over the years but now closed for one reason or another include Lodi Hardware, Northern Hardware, New Lodi Hardware, and the
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Photo of interior of unoccupied Rex P. Wakefield and Luther Thos. Henderson, Jr. Hardware store.

The first four names have been connected with the store for a number of years, the first two in the capacity of owners and last two as employees. Mr. Myers was a member of the firm of Lawing and Myers, Paperers and Paper Hangers. W.W. Henderson will continue in the capacity as General Manager and his brother Thomas Henderson will look after the farming interests which they own jointly. Mr. Gerlach will have charge of the shop and plumbing establishment. Mr. Spooner will continue as head salesman in the store and will have direct charge of the hardware department. Mr. Myers will take charge of the paint and wallpaper department—a new feature of the store which will be enlarged and improved. In the paint and wallpaper department, a large stock of goods will be carried in order to meet the demand of a growing community like Lodi . . . .

The Lodi Sentinel of January 11, 1906, reported that Lodi businessmen in a progressive move had signed an agreement to close their stores at 6:00 p.m. At the head of the list of businesses that signed the petition was Henderson Bros.: . . . hereafter the stores of Lodi will close every evening, except Saturday, at six o'clock . . . . Now that the businessmen have started this early closing movement for the benefit of their employees as well as themselves, it is up to the public to encourage it by doing the necessary buying between the hours of seven a.m. and six p.m. Closing the stores of Lodi at six o'clock is a reasonable hour for that purpose, those who do their trading after six o'clock no doubt are quite averse to laboring after that hour . . . . why expect clerks to work after that hour . . . .

In 1909, Gustave A. Gerlach, William A. Spooner, H.T. Myers, and Edwin G. Steacy bought out Tom and Woods Henderson. Even though the brothers ended their association with the company at that time, the business name was retained. Edwin G. Steacy, an enterprising traveling salesman for the W.P. Fuller Paint Company, left this position of selling Fuller products to the southern mines of the Mother Lode when he joined Henderson Brothers Company. He ran the paint department with G.A. Gerlach and W.A. Spooner. After Mr. Gerlach's death, Mr. Spooner and Mr. Steacy purchased his shares.

The Stockton City and San Joaquin County Directory, 1909-1910 lists Henderson Bros. Co. as having five plumbers and
a tinner on its staff. All these plumbers had a wagon and a horse that was boarded at night in a livery stable across from Sacramento Street. Just as today, labor costs at that time were high. Modern pickup trucks solved the problem of early completion of jobsite work by crew members. With their advent it is no longer necessary to wait for the whole crew to finish before the wagon can return to the shop; each construction worker now eliminates idle time by independently driving from job to job.

It is reported that Gustave A. Gerlach was a very good heating man, especially on hot water systems. When the Masonic Temple was being constructed, Henderson's bid on the job. The company didn't get the project because Mr. Gerlach would not agree with the architect's plans for the system. He refused to install the system as designed, he said it just wouldn't work. He was right, it didn't work. It was a very good heating man, especially on hot water systems.

Henderson Brothers Company, Inc., September 16, 1940, just prior to move.

In 1912, the Frigidaire Company moved to a new building at 231 South Sacramento Street (today's The River House). It became the headquarters of the company and a show room for the company's products. The company's sales force was expanded and new products were introduced. The company's inventory included a wide variety of products, including refrigerators, washing machines, and dryers. The company also had a showroom where customers could see and try out the latest products. The company's sales force was expanded and new products were introduced. The company's inventory included a wide variety of products, including refrigerators, washing machines, and dryers.

In 1920, the company moved to a new building at 300 South Sacramento Street (today's Clancy's). It became the headquarters of the company and a distribution center for the company's products. The company's inventory included a wide variety of products, including refrigerators, washing machines, and dryers. The company also had a showroom where customers could see and try out the latest products. The company's sales force was expanded and new products were introduced. The company's inventory included a wide variety of products, including refrigerators, washing machines, and dryers.

In 1928, William A. Spooner was elected mayor of Lodi and remained in office until 1932. During his tenure, he oversaw the construction of Lodi's new city hall, which was completed in 1930. The city hall was a source of pride for the city and its citizens. The building was designed by the architect Frank Lloyd Wright and is considered to be one of his most important works. The city hall was constructed of locally quarried stone and its design was inspired by the surrounding landscape. The city hall was a symbol of Lodi's progress and its commitment to the future.
In 1940, just before the trying times of the second world war, Henderson Brothers Company moved from 9 North Sacramento to its present location of 21 South Sacramento Street. It was a hot Indian summer weekend when this took place but the staff moved lock, stock, and barrel, with the help of four-wheeled carts borrowed from the railroad, after closing hours on Saturday. They worked round the clock in order that Monday morning it would be business as usual. The new building, owned by Jack Graffigna, a local winemaker, had been recently remodeled. During the renovations a second story was dismantled and the building was given a new front. Just as it is today, records show that the cost of outfitting the new store was very high (for example, oak cabinets with dozens of drawers, tables, bins, and labor).

When everything was in place the wall displays were fully stocked, tables were crowded with items, and all types of merchandise was abundant. World War II changed all that. Wall displays thinned out, cutlery exhibits were practically empty, and tables showed many gaps. Bins literally became homes for cobwebs. W.P. Fuller, the store's paint supplier, could no longer supply the store with its products as the government had become major stockholder of the business. Henderson Brothers Company moved from 9 North Sacramento Street, owned by Jack Graffigna, a local wine merchant, to its present location of 21 South Sacramento Street. It was a hot Indian summer weekend when this took place but the staff moved lock, stock, and barrel, with the help of four-wheeled carts borrowed from the railroad, after closing hours on Saturday. They worked round the clock in order that Monday morning it would be business as usual. The new building, owned by Jack Graffigna, a local winemaker, had been recently remodeled. During the renovations a second story was dismantled and the building was given a new front. Just as it is today, records show that the cost of outfitting the new store was very high (for example, oak cabinets with dozens of drawers, tables, bins, and labor).

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Austin Sperry came looking for gold like so many others in 1850. He came "around the bend" after landing immediately upon arriving to claim fields with four friends and collect gold. After he decided that mining was not in his future, he came to Stockton and worked as a grocer. During this time, he purchased a grist mill to feed the miners. He then became a partner in a Mr. Latrobe's mill and started the business under continuous ownership as a partner and operator. In 1855, he and Mr. Latrobe's mill were purchased for $1,500 by Mr. Baldwin, who purchased the company. Mr. Baldwin increased the capacity of the mill for wheat grinding stores and boiler with the capacity of 125 barrels of flour a day. The mill was a brick mill on Levee Street. He purchased machinery from Erasinger & Company, and the business was purchased by Daniel Larkin.

In 1885, as a student at San Joaquin Delta College, Study of History Class, she placed first in the San Joaquin County Historical Society's "Award of Excellence" competition for her longer version of "Henderson Brothers Co., Inc., Eighty-Nine Going On One Hundred." A native Californian from Humboldt County, she and her husband Tibor Boda live in rural Stockton. Their daughter Carol Edwards and son Michael both live in Lodi. She is currently writing the history of Stockton's Pacific Tannery.

The aim and hope of the Henderson Brothers Company, Inc., having profited by almost a century, is to do the best that is known today and still seek for a better tomorrow, to the end result that the highest possible type of service shall be given to their valued friends and customers. The forecast is excellent for the 1996 centennial observation of Henderson Brothers Company, Inc. of Lodi. Watch for it.
Austin Sperry came to California looking for gold like so many young men in 1850. He came "around the horn" and after landing immediately went to the gold fields with four friends. After panning five days and collecting 500 dollars, Sperry decided that mining was not for him. He came to Stockton and worked for two years as a grocer. During this time, he observed that it would be profitable to start a grist mill to feed the miners' livestock. He took as a partner a Mr. Lyons, and with 1,000 dollars started a mill on the corner of Commerce and Main Streets.

The grist mill was a single story wooden building 175 x 150 feet. The first six months of operation saw the grinding of barley for animal feed. In late 1852 graham flour milling began. Production was seventy barrels of flour per twelve hour work day. Prior to this, Stockton's supply of flour came from Chile and Richmond, Virginia. Due to the cost of transportation, the price for an imported barrel of flour was from eight to twenty dollars and even twenty-two dollars. Wheat was not grown locally. Sperry and Lyons were to get their wheat from Martinez and Napa. Not until 1856 did farmers begin to grow wheat in the San Joaquin Valley.

The flour mill became a profitable business for Sperry and Lyons. In 1854 a Mr. Baldwin purchased Mr. Lyon's share of the company. Mr. Baldwin then increased the capacity of the mill by adding two run of wheat grinding stones and a new engine and boiler with the capacity of producing 125 barrels of flour a day and ten tons of barley.

Mr. Baldwin retired in 1856 and Alexander Burkett purchased Mr. Baldwin's share of the company. The name of Sperry's first flour product was "Drifted Snow." In 1856 the mill was operating at full capacity producing 150 barrels a day. The Sperry mill employed eighteen men and daily produced flour and barley each twenty-four hours. While Sperry was enjoying a huge success, another man named Timothy Paige decided that he would enter the flour business. Paige built a brick mill on the corner of Beaver and Levee Streets. He outfitted his mill with machinery from England but never prospered, and the business was eventually purchased by Daniel Gibbs of San Francisco.

In 1860 Mr. Willard Sperry, brother of Austin, bought into the Sperry and Burkett Company. The Franklin Mill was now purchased and joined to the Sperry and Burkett effort.

The business was now named the Stockton City Mills. The mill was modified until it could produce thirty barrels of flour and three tons of ground barley per hour or 700 barrels of flour and seventy-five tons of ground barley per 24 hours. The building was 50 x 100 feet and four stories high. The engine which ran the entire plant had a twenty-two inch bore and a forty-two inch stroke. The 185 horsepower engine was run by steam supplied by three tubular boilers each sixteen feet long and fifty-four inches in diameter and each containing 49-3/4 inch tubes. The fuel was Monte Diablo coal screenings. The mill consisted of four run of stone for wheat, one stone for middlings and one run for feed. In fifteen hours sixty-five tons of wheat, twenty-five tons of barley and seven tons of coal were consumed. The mill employed twenty men and 500 dollars was spent each week for their wages.

The original Sperry wooden mill was abandoned in 1871 and the entire operation was moved to the Stockton City Mills. The annual production rate between 1867 and 1871 was 70,000 barrels of flour or 7,000 tons and 500 tons of barley.

Alexander Burkett sold out after a 1874 downturn in business. Austin and Willard Sperry now each owned half of the business. The Stockton Mill had the capacity of 800 barrels of flour by 1882. The mill operated with part rolls and part stones. Sperry was shipping flour to Europe by 1873. In one month Sperry shipped over 5,000 barrels abroad. Sperry was becoming a very popular flour company.

In 1878 wheat was priced at $1.55 to $1.60 per ton according to quality. Sperry began a new process for grinding flour called the Granulated Process. The demand for this new process of flour became larger than the supply. Sperry flour was in great demand all over the world. A promotional article boasted, "The flour of her mills commanded a premium in New York, and facilities were made to give her the control of the flour market." This, however, never happened.
The Fire of the Stockton City Mills

Austin Sperry died in 1881 and Willard Sperry continued the business. The Stockton City Mills prospered until April 2, 1882. That day a fire ruined the entire mill and its machinery. Around four o’clock in the afternoon, smoke was seen coming from the direction of the Sperry mills. The Weber fire engine was the first on the scene, and the Eureka was next. The Babcock came and old Betsy, a chemical fire engine, was brought out of retirement and pressed into service. The whole fire department was there to fight the blaze. The Weber used the channel for its water supply, and the rest used the cisterns along the streets. During the fire, the Babcock had to return to its firehouse to be recharged. By nine o’clock the fire was controlled. A lumber yard and a personal house were also damaged in the blaze. The cause of the fire could have been a dust explosion in the smut room on the third floor, but it is more plausible that the fire started near the furnace on the lower floor.

The injuries from the fire were minor compared to its seriousness. One man had his hands badly burned. The Hook and Ladder horse took off with the truck alone through the lumber yard, but was stopped before it could do any serious damage. The most common injuries that occurred were bruises and singed hair. The firemen did a good job in keeping the fire from adjoining buildings of the flour mill. However, the fire equipment that was used was very inadequate and was the reason for the delay in extinguishing the fire. Rotten hoses were a serious problem to all engine companies. The hoses would fall apart when water was forced through them. It took many minutes for them to be replaced. The ladders were too small for the big buildings, and the entire system was blamed for being ancient.

The foundation of the new mill had 24 feet of cement. The building was three stories high and was 50 x 100 feet. The walls were thirty inches thick for the first two floors then one brick was deleted for the third floor. The doors were made of iron to keep the sections isolated in case of fire. The architects were Percy and Hamilton of San Francisco. All carpentry work was done in one day under the direction of Mr. Sperry. The mill’s first floor was all cement in imitation stone flagging. This floor contained the engine room with four tubular boilers each containing forty-nine tubes - 3½ inches in diameter. The engine was a Corliss with extra heavy bed with a cylinder 26 x 48 inches. The horsepower was 350 with a capacity up to 500.

The engine room was 50 x 50 feet and eighteen feet high. The smoke stack was 120 feet high and fifty-four inches in diameter. The machinery was driven by a twenty-six inch double leather belt pulley which was seventeen feet six inches in height and twenty-eight inches in diameter. The second floor was the grinding section, and the upper floor was a warehouse.

The Crown Mills was the largest all wheat mill on the Pacific Coast. The mill ran from 6 p.m. Sunday till 6 p.m. Saturday. The mill employed sixty men. It consumed 40,000 bushels of wheat per week. A new engine was installed with 700 horsepower by Tatum and Bowen of San Francisco. It had a four foot stroke. By 1897 the mill employed seventy men. It produced 1,800 barrels of flour per day. Annually it consumed 720,000 sacks of wheat and produced 360,000 barrels of flour. Ultimately, the Crown Mill expanded to four stories that covered 96 x 180 feet. The first floor contained the boots and machines for polishing the grain. The second floor contained thirty-three stands of Allis rolls and eighteen pairs of Nordyke and Mormon rolls. The third floor contained twenty-two foot hexagon reels, six centrifugal reels and four brass dusters and five Smith’s purifiers. The fourth floor contained twenty-three hexagon reels, six centrifugal reels, and five Smith’s purifiers.

Joining the mill was a long brick wall with the first floor as the receiving area for the wheat from steamers and trains. The sacks were cut and the wheat was sent to the cleaners. There were six separators, three machines scouring grain, and three brush machines for polishing the grain. The second floor of this building was the packing room for the wheat after it was ground. A 600 horsepower wheelock engine furnished the mill’s lighting and heating. The deep natural gas well supplied the gas daily to run the mill’s 10,000 ton capacity. All this came to the mill’s cost of production value.
mill's lighting and heating. A 1,260 feet deep natural gas well supplied 20,000 feet of gas daily to run the mill. This building also had a 15,000 ton capacity warehouse.

All wheat came to the Crown Mills in sacks. This was because they were easier to handle than bulk grain. Bulk grain was not brought onto ships because it was harder to move if the boat became too heavy on one side. To every seventy-five sacks of wheat there was one sack of waste. The waste consisted of straw, sticks, white caps, oats, barley, mustard seed, rocks, sand, adobe, pocket knives, bolts, nails, and chunks of iron to increase the weight. The wheat went through screens and brushes to clean it then it went through the grinding process. The first step was to go through four pairs of rolls which crushed the wheat kernels. Then the wheat was shaken to remove the dust inside the kernel. The wheat went back to six pairs of rolls six times to remove the shell and bran coverings. The wheat was ground a total of fifteen times before it was shaken through silk screens to make it into "Sperry's Best Family Flour" product. It took 300 pounds of wheat to make one barrel of flour.

The Sperry Flour Company became so successful that it was incorporated in 1884. Two years later Willard Sperry died and his sons continued the business. By 1890 production value was over $2,000,000 per year. A slump in business came in 1882 but Sperry and Company and Incorporated came out of this quickly.

An addition of another flour mill helped them come out of the business slump. A Mr. Horace Davis owned the Golden Gate Mills in Stockton. Mr. Davis decided to move and set up another flour mill in Martinez. He sold the Golden Gate to Sperry for 100,000 dollars. With the Crown and the Golden Gate Mills, Sperry could produce up to 5,000 barrels of flour per day.

In 1873 the farmers of San Joaquin Valley had organized the Farmers Union. Its function was the storage and handling of grain. In August 1890 it became a corporation. That same year it was decided to build a union mill. In January 1892 the Union Mills began operation with a capital stock of $500,000. The company's office was in San Francisco under the direction of W.B. Harrison and C.F. Hutchison. Their brand of flour was Stocktonia. The business never prospered and in 1894 was sold to Sperry Incorporated. The mill produced 1,500 barrels of flour daily but could produce 5,000 barrels. It was seven stories high and was 15½ x 85 feet. A 150 x 100 two-story warehouse adjoined the mill. By 1896 the Union Mills were producing 3,000 barrels of flour daily. Stockton was becoming known as the "Manufacturing city of the Pacific."

EARLY 1900's SUCCESS

Sperry Incorporated had many brands of flour: Sperry's Best Family, Drifted Snow, Golden Gate, Snow Flake, Pioneer, and Stocktonia. Sperry would deliver flour to the community in horse drawn wagons called drays. The foreign demand for Sperry's flour became very large. Sperry was shipping flour to San Francisco every evening and every few days an extra steamer was used to fill the orders. By 1900 Sperry was shipping flour to Honolulu, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Yokohama, Manila, Alaska, Mexico, Central American states, China, Japan and the Philippines. Flour was even shipped to Siberia.

Sperry began to expand its warehouse facilities in Stockton. In the early 1900's Sperry had plans drawn to build a 77½ x 141 foot two-stories-high steel warehouse that would be completed before the new wheat crop was ready. Architect George Rushforth designed the fireproof building. Almost no wood was used in the construction. The warehouse was built between the Crown Mills and Stockton Channel. The cost of the building was $150,000. The first floor had a capacity of 5,000 tons and the second floor had the capacity of 7,000 tons of wheat and flour. The floor was made of bitumen and the roof was made of iron. Steel pillars supported the weight of the building, and chutes were made so that the flour could be readily loaded onto the steamers.

By 1908 the company had warehouses totaling 20,000 tons in capacity. The company provided 10,000 tons of barley per month to the local market. Sperry expanded its empire until it owned a total of seventeen mills in the states of California, Oregon, and Washington. These had the capacity to produce 10,000 barrels of flour a day. The total state consumption of flour was 2,000,000 barrels per year. Sperry supplied 1,200,000 barrels of this. Sperry Incorporated expanded its foreign markets to include North China, Tien Tsin, and Shang Tung.

In 1908 Sperry opened the Capital Mills. The Capital Mills was a cereal mill which produced table cereals, rolled oats, corn meal, oat meal, rolled wheat, and pearly barley. Nevertheless, the Sperry
empire began to slowly decline in 1909. The price of flour went up sixty cents in retail price. The cost for a sack of flour was now $1.80. The price per ton of wheat went up to five dollars. Sperry was getting most of her wheat from Washington at $2.05 to $2.10 per 100 pounds. The wheat grown in the San Joaquin Valley was steadily decreasing while the demand for Sperry flour was steadily increasing. Sperry had a major shake-up in employment in 1910. Men in high salary positions who had worked for the company for twenty-five even thirty-five years were suddenly fired with no explanation. A new board of directors came into power, and it was headed by W.H. Crocker and J.H. Rossiter.

The layoffs began in May 1909. In June Sperry started to lease some of its property. Sperry's warehouses were enlarged to a total capacity of 30,000 tons. Sperry Incorporated started to act as buying agents for Balfour and Guthrie Warehouse Company, and Sperry started to lease some of these houses. In 1911 Sperry closed its mills in Chico and Marysville and their business was taken over in Stockton and Port Costa. The reason for closing the mills was that Stockton had better shipping facilities and larger mills. To accommodate the influx of business, Sperry asked the Stockton City Council if part of Monroe Street between the company's mills could be closed for better use. Late in the year of 1911 Sperry made plans for $60,000 worth of bins, two steel sheds, and a carrying system near the vicinity of Van Buren Street. The reason was that hard gluten grain was not grown locally and over half of Sperry's grain was now imported to make their first class flour. Most of their grain came from San Francisco and the mill in Vallejo was less expensive to operate because of cheaper transportation fees. The new system was thought to save money for the Stockton Mills.

The Capital Mills were operating at a huge success. Running twenty-four hours a day the Capital Mills consumed 4,000 sacks of grain and produced 2,000 barrels of flour and 100 tons of feed. The Capital Mill was the largest cereal mill west of Missouri. In one month it produced 1,213,376 pounds of flour and 3,979,355 pounds of feed. It employed 200 men throughout the year.

The year 1913 was very profitable for Sperry. Near Christmas Sperry gave its stockholders an extra twenty-five cents per dividend. During World War One, Sperry operated the Capital Crown, and Union Mills. However, by 1924 the mills were importing almost all of their wheat from Australia and elsewhere; and after January 1, 1926 Sperry moved its entire operation to Vallejo.

The Union Mill was converted into a warehouse. The rest of the mills were left vacant. The reason for the move was that Vallejo was closer to San Francisco, the ocean, and deep water channels. In 1927 the Capital Mill block was bought by New York investors for $80,000. The Capital Mill block was previously owned by San Francisco investors. Later that year Mr. Zuckerman bought the Sperry office building for 20,000 dollars. The purchase was purely for investment. The building was left vacant for many years. Sperry Incorporated continued until it was finally bought out by General Mills in 1952. General Mills returned Sperry to the Stockton area between Stockton and French Camp by building a million dollar feed mill.

The main reason for Sperry's downfall was the lack of wheat grown in this area. More profitable crops such as fruit trees interested the farmer more than wheat. No wheat was grown in the valley, therefore, Sperry had to import all wheat for its flour and this became a very expensive process.

The Sperry empire started from a small wooden building and led into the operation of seventeen mills in three states employing hundreds of people. The Sperry empire lasted for one-hundred years and brought big business to Stockton. With the five flour mills that Sperry owned and with the people that had jobs with the company, Sperry will never be forgotten in Stockton History.

RENEE McCOMB

Renee is a fifth generation Stocktonian. She wrote this article during her first year at San Joaquin Delta College. She graduated with an A.B. degree in American History from U.C. Davis in 1985 and currently resides in Stockton.
Sperry Mills as seen across Stockton Channel
Photo courtesy of The Haggin Museum

Sperry Mills - about 1910
Photo courtesy of the Haggin Museum
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Ed.