

## **INCORPORATION OF SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO**

By Jacquelyne Kious

The incorporation of the city of South San Francisco was a hard-fought battle noted as “one of the most bitter struggles in the history of the county.” (*San Francisco Call, August 1908*)

Why the bitter struggle? Money. The SSF Land & Improvement Company’s struggle with the financial burden of the growing town was an issue early on. “Upon formation of the land company the outlook was extremely bright,” William Martin said in a 1928 interview. But that quickly changed as Martin explained, “the great financial panic of 1892 and 1895-98 produced many strenuous conditions and compelled most rigid economic operations...even abandoning many promised improvements.”

The need to increase revenues would unknowingly lead the town into battle. In 1906 the land company entered into an agreement with Selby Smelting Company, affiliated with the Copper Trust, whose intent it was to build a huge smelting plant employing 3,000 men. The move proved very controversial pitting the town against its much wealthier and politically connected neighbors to the south who quickly rose in opposition forming the Home Protective Association.

The Association contended that sulfur dioxide, a byproduct of copper smelting, would be harmful to people and the environment. The Copper Trust responded by offering to build a facility to handle the sulfur waste, but the Association was not convinced and hired two Stanford professors to make their case.

In May 1907, opposition to the smelting plant was so strong that construction was temporarily halted. In October, after already spending \$1,000,000, the San Francisco Chronicle reported the Copper Trust planned to abandon the project unless a compromise was reached. But the town’s people were not about to give up the fight for the plant and the 3000 jobs.

In an effort to dispose of the issue all together, the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors got involved in January 1908. After several raucous meetings, they passed an ordinance prohibiting the operation of smelters in the county. The Enterprise Journal called the whole process “most peculiar and strange... and all together and entirely one-sided” as only expert testimony from the opposition was allowed.

End of story? A town meeting was held in March where residents voted unanimously for incorporation. At a special Supervisor’s meeting in June some of the town’s largest companies sided with the Association in opposing

incorporation fearing their taxes would rise. But by late summer, compromise was finally reached and incorporation was granted.