

The Auburn Hotel

This is the story of a great old hotel. It wasn't luxurious; it wasn't huge; it wasn't even particularly in a good location, but, boy, it sure had character! It's the story of the Auburn Hotel [*we locals call it the 'Auburn Hotel', but technically it's the 'Hotel Auburn'*], located right here in my own little foothill community of Auburn, California.

The Auburn Hotel was first completed in April, 1880, at a grand cost of \$12,500. It's owner, Sam Putnam, opened its doors as the "Putnam House" in January, 1881. It was promptly consumed by fire within two weeks! But it was rebuilt, bigger and better. The new Putnam House sported a number of amenities that made it quite popular with locals. It lasted as the "Putnam House" only until his death, though, a few years later, on May 25, 1882. New owners again opened the hotel for business on June 25, 1884. The owner, living in Woodland, soon sold it to the former Placer County Sheriff, W. C. Conroy, for \$10,000. Conroy promptly renamed it the Conroy Hotel. He enlarged the hotel, adding another some 20 guest rooms and 'sample' rooms for traveling salesmen.

During those early years, it was successively known as the Nashville House, the Hotel Placer, and the Hotel Conroy. It finally took on the name of Auburn Hotel after the 1912 fire that destroyed all of the building except for a small two-story annex at the rear of the property. It seemed that the Heavens had the hotel fated for oblivion, but, once again, it was reconstructed.

Even the eventual return of the "Auburn Hotel" name wasn't an easy transition. Following the 1903 fire at the first Auburn Hotel (different building, different location) which had killed two people, the new owners were reluctant to take on the same name as its disastrous predecessor. For many years, the hotel was known as the Hotel Auburn as sort of a compromise name.

After the 1912 fire, then, at a cost of \$25,000, the Hotel Auburn was reconstructed in 1913 and reopened for business in 1914. At that time, it had 22 rooms.

It was constructed in the California Mission style, and this time it survived all the way up to 1990. It now featured electric lighting, central heating, a barber shop, a resplendent dining room, and a "modern, up-to-date" automobile shuttle between the hotel and the train depot.

Over the years, the most famous feature of the Auburn Hotel became its celebrated Basque dinners,



offering dish after dish of fabulously tasty and exotic items...and almost as exotic, in its last few years of existence...was the accompanying *live* accordion music. The musician was about 96 years old, as were his many anecdotes and jokes, but he became an Auburn Hotel tradition along with everything else the hotel was noted for. My family and I enjoyed many an evening there, enjoying both food and fare.

Although the Auburn Hotel became an institution over the years, to locals and dedicated patrons from the entire Sacramento area, it never became the hoped-for tourist stopover. Located in downtown Auburn, it was too far from the neighboring freeway for tourists and passerbys to take note of. All of that business was easily consumed by the fast food places and motels that calibrate every length of the local freeway. And so, in 1990, the Auburn Hotel finally gave up the ghost, after 110 years as an Auburn landmark and a Gold Country tradition.

That grand old hotel won't be soon be forgotten, though, for it left behind a legacy of matchcovers that chronicled its struggle for existence, its growth, and its popularity...and quite an impressive legacy, too.

I currently have 24 different covers from the Auburn Hotel (as part of my "Auburn" collection), and I know there must be at least a few more that have, as yet, eluded my grasp. And what variety! Who wooda thunk! Pictured here are a Crown and a Midget, along with a few others, but there's also a DQ, as well. To that auspicious start, a variety of covers were added over the years, including two nice 5-color sets. All 24 covers are 20-strikes, except for the Midget and one 30-strike.

California's Gold County has been host to many hotels over the years, some for noted than others, but the Auburn Hotel has been one of the most, if not *the* most prolific issuers of matchcovers, at least 60 years' worth before its demise. When you hold one of these covers in your hand, you're holding a bit of California history—the California gold country, etc.

Alas, there won't be any other such covers, though; the grand old Auburn Hotel was ignobly turned into a small indoor mall in 1990, its now garish little tourist trap shops doomed to obscurity...which I've never been in.

