COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

True tales from the annals of history, archaeology, construction, and restoration of the Casa de Bandini and Cosmopolitan Hotel.

Old Town San Diego State Historic Park

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Going Up!

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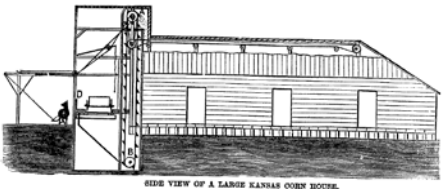
Elevators, or lifts have been around for a very long time. Evidence points back to at least the third century B.C. The first lifts were used primarily in mines and quarries, and to get building materials to a higher level, such as a scaffold for building castle walls. They were fairly simple designs, utilizing either a lever, or a pulley, the mathematical principals of both defined by the ancient Greek Archimedes, the first mathematical physicist. He is credited with creating elaborate pulley systems, reputedly having been able to move a full-size ship by pulling on a single rope. These first elevators used either draft animals, human power, or in a few cases water driven mechanisms.

Although intended for materials, it is almost certain a few workers also took a ride. In 1743 a personal lift was commissioned by Louis XV to link his apartment in Versailles with that of his then mistress, Madame de Chateauroux. In the U.S. the primary use of lifts were in barns like the one Seeley built in 1869, where feed was stored on the second floor, allowing the bottom floor more room for livestock.



SIDE VIEW OF A LARGE KANSAS CORN HOUSE.

The major problem with these elevators was what could happen if the rope broke. This problem was resolved by Elisha Otis, who demonstrated his safety device or "Improvement in Hoisting Apparatus" In 1853. He started a company, the Otis Elevator Company that built freight elevators until 1857 when the company got its first order for a passenger elevator. The first one in use was in a 5 story department store in New York, and used steam power.

Although the restoration of the Cosmopolitan Hotel until now has never had an elevator, it will now after the completion of the restoration. The most compelling reason for the addition is the 1990 federal ADA law, which requires wheelchair access to the second floor. "Alterations to a qualified historic building or facility must comply with ADAAG unless it is determined in accordance with procedures described in ADAAG 4.1.7(2) that compliance with certain requirements would threaten or destroy the historic significance of the building or facility." In the case of the Cosmopolitan, the addition of an elevator will not destroy the significance. It is on the outside, not attached to the adobe first floor, and has siding to match the building.

The elevator has another benefit as well. It can be used in the operation of the hotel, a traditional use, often called a dumbwaiter. As the Casa de Bandini was converted to the Cosmopolitan in 1869, it would have been possible for Seeley to have had an elevator. But the first passenger elevator in the San Diego area didn't appear until the 1890s at the Hotel del Coronado. However, San Diego does have an elevator claim to fame. The first exterior glass elevator was installed at the El Cortez Hotel.