(31) The Frank Hellam House
581 Scott Street

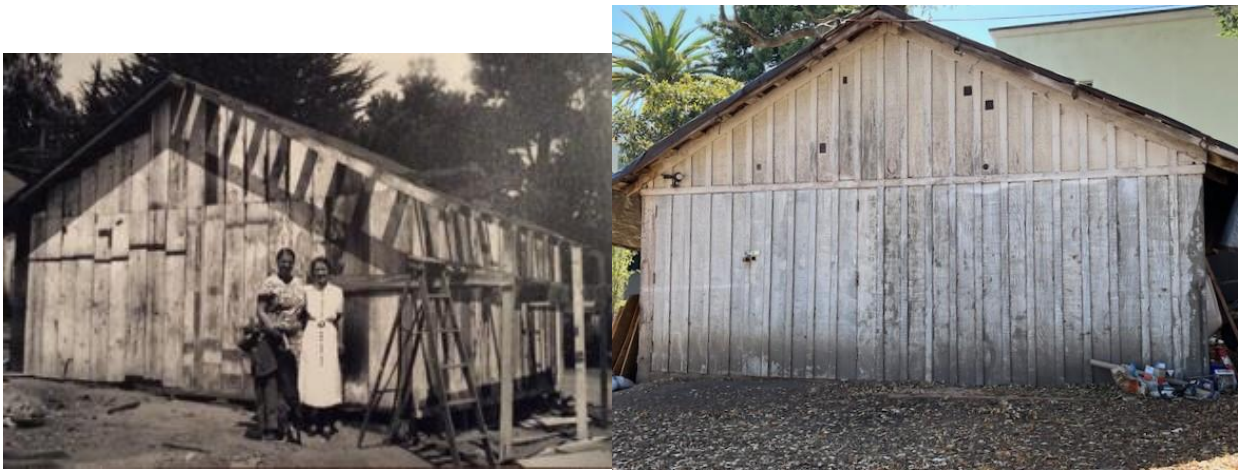
The Hellam House

The Frank Hellam House is named for a prominent Monterey family that has been important to Monterey for over a century. Frank Woodhull Hellam Sr. was born in 1868 in Pontiac, Michigan, the son of John and Fannie Woodhull Hellam Frank Hellam married Amelia Plapp in 1899. They had seven children, Monty, Frank Jr., John, Frances, Anstice, Le Gray, and William R.C.

The Hellam Family from the early 1900's
Photo from the Mayo Hayes O'Donnell Library Hellam Collection

Together they bought the lot on Scott Street in 1900 and started to build "a handsome cottage". He moved a one-room, hipped roof cottage from the Hotel Del Monte to the property onto the lot, and his father, a brick mason, constructed the chimney. The front gabled section and kitchen were added at the same time. By 1912, the back porch had been altered with additions. It is unknown when the dormer windows were added, and the attic area was converted to livable space. The Hellams had seven children, and Frank's father was living in the house as well, so it probably was soon after 1905. The decorative shingles in the gable also indicate an early date.

Earliest Photo of the Hellam House, c 1905 prior to construction
of second floor. Photo courtesy of Richard Hellam



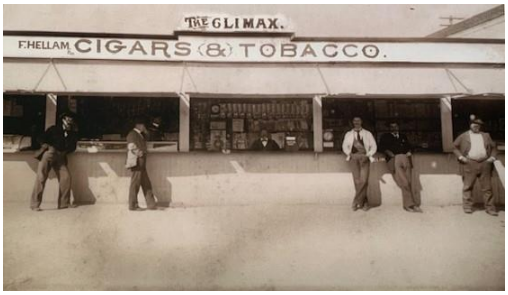
Early view and current view of the garage building. Note the building behind the garage on the right was originally the site of a large barn, entered off Larkin and once part of the Hellam property. There is a tack room behind that barn site which may have once served in operation of a livery.

Construction of the Barn/Garage

Hellam Tobacco Warehouse today

Frank Hellam came out west at age 11 with his father, John, a brick mason, settling in Monterey. Frank returned east a short time later, but came back to Monterey in 1887 and at the age of 19 opened a small boot black stand next door to Adolpho Sanchez's Bohemian Saloon, located on the corner of Franklin and Alvarado Streets. This was the start of his businesses, which grew over the years. When the Sanchez Bohemian saloon closed next door to Frank's boot black and possibly combined tobacco stand, Frank opened the first Climax Cigar Store at 420 Main Street, next to the Monterey Fire Department. Today, the fire department building is occupied by Montrio Restaurant on 420 Calle Principal, and evidence of the early use is evident in the architecture. From there he moved to the ground floor of the Monterey Hotel at 404 Alvarado Street. In 1933, one last move took him to 423 Alvarado Street, which is still the location of Hellam's Tobacco Store. Hellam's is California's oldest tobacco shop and Monterey's oldest continuing operating business. The Hellam family owned and operated the store for more than 100 years, before selling to the current owners in 1999.

The Frank Hellam Climax Cigars and Tobacco Stand (photo from the current Hellam Store).



Climax Cigar Shop left of the Monterey Fire Dept at 420 Main Street, with engines and staff. Photo from the Mayo Hayes O'Donnell Library Hellam Collection.

Below, the interior of the Climax Cigar and Tobacco Shop. Frank Hellam is the third from the left, with mustache. Photos from the Mayo Hayes O'Donnell Library Hellam Collection. Below right is a photo from 2025 of 420 Calle Principal (formerly Main St), currently the site of the Montrio Restaurant.

420 Main St, now 420 Calle Principal

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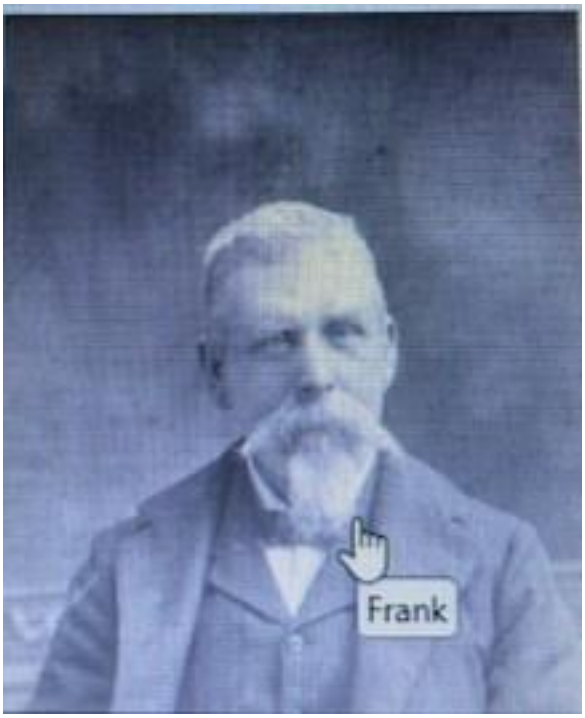
Left is the current Hellams Tobacco Shop at 423 Alvarado Street. Much of the architectural beams and walls remain as they were in 1894, when this picture of the interior below was taken.

Frank Hellam is on the left. On the walls today are many of the photos in this article. Of interest is that the family donated Frank Hellam's cane, which proudly hangs on the wall. There are also clippings from the local newspaper which advertised the Hellam Tobacco Shop.

Below are photos from the Mayo Hayes O'Donnell Collection of the Hellam Family:



Frank Hellam Sr.

Palace of Sweets

By 1908, Frank had built his business into the largest retail cigar store in the United States. He increased his commercial operations when he opened the Palace of Sweets in 1898 and the Climax Furniture Store in 1905. He got into the real estate business in 1905 when he subdivided the southern portion of Block 70 into Hellam's subdivision. He continued to expand his business interests into neighboring communities and the Salinas Valley. He gave generously to build a Carnegie Library in Monterey and was elected to the Board of Freeholders, who drafted the City Charter. He died in 1936. The Hellam's Scott Street house remained in the family for 123 years.

The Hellam family has played a prominent role in Monterey. According to the biography written by Michelle Adams-Wolton found in the Mayo Hayes O'Donnell Library, Frank's oldest son, Monterey "Monty" Hellam (named for the city of Monterey), was born in 1899, and distinguished himself as first assistant chief of the Monterey Fire Department for 17 years, a member of the local WWII drat board, and that of a police judge, presiding over a court that resided in Colton Hall.

On his first day as police judge, in May 1933, it was as if a character had been blown into the court room from the pages of Steinbeck novel, for Eddie Romero, known locally as "Pilon" and infamously, as the model for "Pilon" in Tortilla Flat, stood before Hellam on a drinking related charge. Romero and Hellam would meet up in police court on many occasions, with Judge

Hellam proclaiming in an interview that "Pilon was probably the most docile prisoner that I can remember…he never entered a protest and was always willing to accept the wisdom of the court." He served as a police judge for nearly 20 years. After California reorganized the court systems in 1953 and the office of police judge was abolished, Monty Hellam took on the duties of records clerk for the Monterey Police Department. Monterey Hellam died in 1984.
Photos of Monty Hellam, from the Mayo Hayes O'Donnell Library Hellam Collection. Below left, Monty Hellam is bowling at Monterey Lanes, the former site of Frank Hellam's Climax Furniture Store.

Photos of Monterey ("Monty") Hellam. Oldest son of Frank Hellam