

They called her “The Fire Queen.”

J. C. Quire, the ticket and passenger clerk for the Southern Pacific Railroad at the Colfax depot, was called to his friend’s bedside where she asked him to take down her last will and testament. She had only moved to Colfax a few years ago from Auburn but she made many friends in both places. Not many of those friends however knew exactly why she was called “Queen.”

Emily Edwards had come to California from Richmond Virginia in about 1850. She was a “quadroon” girl about 28 years old. She possessed “a face and figure of striking beauty. She married Hugh Casement shortly after she arrived here. Together they opened a “saloon and dance hall and place of doubtful repute” on the Mission Road in San Francisco. ¹

In 1851, one of a series of dreadful fires swept through San Francisco. The fire of June 14th destroyed ten full blocks of the city plus partially burning another six blocks. Emily Casement distinguished herself by running into the flames and “by passing water both for quenching the flames and the intolerable thirsts of the firemen, she actually assisted the Hook and Ladder companies to tear down the burning building.” She later told the newspaper reporter that she was “a better fireman than half the kid glove gentry who go mincing and a-cuttin around town with no more claim to the name fireman. . .” He wrote: “She knows pesky well that she has seen more service than any of ‘em.” That fire destroyed the *Daily Alta* newspaper building and all its back issues, she found copies and replaced them all. ²

Emily and Hugh owned a saloon and brothel known as the Half-Way House but in early 1855 Hugh left for Australia. She tried for years to claim the property under the Homestead Act, at one point “she ensconced herself upon the lot and seated on a chair in the center, she bid defiance to all encroachers and backed up her belligerent intentions with a good double-barreled gun.” After years in court finally lost the property. ³

In November of 1855 there was an enormous fire at the Novelty Distillery. It was a huge facility; three stories with a basement. It contained gallons and gallons of distilled liquor and hundreds of sacks of grain. The newspaper account reported:

A woman named Emily Edwards, a Creole from the West Indies, and one who was badly burned in the great fire of 1851, is entitled to great credit for her exertions today. She was the first person to give the alarm, she had the fence torn down and carried out a large quantity of grain, and it was she who saved the four men who were scalded, by dragging them from the building and covering them with her own clothing, which she tore off of her person.” ⁴

Another newspaper, *The San Francisco Alta*, gave a few more details:

“The walls were wavering and the roof beginning to show signs of caving in, when a sudden cry rang out that several firemen were still in the building and so overcome by the heat and smoke that they were unable to find their way out. A call for volunteers to go to the rescue remained

unanswered. A second call and still no response. At last Emily Casement sprang forward, and throwing the skirts of her dress over her head, rushed into the burning building. A few seconds elapsed during which the spectators almost held their breath in suspense, when they saw Emily returning, dragging the form of a half-suffocated fireman. Again, she disappeared into the burning building, returning almost immediately with another rescued fireman. Five or six times was this heroic deed repeated, but at last human endurance could accomplish no more the noble woman fell fainting in the doorway by the side of the last unconscious fireman, she had saved from a horrible death.”
“From that day forward she was known as the “Fire Queen” and became the idol of the fireboys and all who knew her.”⁵

Emily was badly burned in the fire and carried the scars the rest of her life. Daily Union Nov. 3, 1855. In 1856, she followed Hugh to Australia but for unknown reasons, she returned alone almost immediately. ⁶

That she was feisty is well documented. She was called to court as a witness and the defense council questioned her ability to testify, as African Americans were barred from testifying in court at the time. When questioned about her ethnicity, she stated that her mother “was as white as many in this court” but she couldn’t testify to the color of her father for he died when she was a small girl. She proudly proclaimed she was born in Virginia and a descendant of Pocahontas. She was allowed to testify. ⁷

Her life as a brothel owner seemed to move up and down in fortunes, she was at one time located in an affluent neighborhood on California Street but finally took a small house on Morton Street, known at the time as “brothel alley” said to have “some of the worst cribs in San Francisco.” One reason she might have ended up here was because of her well known generosity. In 1871 she took one of her prostitutes, who wanted to get out of “the life,” to the California Rescue Mission and later paid for the expenses of other prostitutes that entered this program. ⁸

She is said to have moved back to the East Coast but other accounts place her in Chico, nevertheless by 1880 she was living here in Auburn. She listed herself quite plainly in the census for that year as “mistress of house of ill fame.” Living with her were two young prostitutes, Amanda and Mary. ⁹

Later, Queen moved to Colfax, seemingly in retirement. When her friend J. C. Quire (who would later become the County Clerk of Placer county) came to her aid in 1885, she had him record the extensive list of her last bequests. Much of her rather large estate was left to the children of her friends.

John Lyon Butler – Colfax druggist - \$300

Lizzie Butler – 17 - child of John – a gold chain and \$250

John Butler – child of John - \$300

Lincoln Hollenbeck – 19 - son of Auburn’s banker O. W. Hollenbeck- a gold watch and \$250

David Wolf – The furniture in her house in San Francisco and \$500
 John Coffey – San Francisco Police Detective - \$500
 James A. Wilson – San Francisco Police Detective - \$500
 Margaret Thielacker – of San Francisco - \$500
 William Treasure – Colfax Saloon keeper - \$500
 Lillie Treasure – 12 -child of William - \$250
 Augustus Treasurer – 19 - child of William- \$250
 Richard Rapier – Barber at the American Hotel in Auburn, she lived near him at one time - \$500
 Henry Wales – Colfax Telephone operator- \$500
 James Wales – 16 - child of Henry - \$250
 Frank Kuenzly – 19 - son of Judge Jacob and Maria Kuenzly of Colfax - \$250
 Asa Plank Jr. – 8 -orphan living in Colfax with the Ewing family - \$250
 Charles W. Lamphrey – 2- child of Colfax’s baggage master - \$250
 Woodburn Lamphrey –2 - child of Colfax’s baggage master - \$250
 Ellen Lord – 13 - child of Colfax’s stable keeper- \$250
 Johnnie Lord – 9 - child of Colfax’s stable keeper- \$250
 Daniel Lord – 11 – child of Colfax’s stable keeper - \$250
 Lottie Huntley – 11- son of Auburn’s Sheriff Ashel Huntley - \$250
 Three eldest children of Amanda Donahue/Gregory of Penryn– House and lot in Colfax – valued at \$500– this may have been the Amanda Donahue living with Emily in Auburn in 1880.
 Dr. T. M. Todd - \$250 and her body for study
 Old Ladies Home of San Francisco - \$1,000
 Widow & Orphans Asylum of San Francisco - \$500
 Catholic Orphans Asylum of San Francisco - \$500
 Sailors Home Society of San Francisco - \$500
 County Hospital for Sick Women of San Francisco - \$100
 Colored Methodist Church of San Francisco - \$250
 Mayor of Richmond Virginia for benefit of colored schools - \$1,000. (*This bequest was fulfilled by the City of Richmond. They erected an addition for the Baker School to be called the “Emily Casement Primary Building”*)¹⁰

Sources

¹ *Daily Alta* 7-27-1885

² *Daily Alta* 5-17-1885

³ *Sacramento Union* 2-5-1867

⁴ *Sacramento Union* 11-3-1855

⁵ *Daily Alta* 7-27-1885

⁶ *Sacramento Union* 2-5-1867

⁷ *Sacramento Union* 9-13-1862 & Marysville Daily Appeal 9-13-1862

⁸ *San Francisco Chronicle* 5-9-1871

⁹ Census – 1880

¹⁰ *Richmond Dispatch* 3-27-1888 & Probate # 226

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