State of California — The Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

PRIMARY RECORD

Primary # _____
HRI # _____
Trinomial _____
NRHP Status Code 3CS
Other Listings _____
Review Code _____ Reviewer _____ Date _____

 *Resource Name or #: (Assigned by recorder) 1412-1420 Van Ness Avenue

P1. Historic name of building: Firestone Tire and Rubber Co. store/Oldsmobile Company of California showroom
P2. Location: *a: County San Francisco ☐ Not for Publication ■ Unrestricted
*b. USGS 7.5' Quad _____ Date _____ T ___; R ___; ____¼ of ____¼ of Sec ____; _____B.M.
c. Address 1412-1420 Van Ness Avenue City San Francisco Zip 94109
d. UTM: Zone _____; _____mE/ _____ mN *e. Assessor's parcel #: Block 667, lot 9

*P3a. Description: (Describe resource and its major elements. Include design, materials, condition, alterations, size, setting, and boundaries)

This two-story brick masonry building fills its 70' by 126'-9" lot at the southeast corner of Van Ness Avenue and Austin Street, and extends in an ell to Bush Street. In composition, the Van Ness façade consists of a parapet and end piers of rough-textured tan and buff-colored bricks that surround an interior zone devoted largely to windows and entrances. The parapet is decorated with corbelling and narrow arches formed by brickwork.

At the base of the parapet a profiled cornice stretches across the building. A course of floral patterning runs immediately beneath this cornice, and below it is a paneled frieze. Each rectangular panel in this frieze alternates with small square panels decorated with rosettes of plaster.

(See Continuation Sheet, page 2.)

*P3b Resource Attributes: HP6 – two-story commercial building; HP8 – industrial building

*P4. Resources Present:
■ Building ☐ Structure ☐ Object ☐ Site ☐ District ☐ Element of District ☐ Other

P5b. Description of Photo: (View, date, accession #)
View looking east
June 2009

*P6. Date Constructed/Age and Source: ■ Historic ☐ Prehistoric ☐ Both
1912-1913; building permit

*P7. Owner and Address:
COUNTY ROAD ASSOCIATES
660 WOODSIDE DR
WOODSIDE CA 94062

*P8. Recorded by: (Name, affiliation, and address)
William Kostura
P. O. Box 60211
Palo Alto, CA 94306

*P9. Date Recorded: January 2010

*P10. Survey Type: (Describe) intensive

P11. Report Citation*: (Cite survey report.) William Kostura. *Van Ness Auto Row Support Structures*. San Francisco Department of City Planning, 2010.

*Attachments: ☐ NONE ☐ Location Map ☐ Sketch Map ■ Continuation Sheet ■ Building, Structure and Object Record ☐ Archaeological Record ☐ District Record ☐ Linear Feature Record ☐ Milling Station Record ☐ Rock Art Record ☐ Artifact Record ☐ Photograph Record ☐ Other (List)

Description (continued):

A band of eleven windows stretches across the second story. Windows are separated from each other by faceted wooden mullions; each window consists of a transom light over paired six-light casements, all made of wood. A row of wooden panels runs below this band of windows. These panels consist of a projecting center surrounded by flush borders.

All of the elements described above are original. They are shown in a drawing of the building that was published in the *Chronicle* ("New Home of the Firestone Tire," Nov. 3, 1912, p. 44) as construction of the building commenced, and in a photograph from the late 1920s at the S. F. Main Library (see below).

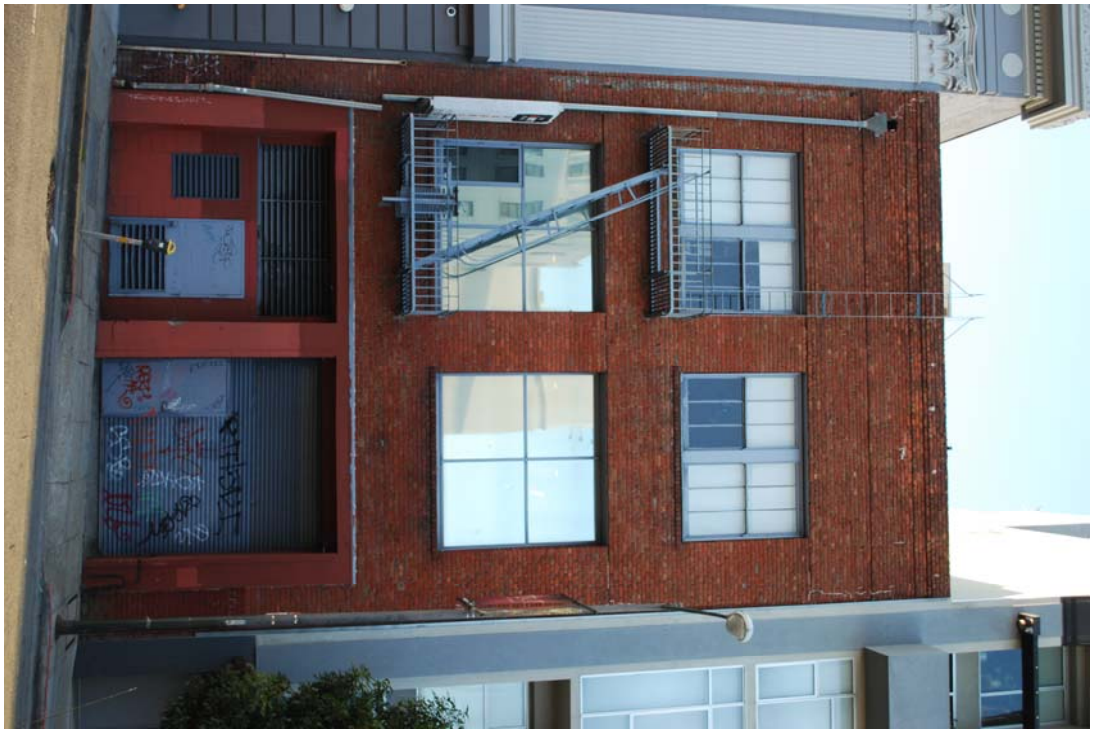
The first story of the building employs modern metal replacement sash for the storefront windows and entrance, all set within original wooden framing. The bulkhead is faced in modern sheet metal.

The Austin Street side is largely intact to the time of construction. Its westernmost bay is finished identically to the adjacent Van Ness façade. The other seven bays are clad in red brick and are topped by a shallow, profiled cornice of brick. Second story windows are paired, with eight-over-eight wood sash. In the first story, three bays have original wooden windows, and three have new aluminum sash. The two easternmost bays were originally vehicle entrances, but now only one of these is for vehicles.

The narrow (31'-7") Bush Street façade is also of red brick, is three stories in height, and is divided into two bays. Paired windows in the third story have six-over-six wood sash. Second story windows have replacement sash. Of the two original vehicle entrances in the first story, one now has a replacement metal roll-up door, and the other has been filled in.

This building in the late 1920s, when J. W. Leavitt sold Willys-Overland autos here.
From S.F. History Center, Main Library (photo #AAD-4672).

Top: Detail of second story. Bottom: Parapet, cornice, and frieze.



Top: Austin Street side. Bottom: Bush Street side.

BUILDING, STRUCTURE, AND OBJECT RECORD

***NRHP Status Code** 3CS

***Resource Name or #** (Assigned by recorder) 1412-1420 Van Ness Avenue

B1. Historic Name: Firestone Tire and Rubber Co. store/Oldsmobile Company of California showroom

B2. Common Name: _____

B3. Original Use: auto tires shop and auto showroom B4. Present Use: art supplies store

***B5. Architectural Style:** Classical Revival

***B6. Construction History:** (Construction date, alterations, and date of alterations)

Built in 1912-1913. First story windows and entrance altered at an unknown date.

***B7. Moved?** ■ No ☐ Yes ☐ Unknown **Date:** _____ **Original Location:** _____

***B8. Related Features:**

none

B9a. Architect: Oser Brothers b. Builder: unknown

***B10. Significance: Theme** automobile industry **Area** San Francisco

Period of Significance 1913-1933 **Property Type** tire store, auto showroom **Applicable Criteria** 1, 3

(Discuss importance in terms of historical or architectural context as defined by theme, period, and geographic scope. Also address integrity.)

History -- Introduction

This building was built in 1912-1913 as an investment for owner I. L. Rosenthal to designs by Oser Brothers, a little-known architectural firm. During its first decade it was divided into two storefronts, one of which (then numbered 1414 Van Ness) was devoted to the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, and the other (#1420) to an auto showroom. In 1923 the two storefronts were united as one auto showroom. The building continued to have auto-related uses through 1945, and thereafter it was occupied by a bank (1948 through at least 1964).

The auto showroom in this building has held some major brands (Oldsmobile, Willys-Overland, and, briefly, Chevrolet), brands that were once popular but are now little-remembered (Cole and Franklin), and some brands that are obscure by any standard (Lexington, Olympian, Saxon, and Stephens).

B11. Additional Resource Attributes: (List attributes and codes) _____

***B12. References:**

Building permit #45025 (October 14, 1912)

Building and Industrial News, Sept. 17 (5:2), Oct. 1 (9:2), and Oct. 22 (20:3), 1912.

Crocker-Langley and Polk's city directory, and PT&T reverse directory listings for occupants of this building, 1914-1964

1913, 1929 and 1948 Sanborn insurance maps

(Continued page 12.)

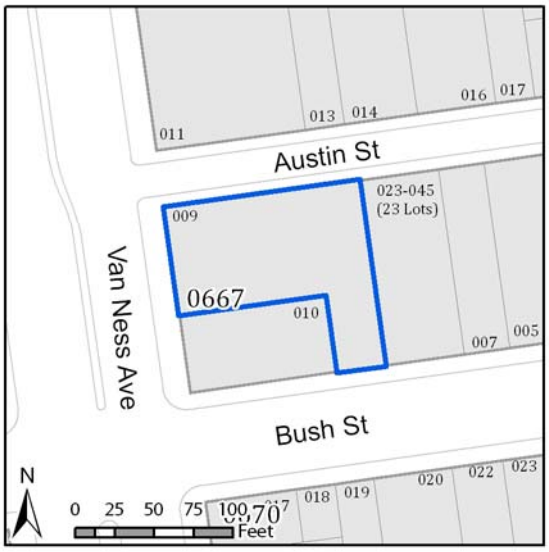
B13. Remarks:

***B14. Evaluator:** William Kostura

Date of Evaluation: January 2010

(This space reserved for official comments.)

(Sketch map with north arrow required)



History – Occupants -- Firestone

The building was designed in consultation with its first tenant and lessee, the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company of Akron, Ohio, and the plans were approved by H. S. Firestone, the head of the company. It is not clear whether Firestone leased only the storefront that it occupied, or whether it leased the entire building and sublet the other storefront.

Firestone was founded in Akron, Ohio by Harvey Firestone to make tires for wagons and carriages, but quickly began to mass-produce tires for automobiles as well, and was the first supplier for Ford. This firm was one of the two largest U. S. tire-makers, along with Goodyear (also of Akron) into the 1970s.

At 1414 Van Ness, Firestone used the first floor for its salesroom and offices. The Bush Street wing was devoted to the service department, with wheelwright and blacksmith shops in the second story and general service work performed in the third story. Access to these floors was almost certainly by means of an elevator entered from one of the vehicle entrances in Bush Street. Firestone also had the entire basement, which they used for their stock room. Here they used a stacking system that was designed to attain 12,000 square feet of total storage area, with minimal waste of space. At this time Firestone sold not only pneumatic tires, but the older style solid tires, which some vehicles still used.

Firestone's factory branch remained at 1414 Van Ness for ten years, through 1923. After that year it supplied the market through local dealers.

History – Occupants – Automobile dealerships

1913-1917: Oldsmobile Company of California.

Soon after the building was completed, the national Oldsmobile company leased the more northern storefront, 1420 Van Ness, for use as its factory branch. The automaker was here for four years, from July 1913 to October 1917. Their ground floor sales room had an area of 35' by 95', and for a service department they had all of the second floor except for the Bush Street wing, for an area measuring 70' by 126'. An elevator lifted cars from one of the vehicle entrances in Austin Street to the second floor.

Oldsmobile was founded in 1897 in Lansing, Michigan by Ransom E. Olds. Problems with financing led him to sell the company in 1899, and thus his connection with the brand was very brief. (Olds went on to found a new company named after his initials, Reo, in 1904, and this brand was also very popular.)

After the company was sold, Oldsmobile was moved by its new owners to Detroit, Michigan. According to the Wikipedia entry on this brand, the 1901 Curved Dash model was the first automobile to be mass-produced on an assembly line, rather than the Ford Model-T. Oldsmobile was reputedly the best-selling car in the United States for a few years during the early 1900s. In 1908, it became part of General Motors. A limited production luxury model, the Limited Touring, won a race against a train in 1909, adding luster to Oldsmobile's reputation.

(Continued next page.)

History – Occupants – Automobile dealerships (continued)

In San Francisco, Oldsmobile was first sold by a local dealership during 1903-1908. In 1911 the national company established a factory branch in a portion of H. O. Harrison's auto showroom building at 1200-1228 Van Ness Avenue. (This building has been heavily altered). Not wanting, perhaps, to share a building with a larger auto dealer, Oldsmobile moved from there into 1420 Van Ness only two years later, in 1913. By the end of its occupancy of this building, Oldsmobile made five body types, including roadsters, touring cars, "speedsters," coupes, and sedans, with variously six and eight-cylinder engines.

The factory branch had three different managers during its four years in this building, perhaps indicating the difficulties this brand faced in competing in a crowded field. The second manager, L. G. Dodge, admitted to a reporter that Oldsmobile was better established in the eastern states than it was in the west. After four-plus years in this storefront, Oldsmobile abandoned the factory branch method of selling its cars in San Francisco and elected to market its cars once again through local dealerships. This was by far the most common way of selling automobiles, in part because local dealers were more motivated than branch managers to aggressively advertise the autos they sold. After 1917, Oldsmobile was sold in a much larger building at 1701 Van Ness (now altered) by J. W. Leavitt.

1918-1920: California Motor Sales Company (L. D. Allen).

L. D. Allen was a successful real estate developer who entered into the auto dealership business in 1917. After occupying a small storefront at 1301-1305 Van Ness (extant), he moved into 1420 Van Ness in March 1918, where he remained for two years under the name California Motor Sales Company. While here he sold three different brands of automobiles. They included:

Lexington (sold here in 1918). This brand, manufactured in Connersville, Indiana, was active from 1909-1927. It assembled autos from parts made by other manufacturers and was best known for its powerful Ansted motor, developed by new owner E. W. Ansted in about 1915. This brand made about 4,000 cars per year for the national market during 1918, when Allen sold them here.

Chevrolet (sold here April-August, 1918). Perhaps Allen missed an opportunity by not offering this low-priced car for longer than he did. It is unclear whether he voluntarily dropped the brand or whether Chevrolet dropped him as its local distributor. Previously, Chevrolet cars had been sold, briefly, in two San Francisco locations, during 1914 and 1915-1917. Allen's distributorship of this brand, when it had newly become a part of General Motors, was similarly brief. Only in 1920 did Chevrolet gain a long-term distributor in San Francisco.

(Continued next page.)

History – Occupants – Automobile dealerships (continued)

Cole (sold here 1918-1920). This was clearly the auto brand that Allen became most enthusiastic about during his several years as an auto dealer. The Cole Motor Company, founded by Joseph J. Cole, made assembled automobiles in Indianapolis during 1909-1925. It made an early reputation by winning auto races in 1909 and 1910, and in 1912 it began to build limousines for the luxury market. It was one of the early auto makers to install V-8 engines in its cars.

L. D. Allen began to carry the Cole in 1918, the same year the popular Cole Aero-Eight was introduced. In that year, Cole offered three models, all high-priced: a roadster, a touring car, and a "speedster." In 1919 it offered seven models.

Allen seems to have done well with the Cole, because in 1919 he commenced construction of his own large auto showroom, at 1625 Van Ness, and also opened several branch showrooms around the state. He left 1414 Van Ness for the new building in 1920, where he sold Cole, another brand, plus Sandow trucks, only to have his business quickly collapse, probably due to the recession of the early 1920s.

1920-1922: W. J. Benson Co. This company sold the Stephens Salient-Six automobile, an obscure brand, from the storefront at 1420 Van Ness.

1923: Gustave A. Boyer. With the departure of Firestone from this building, the two storefronts were merged, and the entire building became available for auto dealers. The first to so occupy this building was Gus A Boyer, who, operating as the Franklin Motor Car Company, sold Franklin autos here. The Franklin was a light-weight, air-cooled auto made in Syracuse, New York during 1902-1934. It did well, and was sold from several showrooms in San Francisco from 1907 through 1930. Why it was sold here so briefly is unknown.

1924-1933: Willys-Overland. During the 1910s this was a very successful auto-maker. In 1916-1918 it built a chain of factory branch showrooms around the United States, including a huge building in San Francisco at 1395 Van Ness (now altered). There it sold its Willys-Knight, Stearns-Knight, Overland, and Whippet autos from 1916-1923. The company over-extended, and after the recession of the early-1920s it had to be restructured. Today Willys is best-remembered for its role of producing the Jeep during World War II and afterward.

During the 1920s and 1930s Willys-Overland was a much less important company than it had been during the 1910s, and in San Francisco it down-sized by leaving its building at 1395 Van Ness and selling its cars through a succession of dealerships in this much smaller building. During these years, the company ended its production of the Stearns-Knight (in 1929) and Willys-Knight (in 1933) brands. The proprietors in this building were the Boyer-Brouillet Motor Company (1924), the Overland-Knight Sales Company (1925-1927), J. W. Leavitt and Co. (1928-1930), and the Willys-Overland Auto Company (1931-1933).

History – Occupants – Other automobile-related businesses

1935, 1940-1942: Used car salesrooms. As was the case with some other auto showrooms, this building filtered down to used car sales rooms during the Depression. These included the Fishman Auto Company (1935) and the used car department of Van Ness Motors (1940-1942).

1942-1945: Automotive Service Company. This business performed electrical service and sold auto parts. It is the last known auto-related business in this building.

From 1948 through at least 1964 this building was occupied by the Anglo-California National Bank, later known as the Crocker-Anglo National Bank. Its headquarters was downtown at 1 Sansome Street and this was one of ten or more of its neighborhood branches. During the 1970s and 1980s this building was used as a post office.

In sum, this building had ten years of use as a tires store (Firestone, 1913-1923), twenty years of use as an auto showroom (1913-1933), and at least 27 years of total auto-related use.

History – Context – Early tire shops

This is one of about twelve surviving buildings in the study area that had some importance as tire shops and retain at least moderate integrity. Eight of these buildings had such history dating back to the 1910s, two back to the 1920s, and two back to the 1930s. Of these twelve, eight had a history as a tire shop for at least ten years. Those eight include:

1414-1420 Van Ness (1913-1923; ten years; sold Firestone)
1233-1237 Van Ness (1914-1924; ten years; sold Pennsylvania and National tires)
1430-1480 Van Ness (1915-1924, and 1927; 11 years)
1650 Pine Street (1917-1917; ten years)
1441 Bush Street (1922-1951; about 30 years)
1501-1519 Mission (1928 to the present)
1601 Mission (1931 through at least 1964; sold Firestone)
500 Turk Street (1935 to the present; sold Goodyear)

From the above list, it can be seen that the buildings from the 1910s had tire stores for briefer periods of time – ten or eleven years – while the later buildings had tire stores for much longer periods.

1412-1420 Van Ness is in the former group, i.e. it is a very early example – in fact, the earliest – with ten years of use as a tire shop. It is one of four buildings in this group that are known to have held stores that sold national tire brands.

History – Context – Early auto showrooms

The oldest auto showrooms in the study area (i.e., those built through 1913) are listed below, in order of construction date. These are probably the oldest in San Francisco as well as in the study area.

(Continued next page.)

History – Context – Early auto showrooms (continued)

550 Van Ness. Built 1908-1909. A moderately sized showroom. The brick walls and ornament remain intact while the window sash has been altered.

2000 Van Ness. Built 1909-1910. This building has lost integrity due to alterations and major additions of 1927.

690 Van Ness. Built 1910. A small showroom with only a few years of use as a new auto showroom; its integrity is fair at best.

1301-1305 Van Ness. Built 1911-1912. This large building has good integrity, but during its first five years its main use was as a tire dealership; its auto showroom use was secondary. Later in the 1910s the entire building became devoted to use as an auto showroom.

1525 Van Ness. Built 1912. This moderately-sized building has only fair integrity.

1430-1480 Van Ness. Built 1912. This building had early, but brief, use as an auto showroom. Window openings have been altered.

1001 Polk Street. Built 1912-1913. A large showroom. Its window sash has been removed, but the integrity of this building is otherwise high.

1400 Van Ness. Built 1912-1913. A large showroom with high integrity.

1412-1420 Van Ness. Built 1912-1913. During this building's first decade one of its two storefronts was used as a showroom, and the other was a tires shop. Integrity is good. This is the building being evaluated here.

1350 Van Ness. Built in 1912-1913. The cornice of this small showroom has been removed.

1595 Van Ness. Built in 1913. A large showroom. Windows have been altered, but integrity is otherwise good.

1600 Van Ness. Built in 1913. Large grilles cover the windows, diminishing the integrity.

2050 Van Ness. Built in 1913. A moderately-sized showroom with fifteen years of such use, including a few years of electric auto sales.

1062 Geary. Built in 1913. This small building had only brief use as an auto showroom, and has fair integrity.

The best of these, in terms of integrity, longevity of use as an auto showroom, and size or capacity are 1400 Van Ness, 1001 Polk, 1595 Van Ness, and 1301-1305 Van Ness. Each of these four also served as showrooms for major brands.

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History – Context – Early auto showrooms (continued)

By comparison, 1412-1420 Van Ness had a moderately small auto showroom until 1923, when Firestone left and the entire building became devoted to auto sales. The major brands it sold included Oldsmobile (for four years), Cole (for three years), Chevrolet (very briefly), and Willys-Overland (for ten years, and perhaps no longer a major brand by this time). It also sold several early brands that are now little-remembered. In summary, 1412-1420 Van Ness is in the second most important group of auto showrooms, among those built through 1913 (along with 550 Van Ness, 1350 Van Ness, and perhaps 2050 Van Ness).

Integrity

The interior zone of the first story (windows and entrance) of the Van Ness façade is generally altered, and this is a substantial area; but the end piers, the second story, and the parapet facing Van Ness are intact, and the secondary facades on Austin and Bush are also largely intact. Of the four vehicle entrances this building was built with, two still have vehicle doors, while the outlines of the other two are apparent as such. In sum, this building retains integrity of location, setting, feeling, and association, while integrity of design, materials, and workmanship are mostly retained.

Evaluation

This is one of more than 100 buildings along the Van Ness Avenue corridor that have a history as automobile support structures, and that are being evaluated for possible historic significance according to the criteria of the California Register of Historical Resources. With a few exceptions, these buildings were auto showrooms, public garages, auto repair shops, auto parts and supplies stores, and auto painting shops. The time period that is being studied is from the initial years of the automobile industry in San Francisco through 1964. Among the factors that have been considered when evaluating a building are its date of construction, its longevity of auto-related use, the importance of its occupants in local auto industry history, integrity, and architectural quality. These factors, and how they apply to evaluations of buildings, are discussed in a cover report, *Van Ness Auto Row Support Structures, 1908-1964*.

Completed in 1913, this is an early example of an automobile showroom. With 20 years of such use in its history, it has good longevity in this use. This is also one of the very earliest tire shops that survive in San Francisco, with ten years of such use by Firestone, a major brand. For these reasons, the building appears to be eligible for the California Register of Historical Resources under Criterion 1, at the local level, for its use as an automobile showroom and a tire shop. The Period of Significance under this criterion is 1913-1933, the years the building had these uses.

None of the proprietors of businesses in this building is known to have been individually important in his field. Accordingly, this building does not appear to be eligible for the California Register under Criterion 2.

(Continued next page.)

Evaluation (continued)

Architecturally, this building is typical for its period. Its best features are the parapet, which exhibits fine brickwork, and the band of second story wooden windows facing Van Ness. Such a window arrangement was once common, but a band of wooden windows of this length and of this age is becoming rare in San Francisco; most have been replaced with modern metal sash. For these reasons, and in spite of the first story alterations to the Van Ness storefront area, this building appears to be eligible for the California Register under Criterion 3, for its design. The Period of Significance under this criterion is 1913, the year of construction.

Character defining features

The character defining features of this building are the height and width of both the main building and the ell to Bush Street; the textured tan and brick Van Ness façade, including the corbelled brickwork; the red brick Austin and Bush facades, including their shallow cornices; the wooden cornice, molding, and paneled frieze below the Van Ness parapet; the wooden transom and casement windows, and the band of panels beneath these facing Van Ness; the wooden casing surrounding the entire interior zone of the Van Ness façade; the original wooden windows in the Austin and Bush Street facades, and the outlines of the vehicle entrances in those facades.

References (continued from page 5)

In the S.F. Chronicle:
"New Building for Firestone Tires." Nov. 3, 1912, p. 44.
"Oldsmobile Branch in New Quarters." July 13, 1913, p. 55.
Leon J. Pinkson, "New Man at Helm of Oldsmobile Branch." Feb. 13, 1914, p. 15.
Display ads Feb. 13, 1916, p. 46; and Aug. 26, 1917, p. A-8; for Oldsmobile.
"Allen Organization Now Cole Distributor," March 24, 1918, p. 28.
"Large Quarters for New Firm." April 21, 1918, p. A-6. L. D. Allen's company moves in.
"California Motor Sales Company Changes Name." March 14, 1920, p. A-2.
Display ads April 21, 1918, p. A-2; May 5, 1918, p. A-5; June 30, 1918, p. A-2; July 14, 1918, p. A-4; July 28, 1918; August 25, 1918, p. 30; March 30, 1919, p. A-14; April 27, 1919, p. A-14; Jan. 18, 1920, p. A-4; for California Motor Sales Company.