

1905: Fairfield gets a much-needed fire department

By Nancy Dingler

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On the Monday evening of Dec. 5, 1899, a cottage occupied by Edward Baker and his family was totally destroyed by fire. Mrs. Baker, while attending to household duties, dropped a lighted coal oil lamp. An explosion followed. The lady had barely enough time to grab her young child and escape from the building before it became a mass of flames.

Neighbors heard Mrs. Baker's cries for help and immediately responded, luckily. But it was impossible to save anything from the burning building.

Fortunately, there was little wind blowing at the time or the fire would have spread to other property and resulted in a serious loss to the town.

Around the turn of the last century, modern conveniences could be very hazardous. Most commercial buildings and homes were built of wood. Illumination was provided by candle or coal oil lamps. Heat came from fireplaces or pot belly stoves, and meals were prepared on wood-burning stoves.

For women, the costume of the day was long skirts. So, here is the woman of the house, swishing about in this voluminous clothing and being exposed to open flames and flammable materials. No wonder so many accidents occurred and fires broke out.

Faced with this reality, it was decided in late January of 1898 to form a fire company. A group assembled in Justice Maynard's office in the Capitol Hotel. They elected officers and several young men volunteered for the hose company.

Before the fire-fighting plan could be put in place, the worst nightmare was realized. A firebug struck, burning a barn and four homes. At about 11 p.m. on Sunday, Sept. 12, 1898, flames were seen erupting from Joe Periera's barn. Mr. Periera and his family were aroused from their slumber and with the assistance of a few neighbors, the residence was saved. The barn and contents were a total loss.

About an hour after the Periera fire had been subdued, another alarm was sounded, this time near homes in Fairfield. The flames spread with destructive fury.

A night watchman, Mr. McDonald, heard the cries of fire. He sounded the alarm and the Suisun Fire Department responded promptly. Their action saved many other buildings

from destruction, since there were still no facilities in Fairfield for fighting fire.

Fairfield continued to rely on the Suisun Fire Department to respond to fires. Then on a hot August night in 1903, the Fairfield Improvement Club decided enough was enough.

Fires continued to break out and people were being injured or killed. As welcome and modern as the Suisun Fire Department was and as well as they might respond, they were not located close enough to be able to save people or buildings in Fairfield from destruction.

The August meeting began with the problem of getting the county to provide sewers for the town. Rather than have to rely on the county to provide sewers, sidewalks, street lights and fire-fighting apparatus, maybe Fairfield should incorporate so they might become a modern city, the same as Suisun. The voters approved of the incorporation in the Dec. 5 election of 1903.

In early March of 1904, the newly elected board of trustees, considered the construction of a two-story building. The lower floor to be used as a hose house and the upper floor as a Town Hall.

Then in December, the Board of Trustees for Suisun agreed to allow the city of Fairfield to establish fire hydrants along the Suisun water system, where it traveled into Fairfield. Suisun elected to charge Fairfield \$10 a year for the use of the water.

By January 1905, Fairfield requested bids for fire-fighting equipment. After much discussion, the board awarded the contract to New York Belting and Packing Co. for the hose and cart and the installation of the hydrants went to the Crane Co.

The newly formed fire department and hose cart were put to the test in October. Len W. Taylor's barn caught fire. Even though the barn was lost, the Fairfield Hose Co. succeeded in confining the flames.

Mr. Taylor's residence stood near the burning building and would no doubt have been reduced to ashes had it not been for the work of the hose company.

In October a meeting was held and drew quite a crowd. The purpose was to formally organize a fire department. T.V. Corcoran was appointed chief. Then in August of 1920, the Firemen's Club had been warning for some time about the inadequate and outdated equipment.

They proposed that the city should purchase a small truck, equipped with a couple of fire extinguisher tanks of about 160 gallons. The current pumping engine for water was

said to be in good condition, but there was a delay getting it to a fire, because a volunteer car had to be rounded up to tow it to the scene. In February of 1923, a 28-foot ladder for the new truck and a siren to replace the old fire bell were purchased.

Since the early fledgling days, the Fairfield Fire Department has grown to its present-day size of six stations. The newest fire station on Pennsylvania Avenue is equipped with 21st-century fire-fighting equipment. In keeping with the long and distinguished history, the new station has installed a fire pole that was part of one of the very first fire stations. Fusilli Ristorante, which is located in the old fire house on Jackson Street, was instrumental in donating the pole to the new fire house.

Today's modern fire department is no longer an all-volunteer force. There are 53 paid firefighters who man the fire stations 24 hours a day, plus 38 reserve/volunteer firefighters and eight non-sworn personnel who respond to approximately 7,500 calls a year.

The newest ladder truck is a far cry from the original and is equipped with a 102-foot ladder. The modern fire department responds to other emergencies besides fires. It encompasses a paramedic service, a fire investigation unit and a fire prevention bureau and is working toward a hazardous materials unit in the near future.

Congratulations to the Fairfield Fire Department for its newest addition to a fine historic tradition.

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