

Vaca Fire Dept. Began as Bucket Brigade

By John Rico

Friday, March 23, 1979

THE INEVITABLE CHANGES - Vacaville has had firemen ever since the town was founded far prior to the turn of the century. The bucket brigade, the hose cart and chemical extinguishers were the accepted tools of the trade here, as late s 1916, when the first mechanical engine appeared on Main Street.

THE INEVITABLE CHANGES - Vacaville has had firemen ever since the town was founded far prior to the turn of the century. The bucket brigade, the hose cart and chemical extinguishers were the accepted tools of the trade here, as late s 1916, when the first mechanical engine appeared on Main Street.

Available rosters of firemen who have served the community go back to the year 1909, and a glance through the pages of those minute books reveal some interesting facts about our yesteryear fire fighters. Between 1909 and the present there have been over 300 men who have served the community in the capacities of volunteer or paid firemen.

In the early days of fire fighting here it was appropriate to select men from all walks of life to be department members, but preference was given to those individuals who were readily available along Main and Merchant Street so that they could respond to the alarms without too much delay.

When Vacaville's first town hall was constructed back in 1907, provision was made for hose cart storage on the lower floor, facing the street. The building, located on East Main Street, is now being used by the Heritage Council.

The bell in the tower, which is still in its original place, would summon the men to the station. If by chance a rancher with his team was nearby, he would volunteer the horse-power to pull the hose cart to the fire, if not, man-power did the job.

Vacaville has had many disastrous fires throughout its history, but none created as much furor as did the burning of Hotel Raleigh on Sunday, July 11, 1909. Being without ladders with which to reach the top floor of the two-story structure, and minus sufficient pressure in the water mains, firemen were helpless to extinguish the blaze.

Research shows the Raleigh fire having started about noon, in 96 degree July temperature. Within a matter of a few hours the frame structure was a mound of ashes. Every effort was made to save the nearby Community Church from burning to the

ground after flying cinders from the hotel fire had ignited the tall church steeple.

Further research into minutes of meetings conducted by the firemen reveal that five months later, fellow firemen made a motion at a regular monthly meeting, asking that charges be filed against all firemen who had become intoxicated at the Raleigh Hotel blaze. The motion passed, but nowhere in minutes of further meetings was there any additional reference about the over-indulgence episode.

In January 1915, the victorian home of newlyweds, Mr. and Mrs. Frank McKevitt Jr., on Buck Avenue burned to the ground. The lack of adequate fire-fighting equipment was given as partial cause for the complete loss.

Irked by criticism from local residents, firemen bluntly requested the town council to buy a fire engine or suffer the consequences of complete resignation of the entire department. The council capitulated, and in 1916 Vacaville received its first mechanized engine.

One of the men who rode on that engine as it made its appearance on Main Street was Earl Brazelton, who served the department for 27 years, and who still likes to recall those exciting days.

Another fireman on that vehicle was the late Joe Libonati who was to later become fire chief, and who continues to hold the record for the longest years of service to the department, 45.

Louis Mohr, who retired from the department in 1977, is credited with 35 years of service. Deceased residents with more than 25 years of service include Henry Schielke, Fred Pyle, Lou Roulund and John Pellegrini.

The following living men deserve the continuing accolades for more than 20 years of service: George Caplener 28, Frank Pritchett and Jim Marshall 26, Edlef Pyle 25, D. A. Mowers 23, David McCready 22, Doug DeFillippis and Ed Fadley 21. No history of the Vacaville Fire Department would be complete without special commendation paid to Warren Hughes, who had served as a volunteer fireman, volunteer chief and the city's first paid chief for a total of 30 years. It was Hughes who molded one of the most respected small-town departments in the state. It was he who spear-headed the initial plans to have constructed Vacaville's first firehouse on Dobbins Street. His list of activities in fire fighting circles in the past and the present are endless.

Chief Hughes ruled the local department with determination, and he got results. When he retired in 1971, Assistant Chief Howard (Woody) Wood stepped in to fill the void.

Woody had been a PG&E employee, had worked: for the city of Vacaville water department, and had been a volunteer fireman starting back in 1951.

Now Chief Wood is ending his smoke eating days, having announced a few months ago that he was going to retire.

The City of Vacaville has gone to Inglewood and recruited Dale Geidert as its new fire chief. Chief Geidert's qualifications are outstanding, but it will take a bit of compassion for firemen to accept the first "outsider" to invade their ranks in almost 100 years.

Perhaps some day, a group of interested citizens would gather together all those men who have served the community in the capacity of fireman and publicly say to them: "Thanks a million."

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/7145>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/7145/>