

Phoenix Fire Department Organized In 1885

VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATION STILL GOING STRONG AFTER 76 YEARS

Early Tradition Carried Down To Present Firemen

March 14, 1935

Fifty years ago yesterday, Wednesday, March 13, 1935, there was formed in Mt. Pulaski, Ill., the Phoenix Fire Department, an organization that brought statewide honors and recognition to the Hill City, three successive years, and today stands as one of the best equipped and most efficient fire departments of any city twice or three times its size in the state.

A small group of men, alive to the needs of their community which was then just passing out of the pioneer period, met on March 13, 1885, and after due deliberation, organized to give their fellow citizens the benefit of what they considered a much needed safeguard in the community to combat the demon fire.

Eighteen young men formed this group and were listed as charter members in their first meeting at the office of F. V. Nicholson. Of these charter members only two are still living. They are George Schafer and H. F. Gordon, both residents of Mt. Pulaski.

Fire fighting methods at first were quite crude but were a great improvement over no system whatsoever. Equipment consisted at first of a Babcock fire extinguisher which was carried on the back of a fireman and calls were responded to by one of the firemen making the run to the fire with it on his back. Always looking toward the protection of the public and seeking ways to furnish greater protection and give added reason for their existence and growth, the department offered to place a member in charge of a Babcock extinguisher at all public gatherings provided the town board would station one at Scroggin Hall which was the public gathering place and on the second floor.

Courthouse Bell

A system of alarms was then adopted so that members of the department would know what part of town the fire was in when the alarm was sounded. Fire signals were arranged as follows: East, one tap; South, two taps; West, three taps; North, four taps. This method was continued until a Gamewell fire alarm system was installed with a box in each ward and was used until the present siren was put in during Mayor Clear's administration.

The question of a suitable uniform was solved by each member agreeing to pay for his own, later to be refunded from the treasury if funds warranted it. The uniform selected consisted of square blue caps, blue shirts with red shield and brass buttons, with the initials of company on the shield and a white belt with the name of the company on it. Trousers were their ordinary clothing.

Drilling was one of the first steps taken to build up the efficiency of the department that no time be lost in their combating fires. Regular drills were held Wednesday night once a month and consisted of instrument and foot drills. Instrument drills consisted of hook and ladder training while the foot drills were ordinary platoon work.

Later the drilling was extended to twice a month and in the summer months a regular weekly drill was held. The drills were first held at the east side of the square. And when drilling for competition in the state firemen's tournaments, practice was held every night at the race track on the north edge of the city just south of the place where Carl Dittus now lives.

The sincerity of the purpose of this organization and the faith of its members can be no better illustrated and proven than by their earnest endeavor to build a department that would be a credit to the city and a matter of pride to the members. Having no funds with which to

build up or equip themselves, these young enthusiasts resorted to such affairs as masquerades, balls, strawberry festivals, 4th of July celebrations and fairs, to keep their treasury supplied with funds. The result was that at the end of the first year they had a balance of \$158.35 in the treasury. The support of the public and its enthusiasm became stronger each year.

Their next piece of firefighting equipment consisted of a hand pumper called "Little Giant" which required the efforts of 10 or 12 men to manage when throwing water on a fire. This was used for a number of years when it was partially replaced with a gasoline service truck and later an American LaFrance pumper.

First State Tourney

They entered their first state tournament in Lincoln in October 1886, and won \$50 in prize money and that added new fuel to the ambition of the department.

The years that brought fame and glory as well as considerable cash prize money to the department was in 1891-92-93. Winning their first state championship with their running team at Lincoln in 1891, the citizens began to realize just what a worthwhile and important organization had grown up in their midst almost overnight and thru their own efforts.

Training became more intensive than ever and the state tournament the next year at Ottawa was looked forward to eagerly and again the local department came home with the bacon. And the reception they received from their fellow citizens was so enthusiastic that the welfare of the department was fully assured as far as the spot they held in the hearts of their neighbors was concerned.

Won Third Successive Tourney

Realizing that the winning of the championship the following year which would make it three straight years, would give them permanent possession of the gold badge championship, greater efforts than ever were put forth to speed up their work and lower if possible the other records

they had made. They trained intensively that summer and the time of 35 2/5 seconds they made was the lowest they had ever made and it was good enough to again win the state championship at Canton and have the distinction of being the only team in the state that ever accomplished the feat. Needless to state the large delegation that accompanied them on a special excursion to Canton that year was hilarious with joy and pride and a thrilling celebration was held following the race and upon their return home.

This feat of winning the trophy three times in succession disqualified the team from further state competition in hose racing.

Joined New State Ass'n.

The local department joined the state association which was formed in Clinton, Ill., Jan. 8, 1889, and have since been active members. M. J. Myers, a member of the department and a former chief, is now serving as vice-president of the state association, a position he has held for a number of years, was president two years and treasurer 10 years.

In reading thru the minutes of the early life of the organization one of the acts that showed the calibre of the men forming the organization was their solicitous care of a member of the organization who was out of work, had little money and was confined to his home by sickness. The members not having sufficient funds in their treasury to engage a nurse, took turns staying with their sick buddy at nights until he had recovered.

Today the Phoenix Fire Department numbers 20 members and Fireman's Hall located above the fire station, is a cozy homelike room, carpeted, well lighted and decorated with numerous trophies, badges and pictures of the members of the department and conventions and tournaments. Meetings are held regularly on the first Friday of each month and the attendance is seldom below 18 which is a remarkable tribute to the faithfulness of the members most of whom were not members in the championship days but are carrying on just the

same.

The only members of the department who belonged in championship days in active service are G. C. Zah, C. J. Kautz, M. J. Myers, F. B. Snyder, Gus Drobisch. And of these Gus Drobisch and G. C. Zah are the only members of the championship running teams. L. F. Weidenbacher is still a resident here but not a member of the department.

G. C. Zah Oldest Member

In years of membership G. C. 'Pacer' Zah is the oldest member in the service and last year was presented a gold badge as mark of respect by his fellow members. 'Pacer' joined the department on July 3, 1885, four months after its organization and but for an unfortunate illness at the time of the forming of the department would have been a charter member.

The department is fully uniformed today with blue uniforms which are worn only on occasions of city wide observance and celebrations and their appearance cannot but give one a feeling of pride and a sense of comfort. For their firefighting equipment, which consists of American LaFrance pumper hook and ladder truck, gasoline service truck fully equipped, and a water system and hydrants and water pressure that is superior to many large cities, fire hazards are at a minimum in the city of Mt. Pulaski.

Hold Regular Meetings

The first meetings of the department were held in a building located on the northeast part of the block of ground in which the post office now stands. It was soon converted into a fire house and the city erected a building later to house the hook and ladder equipment and hand pumper. The rooms above the postoffice were also used for a meeting place until the city built the present city hall when a room was prepared for their use. Wells were sunk on the northeast corner and a huge wooden tank erected into which water was pumped furnished the water pressure for fire needs around the square. A two-inch pipe ran a-

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FIREFIGHTERS FROM "WAY BACK WHEN" AND THEIR "MODERN" EQUIPMENT

