

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan
Livermore City Historian

Livermore Fire Department 1874-1920, Part II

After the fire department headquarters moved from the Second Street firehouse to the new one at McLeod and First Streets, one of the old bells was hung in a tower on the roof of the new town hall. In 1908 an electric bell tapper was installed so that the bell could be rung by turning a switch rather than pulling ropes. The fire department still kept a hose cart house on L Street, where the now famous Livermore light bulb glowed. Twenty new uniforms were ordered and arrived in February 1908: the navy blue coats had two rows of brass buttons, and the hats had L.F.D. in gold across the front. Each fireman also had a nickel-plated badge.

An article in the *Livermore Herald* said that at their first inspection before the town trustees, they "presented a very natty appearance." A third hose cart was ordered in December 1909 for \$70.

In 1911 the town bought a chemical fire extinguisher "engine" named the Success. It consisted of a 45-gallon metal tank suspended horizontally on a pair of wheels similar to those of a hose cart. A 100-foot hose was coiled in a wire basket above the tank. By this time there were 33 hydrants throughout the town. The fire department was reorganized in 1912 so that members were assigned to the piece of equipment closest to their homes or places of business. Five groups totaling 49 men served under Chief P.H. McVicar. Yearly pay was still \$12.00.

On August 4, 1916 a disastrous fire that started in the Horton and Kennedy Lumber Yard planing mill on Railroad Avenue spread to St. Michael's Church, then located on First Street. Burning shingles from the yard were carried by a strong west wind up to the church roof and steeple, far above the reach of firefighters' ladders and available water pressure. The lumber

yard, Peter Moy's residence, and the church burned completely. However, heroic efforts by the fire department kept the flames from spreading farther.

At this time the town became concerned over the slow response times of their hand-drawn vehicles. The fire department suggested that the town offer \$5 to the first cars to arrive at the firehouse or the hose cart house in response to an alarm. The hose carts and other apparatus could then be hooked to the cars so that they could be pulled to the site of the fire. The Valley Garage came to the help of the fire department by offering to rent cars for towing. In October 1919 alone the Valley Garage submitted a bill for \$40.

Finally, in 1919 the town purchased its first "auto chemical engine," a used 1915 Model T that the fire department refurbished and equipped with a 50-gallon soda and acid extinguisher. Foreman L.H. Wright supervised the project, and he said, "It may not be as ornamental as those turned out by the factory, but it will be just as useful." Town minutes for October and November show the purchase of the Ford chassis for \$290, \$60 for a set of tires, and other supplies for \$366 from the Valley Garage. The fire bell mounted on top of the new town hall was replaced by an electric siren in 1919.

In 1920 Livermore trustees approved the creation of quarters for firemen in the second story of the town hall. Part of the large hall was partitioned off into three small rooms, with sleeping quarters and a kitchen for firemen, and the rest of the hall was left for the town court and trustee meetings. A slide pole was put in to the engine room on the ground floor. On duty every night was at least one firefighter who was qualified to drive the town's new pumper truck, a 1920 Seagraves capable of throwing 750 gallons of water a minute on a fire. The

town had voted for a municipal bond issue to cover its cost of \$10,750; a similar small fire engine today would cost about \$120,000. Larger modern fire engines that we see traveling our city cost between \$300,000 and \$400,000.

The Seagrave finally arrived in Livermore on August 16, 1920. The fire department, in anticipation of the new truck, had been reorganized. All members were dismissed, and the new department under Chief Engineer L.E. Wright, First Assistant Engineer R.A. Hansen, Second Assistant Engineer Carl G. Clarke had just twelve firefighters: L.A. McVicar, Charles E. Crane, John J. Hock, Jack Gardella, Louis Renteria, Larry M. Johnson, Frank Savage, J.H. Coldewei, N.D. Dutcher Jr., John E. Jensen, Robert L. Worth, and Fred Tretzel. These men were purposely chosen for their mechanical talent, so they could understand the intricacies of the Seagrave and hose nozzles, as well as for their firefighting experience.

Today, visitors at the headquarters of the Livermore-Pleasanton Fire Department at 3560 Nevada Street in Pleasanton can see old uniforms, a restored hose cart, and the original fire bells from both cities.

The "Firefighters Parade" mural by Kean Butterfield and Vera Lowdermilk on the east side of the old fire house on First Street features in the middle and to the right the old hand pumper, the 1919 Model T, and the Seagrave. The Seagrave restoration is nearing completion by an enthusiastic team of men, but as with all similar projects, often the little things take the longest. The Duarte Highway Garage on L Street houses the restored Model T, the Seagrave, and the 1944 Mack; it is open on the third Sunday of each month.

(Readers can reach me at
am50homan@yahoo.com.)