

Fire destroyed piece of Center history

JAN. 7, 1988

The multiple alarm fire in Central Square in the early morning hours of December 21st gutted a landmark with a history of 64 years.

In addition to being a garage (and most recently a mini-mall), it served for many years as the Center fire station and also housed a restaurant long before Big Joe's or Angela's Sandwich Shop.

It was in 1921 that the forerunner of our present fire department was organized. That year the Selectmen appointed a Board of Fire Engineers to administer the department and, pursuant to a vote of Town Meeting, "motor fire apparatus and equipment at a cost not to exceed in all the sum of \$15,000," was procured. The town was divided into five fire districts, along the then precinct lines, with one piece of motorized equipment garaged in each district.

District No. 1, comprising the Center section, was allotted a "motorized double tank combination chemical and hose car." This truck had no pump but did have two chemical tanks connected to a small hose line. Incidentally, it had no self-starter; a hand crank was used to turn over the engine.

The vehicle was originally equipped with solid rubber tires. In later years these were replaced with pneumatic tires, but the steering ratio was not changed, making it very difficult to steer, a fact that can be confirmed by the personal experience of the present writer. This piece of apparatus was retired to use as a spare truck in 1926 and

The way It was

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was replaced by a 500 gallon Maxim pumper that took over the stall in the garage.

In April, 1922, Rothesay P. "Ross" Kidder purchased the lot of land, "with buildings," between the railroad track and Parkhurst's Store (at Eriksen's corner). After moving the house to 41 Littleton Road as his residence, Kidder erected the existing brick building as the Chelmsford Square Garage for repairing automobiles. Gasoline pumps were installed at the curb.

The extension on the southwest corner (most recently Angela's Sandwich Shop) was rented to the Town and the new fire truck was garaged there with just barely room enough to walk around the vehicle.

That year, Wilhelm T. Johnson superseded Walter S. "Sam" Fletcher as District Chief. The year 1922 also saw the installation of the first electric fire alarm system in the center. (Previously the ringing of the Unitarian church bell had summoned available men to fight fires.)

The Fire Engineers, in cooperation with a

special committee, installed a large iron hammer to strike the church bell with the controls located in the new fire house in the garage. Thus for the first time a coded alarm could be sounded to notify the call firefighters, and the general public, of the location of the blaze. These controls were also used with the air whistle that the Village Improvement Association, donated to the Town in 1923.

Since there were no full time firefighters, Mr. Kidder and the District Chief were engaged on a 24-hour basis, and extensions of the fire phone, as well as keys for sounding the alarm, were installed in their homes. Men working in the garage were available to drive the truck during the day.

The Cookie Jar Restaurant and Food Shop, run by Fanny Mitchell and Edith Hemenway, was opened in the mid 1920's in the store recently occupied by Easy House-keeping Shop. Later, it was a hardware store and still later a real estate office.

The building was sold in 1944 to Raymond T. Osborn, who had an agency for the new, smaller Studebakers, about the first automobiles on the market after World War II.

Unless it is rebuilt, we have seen the passing of one of our younger, but historic structures in the Square.

George Adams Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.

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