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Early Fire Department far cry from today's

The appointment of a new fire chief brings recollections of the Fire Department's earlier days.

The first mention of fire fighting equipment in Chelmsford dates back 163 years, to 1823, when downtown Lowell was still part of East Chelmsford.

At that time, according to published reports, "Kirk Boot, agent of the Merrimack Manufacturing Company, represented to the Town that the Company were proprietors of a fire engine which they were desirous should be employed for the benefit of the Town." The selectmen appointed eight "engine men." Two years later, they named seven of the mill's top executives as "fire wardens" — certainly an elite Fire Department.

In 1825, "the Proprietors of the Locks and Canals, having provided themselves with an engine and buckets, petitioned the selectmen to authorize the same and appoint 21 engine men, which they did."

It was at the Town Meeting on March 15, 1896 that this town took a giant step forward when it was voted "to purchase a chemical engine to be placed at Chelmsford Centre." A horse-drawn "hook and ladder truck" was secured that same year and fire wards and forest fire wards were appointed.

A few years later, \$500 was appropriated for 50 Johnson pumps, pails and chemical extinguishers. The latter were placed in town owned buildings and some were rented to local residents. This writer recalls inspecting and refilling many of these extinguishers, as a call firefighter, just before World War II.

Being a fire ward was not exactly a shortcut to becoming wealthy. The 1902 Town Report lists the pay scale for labor at fires at 20 cents per hour.

The way It was

By George A.
Parkhurst



The first town-wide Fire Department appeared in 1921. That year, the town was divided into five fire districts, each with its own district chief and call men. Administrative control was in the hands of a Board of Fire Engineers.

This system continued until Sept. 15, 1954 when Allan Kidder was named as the first permanent chief. Upon his death, he was succeeded by Ernest Byam, who was killed in an automobile accident while responding to an alarm on Jan. 31, 1965.

Frederick H. Reid, who recently retired, was named chief in February, 1965.

In the early days, fire fighting locally was a far cry from the professionalism we know and expect today. Although the town did have at least one "hand tub," the main emphasis was placed on water buckets and cooperative neighbors who, if the situation looked hopeless, quickly emptied the doomed dwelling of its contents.

It was not unusual, the day following a fire, to see all the furniture and household possessions on the front lawn.

The department was originally staffed by "call men" — men who were trained to fight fire on a part-time basis and were paid a retainer to assure their availability. At one time, there were as many as 55 call men on the payroll.

As the town grew, it became increasingly difficult to find the "hired hand" on the farm, the independent ice dealer, and the store clerk who could leave his job when he heard the fire alarm. By 1970, all call men had been replaced with full-time firefighters.

The early fire alarm was equally primitive. If you found your house, or your neighbor's, on fire, you had only to drive or run to the Unitarian Church in Central Square where you would break the glass in a small box beside the front door, remove the key from its hook, and open the church door.

Then you would pull the bell rope as long as your strength held out, or until someone came to ask, "Where's the fire?" Since there was no coded alarm system, firefighters and spectators had to go to the Center and follow the crowd to the conflagration which, by that time, had made considerable headway. Mill whistles were used to warn of fire in North Chelmsford.

The system was somewhat improved in 1922, when a second large hammer was installed on the bell in the belfry of the Unitarian Church, making possible a coded alarm.

That this was not considered to be the best answer is shown by the fact that the Village Improvement Association placed the first fire whistle on the roof of the Town Hall the following year.

With our highly efficient professional department today, it's hard to believe that that's the way it was.

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