

Fires And Firefighters

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

During the first three centuries in Chatham, when houses were built entirely of wood and with the dependence of all houses on fires to stay warm and to cook, there clearly would have been many fires in town. But the only way to fight them for most of that period was by bucket brigades. Fortunately most of parts of town are near either salt water inlets or ponds that provided a convenient supply of water. Nevertheless many buildings would have been damaged or even destroyed by fire.

But regardless of the need for a means of combating fires, the town did not establish a fire department until 1911, at which time it purchased its first fire wagon, a small one-horse wagon that had the capacity to carry only about a dozen 10-gallon water tanks from which water could be pumped only by hand. The fire wagon was operated by Zephaniah Harding and his son and was kept in his barn at what formerly was the Sou'wester Restaurant but is now Dunkin Donuts on the corner of Main Street and Barn Hill Road.

At town meeting in April 1916 it was voted that the moderator, Heman A. Harding, appoint a committee to investigate the purchase of a motorized fire wagon. The chairman of the committee, George Perry, found a second-hand fire engine that was priced at \$2,625, and the town appropriated \$2,700 for the purchase. The vehicle was delivered in June 1916 and served as the only fire engine until it was replaced in 1926. In 1933, when George Goodspeed was appointed to the board of fire engineers, as the fire department then was called, the department had two trucks, a 1926 and a 1933 both manufactured by the Maxim Motor Company in Middleboro. Each had a six-cylinder, 60 horse power chemical "White" pumper with two 40 gallon tanks. Both engines were housed at the Eldredge Garage on Main Street. In 1963 when Chief Goodspeed retired, the department had five fire trucks and a system of hydrants throughout much of the town. At that time the total personnel of the fire department consisted of Goodspeed and his assistant.

All the rest of the firefighters at that time were volunteers who did not live at the central station. When a fire alarm came in, they were notified of the location by blasts of the fire siren, which was tested daily at noon with one blast. Between two and nine blasts indicated the location of the fire, for example, two blasts from the fire station to Nat Kendrick's Corner; three blasts, from the fire station east to Mitchell's River Bridge, and so forth.

There have been several memorable fires in Chatham in the past century, the earliest being the burning of the 1877 town hall in 1919, which at that time was located where the community center now stands. Ironically the fire occurred one year after town meeting had turned down a proposal to buy a second fire engine. Apparently caused by an improperly extinguished cigarette after a dance in the large meeting room on the second floor, the fire destroyed the entire building, including most of the town records, leaving only the two steel jail cells.

On New Year's Eve in 1971 the Stage Harbor Freezer caught fire when a cutting torch was being used in the process of tearing down the building. The Chatham Fire Department quickly came to the scene, but before long the fire had become so widespread that engines from Harwich and Orleans were called in. In all there were 44 firemen attempting to control the raging fire, but it was so widespread that it took more than 30 hours before it finally was

extinguished.

An even more dramatic fire occurred at the vacant Acme Laundry Building on Orleans Road. The fire was discovered shortly after 1 a.m. on the night of Feb. 9, 1991, when police officer Norman Howes was driving by on routine patrol. He was quoted as saying, “There was nothing I could do. Embers were flying so I got myself and the cruiser away and began turning traffic around.” By the time the Chatham Fire Department arrived on the scene the building was 100 percent involved.

Chatham Firefighter Matt Flynn was quoted as saying, “I could see a glow in the sky from at least half a mile away. Flames were coming out of every section of the building. It was quite spectacular. It’s the biggest fire I’ve ever seen.” The flames soon were so widespread that the fire went to three alarms, requiring the assistance of more than 60 firefighters, seven engines and two aerial ladders from Chatham, Harwich, Brewster, and Orleans. Harwich Fire Captain Albert Tyldesley, who saw the fire as he approached along Queen Anne Road, said, “You could see it for two or three miles.” Chatham’s Deputy Chief Ronald Sgroi said that the flames leaped as high as 150 feet during the blaze. “It was right on the border of a firestorm.” Firefighters estimated that the temperature inside the building reached 1,000 degrees. The fire was declared under control at 2:40 a.m. Ironically, demolition of the building had been scheduled to begin the previous week to make way for a residential development.

Today the Chatham Fire Department is fully staffed and has several firefighting vehicles that seem large and impressive as we see them flying by. Consequently we now have very few fires that get out of control. When in the next year or so the firefighters move into their new, state-of-the-art quarters, they probably will be even better prepared to cope with fires and thereby prevent such disasters.



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