

Days When the Volunteers Fought the Fires in Omaha



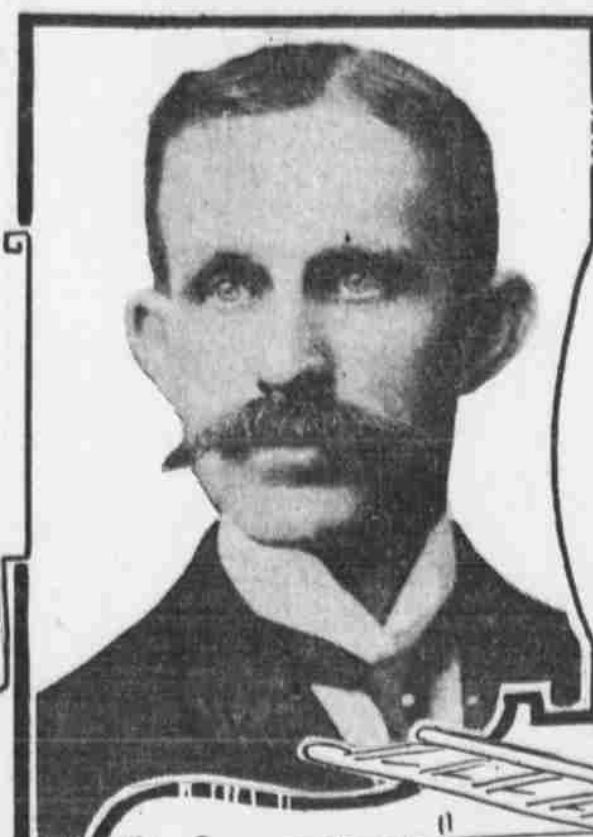
Chas. Pickens



Fire Chief Chas. I. Salter



C.R. Courtney



Frank H. Koesters



C.G. Hunt

PICTURE, if you can, twenty-five or thirty young men, residents of a frontier city, little more than a country village, being aroused from their slumbers by the clanging of a bell. Picture in your mind, if you can, these young fellows, half clad, rushing from their homes to some central point and there grabbing hold of the ropes attached to an engine, a hose cart or a hook and ladder wagon, and dragging the machine to a fire and you will have an idea of what the Omaha Fire department was forty or forty-five years ago.

The fire department of Omaha way back in the sixties and the seventies was an altogether a different machine from what it is today, but around the little department of other days has grown that of the present with its ponderous steamers, its water towers and its auto trucks and carts.

In the days of long ago when the volunteers were the ones who fought the fires; there were no prancing horses hauling the apparatus over the paved streets, and no automobiles that whizzed along at a speed of fifty to sixty miles per hour. Then the motive power was furnished by the volunteers themselves who worked for glory and the rebate of the annual poll tax of \$2. They were fighters, though, and though grizzled and grey a number of them remain and long since organized the Veteran Firemen's association, one of the most respected organizations in the city. It is an organization that meets monthly for business and once a year for the annual banquet, when tales of fires in Omaha half a century ago are told and retold.

First Call to the Laddies

Along about 1860 Omaha had grown to be a town of a few hundred and in order to have the appearance of putting on city airs, as well as to protect property in case of fires, it was decided to organize a fire department. Of course, the town was too small and too poor to support a paid department and there were hardly enough unattached men to maintain a volunteer department. The demand for such a department, however, existed and by persistent effort enough of the youngsters were gotten together to hold a meeting.

According to historical data during the summer of 1860 a call was issued for a meeting of all who desired to become members of a volunteer fire department. Just where this meeting was held, even the most veteran volunteer is unable to remember, though it is a fact that in the whole city of Omaha, but eight men could be found who would enroll themselves as fire fighters. These men were P. W. Hitchcock, later United States senator, Benjamin Stickles, William J. Kennedy, A. J. Simpson, J. S. McCormick, Henry Gray, H. Z. Curtis and M. H. Clark. Of the eight Mr. Simpson is the only survivor, the others having died here or elsewhere, where they subsequently located.

The company was named the Pioneer Hook and Ladder company, and it continued in active service until May, 1883, when it disbanded, but not until some years after the paid department became a fact.

While the first company started with but eight members, this small membership did not continue long, for it soon became a popular organization with the young men of the city and it was considered quite the thing to be a fireman and wear a red shirt when out on parade.

City Provides Cart and Hose

Soon after the organization of the fire department, the city council appropriated enough money to buy a hose cart and 1,000 feet of hose. Then, however, the boys were up against a problem. While they had part of the machinery for fighting fires, there was no water supply, for it was long before the era of water works. As a solution the city ordered a number of big cisterns in the one farthest west being at Fifteenth and Farnam streets, which was well in the outskirts of the city. East of there and along Douglas and Dodge streets and Capitol avenue on the north and along Jarney and Howard streets on the south, they were in most of the intersections. They were filled by storm water from the roofs and gutters. Even now, frequently when street repairs are being made, evidences of these old cisterns are found. They were fifteen to twenty feet across, ten to fifteen feet deep and covered with heavy plank.

Even with the hose carts and the cisterns there was no way of getting water onto the fires and finally it was decided that pumps would have to be had. The city council sent a committee some place, and the members came back to report that in the

east a pump was manufactured that would fill the bill. A couple of them were ordered and though they are not now in service, they are well remembered by the old time firemen. They resembled a handcar in appearance and worked on the same principle, half a dozen or more men at the handles. One of these pumps when placed over a cistern would be connected with the fire hose and by working with might and main, six men could pump a fairly good stream as high as the second story of an ordinary building. It was hard work to pump and consequently the men had to work in relays. If necessary they called upon bystanders to spell them and man the pumps.

Firemen Had Right-of-Way

In the early days firemen were clothed with complete police power, and during fires. If they were running to a fire they could call upon any person whom they saw to fall in and give them a lift on the ropes. If at a fire, and they decided they wanted to rest, they could call upon the men along the curbs to "bend to" at the pumps, and they had to bend. If they did not obey they could be taken away to jail, and more than once was some eminently respectable person arrested for not lending a hand at a fire.

After the firemen got their hose cart and their cisterns they felt pretty nifty, and one night, in a body, swooped down upon the city council with a demand for a hook and ladder truck. There was no money available for the purpose and so the firemen were told. Andrew J. Simpson happened to be a member of the city council and at the same time he was the first chief of the fire department. When the council announced that it had no money with which to pay for a hook and ladder truck, Mr. Simpson was greeted with applause when he announced that in his wagon shop he would build the truck, equip it with ladders, buckets and axes and turn it over to the fire department, taking city warrants in payment.

As a result of Mr. Simpson's offer it was not long until Omaha had a fire department that was worth looking at. Then, as now, the apparatus was painted a bright red. The truck was a light affair and, like the hose cart, by hand, was pulled to the fires. There were two men on the lead rope, with half a dozen or more in behind, and on either side; and then, too, there were usually a lot more who worked behind, pushing up and holding back as they ran down the hills.

As time passed business men enrolled themselves and it was not long until such men as H. D. Shull, John Baumer, Charles Fisher, Ed Maurer, Henry Pundt, Ed Wittig, Louis Falst, Sol Prince, Joe Teahon, A. P. Hopkins, Peter Besen, Charles Schlank, H. Kunde, Gus Beneke, C. V. Gallagher,

James Donnelly, P. J. Karbach, J. A. McShane, Henry Tagger, Fred Schaffer, J. S. McCormick, C. H. Pickens, C. M. Koesters, M. Parr, E. H. Walker, S. M. Meallo, L. S. Reed, H. Hornberger, C. R. Courtney, William France, Peter Windheim, Tony Herrold, Meyer Hellman, Joseph F. Sheely, Fred Schmidt, H. Berthold, Joe Rowles, Phil Dorr, Max Meyer, J. J. Galligan, F. J. McShane, D. W. Shull, F. H. DeLoane, F. P. Murphy, A. Cahn, E. L. Stone, F. H. Koesters, Charles G. Hunt, Frank P. Hanlon, J. E. Markel, John H. Butler, Gustave Anderson, Julius Treitschke, Julius Rotholz, A. H. Sanders, J. F. Behm, William Mack, W. L. May, G. Zimmerman, F. L. Ruff, J. G. Megeath, D. C. Sutphen, Owen Slavin, W. H. Kelley, W. H. Moran, Dennis Cunningham, Charles Gruning, Joseph Rosenstein, John M. Sheely, George Schmid, Martin Range, Charles Goodrich, John A. Croighton, Frank Murphy, W. J. Kennedy, W. J. Cuddy, Charles F. Manderson and a score of others, later prominent with the business affairs and the growth of the city, took part in the fire department and became active members of the volunteers, aiding personally and with their money.

No. 1 Chartered by the State

Pioneer Hook and Ladder No. 1 was the only fire-fighting organization chartered by the state. During the session of the legislature of 1860 the Nebraska legislature, by a bill introduced by a Douglas county member, and passed, had its official origin, continuing twenty-five years. The pioneers were always fortunate, and though always at the fires, seldom was one of the men injured. They fought at numerous fires, among which stand out in Omaha history that of the gas works, Christmas eve, 1870, when the loss exceeded \$7,000. The next day occurred the fire in the Hoagland lumber yards and in the coal yards of T. S. Clarkson, adjoining. At this fire, which was fought for six hours continuously, the weather was intensely cold, and while the faces of the men were burned by the flames, their coats froze on their backs and their boots upon their feet.

At these fires the men were greatly handicapped by lack of water, the cisterns and wells in the neighborhoods being pumped dry.

Among the fires causing the greatest loss of life was the one that destroyed the Grand Central hotel at Fourteenth and Farnam streets, where the Paxton now stands. It occurred September 8, 1878, and five men were killed when the walls collapsed. The men were buried in the ruins at a point near where the dining room is situated in the present hotel.

Steve N. Meallo, the veteran messenger at the Burlington headquarters, was one of the men who had much to do with building the volunteer fire department into a real fire-fighting machine.

Young in those days, Steve came over from Chicago to fill the position of pressman on the Omaha Herald, owned by Dr. George L. Miller.

In Chicago Meallo had had some experience as a fireman and consequently his advice was considered pretty good here, and about the first thing that happened to him was to be voted in as a member of the Volunteers, remaining eleven years. He arrived early in 1870 and in September of the year of his arrival he was elected foreman of Engine company No. 1, located at Sixteenth and Farnam streets. The engine was a crude affair, as were fire engines of that day. It had been bought over in Illinois somewhere off the bargain counter and was a second-hand machine.

Engine No. 1 was the first to arrive in Omaha and its appearance here was greeted with great enthusiasm. It was brought up the river on a boat and put onto the wharf at the foot of Douglas street. According to Mr. Meallo, the coming of No. 1 was made a holiday. Flags fluttered from business houses and residences and most of the stores closed. A gigantic procession formed on Farnam and Douglas streets and, with bands playing, marched down to the boat landing. There the engine was decked out with wreaths and flowers and the firemen, taking hold of the ropes, hauled it uptown and left it at Sixteenth and Farnam streets, where it was housed in a little shed built to protect it from the weather. The first engineer was T. L. Van Dorn, long since dead.

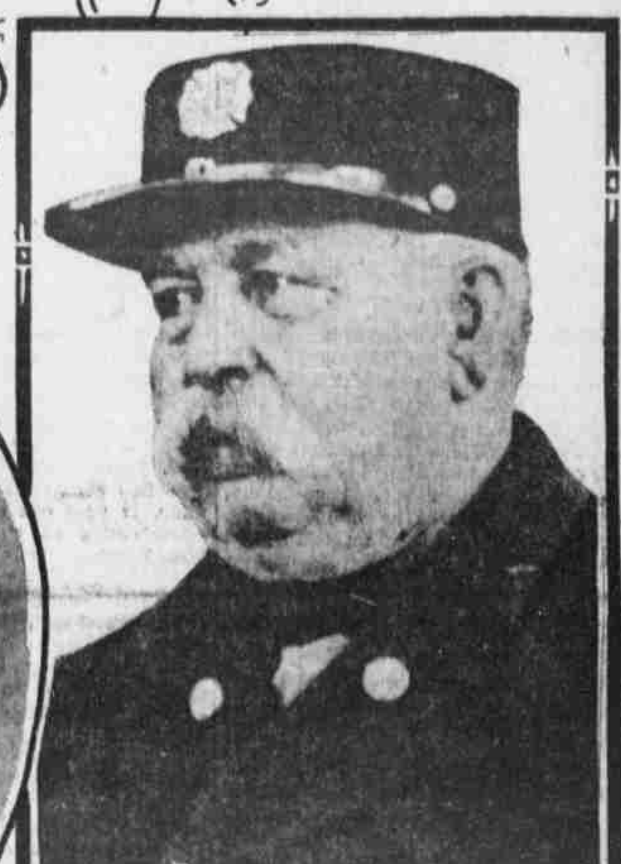
Horse to Pull Instead of Men

A steamer was a pretty thing to haul by hand, especially when it is taken into consideration that along in the early '70s there were no paved streets in Omaha, and frequently the mud was hub deep. This fact started Meallo and a number of the other firemen to figuring how horses could be secured to haul the machine to and from fires. The city was poor and did not have money with which to buy horses and auto trucks as now. There were some public-spirited men, and one of them, whose name Mr. Meallo is unable to recall, donated the use of a horse, providing the city would furnish the keep. That helped some, but one horse was not enough to pull an engine.

Charles H. Pickens was a young, active fellow and for several years had been running to fires, having been mustered into the Volunteer company. Pickens did not own a horse, but the grocery firm for which he worked owned an old white mule. Being a delivery wagon boy, Pickens made arrangements with the proprietor of the grocery to use the mule in case of fires. This solved the problem, for Omaha had a team that could be used in handling the steamer. Many a time when young Pickens was out delivering groceries the alarm of



W.A. Kelley



Martin Range

fire would be turned in by the ringing of the bell. Then, instead of going on and delivering the load, he would stop, unhitch the mule, straddle it and, at a breakneck speed, race down to the engine house, where the animal would be hitched in beside the horse, when Engine No. 1 would be ready to start for the fire.

While Steve Meallo does not boast of it, the fact remains that while he was fireman he was one of the most popular in the city. Along in 1871 he was elected first assistant chief, and during the winter a big Catholic fair was held and a silver trumpet and a chief's belt donated, both to be voted to the most popular fireman. There were candidates galore, but it was not long until Steve had outdistanced all of his competitors. The result of the contest was that he won the prize. At another time he went into a contest of city firemen and came out a winner, securing a dress parade helmet that was put up as a prize, and which he still retains as one of his most valuable possessions.

Prelude to a Paid Department

Charles G. Hunt, the painter on Cumling street, between Nineteenth and Twentieth, has the distinction of being a member of the Volunteers from 1874 until the organization disbanded. He was only a boy when he joined the company, but he made a record, and it was not long until he became assistant chief, holding that position at the time of the Grand Central hotel fire, when a number of the Volunteers lost their lives by the collapse of the walls of the building.

When Mr. Hunt joined the Volunteers in 1874 the town had commenced to grow toward the northwest, and there were quite a number of buildings up on Cumling, west of Twentieth. He lived with his father on Nineteenth, between Nicholas and Paul, and even that far out there was considerable of a settlement. The growth of the town to the north and west imbued the residents of the sections that they ought to have fire protection. In the meantime a new fire engine had been bought for the downtown district and it was decided to locate No. 1 farther north, provided the residents in some locality would furnish the money for the erection of an engine house. Several localities got busy, but only one came up to the scratch, and that was the portion of the city around Twentieth and Izard streets. There the house was erected and there old Engine No. 1 was installed.

There were some rich people around Twentieth and Nicholas streets and they chipped in to help buy a span of horses to haul the engine. It took a long time to raise the money, but it was finally secured, and this was one of the first houses to have a team. Prior to this when a fire alarm was sounded and the volunteers ran to the

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