

Omaha's First Fire Fighting Company

Probably the only fire fighting company in the state of Nebraska holding an especial charter from the legislature was the Pioneer Hook and Ladder company of Omaha, which was organized May 5, 1860. This company was not only the first company organized in the state, but was the last of the volunteer organizations of the city to disband, its existence covering a period of twenty-five years.

When Omaha was platted and the first

which occurred from 1860 to 1885 not a man was killed while on duty. The most serious injury received by any of the members was when one of them broke his arm at a fire on Harney street, near Ninth. The oldest record of the company extant is in the possession of Lewis S. Reed, once secretary of the organization. The earliest date recorded in the minutes is September 6, 1870. On that day Samuel Burns and George Giacomini were made life members,

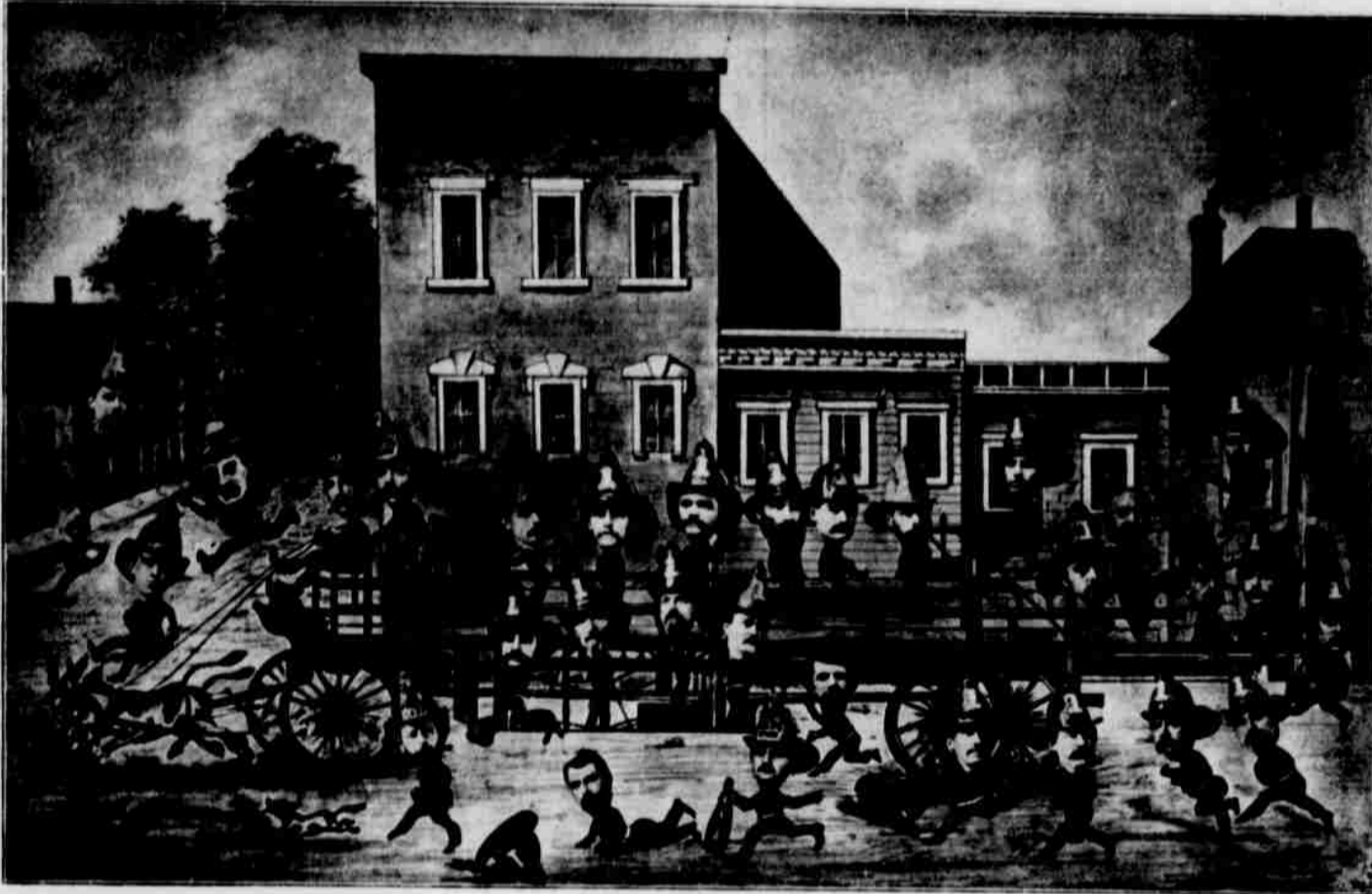
the exertions of this fire, but were enjoying Christmas cheer the next day, when they were called out to fight a fire which originated in the lumber yard of Hoagland & Son and communicated with the coal yard of T. S. Clarkson. The day was bitter cold, and the burning piles of lumber and coal gave off a fierce heat which would parch the hands and faces of the firemen. The coats and boots froze upon their backs and feet, while from their heads and faces it seemed the blood would burst from the heat of the flames. This fire is remembered by all of the firemen of that day as the most disagreeable in the history of the company. For six hours they fought flames and the secretary, in his report, notes the fact that while the day before they had fought fire at the gas works, the

bodies of the members of the company were drawn by the photographer and the heads of the various active members of the company in 1885 were cut from photographs and pasted upon the bodies. The whole was then photographed. Members of the company say that the heads are probably the best photographs of the company as it was at the time of its dissolution.

May 5, 1885, Pioneer Hook and Ladder company assembled for the last time. The paid department had been organized and there was no longer a place for volunteers. The town had grown so large and the fires so frequent that it was really easier to do jury duty anyway than to run with the machine. The event was one marked in the history of the city. The entire fire department and the municipal organization turned out. The veterans of Pioneer company were cheered along the line of march by the citizens. That night at the "opera house" there was a final ball and assembly at which John M. Thurston delivered an oration voicing the esteem in which the company was held by the citizens in the twenty-five years of its existence. Then followed the dance and at its close Pioneer Hook and Ladder company, the Alpha and Omega of the volunteer fire fighting societies of Omaha, became a memory—a memory which is cherished in the minds of many men now far scattered over the country, but once united in common ties in the city "above all others on a stream."

at least did not do. Thereupon they were commanded to stand in line and submit to a thorough search, as it was "Little Bat's" belief that the weapons were concealed beneath the folds of the savages' blankets. The search had not begun when a medicine man, an aged rascal freshly painted for trouble, slipped before the lines of Indians and those of the soldiers. He began a chant which was full of meaning to "Little Bat." It was the Sioux's death song. That a tragedy was at hand there could be no doubt in the mind of this seasoned scout.

In vain did he try to catch the eye of his colonel, who was at the extreme end of one line. Suddenly the medicine man stooped, picked up a handful of snow and sand and flung it high in the air, at the same time



LAST PHOTOGRAPH OF PIONEER HOOK AND LADDER COMPANY.

houses erected the principal building material was cottonwood, a lumber no longer recognized by builders, but in the '50s the only material which could be secured within the borders of the state. First with cottonwood logs and then with lumber cut from the trees were the buildings in Omaha city built. Cottonwood is very inflammable and it was not long before fires destroyed several buildings. The residents of the frontier city decided to organize a fire company, and, under the leadership of Benjamin Stickle, William J. Kennedy, J. S. McCormick, Henry Gray, Henry Z. Curtis, M. H. Clark, A. J. Simpson and P. W. Hitchcock, the Pioneer Hook and Ladder company was organized. The territorial legislature met the following winter and the company applied for a charter, which was granted it, empowering it to own \$2,000 worth of fire-fighting apparatus. The certificate of this incorporation is signed by J. Sterling Morton as territorial secretary.

One of the next laws passed by the legislature was that relieving volunteer firemen from jury duty. In the city of Omaha at that time juries were called more frequently than firemen and that was one of the reasons which brought into the ranks of the Pioneer company a large number of the prominent citizens of the community. Among those in the first organization, or who joined it within the first five years of its existence, were: John A. Creighton, Frank Murphy, Fred Krug, L. S. Reed, W. P. Wilcox, J. E. Markel, W. L. May, John M. and Joseph F. Sheeley, P. J. Karbach, P. Windheim, George Giacomini, Samuel Burns, J. G. Megeath, D. C. Sutphen and Henry Pundt. On the list of honorary members will be found names of other men who took a prominent part in those days in the affairs of the city.

Later in the organization appeared men who came to the city at a later day, but who are now deemed pioneer citizens, among them W. H. H. Llewellyn, now a resident of New Mexico, who led a troop of cavalry in Colonel Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders.

As the Company Appeared in 1868.

Herewith is presented a photograph of the company as it appeared in 1868, so far as known the first photograph taken of the company. The occasion of the assembly which preceded the picture was a parade to be followed by a ball and entertainment at the Academy of Music for the purpose of raising money to pay for the truck which was displayed with feelings of pride that day. This truck was the third purchased by the company. It was bought by W. L. May, then foreman of the company, and was the second which had been secured by him for the organization. In the parade the entire police force of the city, headed by the mayor, took part and the police force and fire department were then lined up in front of the Central block on Farnam street for the photograph. One remarkable thing about the photograph is that it was the last one taken showing Farnam street without a street car track, for the old horse car line which extended from the Union Pacific depot and to the southeastern part of town was laid the following year.

The Pioneers were a fortunate company, for while they took part in all of the fires

having served seven years with the society, A. P. Hopkins was then secretary, and records with evident delight that J. E. Markel reported having received on behalf of the company \$20 from the city council for being the first company at fires the greatest number of times during the preceding year. The minutes show that the members were particular in regard to their associates and that four black balls would suffice to keep a man outside of the pale, and one applicant received them at this meeting.

There was a room committee of three members whose duty it was to keep the rooms and machine in presentable shape. The record, which extends over several years, shows an invariable entry: "Room committee for month fined 25 cents each for failure to perform their duties." This finally became unbearable, and after apparently every active member had contributed his quarter E. Little was employed at \$24 per year to clean the room and apparatus.

Two Hot Fires.

The two hottest fires in the history of the earlier organization occurred in 1870. On Christmas eve the gas plant burned. The men fought as well as possible, but could do nothing, and the entire property was destroyed, entailing a loss of about \$6,000. The men had not recovered from

gas company furnished them, unwittingly, much aid in fighting the Hoagland fire. Among one of the great troubles afflicting the firemen in the early day was a lack of water. Many buildings were consumed solely because the wells from which the engines were fed were exhausted. The gas company first intended to build its plant near the Hoagland lumber yard, and went so far with the work as the sinking of holes for the reservoirs. From these holes, deserted by the company, came the water which extinguished the fire at the lumber yard.

The next big fire was the burning of the Grand Central hotel. The Pioneers took an active part in the fight, but the only record of the fire shown upon the minutes of the company is a minute to the effect that two of the members were fined \$2 for leaving the fire without permission of the foreman. From the first the members of the Pioneer Hook and Ladder company were proud of their organization and to distinguish themselves provided for a uniform, which was maintained until the company disbanded. This uniform is shown upon the body of Frank H. Koesters, the last assistant secretary of the organization.

The second picture of the company is a freak of D. S. Mitchell, an old-time photographer of Omaha, who was a member of the company. The apparatus, motive power and

Little, but a Brave Man

The murder in a Crawford, Neb., saloon recently, of Baptiste Garnier, better known in the Black Hills country as "Little Bat," removes from that section of the country one of its most famous characters.

"Little Bat's" life was passed on the frontier, relates the Chicago Chronicle. He knew little of the outside world and he cared less. Born in the smoke of an Indian camp, his childhood was associated with all the pastimes that were invigorating and strengthening. At 16 years "Little Bat" was as sturdy a specimen of young manhood as one would care to see. He was as supple as a willow and as strong as a giant. The only education he possessed was that which the sun, the moon, the stars and human nature had given him.

He could neither read nor write, but he spoke the languages of the Sioux, the Cheyennes and the Crows quite as well, if not better, than he did that of the whites. As hunter and scout for prospectors who were then tumbling over one another on the old Sidney trail in their rush to the hills "Little Bat" attracted the attention of army officers. Contemporaneous with Frank Gurard, and a warm, personal friend of this famous scout, the young man soon found himself intrusted to perform the most hazardous bits of work.

It was only when there was no scouting to be done or explorations to be made that the wild harum scarum and yet harmless nature of the big-hearted fellow who had been gulping fresh air from babyhood exhibited itself. "Little Bat" enjoyed a game of monte about as well as any man on the frontier and during the long, dreary months when his services as a scout were not in demand he could be found before a layout smoking cigarettes which he rolled himself and betting or borrowing, according to his success at the game.

"Little Bat's" last prominent field service was in connection with the Sioux campaign of 1890-91. When Big Foot's band was corralled at Wounded Knee creek by the Seventh cavalry he doubted the sincerity of the Indians, who had promised to surrender formally on the following day. He told Colonel Forsythe of his fears. The night passed without incident. With the break of day the camps of the troopers and soldiers were astray. Breakfast over, an order was issued that the redskins surrender their arms. This they refused or



FRANK H. KOESTERS—LAST SECRETARY OF THE PIONEERS.

ceasing his chant with a shrill cry. "Look out!" yelled "Little Bat" to the soldiers, but before they could raise their carbines a murderous fire was turned upon them from the two columns of savages. For a moment or more the troopers were in a panic. They knew not which way to turn, so sudden was the attack. But the tide of battle was quick to turn and within thirty minutes over 200 dead and wounded Indians lay upon the field. Of the troopers thirty-five, including brave Captain Wallace, were killed outright and twice as many more were disabled—an awful penalty to pay for attacking so little importance to the suspicions of so experienced a scout as "Little Bat." Garnier got out of the cross-fire of troops and savages by crawling on his hands and knees to an elevation where a four-inch gun was planted. Here he lay pumping his Winchester into the Indians as they fled for cover in the draws of the hills.

Since the campaign of 1890 the scout has been a familiar figure about Crawford, Chadron, Hay Springs and Oelrichs. He seldom got farther east than Valentine, which is near the Rosebud reservation. The meager press reports of his death show that he was slain by a saloon manager or bouncer. It may have been brought about by a quarrel over monte. "Little Bat" enjoyed the confidence of Generals Crook, Terry, Carr, Merritt and Miles and next to Frank Gurard was the foremost scout in the army. He was not a relative of Baptiste Poirier, who is known as "Big Bat" and who enjoys some distinction as a scout.

Now Will You Smile

Mrs. Kendal is nothing if not impulsively genial, reports the Philadelphia Telegraph, and the imperturbability of certain characters has often a curiously irritating effect upon her. She was shopping one day at certain well-known stores, and, having completed her purchases, took leave of the assistant who had served her with a friendly "Good morning." There was no reply. In that hard-working dame's busy career there was no time, probably, for the minor gentlenesses of life. "Say good morning and smile!" exclaimed Mrs. Kendal, impetuously. The girl stared in mute amazement. "Then I shall remain until you do," said the great actress, in the most persuasive but yet in the firmest tones. This was too much for the girl. "Good morning," she said, and burst out laughing. From that hour Mrs. Kendal's appearance at the stores in question was the signal for an outburst of geniality.

The Extreme Limit

Washington Post: "I think there should be a law against publishing lies," said the innocent-faced man as he laid down his paper and heaved a sigh.

"Have you discovered a lie?" was asked by a fellow passenger.

"I'm sure of it. A man who was on a steamer when it was wrecked claims to have swam a distance of forty miles to land. We know that a physical impossibility. I myself was once on a steamer lost off the coast, and at that time I was called a champion swimmer. I swam and swam, but I didn't swim no forty miles. I couldn't have done it."

"How far did you swim?"

"Thirty-nine miles to a foot, sir, and any man in this world who says he has swum forty is a liar, sir, and the truth isn't in him, sir."



FIRST PHOTOGRAPH OF PIONEER HOOK AND LADDER COMPANY.