

Thirty-five years
of
Brookhaven Fire Company history
reviewed by
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1.

Ten years ago it was my privilege and honor to review the first twenty-five years of this organization's history. Since what I said then is on record, I shall cover only the high lights now.

The inception of the Brookhaven Fire Department was on May 10, 1923 when a group met in Barton's Garage for the purpose of organizing a fire department. The garage was located on the east side of the South Country road about one thousand feet south of the railroad tracks. The early minutes are incomplete and very sketchy but we know the first meeting actually did organize a fire company. The first officers were: George Waldron, Chief; William Horn, Foreman; John H. Morton, Secretary and Treasurer; Ed Barton, Driver #1 and S. King, Driver #2; this in spite of the fact that we had nothing to drive but private cars. The outfit was to be named The Brookhaven Hose Company No. 1. The District boundaries were to coincide with the election district #27. At various times during the year 1923 the following names were mentioned and so may be assumed to be charter members: John McGreavy, George (Ed) Waldron, Jr., William Riseley, Ev Swezey, William Hicken, Al Rodde, Lou Decker, ~~Tom Lyons~~ and R. H. Lyons, Sr. All the others mentioned are either dead or long since moved out of the district.

A petition for the formation of a Fire District was circulated and some sixty-five per cent of the taxpayers signed it. However, some technicality delayed its presentation to the Supervisors until March, 1924. Apparently the only equipment we had was a few shovels, brooms and water pails until May 1924 when 6 two and a half gallon fire foam extinguishers were bought at twenty dollars each, less five per cent, paid for by private subscription. These were parked around the village in the custody of people who had an automobile and a telephone.

The Board of Supervisors met in Riverhead on March 30, 1924, accepted our petition and voted to establish The Brookhaven Fire District. The citizens evidently approved this at an election some time in April for at the May meeting

it was voted to pay a bill from The Patchogue Advance for election expenses.

In September, 1924 the chemical tanks discarded by the Bellport Fire Department were purchased for \$25 and six months later a second-hand Buick car was bought for \$100 and the tanks mounted thereon, to become our first fire truck.

During April, 1925 the fire company acquired from the Oakwood Realty Company title to a lot at the corner of Railroad Avenue, (now Bridge Place,) and Seeley Street. Also in April, 1925 there was held the first election to approve the district budget. It was advertised to be \$300 for contingent expenses and \$5,700 "or as much thereof as is necessary" for construction of a fire house. However, the ballot as actually printed, left out the one word "thereof." Some keen-eyed opponent spotted this omission which would have authorized the Commissioners to spend \$5,700, or as much as they saw fit, without limit. The citizens voted this down.

Apparently no budget was approved until the following year. This time the proposition was for \$3,500 for the building and \$2,000 for a chemical engine. Everybody thought it was approved and a Chevrolet truck with soda and acid tanks was delivered on September 26, 1926. However, some legal technicality voided the election and it was necessary to vote the third time and this time it was approved. Ground was broken on October 5, 1926.

In May, 1927 a Locomobile was purchased with company funds and converted to a "fire truck." Actually it was a racing truck but carried ten gallon milk cans filled with water. *Slip Tag Day May 28, 1928*

Until 1936, George Waldron served continuously as Fire Chief. It is unfortunate that we have never been able to obtain a photograph of this much-loved pioneer who did so much to make the company a "going" concern.

We had a very active tournament team which won a respectable number of trophies. The relatively small company had a wonderful esprit de corps and

every member worked hard.

In 1930 a Buick car was purchased with company funds to replace the Locomobile and two of the members built and mounted a hose cart body. To be sure we had no hose and no use for any hose since we had no pumper, but they were looking ahead. In 1932 a fully-equipped Buffalo fire truck, a 500 gallon a minute pump and a 400 gallon booster tank was purchased, but only after a mass meeting had been called to sell it to the taxpayers, many of whom thought it was merely a \$6,000 toy for the firemen to play with. After all, the firemen were mostly youngsters hardly out of their teens and the older people who paid the taxes took the usual dim view of anything the youngsters wanted to do. Believe it or not, a very vocal group thought of the fire company as a select social club run at the taxpayers' expense.

Tam Morrison
I was chosen to make the "pitch" at this meeting, the new truck was approved and in appreciation of this the company made me an honorary member, * *him*
~~the first of the~~ *we don't know much of the details from Jan. 1928 to Jan. 1938 since the records were burned*

In March, 1938 the fire police were organized with Bob Lyons, Sr. as Captain. Concern about the quality of new members goes back twenty years for an Investigating Committee was set up then.

When Bellport installed their water system, we purchased their old fire wells and the district installed four of them about the village, one each at the Brookhaven and Southaven schools, one at Seeley Street near the fire house for practice and one at Bay Road at John Morton's house. The Wellington and Post wells were installed privately.

In September, 1938 the first of several annual trips to the Coney Island Mardi Gras was taken.

During the 1938 hurricane the company performed heroic work in rescuing several persons down Bay Road. The water was chest deep and rescue was

effected by a duck punty commandeered from Clint Smith's Boatyard. The company

* *The first Honorary Member was the Rev. Mr. Spahn Chaplain of the Company and a very active fireman in 1926*

was officially thanked by the Town Police for this and their other work during the storm. It was also in 1938 that the company put on the first annual Christmas party for the school children and in May, 1939 the first Memorial Day service as held at the Southaven Church.

In 1940 Drs. Horenstein and Bancroft were made honorary members for their services in instructing the company in first aid. It was also in 1940 that the Brookhaven Ambulance Company was organized as an adjunct to the fire company, so you see that the pattern of unselfish public service over and beyond firemanic duties were set some twenty years ago. We may well be proud of this record. It certainly gives the lie to those early, bigotted objectors who thought of the firemen as a card-playing, beer-drinking clique enjoying themselves at taxpayers' expense, and now-a-days when there is need for some public improvement, the citizens invariably turn first to the fire company.

The first inspection dinner was held in 1941 at the Better 'Cle. War clouds were gathering even before Pearl Harbor and in May, 1941 members who were called into the armed forces were given full active status during their service period. Apparently there were a lot of them for in January, 1942 eight new members were accepted on a special wartime status. There were blackouts; gas rationing; classes in chemical warfare; the firemen were finger printed for Civil Defense Certificates; a Service Flag was hung in the fire house and an Honor Roll set up at the Memorial Park in front of the World War cannon.

The company had come of age. The hard work necessary to organize the company and get it functioning were over and firemen began to relax and take things for granted. The lack of discipline and organization showed up and in March, 1944 it was necessary to take official action and instruct all firemen to return to the fire house and sign the book after fires. This problem continued to plague us until 1957, when everyone at last realized its importance.

Then on December 15, 1945 there was a flash fire and explosion in the

fire house. In the few minutes it took for the first men to get there, it was already too hot to hook a tow chain to the trucks and pull them out. The building, equipment and all our records were a complete loss. You can imagine the shock and disappointment.

Three days later, on December 18th, a special meeting was called at the school and it was announced that we had already purchased an army surplus fire truck and arrangements had been made to have Bellport Fire Company cover our district. The following Sunday a committee met with the Commissioners in reference to new equipment. Less than three weeks after the fire, we had a new four-wheel drive, fully-equipped Chevrolet fire truck ^{new house sketch} and we were back in business. The site and the approximate size of the new house was determined. By May we had a new Ford 500 g.p.m. pumper, a deed to the property and an architect ^{architect} had been retained. By July the Brockway chassis had been purchased and sent to have the pump mounted and the body built. *

About this time it was realized that the assessed valuation of the district would not permit us to legally raise sufficient money to build a new fire house adequate for our needs at the prices then in effect. By some quick work of the Commissioners', the district was expanded to take in the Shirley area west of Upton Blvd. and William Floyd Parkway, all the way from the high tension lines south to the Great South Bay.

When the new building was about half completed, it became obvious that we were not going to have the money to complete it the way we had hoped, and the village was divided into two camps; those who wanted the outside appearance of the building to look like the architect's sketch and those who would economize on appearance and finish the upstairs room so it could be used as a meeting hall. The story is best told in a report to the taxpayers circulated after the completion of the building, to inform them where their money went. This report set forth the following information: The original bid for the building

* Mr. William Hickman performed miracles in cutting Washington Red Tape & in getting our Army Surplus Fire Trucks and was made an Honorary member for his services

was \$59,000, but the most we could legally raise even with the expanded district was \$46,669.74, less necessary preliminary expenses for legal fees, bonds, architect fees, land clearing, grading and insurance, etc., which came to a net of \$42,000. The Commissioners selected the cheaper of all the alternatives approved by the architect and decided to forego some things which could be added later and did not affect the immediate usefulness of the building

There was a storm of protest which was resolved by holding a mass meeting at which there was made a public appeal for funds. This resulted in the collection of \$5,250 cash, plus such specific items as a weathervane, electric stove, conference table, silk ceremonial flag, official United States flag, kitchen cabinets and counter, trophy cabinet, desk, cornerstones, insulation over the second floor ceiling, a bronze memorial plaque, clocks, a mirror and vanity table in the powder room and the use of machinery and equipment, plus seven hundred hours of labor on the concrete ramp. The land was also donated. The result was an attractive and usable building, which actually cost in cash outlay \$51,903.34, at a cost to the taxpayers of only \$46,669.74, a saving of \$12,330 as against the original bid. And this saving was the result of the enthusiasm and the unselfish work of the members of the fire company.

By August the building was in use, the trucks and ambulance were housed in it instead of being scattered around in different buildings. The building and the Memorial Plaque were dedicated at 2 p.m. on August 24, 1947. The racing team was granted permission to hold a dance in the fire house and that was the first such function. But they were forbidden to sell beer! This crises was overcome, however, when \$20 was donated to purchase free beer.

The By-Laws were revised to require fire school training for all candidates for office. In another action, drivers were required to report monthly on the condition of their trucks and once again members fighting fires must sign the book. The importance of insurance rates and regulations was having an increasing impact on company operations. About this time we had a letter from

the Town Board stating that no member under eighteen years could fight fires as they would not be covered by the Town's compensation policy. This increasing importance of insurance requirements was responsible for the inclusion in the minutes for the first time, of a fire summary for the year 1947-48. We had 34 fires in which 4 lives were lost. There were 715 men fighting fires, 2,197 acres burned, property damage of \$19,000 and there were 1,446 man hours expended or an average of $43\frac{3}{4}$ man hours per fire. Many of these fires were caused by sparks from the steam locomotives and in April, 1948 the L.I.R.R. promised to try to stop them.

In April, 1948 the traffic light in front of the fire house was installed and the system inaugurated by which the Bellport telephone operator sounds our alarm. At that time the following were made ~~the first~~ Life Members because of early membership in the original company: Arthur Waldron, R. Lyons, Sr., R. Fawcett, John Morton, Ed Waldron, Walter Zukowski, A. Rodde and Adam Kress.

→ On July 3, 1948 we had our 25 year celebration with open house and it was a big success.

At the meeting in October, 1948 the condition of our equipment was described by one of the members as "stinking" and the general efficiency of the company low, in spite of, or perhaps because of, a large membership. This criticism was evidently thought justified by the membership for it was moved and seconded to close the membership books until the By-Laws could be changed to insure greater discipline and a better calibre of new members. The criticism was felt just by the Commissioners also, who wrote to the company demanding more practice drills and that the drivers keep log books of the operation and performance of their trucks. In spite of the obvious value of this, it took several years to enforce. On the good side of the record for that year it was reported that sixteen uniforms were to be bought from the fund that had been building up for several years, and a dance for the uniform fund raised

* Mr. James H. Lord was made a Life Member and presented with an illuminated scroll, executed by Malcolm Fraser, on May 5 1926

an additional \$225.

In 1949 the Ambulance Company purchased a LaSalle ambulance from the Patchogue Fire Department, which was a vast improvement over the ancient Kissel. They also now possessed an inhalator and oxygen tanks.

The fire at the Durkee Estate in East Patchogue was discussed at one of the meetings and the errors of commission and omission thoroughly talked about. The property was not well protected and the loss much more than there should have been. The lack of co-ordination between the various companies and the lack of chain of command pointed up again the need for organization and discipline, not only of our own company, but of other neighboring companies.

The Commissioners concern over the efficiency of the company was again expressed by their demand that no man be permitted to drive the huge Brockway until he had demonstrated his ability to operate it.

The present pick-up truck was bought after a long hassel over whether to buy a half-ton or a 3/4 ton chassis. The company was about evenly divided and the vote was 19 for the half-ton truck and 18 for the 3/4 ton truck but the minority are still not convinced and the argument still goes on.

The fire report for 1948-9 showed 34 fires plus 5 that were not recorded. 1,683 man hours were expended at fires and 2 firemen were injured. Five fires not recorded, five years after all the firemen were instructed that they must sign the books after each fire! The importance of such records for our insurance standing was still not appreciated.

A proposed Ladies' Auxiliary was voted down 29 to 14. In spite of this, the ladies, God bless 'em, always show up at a big fire and see to it that there is coffee and grub for their men. They neither receive nor expect thanks, and if that isn't unselfish service, it's love. Whatever it is, it's wonderful!

A survey of the map of the district for availability of water was proposed and this led to the adoption of the plan for adding one or more wells annually where a well or a stand pipe is practicable and needed.

omit *supp*

In 1950 was the first inventory of truck equipment, subsequently to be made regularly. According to the minutes for that year the Secretary's books had been in such sad shape for years that the Chief requested all previous officers and committee members to report to him so that records could be brought up to date, which again shows the increasing awareness of the need for proper organization and discipline.

At a Scout meeting at the school, a fireman who was also a scouter noticed that the exit doors were locked and chained. The meeting was in the evening to be sure, but it raised a question of whether this was standard practice and led the Chief to survey the school for fire hazards. This was a step forward from fire fighting to fire prevention.

You will recall that when we built the new building, our district was expanded to reach all the way down to Smith's Point and an increasing number of our fires were at the distant end of our district and there was a lot of griping and reluctance of the men to go that far from home. A loophole in the law was discovered which permitted two adjacent fire districts to adjust their territories merely by the consent of the Commissioners of the territories involved. We took advantage of that loophole and transferred the district south of Neighborhood Road to Mastic Beach. Thereafter they would not only take over the protection of that district but also took over their pro rata share of our debt on the new fire house.

It was suggested and adopted as standard procedure that at each meeting thereafter, all fires for the previous month would be discussed for the lessons to be learned therefrom. The point system was adopted to increase the efficiency of the company. For the sake of the record, since it is not explained in any of the minutes, the point system gives each member a specific number of points for the percentage of meetings attended, the percentage of fires fought, the percentage of compulsory drills, work details, offices held

and committee posts filled, etc. I can't be more specific since the values were modified from time to time but the basic idea was that to rate the classification as an active member, it would be necessary to accumulate a certain number of points each year. If the member did not make the required number, he was dropped from the active list and if he exceeded the required number, he was given an award in the form of some distinctive insignia worn on his uniform. There is no question but that the point system has raised the efficiency of the company.

The Commissioners approved a \$1,500 radio setup for the company. Now we wonder how we ever got along without it.

In the latter part of 1950 was the first mention of mutual aid in the minutes and we were advised that firemen could not take any other Civil Defense jobs. The company went on record in favor of the proposed Suffolk County Fire College. (*Training Center*)

In 1951 Jim Kinsella gave the first monthly report to the company on the action of the Commissioners. *SINCE THE PREVIOUS MEETING.*

In May of 1951 there evidently was a big fire, for the minutes recorded that "thank you" letters were sent to the Brookhaven Town Police and to all the companies participating in the recent fires and an ad was put in The Patchogue Advance thanking all concerned for their help and the ladies for their services. (I will have to take back what I said about no thanks.) Then when the minutes came to the item "report on fires" it was recorded, and I quote, "One hot time was had by all." Not a word as to where the fire was, what companies helped, or why such measures of gratitude!

Most of us remember that week, but even recent as it is, there is a great deal of confusion as to the actual happenings. It started on the 2nd of May when a fire was reported at 3:20 p.m. at the Hard's Estate. Actually it started at the dump in Yaphank, jumped Yaphank Avenue and with a shift in the wind, raced south. We tried to backfire at Gerard Road but it jumped there;

the trucks raced down to Farm-to-Market Road but the fire was already ahead of them. We tried to stop it again at Montauk Highway but it jumped again and was finally stopped about at the railroad tracks and the company returned at 2:30 a.m. the following morning. Eleven hours on one fire. Less than six hours later we had a brush fire at Farm-to-Market Road which we fought from 8:15 to 10:15 and fifteen minutes later a fire was east of Leskowitz farm which we fought from 10:30 to 12 and a third fire that same day at Upton Blvd. from 12:30 to 1:10 p.m. The next day, May 4th, a fire at Camp Upton from 4:10 to 7:30 p.m. and on the 5th a brush fire in the Laboratory from 1:10 to 7:20 p.m. The following day a fire at River Road in Southaven from 1:45 to 3:20 and the day after that a still alarm at the cemetery which rolled only one truck and on May 8th a fire at Farm-to-Market Road west of Yaphank Avenue. Nine fires in six days!

It was in 1951 that the company agreed to take over the sponsorship of the Boy Scouts from the P.T.A. and again as a public service put on the first of what turned out to be the annual Halloween parties for the kids to try to keep them out of mischief.

In 1952 the company voted \$100 for a resuscitator for the Ambulance Company, the balance to be raised by a V.F.W. dance and public subscription. The Ambulance crew has always been a dedicated group, ready to serve any time, day or night. However, in 1952 the membership had dwindled and there were so many calls outside the fire district, it was sometimes difficult to find men to answer the calls. It seemed that it would be better to confine the activities to the fire district and by reducing the number of calls, have more willing response and render better service. However, because of donations and subscriptions from outside, this could not be accomplished at once. It was decided to continue until June, 1954 and in the meantime train crews in neighboring villages to set up their own companies. This has proven to be a

wise decision, the crew is now larger and the demands on individual members not so great.

By 1953 the insurance companies were becoming more choosy for their claims were up and their rates held down. Only actual firemanic activities would be protected. Funerals, parades, etc., would not be covered unless authorized in writing as an official drill. This put a crimp in tournaments. Older men and those with known disabilities had to cease active fire fighting or face the possibility of not being insured. It was then that the possibility of a physical examination for all firemen was first discussed. It was in 1953 also, that the district set up a capital reserve fund whereby funds could be accumulated for new equipment over a number of years, thus avoiding unusually large expenditures in any one year. The Ambulance Company purchased a brand new Cadillac ambulance to replace the LaSalle. The meeting room walls, bare cinder blocks since the building was dedicated, were covered with pine panelling.

1954 was an uneventful year. We took delivery of a fully-equipped truck, #5, in April.

In July we had the first of a series of C.D. drills with a simulated "incident" at Shirley and it was about that time that the fire horn on Post hill was put in operation.

In September Al Rodde who had been a charter member moved out of the district and in appreciation of his long service, he was made an Honorary Member. Rod Kaller also moved out of the district and in appreciation of his services in the company and as Secretary to the Board he, too, was made an Honorary Member. It was shortly after that the first Certificates of Honorary Membership were awarded and it was in October, 1954 that the Drivers Organization was formed.

The following year we purchased the tape recorder which was of tremendous

help in teaching good radio procedure.

In 1956 we had an unfortunate fire in which a family was completely burned out. A spontaneous move to render them much needed help resulted in an affair at the Better 'Ole which netted \$761.05. Subsequently company action was taken to set up a permanent "Emergency Fund" with a committee to administer it.

In April, 1956 we had another C.D. drill primarily to set up radio procedure. All Brookhaven Town Fire companies were alerted and the Fire Co-ordinator ordered trucks and ambulances of the various companies to locations outside their own districts.

In December of '56 our delegates to the Suffolk County Volunteer Firemen's Association voted to discontinue Racing Teams and Tournaments and henceforth have only Field Day type of competition. This does not involve the use of trucks and so overcomes difficulties of insurance coverage.

In March, 1957 an inspector of the N.Y. State Fire Insurance Rating Board made a complete check of our equipment and records. The stress placed on discipline in the last few years paid off and we were given a very satisfactory rating. However, he felt we should keep even more detailed fire records showing the time, place and type of fire, type of building involved, number of men on the job, amount of water used, etc.

also in this year
~~Last year~~ as you all remember, our latest truck, a Hose Truck, #6, was put in service. Also a Welfare Fund of \$100 to be administered without specific accounting by a committee consisting of the Chaplain, the Chief and Assistant Chiefs; a fire siren was put in operation in Shirley, the plates showing friction loss were mounted on each truck for more efficient pump operation and we held our own Memorial Services (for firemen as distinct from veterans) on the evening of May 28.

Last June and July were perhaps the busiest we have ever had. In June

there were 6 brush fires. In August we had 2 false alarms, 7 brush fires, 3 house fires, 1 car fire, 1 R.R. engine fire - $1,548\frac{1}{2}$ man hours spent, 29,650 gals. of water pumped and the trucks rolled 671 miles!

The worst fire¹⁹⁵⁷ started up north and reached our district at 6:10 p.m. on July 11. We got a bulldozer eventually which broke a fire lane in the dark. The trucks and crew did not get back 'til 3 a.m. At 11:30 that same morning (July 12) it broke out again and was not extinguished 'til 10 p.m. We fought fire 20 hours out of 28! There were 17 companies on the fire besides us and to make matters more confused there was a C.D. drill on at the same time and the Fire Co-ordinator took up his headquarters in our radio room!

~~Last~~ Last fall we had what was the most instructive and realistic drill we have ever had. With the number of children sleeping in dormitories at Washington Lodge the possibility of a truly disastrous fire is obvious. Such a situation was simulated, worked out ahead of time on the blackboard and then actually on the spot at night we had streams of water on the dormitories within a few minutes after the alarm!

Just two more items for 1957. Our first Booster Drive for funds netted \$1,117.00 and our school population was so big we had to hold 3 simultaneous Halloween parties.

The year's activities are summed up in the annual report:

Average attendance at Meetings - 49

Trucks rolled 727 miles each

$4,400\frac{1}{2}$ man hours spent

65,255 gals. water pumped

7 house fires

53 brush fires

1 chimney fire

6 car fires

3 false alarms

15.

Average of 23 men turned out at each fire

12 compulsory drills

3 Stand-by services for other companies

That seems to be a good note on which to end. Thirty-five years is a long time and the Brookhaven Fire Company has changed with the times and grown to keep pace with the increasing population. We can't predict the future - but we do know this - the Brookhaven Fire Company will be what it is now - one of the best and most efficient of them all.