

History of the Loleta Fire Department

As compiled by Ken Cunningham 1979

“Wobbling on foundling legs from the beginning, the Loleta Volunteer Fire Department was formed on the night of February 16th, 1900 in Dickson’s Hall.” It consisted of seven elected officers and a triangle that hung near the Hotel was used as an alarm.

Those officers were: Clinton Shaw, Joseph Hodgson, Edwin Meller, Louis Olsen, Fred Smith, Robert Dickson and Frank Bertsch who jointly received \$223 from local merchants in donations for purchase of fire equipment.

In May of the same year, the firefighters took delivery on a handcart and three hundred feet of two-inch hose. The necessity arose to have fire hydrants so Frank Bertsch and Will Parrott of the Loleta Water Works installed hydrants on the water main.

Lack of fires to fight caused interests to weaken and during the tenure of Edwin Meller, Joseph Hodgson, Cornelius Rasmussen, Moses C. Poyfaire, Hans C. Hansen, and H. R. Williams. The department threatened complete dissolution during 1901.

In June of 1902, under the leadership of Louis Olsen, a call was answered to put out a fire in the attic of Arthur Dickson’s residence. Dickson showed his appreciation by treating the Department to an oyster dinner. This event sparked renewed interest in the department and impetus (energy) was added when Charles Egbert, resident agent of Coldbrook Creameries (later Humboldt / Foremost) donated room to house the Fire Department.

Firefighters then numbered hydrants and leather buckets were purchased for use on fires more than 300 feet from fire mains.

Robert Dickson, John Mueller, H. C. Hansen, Ernest Evans, Charles Hyson, Edward E. Hill, and Louis Olsen were largely responsible for holding the organization together from 1902 to 1917.

In 1909, Van Derse, Manager of Libby McNeill & Libby (Which bought out Coldbrook Creameries in 1908) connected the company’s fire main to that of the town in order to provide greater water pressure for fire fighting.

Acquisition of a chemical handcart with which to fight fires located beyond range of the hose cart and mains added to the effectiveness of the Department in 1913.

The Fire Department became reorganized into an association in 1919 and new officers were elected. Philip Dahlquist became Fire Chief, Oscar Rogers became Assistant Fire Chief, Ralph Wanzer became Secretary, and George Thomsen

became Treasurer. Oscar Rogers replaced Philip Dahlquist after he resigned, having served as Chief for three months.

Members of the community who served as Chief since the association was formed in 1919 are Clyde Johnson, Edward Knudsen, Fred Shock, H. I. Graham, Joseph Genzoli, Robert Orsenico, Frank O'Neil, Donald Neuhaus, Harold Archer, Jim Davy, Bernard Christen, David Fidgeland, Jeff Genzoli, David Waterman and currently Ken Nielsen.

In 1918, Robert Niles (Sr) had a barn fire (which was apparently one of many fires that the department was to fight at that barn). It was located out of the town about 4 miles and far from the water mains. Philip Dahlquist fastened the chemical handcart to the rear of his auto and arrived in time to save the barn.

Shortly after that incident, a committee canvassed the community asking for donations in order to purchase a fire engine. Before the end of 1918, \$1600 had been donated and a Model T Ford, La France chemical fire engine with a hand crank to start the engine was purchased.

On September 6, 1924, a Fifty Year Articles of Association of the Loleta Fire Department was adopted and Edwin Knudson, J. A. Holt, R. O. Dickson, Fred Bauer, Frank Bertsch, H. I. Graham, and N. C. Petersen made up the first board of directors.

Fred Shock was the Fire Chief during the land acquisition and pavilion construction activities starting in 1925. Pat Carr sold land to the association, which was suitable for building and not for farming. Fifty-six community members and farmers combined resources to buy the land and additional funds were raised (\$15,000), to build the pavilion.

Frank Bertsch built the Firemen's Pavilion with the help of the men in the department.

Chris Hansen bought maple flooring at cost for economy in construction and dances were organized by Fred Shock and Johnny Holt to raise funds to pay off loan notes.

Dances were held in the Loleta Dance Hall for benefit of the Fire Department and drew huge crowds with prominent named bands appearing and occasionally two bands played at once, one at each end of the hall. Local bands found Loleta dances a good place to acquire publicity since crowds sometimes numbered in the thousands. Receipts for one night were to be from \$1,600 - \$1,700. Names were drawn to determine which loan note was to be paid with the receipt funds.

During the "twenties", occasional smokers were held. According to Fred Shock, hookers were brought in from Eureka to provide stripping entertainment for a

strictly stag audience. "Of course", Fred Shock says, laughing, "We let it be known far and wide that the Loleta Fire Department had nothing to do with it".

The Baseball Diamond was moved to the Loleta Firemen's Park in 1925. The Dairymen's Association helped the firefighters build a grandstand in 1929. The cost of the flood lighting for the diamond was shared by the firefighters and the Chamber of Commerce, each paying \$500. A very nice gun range was built but was later done away with due to high insurance costs.

A Firemen's clubhouse was built a few feet south of the Pavilion in 1930. It was later used by the 4-H and Girl scouts.

In 1926 or 1927, there was a house fire in town late one night. The house was well ablaze by the time the department arrived on the scene. Firefighters used hoses off the handcart to fight the fire. The chemical tanker proved to be less effective large fires such as this. The Creamery cut in their pump in order to aid with water pressure but it split the canvas hose. Apparently, they were unsuccessful in saving the house. A favorite saying of one of the former chiefs spoken to was "We saved a lot of (land) lots in those days". County Supervisors were asked for new fire hoses by the department but were turned down because they were only a volunteer department.

In this period, more money was borrowed. Farmers and Businessmen again came up with money for the loan so that the Pavilion could be rebuilt. The original building was not strong enough. It was not until 1935 that the department was free from all indebtedness.

Sometime in the 1930's an agreement was made between the Scotia, Fortuna, Ferndale, and Loleta Volunteer Fire Departments that they would each hold a dance on given weekends each month. This allowed each department a chance to make money. Times changed though with the Television era and the dance era died out.

1933 brought the end to prohibition and a bar was built in the Pavilion.

The Model A replacement of the Model T improved the reliability of the fire truck and the year 1933 marked a change in equipment by modifying a 1930 Model A chemical tanker to a pumper, which didn't carry water. The pump was given to the Loleta Fire Department by civil defense.

Loleta petitioned the County Supervisors to become a Fire District in 1935. An opposing petition was filed against the formation because it would mean additional taxes to land owners. Both petitions were dismissed due to some of the same names on both lists. However, in 1936, an election was held and the district was formed.

The District area to be covered included six school districts; Eel River, Loleta, Banner, Salmon Creek and Table Bluff. The Southeast section of Banner District requested to be included in the Fortuna Fire District and was granted their request. Supervisors appointed five commissioners for the district; John P. Meng, George D. Herrick, Hawley Evans, Albert Pedrazzini and Ralph Herrick. Since that time, a number of members have served in the same capacity to name a few of days past; Owen Quinn, Neils Holgerson, Lenwood Olsen, Ole Johnson, Joe Genzoli, Rawley Evans, Harold Archer and Donald Fidgeland.

The first meeting held in March of 1936, commissioners set up a budget of \$1550, and a tax rate at 10 cents per hundred dollars of the assessed value of the taxable property. At that time, the district was assessed at one million dollars. In 1979, the assessed value was over 12 million dollars.

In 1937, the district accepted the fire fighting apparatus, which was turned over by the former Loleta Volunteer Fire Department. The district authorized Fire Chief Joe Genzoli to sell the old Model T Ford chemical truck for no less than \$20. It was sold to Henry Biondini.

In 1939, the new International Pumper was purchased which carried three hundred fifty gallons of water, a thousand feet of three-inch hose and several hundred feet of hose in various sizes. Before purchase of this tanker, water was hauled to fires in milk cans and subsequently a creamery tanker, which had to be filled with water after a fire was reported and if, full of milk, had to be emptied first and filled with water by the firefighters.

The Department installed a new fire main system in 1940 under the auspicious (favorable) beginning of a W. P. A. project. Pipes from Rohnerville Golf Course, which in turn were old boiler tubes from the Scotia Sawmill, were used as fire mains. Robert Orsenico states that the old pipes were constantly in need of repair after the firefighters popped off rust scale.

Water was pumped out of a lake near Joe Genzoli's residence to supply the main. However, problems were encountered in using the International due to inability to negotiate hills around Loleta. The eighty-seven horsepower engine was too small and it became necessary for Fire Chief Joe Genzoli to install a special steel plate on the rear of the truck to enable him to push it up hills with his pickup. The engine was replaced in 1955 with a new one hundred forty-five-horse power engine.

In 1955, Commissioners voted to start paying the Fire Chief and at that time, the pay was \$10 a month. The money was to be used to help with the gas money Chief's used for their extra "running around" for the department.

A fire during August of 1956 in the old Bertsch building completely destroyed the structure. Fire mains were inadequate in that when water was drawn from a hydrant west of the Station, suction was lost on hydrants across from the station.

An article from the Humboldt Times read, "FIRE DESTROYED the old Bertsch building in Loleta last night in a spectacular fire seen for miles around. The old wooden framed building was formerly a theater and a store, later used for storage. Three families were forced to flee from the apartments on the second floor, but no one was killed or injured in the fire. Volunteer fire departments from Loleta, Ferndale, and Fortuna, as well as the state Division of Forestry department from Fortuna brought the fire under control in about two hours of intense effort."

The tax rate went to ten cents on the dollar in 1956 and twelve cents in 1957. Commissioners bought a used panel delivery truck in 1957 to carry a resuscitator purchased in 1955 along with other fire equipment. The panel truck replaced an old truck previously purchased from the milk plant.

A large mill fire in Salmon Creek occurred during 1958 with winds of gale proportions fanning the blaze. Suction was taken from Salmon Creek and firefighters were on duty up to 24 hours. The mill was lost. Only a portion of the log deck was saved. Along with the mill, Neil's barn, which was some distance away, burned down as well. The fire's heat was so intense that barn burned in seven minutes.

Commissioners raised the tax rate to twenty-five cents in 1958 to buy a new fire truck. In 1960, it was raised to thirty cents.

A new American La France fire truck was purchased in 1960 costing nearly \$31,000. The International truck was restored as well, costing \$700.

Joe Genzoli and Lenwood Olsen flew to New York City and then traveled four hundred miles north to Elmira NY to take delivery on the new fire truck. They drove it themselves to Loleta, which was the most economical means of conveyance. Due to the open cab of the fire truck, the drivers suffered the exposure to the elements of rain and sun.

Many mishaps occurred before the purchase of the La France. One such mishap was the loss of a house belonging to Pete Petersen caused by the unobtainable suction in Salmon Creek due to defective packing on the pump.

A large portion of early records regarding the origins of the Loleta Fire Department were lost when the hardware store was sold. Those records stored there were thrown into the Table Bluff dump. Frank O'Neil found a portion of those records along with the Articles of Association at the dump. When Frank

O'Neil moved from Loleta, those records were discarded for the last time. Now very few photographs or written information exist in original form.

In 1971, the benefit program of the department was altered to include an Antique and Country show. This was more effective and desirable than the previous method of going door to door selling fruit cakes. The Annual Loleta Antique show continues to be the most successful form of fund raising for the department as well as a much anticipated event for the surrounding community.

Another tradition started by the department in the 70's, along with the Loleta School's PTA was the community Christmas program for the children. During this, Santa Claus rode into town on a fire truck bearing gift bags of nuts, candy and fruit supplied by the fire department. This tradition remains today.

Jack Czervieniec, owner of the Loleta Water Works in 1974, installed new water mains. The fire-fighting capability of the water systems were finally considered very effective.

When it was time to renew the 50 year Articles of Association paper, the department decided it was in their best interest to Incorporate. The department was incorporated on January 14, 1976 at the cost of around a thousand dollars to the department.

In 1979 the grounds around the pavilion was named the Thomas Carr Park honoring Tom for his many years of service and upkeep of the pavilion and grounds. Also, 1979 brought the department it's first two women to join the department; Paulina Petersen and Wendy Lougher.

Early firefighters were hampered by lack of fire fighting equipment but today, we have excellent equipment and an excellent team of dedicated firefighters.

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