

History of the Royal Oak Fire Department

The first Royal Oak fire department was organized in William Sullivan's home in 1908. Sullivan was elected fire chief; Harry Anderson, Secretary; and William J. Folland president. Other members included Robert McClure, Ralph Bourgeois, William A. Wheeler, Mark and Lee Halsey, Roy Gass, Freeman Robbins, Edward Roy and Edward W. Joyce. With Arthur L. Lawson ringing the St. Mary church bell whenever a fire broke out, this organization safeguarded the village until the Royal Oak Volunteer Fire Department was organized.

In 1912, the village experienced a disastrous fire which threatened to destroy the business district south of Third Street. Everything was burned from Mrs. Lochbihler's to Codling's. It was a bitter cold night and a strong wind prevailed. Sparks were carried so far that other parts of the village were threatened. The Masonic Temple caught fire in several places. Help was summoned from Detroit but before it arrived the fire was under control through the valiant efforts of the volunteer group. As a result of the fire, merchants got together and formalized the Volunteer Department on February 13, 1913. Membership increased to include Roy Wing, James Allen, William West, Carlos Marshall, Delbert Geyer, Homer Ebling, George J. Scott, Julius Robar, J. Frank Codling, and Harry A. Brace. William Folland was appointed Chief on April 3, 1912. The early meetings were held in the old town hall on the northwest corner of Main and Fourth Streets. Upon the sale of this building, member's homes were used for a time. Peter Sorenson had a blacksmith shop, on the northwest corner of Fifth and Main, it housed the firefighting equipment consisting of one 20 gallon chemical truck-man drawn. The fire chief, William J. Folland, was also police chief, superintendent of water, and street commissioner, all for the salary of \$50.00 per month.

Later a ladder truck was purchased. By 1915 the group had grown discontented with the quarters and on October 12, 1915 voted unanimously to give the council a mandate in which to furnish suitable accommodations. If the council did not comply, the group would disband. At the invitation of Mr. Frank J. Hoffman, president, and councilman, a meeting with the volunteers at the blacksmith shop was scheduled. The story of the meeting as told by William J. Folland, "We were ready for them. I removed all of the tables from the club room and tossed all of the horse hoof cuttings that I could find in the fire. Meanwhile the other boys borrowed a half dozen nail kegs. We volunteers were very polite. We all perched on the ladder truck, while the committee got the preferred nail keg seats". He continued, "I'll give president Hoffman credit. He stayed through the meeting, seated calmly on the nail kegs. We boys could hardly stand the stench, but each stuck it out like we were used to it. The result of the meeting was an agreement to build a new fire hall." He further related how the hall, located on the east side of Main Street, north of Sixth, was built, furnished and used. "Two months later, Fire Hall #1, at a cost of \$1,700.00, was completed. I have often been asked how it was put up at that price. The volunteers did a lot of the work. I took my street gang off the streets several half days and put the boys on the building. The council paid for the building, but we furnished it with our own funds. We had lots of money those days". "Those whose homes we saved usually presented us with some cash, and the council was fairly liberal in its contributions. Our treasury was further augmented by the fines of the members. It cost twenty five cents to miss a meeting. Fines for not addressing the chair ranged from ten cents to one dollar. During heated discussions the treasury might be increased by \$10.00. The furnishings were high class. The table behind which the president presided in recent years is now used by the City Commission."

Many of the wives in the old days, then young brides, recalled hubby's excuse when he wanted an evening out. "I've got practice with the volunteers." Mother Folland knew the right answer when one of the wives called up, "I think he's down at the fire hall". "That excuse covered up a lot of evenings out when the boys never showed up at the hall." Chief Folland chuckled when some time ago he recalled the good old days of the volunteers.

Sometime later the village council purchased an old Jeffrey truck with a fifty-foot extension ladder and an Acme truck with a twenty-four foot ladder.

In 1922 a new Gamewell fire alarm and police signal system was installed in the fire hall. Eleven street alarm boxes were installed, which caused the number of the box to be printed on ticker tape at the fire hall. The boxes were also equipped with police signal lights, and when officers at headquarters wished to get in touch with a patrolman, the lights on his beat would be turned on. A fire siren would blow the number of the box from which an alarm had been turned in. Boxes were installed in the three public schools and two local banks as master alarm boxes. An emergency wire was also connected with the Detroit and Ferndale Police departments. Prior to this time the first alarm was sounded by the bell on the old St. Mary's Church on the corner of Fifth and Main. The first horse to appear after the alarm was hitched to the ladder truck and the firemen left their active employment to man the truck as it rushed down Main Street. The owner of the horse received \$2.00.

The Village of Royal Oak became a city in 1921. In 1922 the city decided to replace the Volunteer Fire Department with a paid department. Members of the Volunteer Department voted to share their station and equipment with the paid department. Equipment included an early Ehrens Fox pumper, firehose and ladders.

Late in 1922, an order was placed for a 1923 American LaFrance pumper. It was a Model #75 rated at 750 gpm. The six-cylinder truck had right hand drive, chain power transfer, mechanical brakes and an exhaust whistle. This was the Model-T era. Construction of the Ford plant in Highland Park meant many jobs for Royal Oak residents and made it possible for Royal Oak to grow as a city.

A few "paid" men were hired, among them George Cook, Frank Winter, Ora Rutledge, Fred Gerds and Dave Gearhardt. In 1924, the decision was made to have a paid, trained man run the Fire Department. Martin Bishop, retired battalion chief from Detroit was hired. He served from June 1924 until November 1928.

After many meetings of the City Council, City Manager and Mayor, it was decided to build a new fire station. The Northwood Development Company, partially owned by H.Llyod Clawson, agreed to furnish a site and to provide the services of their architects to design the station. Northwood Fire Station was located on Webster, near Crooks Road, and cost \$65,000.00. It opened in 1928, for many years being by far, the best city owned building. Lieutenant George Cook was put in charge and Lieutenant Frank Winter his second in command. The 1923 LaFrance was sent to Northwood, as well as a new 1928 Dodge truck, which the City bought as a booster truck. Five firemen were assigned to each unit. The Gamewell system and telephone were connected and some old furniture was brought in from City Hall. The station was put into service. A fire district was worked out, Northwood answering alarms west of Rochester Road, from Catalpa to Fourteen Mile Road, and all alarms north of Catalpa to the city line, and all alarms west of Woodward from Webster to Fourteen Mile.

There were few telephones in the city and residents were told to call the Police Department to report fires. The police would then contact the Fire Department. A tapper was installed in the Police Station and a telephone was connected to the Fire Station. The police would tap four times which rang a bell in the Fire Station. Then the firemen would pick up the telephone and get the location of the fire.

Phil Mains and Jack Hoekstra were hired. The next event was to build an addition on the back of Fire Station #1. It was to be a kitchen and eating room. It was built by Phil Mains, a carpenter, and other paid firemen.

For many years after the establishment of a regular department, there was still a Volunteer Fire Department, although, except in times of extreme emergency, it was mainly a social group.

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In November, 1928, Charles Henning, a former volunteer, a U.S. Navy man having served on a battleship in World War I was hired as Chief. He served as head of the department until June 1954. Also in 1928, three new fire trucks were purchased, a Seagraves pumper, a Seagraves service truck and a Dodge booster. The pumper was a 1000gpm centrifugal pumper. The service truck contained all kinds of equipment, and many wood truss-type ladders, the longest being 55 feet. The Dodge booster truck carded 175 gallons of water, a 300 gpm centrifugal pump, a booster line in a basket, a few soda acid extinguishers, and some tools.

The Depression years did not spare the city of Royal Oak. Taxes could not be collected, all departments had to cut budgets, equipment began to fail regularly, retiring police and firemen were not replaced.

The outbreak of World War II found the Royal Oak Fire Department ill prepared. The trucks were getting very old. The Seagraves and Dodges built in 1928 were thirteen years old, the 1923 LaFrance #75, even older, and its radiator leaked badly. A pail of water was kept next to the front of the truck. When an alarm would come, the driver would have to fill the radiator before leaving the station. The Bendix assembly on the starter would sometimes lock up. When it did, one of the guys would jump on the crank to break it loose. Driving the old LaFrance was considered the worst job in the fire department during World War II. One new truck had been ordered, a Ford - it was never delivered. Ford production had been entirely diverted to war production.

All the trucks were in pretty sad condition by 1941. There would be no new trucks until 1947. Many good men were lost to other jobs due to very low wages. Starting salary during this era was \$2,200.00. One of the many constraints of the day was the rationing of gasoline. Firefighters received "A-cards". This entitled them to two gallons of gas per week. A requisition for more gas could be approved if it was essential to the war effort, but Chief Henning would not requisition more and it was "make-do" with what they had.

After the end of the war a great many new homes were built. This brought the city more tax money to work with. The city found that \$100,000.00 had been saved during the war years, so a new city hall was built. Two new fire trucks were ordered from American LaFrance and were to be 500 gpm pumpers. One was to replace the old LaFrance #75 at Station #2 and one was to replace the 1928 Dodge at Station #1. These trucks were finally delivered in 1947.

In December 1953, Station #1 finally moved from the cramped quarters at the northwest corner of Main and Sixth to a large new headquarters at Sixth and Troy Streets. A new station was designed to be built at Rochester and Lawrence, just south of Thirteen Mile Road. The new station was completed in 1954. Stanley Schumaker and Philip Mains were promoted to Lieutenants and took command of new Fire Station #3. A four-wheel drive, 750 gpm pumper was purchased and sent to Station #3. The new station was assigned a fire district covering the area bounded by Gardenia, Campbell, Main and Fourteen Mile Road. Four men were assigned to each unit.

The city was growing fast. There were fewer grass fires and more house and car fires. Station #2 had to send a truck to all house fires in the north area. It was about this time that the city bought a 75 foot Peter Pirsch aerial ladder truck. This truck was sent to Station #1. The old Seagrave service truck was sold to the owner of the Oak Drive-in Theatre. For several years it was an attraction for young movie goers.

A new hospital was badly needed in the city. A fifty acre farm at Thirteen Mile Road and Woodward was offered at a very reasonable price for the purpose of constructing what has become William Beaumont Hospital. A fire station was needed nearer the hospital. The City owned land on the northeast corner of Thirteen Mile and Woodward. By the end of 1954, the City had constructed Fire Station #4.

Clyde Wray served as Chief from June 1954 until the winter of 1958 when he was forced to take a leave of absence because of illness. Wilfred Spears was named acting Chief at this time and, in August 1959, was named Fire Chief. He served until October 1972, when he retired.

Late one night in the summer of 1967, an urgent call for assistance came from the Detroit Fire Department. They had more than 100 fires going with no equipment or manpower to respond to at least 30 of them. Chief Spears summoned City Manager Ed Shafter, who in turn convened a special meeting of the City Commission. By 2:00 am the following morning a plan of assistance was worked out. A truck was dispatched to the Detroit Fire School grounds on Lonyo. A retired Detroit Lieutenant was stationed on the roof of the school. He would scan the horizon and direct a truck from the school to any fire that appeared to be spreading.

In November 1972, Assistant Chief Clayton Nicholes was promoted to Chief, retiring in March 1976. He was followed by Ronald Nancarrow who served as Chief until May 1983. It was during the Nancarrow years that the Department first began responding to medical runs with trained Emergency Medical Technicians.

Chief William Crouch served from June 1963, until his retirement in May 1996. While he was Chief, the Department instituted an Advanced Life Support, Paramedic program and began transporting patients in city owned ambulances in April 1995. In addition to the three ambulances, Chief Crouch oversaw the purchase of three Sutphen Engines and a 75 foot Sutphen ladder. A successful door-to-door firefighter millage campaign enabled the purchase. It was during this same time that the Department hired its first female firefighters.

Chief Donald Stanford was appointed Chief in June 1996, and served until October 1999, when he retired. During his time, the Department acquired a new Pierce Saber engine, a fourth Ford/McCoy Miller ambulance and talks began about replacing the aging Fire Station #3. Upon his retirement, Assistant Chief Richard Strehlke was named acting Chief, then appointed Chief in January, 2000.

Compiled from:

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Michael Pennanen, Firefighter May 2002