

August 1 2000

THE PLEASANT PRAIRIE FIRE DEPARTMENT

1947 To 1955

By Harold Bastrup Former Pleasant Prairie Fire Dept. Volunteer

In 1947 I married my wife Elsie, who was a farm girl who grew up on her fathers dairy farm located on I 192 about a mile North of highway 50. Her father gave us a old home located next to his and there we lived for the next nine years.

I was aware of the Pleasant Prairie Fire Department because as a teenager I had known a friend who lived in a rented home on the Kamerzelt farm and I would visit him occasionally. I become fascinated with the fire truck and fire tanker truck which was parked in the huge barn that faced highway 50, just West of the twin overheads, A wide blacktopped driveway from the barn extended out to the highway. The barn also contained some of the other township mobile equipment.

Now a resident of Pleasant Prairie Township, I applied for a position as a volunteer fireman. I attended a number of Saturday morning practices and later, at a monthly business meeting, was voted in as a member by the other volunteers. There were thirty one members of the department at the time.

Because of the weekly practices on Saturday, which usually lasted two or three hours, we were listed as a semi professional Fire Department. This helped in lowering insurance rates for people living in the Pleasant Prairie Township.

As it probably still is today you joined the Fire Department because you were interested in contributing to the health and welfare of the township, and enjoyed being a fireman. It certainly was not for the meager pay we received . We were paid two dollars per call and for each training session. This helped in some of our personal costs in belonging to the department.

The fireman's helmet, raincoat and boots were all that was provided by the township. Other items you paid for yourself including the cost of using your own vehicle, the additional equipment you would keep in your car such as first aid kit, pry bars, fire extinguishers etc. They were necessary because of the largeness of the township, and the fact some volunteers would arrive at the emergency before the fire trucks, and were expected to take charge before the equipment arrived from the lone fire station.

One plus in belonging to the Fire Department was that a county snow plow would clean our driveways after a heavy snow so we could get out to respond to a emergency. It was a priority assignment for township workers driving the plows.

Our Fire Chief in those days (all my nine years) was a man called "Shorty" Anderson. He lived directly across the street from the Fire Department. He worked at American Motors, but also, for a number of years, had a hamburger stand located in a building he had built in front of his home. His hamburgers were probably the original "Whoppers" long before McDonald was in business. People would drive out to his place from Kenosha and other county areas to buy his huge hamburgers.

"Shorty" was small in stature, hence the nickname. He was a good Chief and knew the business of running a efficient department. Taking charge at major fires we depended on his expertise in getting the job done. He worked tirelessly in getting support from the Pleasant Prairie Town Board, and he insisted on all his men being well trained. A number of times I am aware of his asking a volunteer to leave who did not meet his standards of training or make any real effort to be part of our fire team. "Shorty" received the same call out pay that we all received.

We only had one man who was paid as a full time employee of the department at that time and his name was Ray Smith. He lived in a home provided by the township located only a few feet from the Fire Department. There he lived with his wife. He was required to be at the department or at his home 24 hours a day, six days a week. Saturday was his day off and Shorty would spend the day at the department, or if he could not make it one of us would be asked to fill in. We would be paid for this.

Also, if there was something important Ray Smith needed to do one of us would fill in for him. We were the only township that had a full time employee for our Fire Department. Places such as Somers would be notified of an emergency by the activation of a siren on the roof of their Fire Department and also with phone calls to key personnel made by the Sheriff's department. At the Sheriff's Department they could send a radio signal to activate the siren, or if this would not work, dial a secret phone number which would activate the siren. Unfortunately the number would occasionally be learned by pranksters who would set off the siren in the early morning hours. Pleasant Prairie, however, had a full time man on duty at all times.

Ray Smith did not have a rank and often responded to a fire call in whatever he was wearing at the time of the call. He did not look professional to people who were used to seeing uniformed people manning fire equipment. He, however, was an excellent fireman who also maintained our rolling equipment at a state of readiness as well as keeping the station clean and other equipment ready to go. After a fire, where we had used heavy hoses, we would return to the station with Ray to hang up the hoses and clean up equipment, but mainly it was Ray who would see that all was ready to go. It was, in my estimation, a low paid and almost thankless job, but one he loved.

The Saturday morning training at the fire department lasted about two to three hours. We had a large enclosed room in the barn which had numerous couches around the walls, There the volunteers would critique recent fires, what was done right, and what could be improved on. Ray and Shorty would conduct training classes and occasionally we had a professional fireman, usually of rank, from the Kenosha Fire Department, who would lecture or demonstrate how to use equipment. If the equipment demonstrated was something new, and we felt we should have, we would put it on our "wish list" to try and get the Town Board to buy it for us. Because township budgets were limited, we often used money from our fund raising activities or sometimes got individual donors to buy it for us.

We also had cutting equipment which could be used at bad accidents (Long before the jaws of life and the other advanced equipment you have today.) We did not have resesitators because all Sheriff's units carried them. I was the qualified first aid instructor for the volunteers and all members had to qualify, first for a Standard Red Cross card and later a Advanced card. Long before the fantastic paramedic units we now have today, we were the best they had, but we were very good. I know of many incidents where stemming the flow of blood, restoring breathing, childbirth, caution with broken bone cases, splinting, etc were all handled well. The Sheriff's Department in those days provided the ambulance service.

Our "hands on" training on the fire engine and the water tank truck included the knowledge of working the pumps, proper hose use, storing equipment on the engine, how to fill up the tanker with water, (usually from city fire hydrants) and how to make use of water supplies in ponds and water storage tanks., All of us had to qualify as drivers, although there were some who refused to do it unless there was an absolute need . Myself, I jumped at any opportunity I had. For that time in history I still feel today we were the best trained Volunteer Fire Department in the county. I must add that after each Saturday training session some of the volunteers would stay around and play cards. Recently married, broke, my eagerness to get home to work on the remodeling of my new home, besides being a lousy card player, kept me away from this social activitie.

As for department volunteers activities, we had a business meeting once a month on a week day evening in the meeting room at the Department which I have described. We would also get together there on special occasions that were social. At our business meetings Ray's wife would earn a few extra dollars by preparing things such as beef sandwiches or sauerkraut and wieners. This was paid for from our recreation fund, a small amount which was taken from each years fund raising activities. Yes- they had beer after training, business meetings, or on social occasions but I can never remember that that was a problem. The "designated drivers" for that occasion would not drink and I can not

recall anyone ever falling off the fire truck on a response. Ray, our full time employee, never drank.

We also had yearly picnics where some of the contests included hose handling or trying to knock over your opponent with a hose spray. Of course we used minimum pressure.

Our fund raising activities included a yearly dance. All of us would sell tickets and it was always a big Pleasant Prairie happening with over a hundred people attending. Many of the persons who were asked to buy tickets would just make a cash donation and there were no hard sell tactics ever needed. The people of the township were always ready to donate to their Fire Department. We also sponsored a carnival, for three years as I recall, on a large lot on South Sheridan Road. All of us were required to help during the week with ticket taking and helping around the carnival grounds. (One mans wife refused to let her husband work there because of the "Girlie" show on the midway.) It was great fun working the carnivals and our children made out well as they could ride the numerous attractions for free, since we were the ticket takers. All of us had special firemen's shirts identifying us for these activities. Our fund raisers made us a lot of money, which was always used for equipment.

A FIRE CALL SCENARIO WENT SOMETHING LIKE THIS:

A fire report was received either at the home of our paid fireman or at a phone in the barn. They were on one phone line and both rang at the same time. (We also had a business line.)

A siren was activated on top of the fire station, and those of us who lived or worked nearby would hear it, and head for the station.

The location of the fire was written on a large black board, and the Ray's wife would start calling volunteers, those living closest to the fire or emergency first. We had no hand held phones or beep alarms of any

type in those days and had to be notified by phone. We did have two way radio contact with the Sheriff's Department on the Sheriff's-Kenosha Police radio frequency on both fire trucks, A few of the volunteers, those who could afford them, had radio receivers in their cars which were receivers only. In those days each and everyone of us had to study and pass a test required by the state in order to use the radios.

The full time driver would immediately leave for the location of the fire. No time was wasted in waiting for responding volunteers. Those who were near enough to make it to the truck would jump on. The engine was open and not covered in any way, not even the drivers position, which made it difficult in driving in bad weather (The tank truck had a cab) Those of us who arrived in time would jump on to the rear of the truck and stand on the back platform hanging onto the rail provided . There was also room for another on the front seat. Hanging on the back could be dangerous especially in heavy weather of any type be it a snowstorm.extreme cold, or rain. Our responding speed was 45 to 55 miles per hour depending on the weather conditions and condition of the county roads. (Two Somers firemen were killed during that period when their truck rolled over because the driver took a speedy turn onto another road. They were crushed to death when the truck rolled over on it's side as they were thrown off of the back of the truck.)

The first volunteers to arrive after the truck had left would bring the tank truck if it was necessary. Vehicle fires or first aid assists did not necessitate this.

Most of the firemen would arrive at the emergency, however, in their own vehicles. All of us had a license plate holder which read "Pleasant Prairie Fire Department" This gave us some leeway in carefully going through red lights or driving a little faster then the posted speed limits. We all took defensive driving courses which basically said you were to drive

reasonably in responding to an emergency. Both the Sheriffs Department and the Kenosha Police Department made allowances for a fireman responding to a call. I do not know of one incident, in my nine years on the department, when anyone had a accident or was stopped for unreasonable driving.

The volunteer firemen that arrived at the fire before the fire truck would take charge, and sometimes would use the equipment they carried in their cars if it was necessary. Almost always, they would put on his firemans helmet and sometimes coat and boots, depending on the circumstances. We also had a badge we all carried for identification. These were the mark of authority and other people arriving to help would follow our instructions. Life saving and animal saving was always the first priority. Caution was necessary so that fire personnel and those unexperienced persons helping would not put themselves in extreme physical danger. We were also trained in the handling of livestock and removing animals and fowl safely from the fire area. We even received instructions in our schooling on how to open the restraints that cattle had around their necks when they were in the barn, and how all animals responded to fear so as to be able to quiet them and lead them to safety, at the same time not putting ourselves in harms way. Another duty of the first volunteers to the scene was to try and determine if there was any water supply available be it a pond or water tank and figure out the best way to tap into the water.

When the fire engine arrived at the scene ether the paid track driver or the Fire Chief, if he was there, would direct the fighting of the fire. There was no other rank at that time.

If necessary other townships would be asked to send their men and equipment if the fire was a large one. Often the request was for their water tankers only in order to have a almost constant source of water. I have seen times when three different township tankers were used.

As all fire personnel can relate today we worked many major emergencies which are noteworthy from major bus accidents to the loss of five people in one fire. We delivered babies, removed leaking refrigerators from homes, (Yes we had them even in those days.) and assisted after a major tornado. As for the firemen, I can not recall any of us ever receiving serious injuries, a credit to our training.

When the fire was over we would make a report on the fire and any other pertinent information needed. Most times the volunteers would return to their work or homes but there was almost always someone ready to assist getting things back in order at the fire station for the next emergency.

So that how it usually went on a routine call. Of course there were many other ways we assisted at emergencies including accidents and even an occasional cat in a tree. (Note chapters 19-30-57 in my book. Some of these other assists by the volunteers of the Pleasant Prairie Fire Department are told.)

Recently, on one of my yearly visits to Kenosha, I saw the Pleasant Prairie Paramedics at work at a bad car accident. There were both male and female paramedics at work. I was impressed watching them do a great professional job. Women as volunteers was not done during my time, although the wives of the volunteers assisted with the dances, paperwork, humane aid when needed, and always saw that we were fed when we worked long emergencies. Women today have made a fine addition to the team. I have also have visited one of the Pleasant Prairie fire stations and looked at the great equipment the Fire Department has today compared to the one fire engine and tanker truck we had when I belonged.

So-----I hope those of you who are interested in the past history of

the Pleasant Prairie Fire department will find my recollections interesting. Many of us, from that time, have already gone to fight the fires in Hell along with the other Heavenly volunteers up there, however, those of us who still remain have many good memories of the past about our experiences working on a great Fire Department. You should all keep in mind that today will soon be history and you are part of it . Preserve that history.

Harold A. Bastrup

10-2000