

Firemen recall earlier days of service

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Gothenburg Volunteer Department witnesses many improvements.

Pagers have replaced the siren that blared for fires or accidents.

Equipment these days is much more sophisticated than most Gothenburg Volunteer Fire department veterans could imagine when they joined the department.

Early veterans remember when the fire hall moved from where it was located in the present city hall to a block south of Gothenburg Medical Arts clinic and finally to the 600 block of 10th Street.

Dale Franzen, a volunteer fire fighter for nearly 40 years and chief for 20, has many memories he wouldn't want to remember—most of them accidents.

Wally Trimble, a 34-year veteran, agreed.

“I don't want to go into accidents because there were too many bad ones,” Trimble said.

On a less serious note, Franzen recalls when the fire department was located at city hall and the police department.

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Franzen joined the department in 1969 when Plectrons—a single-channel emergency-alert radio receiver—were used to notify members of fires.

Interestingly, Plectrons were manufactured by the Plectron Corporation in Overton and used by responders across the country.

He remembers that about 10 firemen had Plectrons and called other members when there was a fire or accident. A siren behind the police station also blared.

“When it blew, we all went to the station not knowing what the call was,” Franzen said.

Franzen said funeral home employees, with assistance from local police officers, once responded to accidents and transported victims to the hospital or funeral home in a hearse.

That changed, he said, when a tragic car-train accident happened west of Gothenburg and the entire police force responded to the call.



“They realized there weren’t any police officers guarding the community so they asked the fire department to respond to accidents,” Franzen said.

As a result, the fire department bought its first ambulance in the 1970s with proceeds from the first Firemen’s Ball that year plus other donations.

Through the years, both Franzen and current fire chief Mark Ballmer said rescue calls have probably tripled and fire calls have decreased due to several factors.

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Those include better public awareness about how fires start and improved wiring in homes and businesses.

Although the number of calls vary each year, Ballmer—a 33-year fire veteran—estimated about 250 rescue and 50-plus fire calls.

Jim Hecox, a member for 30 years, attributed some of the drop in fire calls to Union Pacific Railroad officials curtailing more of their grass fires.

“People are also required to fill out burning permits and are more attentive to fires,” Hecox explained. “In the old days, they’d light a fire and leave.”

Much of the increase in rescue calls, several fire fighters said, can be attributed to Interstate 80 where high numbers of vehicles, at high speeds, travel day and night.

“Departments in places as Broken Bow and Ord have no idea how I-80 affects us,” Franzen said.

Fire department president Roben Ostergard said he gets a certain satisfaction from responding to a fire or rescue call “even if it’s not to our liking.”

Outside of law enforcement, Franzen noted that the fire department is the city’s first line of defense in the case of a disaster like a chemical spill.

Today, the department numbers 44 compared to 40 when Franzen first joined.

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Franzen remembers his brother Larry Franzen joining in August of 1970.

“That was the last time the roster wasn’t full,” he said.

Since then, there’s always been a waiting list, according to Ostergard who’s been a member for nearly 20 years.



Trimble said he’s thinking about retiring since he’s not as active as he used to be and “the youth coming up will help the department prosper for a long time.”

In addition to fighting fires and rescuing accident victims, Ostergard said the department is committed to community involvement.

For example, members do such things as help with River City Roundup, put on a city Fourth of July fireworks show and watch the skies when weather turns threatening.

Previously, they hosted a scholarship pageant for young women.

In celebrating the department’s centennial, Ostergard said it’s a great testament to the department and the city.

“Community members make up this department as volunteers,” he said.

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Rescue captain Jason Wagner, who's served for six years, said he's watched the department grow in different ways.

"And it's wonderful the community supports us," Wagner said.

Ostergard said he thinks the department has grown stronger and closer.

"That's a direct reflection of the community—Gothenburg's a strong community, therefore we have a strong fire department," he added.

ebarrett@gothenburgtimes.com 308-537-3636