

COVINA VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

FIRE DEPARTMENT

by Martha Olson

In the early 1900's the signal for fire was the ringing of the church bell. The whole community was alerted to the emergency. Fire was a real threat to the new city of Covina.

A small group of businessmen and nearby ranchers organized a volunteer fire unit. Two of these early firemen were Mr. E. G. Clapp and Mr. J. R. Hodges. When Covina was incorporated as a city, several of the fire volunteers took city jobs and the City Council appointed Alois Nigg fire chief in 1902.

Mr. Nigg was the local blacksmith and his trade came in handy many times when equipment needed to be designed or repaired. He built a horse-drawn hook and ladder wagon to supplement the hand-drawn hose cart. A shed was built on College Street to house this equipment. When the fire bell rang, all the volunteers had to drop their work and run to help with the equipment. Mr. Nigg was small in stature and he encouraged young men, boys or whoever was available first to join in and pull the hose cart. If school was out young boys were always first to arrive at a fire, so Mr. Nigg, very wisely, made them feel useful by helping with the hose cart. A Winton automobile was used to pull the hook and ladder wagon after a few years.

Fire fighting was not easy work in these early days, and few buildings were saved from total destruction. The nearby buildings were usually unharmed, and no lives were lost due directly to fires. Mr. Nigg resigned in 1910 and was succeeded by Frank Kendall.

Mr. Kendall was the butcher and left many a customer waiting for their order of meat during the next twenty-eight years. He was fire chief during the period when Covina changed from a very small community into a growing modern city. The city needed a more professional and better equipped fire department. Mr. Kendall organized the volunteers by establishing regular meetings with drills and practices. Each man was assigned special duties and were expected to learn their jobs. Uniforms were ordered along with other much needed equipment. The volunteers raised most of this money through social activities; this supplemented the money from the fire tax assessed by the city. These functions not only helped finance the department but encouraged a camaraderie among the men.

In 1911 the shed on College Street was no longer sufficient for the needs of the larger community. The city awarded a contract to build a firehouse and jail on the College site, the total cost being \$6000.00. The completed firehouse was a real pride to the volunteers as well as all of the citizens of Covina. Many dances and parties were held there, and it became a gathering place for the volunteers and their friends. Covina's town band held practices at the firehouse once a week for a short time before World War I. The building was very well used.

This firehouse and jail may be seen in many pictures taken by C. W. Tucker. On special occasions, such as a parade or bond drive, the 1914 Boyd fire truck was decorated with flags and perhaps a picture of President Wilson. The fire truck was ivory-white with gold trim; painted on the side was Covina Fire Department No. 1 and all the metal was nickel plated. The volunteers in full dress uniform made a very exciting addition to any special function.

The firehouse building has served Covina as a jail until very recently. A new City Hall building was erected in 1930 which included housing for the fire department.

The city has long needed a place to display the many pictures and memorabilia of its history. The Covina Valley Historical Society is making this a reality, with the help of all the people of Covina, by restoring the 1911 firehouse to be used as a museum. This will provide the community again with a gathering spot to refresh memories of some and to inform our young people of the rich historical background of their city.