

THE EARLY YEARS

Indiana residents received their first piece of fire-fighting equipment in 1834 – more than four decades before the Indiana Fire Association was formed.

The 1834 “engine” was actually a hand-operated pump on wheels, was limited in its effectiveness by the source of water available to pump from, and by the fact that it had a relatively small diameter hose.

It was reported in Arms and White’s 1880 history of Indiana County that “When it arrived, it looked so small and insignificant that the town council refused to pay for it and the makers sued the borough for the price of the “engine”. “No one had any confidence in the machine; it was taken apart and stored in the attic of the courthouse.” The disassembled engine was still in storage on February 12, 1840 when the Ephraim Carpenter home at Philadelphia Street and Carpenter Avenue was heavily damaged by a fire that started near a stove pipe. The building was the oldest house in Indiana at the time and was the site of the first session of court in 1807.

The blaze renewed the call from the townspeople for better fire protection and the 1834 engine was taken to a wagon shop in town to be reassembled.

The engine made a better showing when a later fire damaged a hatter’s shop in the 500 block of Philadelphia Street.

The engine “was hunted up and brought to the scene of the conflagration and demonstrated that it would throw all the water that could be supplied to it. After this a small house was built on the jail lot and the engine was properly cared for and has performed admirable ever since.” 1880 history reported.

Nineteenth century Indiana, like many other towns at this time, was susceptible to big fires. Most of the buildings, mills, stable, and foundries were constructed of wood. The common heating and cooking fuels were wood and coal which provided more fuel for the fires.

In 1865 the Black Horse Hotel along Philadelphia Street caught on fire. A slight rain helped contain the flames, but still three stables and additional buildings were destroyed. The loss was set at \$9,000 which was an exorbitant amount at that time.

A report for the Indiana Democrat wrote, “As is usual when an alarm of fire is given in this place, the old machine (apparently the 1834 engine), by courtesy called a fire engine, was hauled to the scene of the conflagration, but was found to be entirely useless. About the time that the fire had destroyed all that it could reach, the engine started working but at the first effort the rotten, worn-out hose burst. . .the best thing that could have been done with it would have been to run it into the fire.”

Indiana’s residents urged the borough council to acquire a more effective fire engine to protect the town and the Democrat suggested that citizens be called upon to donate money for its purchase.

“What is needed quite as much as an engine is a fire organization to take charge of the apparatus and keep it in good order,” the Democrat reported. “We have just the material in this place for a good fire company and believe that if the proper encouragement is given that an organization can be started that will be the means of saving much property and perhaps the lives of some of our citizens.”

In 1865 council purchased a second-hand engine in Philadelphia for \$1,000. After it was delivered it was sent to Pittsburgh to have it converted to a “suction engine” for an additional cost of \$500. But it never worked well and some years later it was dismantled and sold for scrap.

The Indian Weekly Messenger reported in 1879 that Indiana had several organized fire departments in the preceding years, but for various reasons those companies fell apart.

In 1878 another company was started, this time with a constitution and bylaws. The citizens contributed \$500 to buy uniforms for the members. The new company was called the Indiana Fire Company and Library Association.

The borough council also paid for a two-story engine house for the company on North Sixth Street across from the jail. The council also bought a chemical engine, a hook/ladder truck, buckets, and other equipment.

“The town is now supplied with a very good fire department that is well equipped and efficient,” the newspaper reported. “The cost of buildings and apparatus will total about \$7,000. A fire alarm bell has been put on the building and is to be

operated by electricity from a dozen or more boxes located in different sections of the town. The present company is composed of 125 members”

LENDING A HAND

When the association was formed, there was no municipal water supply system for the consolidated boroughs of Indiana and West Indiana. In contrast to today when spectators are instructed to stand back and stay out of the firefighters’ way, the townspeople in the 1800’s were encouraged to take an active part in firefighting operations. Help was welcome in getting the early firefighting machines to the scene of the fire and then in bringing an adequate supply of water to the machines through the use of the “bucket brigades.”

To assist the volunteer bucket brigade, the association at one time was equipped with a light wagon that carried 100 buckets.

When a fire was discovered, residents living nearby would sound the alarm. Firemen and able-bodied young men would run on foot from their homes and places of employment to the firehouse. Using long ropes they pulled the pieces of equipment to the fire.

Others joined in as they traveled down the street. Sometimes the firemen and townspeople would jump on the back of a passing horse-drawn wagon and pull the fire-fighting equipment behind.

At the fire they attached one end of the hose to the engine and dropped the other end into a well, cistern, or stream. A dozen men would work the pumps to draw water to the engine.

The firemen and citizens helping would draw water from Marsh Run if the fire was on the east side of town and from Paper Mill Run if the fire was on the west side of town. Water wells were used when possible.

Newspapers took note of the contribution women made to the bucket brigade that battled the February 12, 1840 fire at the Ephraim Carpenter home (located at Philadelphia Street and Carpenter Avenue). Water to fight the fire came from the basement of a nearby building. Women passed the empty buckets to the basement and the men returned the filled buckets to the fire engine.

IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

In March 1886, G. W. Hood formed the Clymer Water Company in West Indiana and Indiana. It would draw water from a well drilled two years earlier. Eventually 41 hydrants were installed with two reservoirs. This provided a holding total of 300,000 gallons of water. By the summer of 1887, 5 ½ miles of cast iron pipes were installed in the borough and filled with water.

But two costly fires in Indiana near the turn of the 20th century proved conclusively that the growing Indiana community needed even better fire protection.

On December 10, 1899 a fire destroyed the Christ Episcopal Church. The Church had been remodeled only four years earlier.

An editorial in the Indiana County Gazette three days later said the church fire demonstrated clearly two things: the town needed a more reliable fire alarm system and a more audible fire alarm system. The editorial also noted that even when the firemen were on the scene of the church fire the water pressure was too low to be of much value. “Repeated efforts to get a stream to the ceiling of the church were without results because the water wasn’t there,” according to the newspaper editorial.

The needs for a better alarm system and stronger water pressure were demonstrated again on December 1, 1905 when fire destroyed Clark Hall. This was a boy’s dormitory at Indiana Normal School.

“An unfortunate feature was that the people of the town had been notified that the fire alarm whistle would be tested and regulated at that time and that they should not be uneasy if they heard the alarm,” the Indiana County Gazette reported in its December 6 edition. “This fact deterred many from going to the fire when the alarm was sounded.”

As in the Episcopal Church fire, inadequate water pressure was blamed for dooming the building. Borough council discussed the Clark Hall fire, noting that the lack of water pressure “demonstrates that the town is in constant danger of destruction by fire.”

After the Clark Hall fire, council gave the Clymer Water Company five days to comply with its contract to provide adequate water pressure.

A new reservoir with a capacity of three million gallons was built on Gompers Hill, east of Indiana, and a new pumping station was built. By 1913, there were 18 miles of water mains and 90 fire hydrants in the borough.

THE WAR YEARS

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the IFA made long runs to respond to alarms, sometimes as far away as Barnesboro, which is now known as Northern Cambria. Those responses became less frequent as other volunteer fire companies were established around the county.

In mid-1941, when it appeared America might be drawn into war, the Indiana firemen discussed ways to protect their fire station and equipment. Sheet metal was secured over the windows of the station and it was suggested that a full-time watchman should protect the trucks.

Members of the department had their blood typed so they could be emergency blood donors.

During blackout drills during the World War II years the IFA members dispatched one truck to each of the four wards.

By 1943, with more and more young men serving in the military, the IFA was hard-pressed to maintain adequate manpower. To compensate, some auxiliary firemen were approved to serve with regular IFA members at fire scenes.

In the post World War II years building inspections began with the goal of having safer communities. The firemen aimed at getting a better rating with the Middle Department Association of Fire Underwriters. Through their efforts Indiana was rated Class B, the highest possible rating for a community with a volunteer fire department.

In the mid 1950s it became compulsory for rest homes to be inspected and plans were made on how to approach fires in those special circumstances. Invalids were registered and special decals were placed on windows to help firemen locate people who needed help in escaping fires.

In 1957, to meet the changing needs of the more complex department, Chief William Simpson suggested a training officer and a fire prevention committee be created in the organization.

Indiana area residents increasingly relied on and expected their fire department to respond in other types of emergencies – to pump flooded basements, to perform physical rescues, and to clear away storm damages.

“We started out at a house fire and never came back home for three days,” recalled a member of the department’s service during the flood of 1977.

During the flood, IFA members rescued stranded motorists at the bottom of Sample Run Hill and participated in searches near Tanneryville and along the Conemaugh River.

By 1958 it was becoming evident that residents of White Township would have to participate more fully in the financial operation of the IFA. Negotiations began between the borough and township. In 1960 the township agreed to pay \$5,000 annually for fire department protection.

In 1963 Chief Simpson, fearful for students living in John Sutton Hall on IUP campus, had a pre-fire planning conference with out-of-town fire chiefs.

During the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and until the mid 1990s the IFA – unlike many other volunteer fire departments – did not have manpower problems. Many current members had to spend two years or more on a waiting list before a vacancy opened to allow them to join the department.

One member recalled, “It was harder to get into the Indiana Fire Association than it was to get into the country club. It was prestige if you were accepted into the fire department.”

NEW CHALLENGES

The advancements in equipment and training are some of the biggest changes in the association. The members are responsible for taking their yearly HAZMAT training. In addition to regular monthly meetings and training sessions, some members belong to committees that meet once or twice a month. Now basic fire training is over 120 hours of training and is broken into four courses. There used to be a waiting list, but the list has slowly dissolved, as it is getting harder to get volunteers.

The late 1990s was one of the few times when the IFA struggled to maintain its ranks. The minutes of the October 1999 meeting mentions that, "The President challenged each member to bring in a new member prior to the next meeting... Members were reminded that in most cases, because of the module style of the 120 hour (basic training) course, the new members can take up to two years to complete the IFA required training."

At the March 2001 meeting it was commented on the "shortfall of members currently in the association and the continued strain on those who are active...Bottom line, we need more volunteers."

Today, when a new member joins the Indiana Fire Association, they are placed in one of four active companies. Included in the four companies are members that also belong to the rescue squad and the water rescue team.

Company five is the designation for the retired members. The members of company five have served the association for at least fifteen years and no longer wish to respond to calls or serve as an administrator for the association.

In 2002, the association created company six as a way for the association to retain members who because of the constraints would have had to retire from active status. Members of company six are considered part time members who still carry pagers, respond to calls, and can assist the association by serving on committees or as executive officers.

A change was made in 2005 which would permit students who moved to Indiana to attend IUP or neighboring colleges to join the association as an associate member. In order for the proposed member to qualify for membership, they must be at least 18 years of age, have completed the essentials of firefighting program, be in good standing with their home and be residing within the fire association's service area.

The fire association received notice in 2007 that they received a federal grant to be used to purchase a fire prevention trailer. The grant provided 90% of the funding leaving the remaining 10% to be funded by the IFA. The remaining 10% was funded through a partnership between the IFA and the Indiana Kiwanis.