



San Rafael Volunteer Fire Department, c. 1910

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Marin History Museum Volunteer

In July of 2020, Station 51 of the San Rafael City Fire Department moved into the new public safety center at Fifth Avenue and D Street. The previous station house had been located on the corner of C and Fifth since 1917. The original fire house, pictured above, was located further down C Street closer to Fourth. Formed in 1874 by William Miller and J.B. Rice, the all-volunteer department, led by sheriff James Tunstead, was made up of forty-five men that included carpenters, painters, blacksmiths, merchants, a school superintendent, all who paid dues to help equip the department. In 1875, the department and local citizens put on its first annual 'Fireman's Ball' to raise money for the fire house. Newspaper advertisements promoted the affair writing that, "An excellent supper will be provided at the Mahon House with music by Willis' Band of San Francisco." Tickets for the ball were, for the time, a rather steep \$2.50.

In the early decades, the department had hose carts that had to be pulled by volunteers to the scene of the fire. By the 1890's there were over fifty fire hydrants that were fed by a gravity-water system and the hose carts were pulled by horses 'rented' from local stables. This system came under a great deal of criticism in 1907 as too slow and antiquated. A pair of iron-gray horses named "Tom & Jerry" were purchased for the department along with a hook and ladder carriage and an alarm system that rang a bell at the fire house and in the volunteer's homes. The horses became quite popular as they were always the first on the scene when a fire broke out. In fact, when a local circus was in town, the owner, on seeing Tom and Jerry being exercised, went to the fire house and repeatedly offered \$750 for the pair. Fire Chief Schneider, losing his patience, threatened to turn the fire hose on any circus employee who subsequently turned up at the station.

This system of firefighting often involved residents who would come to the aid of the volunteers. One late night in June of 1913, a fire broke out in a shed behind the mansion of

William Lichtenberg across the street from the Dominican Convent. Aroused from their slumber by the fire alarm, scores of female students joined other neighbors in forming a 'bucket brigade' and helped extinguish the flames before it consumed the entire house. The following year, the department purchased a motorized vehicle called a "Pope chemical wagon" that was a pump and hose apparatus that ended the fire-fighting careers of Tom and Jerry. It wasn't until 1945 that the first, full-time fire-chief became a paid employee. Over the years, more paid positions were added to supplement the volunteer brigade. Today, there are more than ninety paid employees that, along with firefighting, provide emergency medical care, fire suppression expertise and emergency preparedness training.

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