

LEHI FIRE DEPARTMENT



ONE HUNDRED YEARS

CHIEF EKINS

History of the Lehi Fire Department

1901 - 1950

Few cries struck more fear in the hearts of Americans than did "fire!" Improper stove and chimney connections, knocked over lamps, and children playing with matches was a worry to everyone, particularly during long winter nights. Sparse moisture and summer sun-dried out grasses surrounding towns. Lack of water and proper equipment put towns people at the mercy of fire resulting from haphazard lightning or human carelessness. Mining camps with their cramped lumber buildings were vulnerable to fast-spreading fires. Aware of these perils, citizens everywhere stood ready to fight for their homes or businesses with bucket, shovel, and wet gunny sacks.

The first fire of record in Lehi was recorded in the journal of William F. Butt. He noted that in 1859, nine years after the first settlers arrived in what was then called Dry Creek, a young boy named Lewis "put down a flat iron on the corral and the fence and burnt up a valuable stallion of Porter Rockwell." Butt does not add if the young boy became another notch on the gun handle of the notorious Mormon lawman who was noted for his fine taste in horse flesh.

The most spectacular holocaust of the 19th century Lehi was the meeting house fire of Sunday, February 5, 1870. John Bushman had built a hot fire in the stove of the second story quorum room for an early morning prayer meeting. A lump of plaster on the wall near the stove had broken off leaving the lath exposed. The intense heat caused the partition to ignite and the fire quickly burned through the ceiling onto the shingled roof. Several boys playing outside the building, which stood on the southwest corner of second west and first south, noticed smoke

pouring from the building. James M. Kirkham noted in his diary under this date that at 12:15 p.m. as "Elder I.H. Evans was speaking from the stand D.W. Thomas came to the door of the meeting house and notified the people the house was on fire." Though the warning was, "don't get excited brethren and sisters, but the meeting house is on fire," pandemonium broke out. The entire congregation arose and rushed to the door. According to eyewitnesses, most men completely "lost their heads." The kerosene lamps that lighted the hall were thrown out the windows, and men began tearing up the floor to save it from the flames. One man called for an axe to chop down the pillars to allow the ignited roof to cave in. Others began tearing off the cornice. Despite the hysteria, some men maintained their wits. John Stewart was the hero of the hour. After cutting a hole through the roof with an axe he yelled for the men below to string out across the street to the east to form a bucket brigade. Their efforts soon emptied the well of John C. Nagle. They then reformed across the street to the North and emptied Israel Evans' well before the flames were finally put out. Although the billowing smoke could be seen all over town, the fire was contained to the roof itself. James Kirkham sadly noted in his diary, that "more damage was done to the building by men tearing it to pieces than the fire did." The hall was quickly rebuilt and used as a meeting house until 1972.

Fortunately, few serious fires occurred in Lehi until the 1890s when the community's population increased with the building of the Lehi Sugar Factory. In March 1899 the new central school building (located at the northeast corner of Center and 600 North) caught fire when chimney sparks ignited a sparrow's nest on the roof. The building was spared by quick action from school personnel and nearby neighbors. The near disaster prompted an April first editorial in the Lehi Banner:

Occasionally we are given a reason showing us the necessity of having some adequate protection against fire in our city. Lucky for us these lessons do not occur very often and losses from fire have been very small here but no one can tell when a fire might break out and do a great amount of damage. If it gets started, it will burn until all within reach has been consumed for we have no way of stopping it. The city can scarcely afford to put in extensive water works . . . but the city council could protect the property by purchasing a chemical fire engine which would answer all purposes here and be a great benefit to the city. We should then be prepared for the worst and if a fire ever broke out in our city we could successfully meet it. The engine might soon save more than it cost and it would immediately reduce insurance rates here. The subject is worth considering.

City officials may have mulled over the necessity of doing something about fire protection at this time, but they took no action. Two years later a group of young civic minded Lehi men met together and organized the "Lehi Volunteer Fire Department" without city sponsorship. On February 28, 1901, the Lehi Banner noted that during the past week:

The members of the Lehi Fire Brigade met in the City Hall Tuesday night and organized. Chief Divine and Captain Wood of Salt Lake Fire Department were present and gave the boys some instructions and encouragement for the steps that had been taken. Figure 1 shows eleven members of the Lehi Fire Brigade next to the hose cart.



Figure 1 Member of the Lehi Fire Department in 1901

Butt (chief), Prime Evans (assistant chief), T.J. Wadsworth (secretary), and Ren Wells (treasurer). Other members listed alphabetically included: Ted Bateman, George Beck, jr., Austin Bennett, B.W. Brown, jr., Dick Darling, Joseph E. Dorton, C.W. Earl, Abe Gumundsen, James Haggie, George Hammer, Sam Hammer, Sam Hanson, Henry Lewis, Dr. H.C. Merrihew, H.E. Osterloh, P.N. Peterson, James E. Ross, S.W. Ross, John Swisher and Josh Whitman.

Firemen S.W. Ross and Prime Evans, and their friend L.A. Phillips, served as self-trained “lawyers” drew up the department’s constitution and bylaws which were printed in the March 14, 1901 Lehi Banner and are included in Appendix A. These regulations implied that the city evidently owned some fire apparatus, buckets, ropes, ladders, and an axe or two. Public pressure began to build, however, and the April 18, 1901 Lehi Banner reported that *in a special session of the city council a committee was appointed to study the issue*. The following week’s newspaper reported that *the committee had traveled to Payson and Eureka to examine their fire engines*. Apparently the water engine in Payson proved inadequate during several fires. The April 25 Lehi Banner editorialized that *if the city did not show its gratitude to the volunteer firemen that “thinking people will say the city is ungrateful to those liberal minded men, and if a fire should break out the council would be condemned on every hand and justly too.”*

The July 11, 1901 Lehi Banner reported that *the city council had decided to buy an engine from the Salt Lake Hardware Company for \$570.00.*



Figure 2 1901 Hand pumper

Publicity for the mechanism announced that it weighed 800 pounds, and the hose cart carried

enough hose to reach a city block with the capability of “easily” throwing the water that distance. Figure 2 shows the 1901 hand pumper, now located in the Hutchings Museum. An 18 by 26 foot fire station was erected to the east of the city hall at 172 West Main (presently the west half of the Lehi Bakery). This building was completed in the first week of January 1901. Figure 3.



Figure 3 Lehi Fire Department at the right

Two water cisterns for the hand pumper were also erected on Main Street. One was near the city hall and the other was on First West.

The earliest recorded fire in which the hand pumper was used occurred only a few feet west of the fire station in a small storage building connected to the city hall. *Fortunately, city night-watchman John D. Woodhouse discovered the fire on his rounds before it had spread beyond the frame building. City hall and the West Main business district were saved. The damage to the storage shed and its contents (electric light globes, election booths, etc.) amounted to only \$250-300 (Lehi Banner, March 24, 1904).*



Figure 4 Lehi Fire Department in 1910

Figure 4 was taken in front of Lehi’s first fire station in 1910. Front row, left to right: Don Wadsworth, Sylvester Evans, Eli Batchelor,

Darrow Lott, M.S. Lott, Moroni Royle, LeRoy Davis, J. Freeman Royle. Back row: Oliver G. Kirkham, Melvin Beck, H.P. Hardy, Charles Goates, and Heber Hart.

When the city curfew bell (installed in the belfry of city hall in 1887) sounded its fire signal, members of the fire brigade literally made a run. The 800-pound pumper was pulled by sheer man power to the scene of the fire. Later it was pulled by Ira Racker's team of horses. Then, as now, numerous citizens followed the engine to the scene of the fire. The help from able-bodied citizens was more than welcome in operating the hand pumper, which quickly wore the firemen out. Water was pumped from irrigation ditches when available, and from wells and water troughs when it was not. Lack of water was not the only problem early fire fighters faced. The June 6, 1914 Banner noted that *while attempting to put out a fire in a piano box of Joseph Hammer's, the water pressure in the pumper was only about one third of the normal. After the fire was extinguished, close examination of the nozzle revealed that some "miscreant had done a dastardly deed" by pounding a wooden block into the nozzle and then screwing the cap back on again.* The piano box fire was the least of the department's worries in 1914. In a departmental squabble in December, Chief John Cooper resigned to the department. He refused to resign to Mayor William F. Gurney because the department "refused to give him the material for a report." The department in a communication to the mayor stated that they "do not know one John Cooper," and rather than give him a report tendered its resignation as a body. The controversial matter was referred to the mayor and the committee on the fire department "with power to act." The matter was ultimately resolved in March 1915, H.M. Royle Jr. was appointed chief of the fourteen-man force. During Royle's term, an electric gong replaced the curfew bell as the city's fire alarm. This gong was operated from the Mountain Bell Telephone offices at 46 West Main.

When a fire call came into the central operator, she not only turned on the alarm, but could identify to in calling firemen the exact location of the fire. This system proved unsatisfactory, however, and the bell in the city hall belfry continued to be used. Under Royle's leadership firemen painted all fire hydrants through the city. In a May 11, 1915-letter to the mayor and city council the fire chief had noted that "it is a hard matter to distinguish a fire hydrant from a (hitching) tie post after dark owing to the lack of paint."

Chief Royle was responsible for obtaining the city's first motorized fire truck in 1916. The modified 1914 Ford automobile was purchased from the White-Savage Motor Company of Salt Lake City at a cost of \$2,500. The truck was capable of carrying eight men or 1,500 feet of hose, and came equipped with a mechanical hose reel, 35 gallon water tank with extra acid and soda bottles, a 38-foot extension ladder, a plaster hook, two portable lanterns, two electric headlights, two spotlights, a hand siren, a 12-inch rotary gong, three portable three-gallon hand chemical tanks, a fire axe, a crow bar, a door pinch bar, and two stationary body nozzle holders. Though the truck pulled the old 800 pound pumper to fires, manpower was still necessary to operate the unit. The proud brigade can be seen in front of the main street fire station demonstrating this equipment in figure 5. The 1901 hand pumper is on the left and the hose cart is behind the 1914 car.

Members include, left to right:
Sylvester Broadbent, H.P. Hardy,



Figure 5 Member of the Lehi Fire Department in 1914

Hamilton Laird, Robert M. Allred, Harvey Lewis, Edwin “Ted” Street, Ira Racker, and Chief Melvin Beck. The picture was taken in front of the fire station where the Lehi Bakery now stands.

With the addition of the new truck, it quickly became apparent that the fire station was inadequate. After completion of the new city offices in the Memorial Building on Center Street, it was initially intended to tear down the old city hall and the fire station so that a new fire station could be built on the site. The August 26, 1920 Lehi Sun printed a *request for bids to demolish both buildings*. This plan was not

followed. Instead the basement of the 30 by 30-foot city hall, which had been used by the fire department for a meeting room, was filled in and the entire building was remodeled into a fire station in 1924. In 1928, fire chief Claude Curtis obtained city approval to purchase a 1925-



Figure 6 1925 Waterous Fire Equipment on White Ford truck

Waterous fire equipment on a White

truck chassis equipped with the latest American LaFrance pumping equipment. Figure 6. This photograph was taken in front of the Utah State Capitol Building.

The largest fire in the history of Lehi up to that time occurred in July 1931. Rose Wilkins remembers her little son Jerry coming into the house to fill a syrup bucket with water. She thought that he was playing a game with his friend, but she quickly saw that the boys had started the Wilkins barn on fire.

The dryness of the sun-bleached wood caused the flames to be out of control within minutes. Though the barn was less than 100 feet from the fire station there was very little water available. The fire quickly spread to the historic Hammer Livery Stable, burning it to the ground, and threatened main street's business district. Men and boys climbed on tops of buildings all over town to prevent roofs from catching fire from blowing debris. Ultimately only \$5,000 damage was done to two barns, the livery stable, a few sheds, and the main city telephone cable.

Another historic Lehi landmark, the Kirkham Building, had housed James Kirkham and Sons Store, and later the Lehi Banner and Lehi Sun Offices. Built on the north east corner of 100 East and 600 North in 1894, this fine structure was destroyed by fire in the fall of 1934. The October 4, 1934 Lehi Free Press speculated that *the fire could have been caused by several factors including: spontaneous combustion, mice or rats finding matches, electric wiring problems, and/or "Firebugs."* Ultimately the latter were identified as the source when patrons returning from a movie at the Royal Theater earlier in the evening recalled seeing "unknown persons" moving about inside the building.

In addition to firebugs and incendiaries, the fire department faced other difficulties. Lack of water, both due to summer's drought or winter's freeze, was a persistent problem. The fire station was unheated and water could not be stored in the truck's tank during winter months. Cold weather also made the Dodge truck hard to start. Recognizing the need for a new fire station, the city council in the fall of 1938 announced that an addition to the Memorial building would be built immediately south of the city jail. The new station was constructed of materials from the old city hall and fire station, and connected into the steam heating plant of the Memorial Building.

Thomas Powers, who served as Lehi Fire Chief from 1934 to 1951, was chief when the city purchased a 1941 American LaFrance Ford fire truck. Figure 7. Shown in the truck was driver Toff Glover. The riders were Tom Powers, John Broadbent, Lowell Brown, Alex Jameson, Ferd Evans, and Afton Giles.



Figure 7 1941 American LaFrance fire truck

Members that were Absent from the picture were, Noble Evans, Tom Woffinden and Roger Price. Note that the old fire station in the background also housed the police department and ambulance department and is now part of the Hutchings Museum. The first major action this 500-gallon-per-minute pumper saw was the September 1944 burning of the Royal Theater on State Street. Theater manager Cliff Miller, reported a \$50,000 loss. Partly covered by insurance, the building was rebuilt and opened again on March 22, 1945.

During Chief Powers term, the fire department added another larger fire truck. A 1944 American LaFrance Ford with a larger tank and better fire fighting capabilities. Figure 8. He was also instrumental in adding the departments' first



Figure 8 1944 American LaFrance fire truck

brush truck. The truck was a 1948 Ford and was used to ferry men and equipment to and from brush and grass fires. Figure 9.

During the first fifty years, the Lehi Fire Department went from fighting fires using buckets and emptying wells, troughs and ditches to their first purchase, the 1901 hand pumper. Throughout the years the fire department continued to upgrade its equipment and trucks.



Figure 9 1948 Ford brush truck

Lehi had twelve firemen serve their city as fire chief starting with J.N. Butts in 1901 and ending with Thomas Powers in 1951. Although the Lehi Centennial History lists M.W. Ingalls as Fire Chief as early as 1899 under Mayor Mosiah Evans. The Lehi Centennial states *"It was the twenty-fifth City Council 1900-1902 which took the initial steps to provide the city with a fire department. It purchased a number of ropes, buckets and ladders as equipment. They also sent a committee to Payson and Eureka to study the fire departments existing there, and by ordinance created a fire department in Lehi."* The Twenty Sixth City Council 1902-1904 was *"directed to improving the efficiency of the newly created fire department."* See appendix B for a complete list of Fire Chiefs.