

Historical Ramblings

Lompoc's Volunteer Fire Fighters

Lompoc has always depended on dedicated volunteers to assist with community-wide efforts in social services, social and fraternal organizations and churches. One group of volunteers, that no longer exists, was the force of volunteer firemen who augmented the city's full-time paid firefighters.

The men who comprised the volunteer fire department were simply community minded fellows who were dedicated to a valuable community service. They came from all walks of life. Some were local business owners. Others were employed by local businesses and organizations, such as the school district, retailers and flower and vegetable growers. These proud volunteers were not firefighters by trade, but they held their own next to the paid professionals.

The only fire station in town was on South G Street, where fire station number one is still located. Every Tuesday evening, the volunteers gathered there for "fire practice." As a child, I always thought they started fires on Tuesday nights to practice putting them out. This, of course, was not the case. At these sessions, they learned how to handle the hoses, drive the trucks and learn the behavior of various types of fires. Training also included the occasional controlled burn of an unwanted structure. Fire practice was also an occasion for socializing with the other volunteers as well as the firefighters on duty. The volunteers were a close-knit group who were readily accepted by the paid staff and recognized as an important addition to Lompoc's firefighting efforts.

Each volunteer was issued a set of turnouts, with heavy rubber boots attached to canvas overalls, all held up by substantial suspenders. The turnouts were always situated next to the bed, inside out, ready to be jumped into if a late night fire beckoned. When a fire call came in during daylight hours, the hearty group would often dash home from their jobs, jump into their fire gear and rush to the fire station.

This was a time before pagers and cell phones. The method of alerting the volunteers was by a loud siren mounted atop a recycled oil derrick situated behind the fire station. From the time the siren was activated to the time the volunteers arrived at the station, only a few minutes had elapsed. The town of Lompoc was so small, that the fire siren could be heard in every neighborhood. All the volunteers lived within a short distance of the station – some so close, they could run from their homes and be at the station within a couple of minutes. There were designated volunteers to drive the unwieldy trucks and others to jump on the sides and back to assist with the hoses once they arrived at the scene of the fire.

As the town grew, and volunteer fire fighters lived further from the station, state-of-the-art equipment was issued to them, replacing the siren. The equipment was called a “Plectron,” a radio receiver, the size of a large toaster, which lived right next to the turnouts at the bedside. The volunteers were summoned by a high-pitched screeching tone, followed by an announcement of the type of fire and its location. Many wives were unconvinced that this was progress. They preferred the siren over the nerve-shattering jolt provided by an electronic screaming machine!

The volunteer firemen served the city well, offering valuable assistance at many major Lompoc fires, including those that devastated the vegetable packing sheds on West Laurel Avenue, the Eagle’s Hall on South H Street, the Sloyd Building at the Lompoc Elementary School and the La Mesa Theatre on West Ocean Ave.

Lompoc continued to grow. The volunteer force dwindled and eventually disbanded. Today, firefighters are formally trained at fire science academies and also serve as emergency medical personnel and arson investigators. The volunteers of days gone by had only one purpose – connect the hose and put out the fire.

These days, when the city faces inadequate fire protection, perhaps its time to reinstate a volunteer force to simply man the hoses and extinguish the fires.