

HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE FIRE DEPARTMENTS OF
SOMERSWORTH AND BERWICK.

BY W. S. ROSS

SOMERSWORTH FREE PRESS

JUNE 16, 1905

In Somersworth, as everywhere else, our grandfathers fought fires at close range. There were no machines: the most interested or most adventurous among the men clambered on burning roofs or took the posts of danger; the others, with buckets and pails, formed a double line to some convenient stream or well, where they hastily dipped the buckets and passed them along to the fighters, who returned them empty.

In the days before machines, Somersworth seems to have been remarkably free from fires: the earliest recollected by living fire-fighters was in 1830 or 1831, when, at the burning of the dry house of the woolen mill, the wind bore blazing shingles as far as Samuel D. Whitehouse's, in the brickyard.

The first machine here was a nameless, numberless tub worked by cranks at each side, like the old-fashioned handcar. Four men, facing each other, two by two, toiled at each crank and the stream went well up on a two-story building. The men poured the water from buckets into the reservoir, which held from four to five dozen tubfuls, and the machine was emptied and played out like those of today, though without suction. The palmy days of this first tub were in the late thirties, it was the property of the Great Falls Manufacturing company, and was manned mostly by the mule-spinners, to the number of 25 or 30, with their overseer, Matthew A. Chandler, as foreman. Jonathan Legro and Charles S. Jones are the only members of that pioneer band who now live here perhaps the only ones surviving. Once a year the men used to have a "spread" at Carter and Dodge's at Rochester, or they occasionally had a supper at the Great Falls hotel. The engine's home was a little structure opposite No. 1 mill, somewhat south of the present railroad station, near the hayscales and close to the "wool-house," or temporary dwelling of those of the townspeople who were not given to virtue's ways. This was between Main Street and the mill-yard, long before the advent of cars.

The members of fire companies, in those early days, were excused from military drill, all others, over 18 years old, except a few privileged classes, having to appear, "armed and equipped as the law directs;" that is, with uniform and arms complete, at their own expense, at the annual May training, the general muster in the fall, and at a drill one or two weeks before the general muster.

In a way everybody was a fireman, or, at least, had a duty at an alarm of fire; for each house, not only those of the Manufacturing company, but even those belonging to private individuals, had two leather fire-buckets, long and slender, always hanging in the front entry, and

at an alarm the occupants of the house were supposed to throw these buckets, each which bore the name of the owner or some designation of the house, out of doors for collection by the passing firemen.

The first tub was replaced by one built by Arthur D. and Milton Noyes in the machine shop rear the gristmill and at the easterly side of the bag mill, or No. 6. It was filled from buckets like the other, but was of the modern style, in that it had brakes instead of cranks. The first fire at which it was ever used was Berwick's greatest, sweeping away many buildings on both sides of the street which now runs behind the stores on Sullivan square. It started just south of the barn belonging to Parks and Harris, near the present tannery, and was checked at the birck house at the corner of School Street. There were not men enough to fight it, and the women and boys turned out with pails or anything they could get, and went into the lines with the men. Edwin P. Horn remembers that his mother, Mrs. Ruth Horn, received for her services at this fire a calico dress, as a present from Parks and Harris, whose grocery store standing where Robinson's now does, was saved. Another great fire, soon after this, resulted from the blowing up of the Lord block, near Tibbett's corner, and burnt the buildings on that side of Market Street to the post-office next the old freight house.

Deluge No. 1 was the next engine here, and was built in the present machine shop by William Bedell, when he was mechanical engineer of the Manufacturing Company. Its home was a little house, not more than fifteen feet by twelve, on Canal Street, and Albert Horne was the first foreman. Canal Street was where the cloth hall is today, and a road led from Main Street, three or four blocks south of the stores, across to it, with a bridge over the canal. Afterwards, when the Manufacturing Company needed the site for building, the little engine house had to go, but the Company gave the land where No. 1 is, and the town built the house, in the agency of John A. Burleigh. The engine built by Mr. Bedell is still there.

Conqueror No. 4 was built by Hunneman of Roxbury, and the town bought it new, about 1847. Luther Thompson was its first foreman; and the company was the "crack-a-jack" one of those days. Everyone was ambitious to be enrolled in it, and only those of the finest record were taken. George M. Hanson, Ichabod Pearl, and O. A. Frost were among its foremen. Its first house was on Pleasant Street, and the one in the High School yard was not built until 1877 or 1878.

In the late fifties occurred the greatest fire that Somersworth ever had, so far as the extent of the burned area was concerned. It began in Samuel Grant's hotel "Ben Franklin," at "Bloody" corner, and swept along Orange Street in one direction, and up Washington Street to Court Street and along the north side of Court Street, where there were then many houses. The sparks from this conflagration were taken by the wind all over the town, one of them setting on fire the roof of the house owned then by Albert Wakefield, and now by Mrs. William F. Harmon.

David H. Buffum was the first chief engineer of the fire department and it was in his time, say about 1868, that Edwin P. Horn went to Lowell in behalf of the Manufacturing Company, to purchase Deluge No. 3, which was Lowell Bleachery 14. Edwin Mellen was the first foreman. After the water system had been established here, some years afterward, Mr. Horn went again for the Deluge 3 Company, this time to Boston, to superintend the shipping of a brand new hose wagon, which had been made in New York, and of which he was to be foreman.

Right at the close of the war, when everybody had plenty of money, men belonged to the fire companies, not for pay, but for fun. Each company had from 60 to 65 men, the latter being the number of members of companies 1, 4, and 3, and every man had a uniform. The pay of a fireman was only five dollars a year, and that he always put back into the general fund, and was besides assessed on the occasion of a ball or a supper. Undoubtedly the greatest muster the state ever had was here when George W. Burleigh was chief engineer. Deluge 3 paid the famous Gilmore's band \$375 for the day and evening; Conqueror 4 hired the Marine Band of Portsmouth, and companies came here from all the region about, with no difficulty whatever in disposing of ball tickets at two dollars each. The Somersworth companies put up money for prizes, but did not themselves compete. Piscataqua of South Berwick won, having well greased her pipes by putting into the water soft soap, which shot in great lumps among the spectators. This was but one of the merry-makings of early times, when to be a fireman was an honor eagerly sought.

The town of Berwick having bought the Triumph engine No. 1 from Biddeford, her company was organized January 6, 1873, at the schoolhouse on Rochester Street, with Andrew G. Bracy foreman the first year, and after him William H. Rich for many years. The machine cost \$300, and it has earned about \$2,000 in prizes. At Biddeford, July 4, 1877, it won first money, with a record of 196 feet, 11 inches. The Auburn company, who came second, being dissatisfied with the result and claiming that the decision was unfair, challenged the Triumph,

and the two met at Saco, August 2, 1877, each putting up a sum of money equal to the first prize in question, when Triumph won easily, with a record of 216 feet, 8 inches. This record remained until August 14, 1902, when at Portsmouth she won third money with a record of 222 feet, 9 inches. At the York County Fair, Biddeford, September 16, 1897, she played 216 feet, 6 inches, winning first money and the fire trumpet belonging once to James Smith, captain of the old Pioneer engine company of Biddeford in 1848. Triumph has won first money at Dover, Haverhill, Lawrence, Exeter, Rochester, Portsmouth, Biddeford twice, and Somersworth twice, second money at Somersworth twice and at Rochester, third money at Portsmouth, and prizes at Manchester and at Portland.

The hose wagon was built for the Triumph company about a dozen years ago, and the company exchanged it with the town for the engine, which will be kept by them for muster purposes and outlying fires so long as there shall be a company. They now enroll 102 men; the hosemen, however, are twelve, paid by the town, and there are eight men on the hook and ladder, which was bought in 1902.

When the Triumph Company was established in Berwick, those who did not get in wished to form a company of their own. They appealed to Agent George W. Burleigh, who loaned them the old tub. By subscription and by a ball they got 200 feet of hose and a hose wagon, christened themselves and the tub "Young America," and vied with Triumph in reaching fires and doing valiant service. The tub was afterward sold in Milton, where it is still in use.

Alert Hose Company No. 2 was organized at Central hall, April 13, 1874, with Howard M. Hanson as foreman. They first met at their new quarters on Pleasant Street, September 6, 1875, and the new engine came November 5, 1900.

A hook and ladder apparatus, under the charge of volunteers, was put under the old town hall when it was first built, and remained there for years. The Rescue Company was formed December 3, 1877, with Joseph Libby as foreman.

The home companies have not paid so much attention to musters as the people of Berwick; No. 3 has frequently taken the tub off for a good time, and has won against 4 and 1 in the factory yard, earning a fire trumpet; No. 1 has won on Market Street, at Seavey's park, and two or three times out of town. The Vixen, an independent tub, three years old, has also won some prizes.

By vote of the city council of Somersworth, the fire department was re-organized July 1, 1896. Deluge Hose Company No. 1 was reduced to 15 men, Alert No. 2 to 20, Deluge No. 3 and Conqueror No. 4 to 15 each, and the Hook and Ladder Company to 20 men. Since then, Alert has also been reduced to 15 men.

The chief engineers of the department have been David H. Buffum, George W. Burleigh, Thomas G. Jameson, Stephen S. Chick, Dr. Orrin Q. Shapleigh, Edwin P. Horn, Clarence L. Chapman, B. Frank Hanson, J. Sewell McDaniel, Patrick Quinlan, Fred Wiesner, Jeremiah Murray, George L. Aldritch, John Kershaw, and Timothy J. Sullivan.

Somersworth and Berwick have every reason to be proud of their firefighters. They have been brave and energetic, quick to respond and to plan, and ready to take any chances and to face any inconvenience or danger. Through them, thousands of dollars' worth of property, which seemed doomed has been saved.

The most fearful fire in this vicinity, and the only one attended with loss of human life, occurred on the night of April 4 and 5, 1876. It had snowed all day the previous day and people were grumbling at such a tremendous storm when the winter had passed. The snow was a foot and a half deep and was still coming with a high wind when the alarm was given. That night the entire business part of High Street, from James's corner to the Pray building, was consumed, and Bradstreet Hill and his sister perished in the flames. The sparks bore up High Street in clouds thicker than the snow-flakes, and many families packed their valuables to be ready for immediate flight. Even under the mass of snow, gate-posts and roofs caught fire for a moment, and the next morning hardly a bit of snow was to be seen, for it was almost completely covered with black debris. Shingles and burning bits of wood were carried to a distance of two miles.

Other fires worthy of mention are the burning of Harrison Davis's bobbin shop, at which W. A. Levi fell from a ladder two stories and a half and at once went up again, when he sank, and it took three men to get him down; the fire which took the Sherman Oyster house and the adjoining stores; the Woodward block and the adjoining buildings; the Market Street fire of January, 1886, when, with the mercury nearly 30 degrees below zero, the water froze as the firemen worked, and some of them were coated it ice half an inch thick, and their clothing was cut away from them; the Kinsman fire, when the sparks rose to a majestic height in the still night and sailed in a splendid cloud over the town, dropping burning brands, and when the Scott barn, only a foot away, was saved; the fire at Jesse Horne's mill, when the men fell through the ice

into the river; the burning of Josiah K. Towle's buildings; of Pecker's shoe shop; of Girard's store, when Central buildings were saved; of Jameson's barns, where the men worked all night in bitter cold; the Fogg fire, where they performed the seemingly impossible feat of saving the house, to which the burning barn was annexed; and the West Green Street fire, at which a large number of buildings caught.

Such is a general sketch of the history of the fire department here. The risks and hardships incurred in saving property, the patient toil amid stifling smoke hour after hour, the colds and other sicknesses brought on by exposure, and the consequent inability to earn wages for a longer or shorter period, are not recorded. Our firemen have been peculiarly fortunate in having in their annals no great and thrilling disaster to be forever remembered. Yet there is no fire of any magnitude, which has not had its acts of heroism and self sacrifice, and over and over again the fire-fighters have only by the most strenuous effort succeeded in saving property which seemed doomed and whose value has been equal to or greater than that of the property consumed.

The annual pay of a fireman is scarcely enough to cover the loss of clothing, which may be incurred at a single fire. In the past the town has many times been indebted to the brave men who, without salary or thought of reward, have not hesitated a moment to expose themselves to danger or loss for the general good.

To provide for emergencies and the more nearly to equalize the extraordinary demands which may come on any one of their number the members of the several companies met in December, 1903, to organize The Somersworth and Berwick Fireman's Relief Association, "For the purpose of mutual aid and relief in those cases of accident or injuries to which firemen, in the discharge of their duties, are peculiarly exposed." Minor losses are not provided for, but by this bond the firemen hope, by the strength which their union affords, to insure themselves, at least in part, against those greater ones which may come to them.

The association was therefore made by its by-laws open to every member of the department in Somersworth or in Berwick, janitors included, upon the payment of a small admission fee and small semi-annual dues. Any citizen may also become a member in full standing, his admission fee entitling him to all the privileges of the association except its benefits. Patrick Quinlan has been president since the founding of the society.

By thus banding together and by creating a small fund from their salaries and their membership dues, the firemen have made a beginning, which by good luck may become sufficient to provide against disasters.

Such a fund must necessarily be net; that is, the expense incidental to its collection and to the carrying on of the organization must first be paid. In order to keep every cent possible for the exact purpose for which the organization is established the incidental expenses have been reduced to a minimum. The secretary and treasurer receive merely nominal salaries and furnish heavy bonds. The board of directors, who manage the finances, control all investments, investigate all cases of distress and further constitute a visiting committee, whose duty it is to visit any member each day during his sickness or disability, receive no compensation. The labor of all these officers is practically a labor of love.

Every available cent goes directly, as the by-laws say, "For the relief of any member who may receive any injury to his limbs or health while in the discharge of his duty as a member of the Somersworth or Berwick fire departments, going to, working at, or returning from a fire, practice, or drill, or whenever ordered out by the Chief Engineer." The fund is used to hire nurses, or for weekly and special benefits, as may be needed. Upon the death of a fireman while in the discharge of his duty, a funeral benefit of fifty dollars is to be paid.

The benefit is thus seen to be limited to accidents incurred while in the direct discharge of duty. A disinterested committee of three is appointed to investigate the facts of each case and determine the amount to be paid, and no member disabled by dissipation can receive aid.

The fund is thus created, even though it is limited in this careful way, is by no means adequate, for it would soon disappear upon the prolonged sickness or disability of any fireman. The association needs the co-operation of all the citizens—a co-operation, which will heartily be given by everyone who understands its purpose. The accidents and misfortunes of firemen are incurred by the few to help the many, and if the many in turn aid them, they but discharge a moral debt. This matter ought to be provided for in the statutes of every city. At present the injured fireman who belongs to the association need not be the object of compassion, but possesses a clear title to a fund lending him. With the same confidence with which he has in the directors of the fund, the association should lend to the public, and whatever be the means taken from time to time to arouse interest, every citizen should generously respond. No worthier cause

can be imagined, none which more commands respect, none to which we are, one and all, more deeply indebted.

by — W. S. Ross.