

Salida's Fire Boys

The town of Salida was formed in 1880 and six months later, Salida Hose Company No. 1 was established. On January 13 & 14 in 1881, meetings were held where officers were elected and by-laws drawn up. Then a call was put out in the Mountain Mail: "All those who take an interest in this organization can now become members by signing these by-laws."

During the formative years when money was tight and city council was not offering anything from their coffers, Salida Hose Company No. 1 threw 'grand balls' to raise money for their department. The first of these events, held in February of 1882, was described as "one of the finest entertainments ever attended by the people of this town ... If any person left the ballroom without having danced as often as he desired it was his own fault. To show that there was a good crowd in attendance and that there was plenty of room, it is only necessary to remark that there were nine Virginia reels on the floor at once."

That first ball brought into the fire department's treasury close to \$75.

By September of 1882, Hose Company No. 1 was making requests to city council for hose carts and hooks, chains, and ropes. It is doubtful that firefighters were wearing any sort of protective gear at this time. But they were busy working on fires: that November, Bissell's Grocery (around 101 F) caught fire. The Mountain Mail reported: "The fire boys were prompt to respond and in an incredibly short space of time, two streams were turned onto the fire.' It was a mystery how the fire started but the Mountain Mail commended the department: "Boys, you have the thanks and gratitude of every person in town, and more especially of those living in the same block in which the fire occurred."

By January 1883, the Hose Company had a new hose house located around 114 E. 1st Street. "The convenient and practical arrangement of the house was the theme of universal comment. The bell tower is utilized by a large wooden drum, suspended near the summit underneath the place destined for the bell, on which the hose can be readily and expeditiously hoisted for the purpose of cleaning and drying, The hose, of which there is a sufficient length for all practical purposes on hand [about a 1000 feet], is linen, and can stand the big pressure that it sometimes has to stand, first-rate. The larger portion of the hose house is, of course, occupied by the truck room. On the sides are conveniently arranged a number of leather buckets and a large supply of ladders of various lengths; a room in the rear is fitted up with a number of bunks for sleeping purposes. After last night's meeting, the boys went out for an hour's practice with their apparatus. It worked like a charm. The water plugs showed an excellent pressure, and streams were thrown that went way above the tallest buildings—nay even above the big flagstaff. Our citizens may be rest assured that no fire that may break out in Salida within reach of its water-system, can get much of a start."

On New Year's Day 1883, the 'gallant boys of Salida Hose Co. No. 1' celebrated by throwing a parade. Afterwards, a ball was held at the opera house to raise money to buy a bell for the tower at the hose house on 1st Street. "The terpsichorean exercises continued until three o'clock in the morning, when the assembly broke up in the greatest good humor, and the occasion was generally voted to be one of the most pleasant that Salida has seen since its foundation."

It appears they made their purchase of a bell because a few weeks later, A.T. Ryan's livery near the tracks on W. 1st Street broke out in flames. That January morning, engine whistles from the Denver & Rio Grande Roundhouse and pistol shots from the local police sounded the alarm. Unfortunately, "the little fire bell in the hose tower did its best to add to the clangor but it was found to be entirely too small." The Hose Company set to work but came across difficulties when it was discovered that the distance to the nearest fireplug was 800 feet. The friction caused by that distance destroyed most of the water pressure. The below freezing temperatures did little to help the cause and there was a blustery wind blowing as well. "Some of the fire boys had their noses, ears, and fingers seriously injured by the intense cold. J.M. Buster stuck to the nozzle 'til he was covered with ice from head to foot, and he had to be taken by his friends to be resuscitated. Charlie Rose didn't care for himself when it came to saving property and was completely broken up by his superhuman exertions." A.T. Ryan's livery was a complete loss; no insurance made the loss more heartbreaking. The Hose Company lost nearly 100 feet of hose due to bursting from the freezing cold but kept the fire from spreading to nearby buildings.

In 1883, the situation was getting desperate for the Hose Company. The city of Salida could not financially support the department. So, the Fire Company put out a call for subscriptions:

"It is well known to all of you that our supply of hose is altogether too small for the size of the town, that for want of proper protection from the water, we have inevitably got wet through when we attended fires, to our great discomfort and to the great detriment of our health, and that with our present style of head-gear, we are in constant danger from falling coals and timbers when we go into burning buildings. To protect us from the falling water, coals, etc., we need the regulation rubber coats and the style of helmet usually worn by firemen ... Are there any citizens of the town or members of the council (who) will be liberal enough to subscribe the necessary money?"

Salida responded positively and many businessmen donated money to the department to keep it running. Over the next decade, the Hose Company survived on subscriptions.

A.T. Ryan, whose livery burned to the ground in January 1883, suffered another disastrous fire in September of 1883, losing both horses and buildings. The Mail reported:

"The flames spread with lightning rapidity (and) had wholly enveloped the combustible material in a seething sea of fire ... Too much praise cannot be bestowed upon the firemen, for the courage with which

they fought the devouring element, rushing into danger, apparently impelled by the one motive of seeking to save. No earthly power could have saved the building, and they may be proud they stopped the flames when they did. Had it not been a perfectly calm night, there is no telling what the consequences may have been.”

Arsonists caused most of the fires in early day Salida. It is rare to come across a news article that lists a fire’s actual cause. Most were attributed to ‘incendiaries’. By the latter part of the 1880s, Salida had seen a fair amount of fire. The Big 1886 and 1888 fires that razed blocks have been most publicized, but many small business owners lost their entire livelihoods to small fires. Many did not have insurance.

A November 1884 fire took out Hanley’s Millinery Store. The Mail reported:

“Mrs. Hanley has had a hard struggle for existence against adverse circumstances in this city, and the loss comes heavy on her, and is very discouraging to one who has suffered as she has the last year. Lynch law is never to be recommended, but if the right party was caught, a rope would relieve the world of a worthless being who could be better spared than kept. A man that will set fire to a house at night is but little better than a midnight assassin.”

In November of 1887, an \$800 horse-drawn hook and ladder truck had been purchased and was in use in Salida. Over \$600 of this amount was raised by subscription by the townspeople of Salida. Philanthropic citizens got their name in the paper for contributing to the cause.

By the end of the decade, Salidans were becoming realists when it came to fire. The first wooden structures had been slapped together, and by 1890, were becoming an eyesore. Also, downtown business folk were insuring their properties more so than in the past. A September 1889 fire that took out four saloons on Lower F Street was termed ‘a beneficial blaze.’ The fire was kept at bay by the Hose Company with assistance from the ‘Hook and Ladder boys’, a newly formed wing of the department.

In May of 1890, a large fire at F and 1st Streets, ‘cleaned out some one-story wooden buildings in the heart of the city, a calamity that will probably prove a blessing to the town’ due to the shabby nature of the wooden structures. By 1890, the properties on F and 1st were becoming valuable due to their location, and ‘it is altogether probable that the space will soon be filled up with good substantial brick structures.’

In May of 1892, the Salida Fire Department was in danger of being disbanded. During an election for fire warden, City councilman Wenz made an unsubstantiated attack on one of Salida’s bravest. Councilman Wenz ‘without any good cause whatever’ rebuked William Kenton, who the entire Fire Department had submitted as their choice for fire warden. The Mail reported:

“The boys got hot headed when they first heard of the abuse of one of their numbers and were very anxious to resign at once, but Capt. Churcher (of Haight & Churcher Undertaking) kept them together....The boys will take the steps to reorganize the department if the city council will interest themselves sufficiently to recognize them as one of the departments of the city.”

Later that month, Mayor Wright held a special city council meeting to reestablish the fire department. He thought 'the old department had been very shabbily treated' and raised over \$300 by subscription from local townsfolk to get the department some new digs on 2nd Street.

On the 4th of July 1892, the Salida Fire Department was 'the admiration of everybody, in their new uniforms furnished by Ben Disman.' Later that day as part of the Independence Day festivities, they competed in a hose race with Buena Vista's fire department, and handily won the grand prize, a silver trumpet.

By 1900, the building at 124 E Street had been expanded and improved, and became Salida's City Hall, with room for the jail and the Fire Department's hose house.

124 E has since remained the Salida Fire Department's home.

Gratitude to SFD Chief Bess for his assistance with this article.