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Evolution of Arkadelphia's firefighting equipment

By Wendy Richter
For the Siftings

As with many other things in our world today, firefighting has changed during the last 150 years. With many improvements from the days of the "bucket brigade" using water from wells and cisterns, firefighters today employ new techniques and enjoy quicker response times in order to more effectively protect citizens and property from fire. Arkadelphia's transformation into the modern era of firefighting paralleled that in other cities and towns around the nation.

While there are mentions in city records as early as 1867 of firefighting equipment purchases, little is known about how it was actually used in the town. As far as can be determined, a man named Emil Gilman served as the head of Arkadelphia's first real firefighting group, and had promoted the formal establishment of such an entity. By 1891, fire hydrants had been placed in strategic places in the city, and Gilman, a city councilman, assembled a group of young men called the "Arkadelphia Hose and Hook and Ladder Company No. 1." The city purchased a hose cart, a hook and ladder carrier, and 700 yards of hose. A fire house was constructed on Clay Street. And in 1892, a bell and sixteen fire hats were added to the equipment inventory.

According to an old ledger obtained in the 1960s by local historian Farrar Newberry, to become a member of the Hose and Hook and Ladder Company, these firefighters had to meet certain standards. They had to be "at least 18 years old, of good character, industrious behavior, exempt from all physical infirmities and a present resident of the city, and have some visible means of support." Interestingly, if one was approved by the membership committee and members, he paid an entrance fee



of one dollar, and then twenty-five cents a month in dues. Then, the members were subject to fines for lack of performance: Two dollars for not being present at a fire, and twenty-five cents for missing a company meeting. And, members could even be expelled!

In addition to Emil Gilman, according to Newberry, some of the earliest members of the company (and their occupations) were Frank Clark and J.A. Williamson (druggists), J.C. Cannon (policeman), H.J. Campbell and J.C. Dawson (butchers), Alva Greene (bookkeeper), J.B. Browne and Myal Greene (painters), J.A. Husley (tinner), Lou

McCorkle (journalist), George Miller (barber), John Hunt, John McCaslin, and R.C. McDaniel (clerks).

People of the city seemed pleased with the effectiveness of these early firefighters. As one example of the department's success, the group sprang into action when in 1892, a fire occurred in the downtown area. Multiple businesses were threatened on Johnston (now Main Street) between Maddox (now Sixth) and Hardy (now Seventh). The company responded quickly to the 2:30 a.m. alarm, streaming water from three hoses on the buildings. In about one-half hour they had the fire under

control. What could have been a major disaster for Arkadelphia ended with only an estimated \$10,000 loss. The local paper wrote that "too much praise cannot be bestowed on Chief Emil Gilman of the Fire Department. He is a Wellington in a Waterloo fight against the Napoleon of Fire."

For additional information about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum (www.clarkcountyhistory.org or 230.1360) or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library (www.obu.edu/archives or 245.5332).