

History of the Cotuit Fire Department

Courtesy: Historical Society of Santuit and Cotuit

Written by: GORDON M. BROWNE, JR., July 14, 1967

Photos: Collection Fran Parks

The Fire District accepted as a gift the equipment of the old Chemical Company and that was all the fire-fighting equipment it owned. This consisted of one 50 gallon chemical engine and a Ford chassis, which carried as many shovels, rakes, axes, and brooms as could be packed on it. The committee appointed at the first District Meeting to plan for fire protection brought in a request at the Annual Meeting in 1927 for \$25,000 to provide a fire house, an engine, and other equipment. Their request was included in a well presented, two page report, which pointed out that 90% of the houses in the District were within 1,000 feet of the sea or of a pond. If iron pipes were run from the wharf to the business center of Cotuit and from the Santuit River up along Newtown Road, the water needs of fire-fighting could be met for the entire District. The courtesy of the floor was granted to Mr. Maxim of Middleboro, the president of a company manufacturing fire-fighting equipment, so that he might discuss firefighting and fire equipment. The voters, however, wary of new taxes, voted indefinite postponement of the committee's article requesting \$25,000. The Fire Department still had only the little Ford and the chemical equipment.

Reporting to the District meeting in 1929, the Board of Engineers pointed out that there had been 10 fires the preceding year with a total loss of \$55,000. This included the disastrous fire at Judge Alroy's house. The Engineers report urgently recommended that "the District . . . give the Fire Company something better to handle fires with, and in doing so, it would show the appreciation of the District to the Fire Department for the faithful work (as we look at it) in the past seventeen years." That year at last the District began to respond.

In 1928, the Prudential Committee had pointed out that the existing fire house, which had once been the hardware section of Ben Sears' store before he expanded, was on rented land from which the Fire Department could be evicted on 30 days' notice. They asked that a permanent site for the fire house be bought, and in 1929 \$600 was appropriated to buy the lot presently in use on High Street. \$350 was appropriated for the purchase of a booster pump, and out of the annual appropriation of \$1,500 for District expenses, the Prudential Committee and Board of Engineers managed to save enough to buy a 1927 Dodge chassis, the first new truck for the District. By 1940, this truck was the oldest of three operated by the District.

Gradually, then, the Fire Department began to be equipped. New hose was bought several years running. In 1930, Robert M. Roleson presented the District with an inhalator. A 160 gallon tank was installed on the Dodge. Rubber coats and fire helmets were purchased for the Fire Company in 1931. In 1932, the Board of Engineers was able to report that the 13 calls the preceding year had resulted in a total loss of only \$1,250. Though there would continue to be occasional destructive fires, such as the Whitcomb beach house fire when the first pump was ruined by taking in sand and the Ogilvie fire in

1966, fire losses in Cotuit were at last under reasonably effective control, and the voters, with only occasional hesitations, were prepared to provide the equipment necessary to maintain that control.

One of those hesitations occurred in 1935 when a proposal to build a new fire house was turned down 48 to 19. The original fire house had been moved to the High Street site but was now inadequate to house the new equipment. At last, in 1937, a committee under the chairmanship of F. Maynard Gifford, Jr. was named to oversee the construction of a new building. The Town of Barnstable sold Cotuit's Elizabeth Lowell High School building to the District for \$1.00, and the materials from that building went into the new fire house. WPA labor did the actual work, which resulted in a construction delay when the crew was sent off to work on the National Guard camp in Bourne and on the airport in Hyannis. The building was finally ready for occupancy, however, early in 1938. In their annual report for that year, the Board of Engineers expressed their gratitude to Carte and Pemberton Whitcomb for a gift of office furniture for the new fire house, to Mrs. Charles Riley and Miss Mabel Riley for a gift of chairs for the assembly room, to Robert Wessen for a gift of a piano, and to C. A. Cottrell for putting the piano in condition. This fire house has been the home of the Cotuit Fire Department ever since.

During World War II Fire Department manpower was seriously depleted, but the Department carried on faithfully and added the teaching of Civil Defense and First Aid classes to its regular duties. A County brush breaker was housed at the fire house for the first time, and in 1943 the District voted \$200 for forest fire prevention work, but this appropriation was voted down the following year and never renewed thereafter. After the hurricane of 1944, the Fire Department immediately cleared village streets of limbs and carried on a 24-hour-a-day patrol for three days until telephone and electric service to the fire whistle could be restored. At their own expense the firemen maintained the village "honor roll" of men in service at the Library.

With the end of the war, Cotuit began to change. It became increasingly a residential community with fewer and fewer businesses. As a result, fewer and fewer men worked in the village, which meant an increasingly difficult manpower problem for the Fire Department during the daylight hours. That problem continues to grow more acute, and no solution to it is yet in sight.

Aside from equipment changes, the most important change in Fire Department operations in recent years has been the addition of the Rescue Squad. In their annual report for 1954, the Board of Engineers noted that the Department was receiving more calls for first aid and rescue work every year. They thanked Centerville-Osterville for their prompt response to calls for their rescue truck. The following spring a secondhand ambulance became available. A special meeting of the District was called, and on June 15, 1955, purchase of Cotuit's first ambulance was authorized.

The Rescue Squad became a special unit within the Department, with its own officers under the Engineers. All members had to hold advanced first aid certificates granted by the Red Cross and to attend monthly drills in addition to fire drills. In 1964, a women's auxiliary was added to the Rescue Squad. A number of women, most of them wives of Rescue Squad members, took first aid training and qualified themselves to ride the ambulance and care for female patients on long transportation runs. The women now attend drills with the men.

The first year the ambulance was in service there were 13 calls for it; the following year there were 29; by 1960 there were 47 in a single year. In 1961, the present ambulance was purchased from the Cape Cod Hospital, again secondhand, and its use has continued heavy. In 1966, there were 62 rescue and

ambulance calls. Help from the Schwab Fund has made it possible for the ambulance to have the best and latest rescue equipment.

In 1966, the Fire Department answered 19 fire calls and 62 rescue calls in Cotuit, performing one of the essential services for which the District was formed.

CHIEF ENGINEER

Thomas D. Rennie	1926*
Alexander Seabury Childs	1926-1927
W. Christie Rennie	1927-1928
A Seabury Childs	1928-1939
Warren P. Campbell	1939-1940
A. Seabury Childs	1940-1941 **
Warren P. Campbell	1941-1943
William L. Cash	1943-1946
I. Louis Campbell	1946-1949
Warren P. Campbell	1949-1952
Robert O. Dottridge	1952-

*resigned September 22, 1926

**elected Honorary Chief in 1941

FIRST ASSISTANT ENGINEER

Milton H. Crocker	1926-1928
Freeman M. Nickerson	1928-1929
Ernest O. Dottridge, Jr.	1929-1931
Herbert W. Gifford	1931-1937
Warren P. Campbell	1937-1939
Herbert W. Gifford	1939-1940
Warren P. Campbell	1940-1941
Edward Bearse	1941-1943
Roger A Burlingame	1943-1946
Franklin Childs	1946-1947
John E. Frazier	1947-1951
Antone R Souza	1951-

SECOND ASSISTANT ENGINEER

Freeman M. Nickerson	1926-1927
Ernest O. Dottridge, Jr.	1927-1928
Herbert W. Gifford	1928-1931
Henry J. West	1931-1936
Franklin Childs	1936-1937
Herbert W. Gifford	1937-1939
Edward Bearse	1939-1941
Seaver Harlow	1941-1943

John R Souza	1943-1951
Robert Dottridge	1951-1952
F. Maynard Gifford, Jr.	1952-1956
Roger A. Burlingame	1956-1962
John E. Newton, Jr.	1962-



