

OTTAWA FIRE DEPARTMENT HISTORY



On January 24, 1867, a city ordinance was published in the Western Home Journal on page 3, "... establishing a fire department for the town of Ottawa consisting of a hook, ladder and bucket company." This first department was made up of all volunteers. Members were to be no younger than 18 years of age. Membership would exempt firefighters from working on highways and serving military and jury duty for the town. On April 24, 1867, the strongest recorded earthquake in Kansas damaged the new schoolhouse in Ottawa. It was declared unsafe. The schoolhouse was converted into the fire station and used in that capacity for over 30 years.

W.H. Hartshorn became the first driver for the Ottawa Fire Department on March 19, 1872. Hartshorn also became the first paid firefighter for the OFD.

In April of 1872, the City of Ottawa took delivery of a fourth size Silsby steam fire engine. It cost \$5,000.

On April 24, 1872, Ordinance No. 62 organized the Ottawa City Fire Department. Erastus H. Dimmick was named superintendent of the fire department. The original roster was made of 55 men. The following month, Mr. Dimmick resigned. and O.T. Cosset became head of the department.

In 1873, Joseph Marsh became head of the department. He was proprietor of the Marsh Hotel. Marsh later became a member of the city council in the spring of 1898.

In 1874, Henry C. Branson became fire chief. He was manager of the Ottawa Foundry Company. A.P. Elder became assistant fire chief, Joseph Marsh was department foreman, and J.T. Black was foreman of the hook and ladder division.

In 1882, the Silsby fire engine was exchanged for a four-wheeled, horse-drawn hose reel. The Ottawa Fire Department's first hook and ladder was purchased from Seagrave and Company for \$850. This horse-drawn wagon was equipped with 55-foot and 36-foot extension ladders, a wall ladder, two roof ladders, two copper polished fire extinguishers, two wrenches, two brass lanterns, two steel crowbars, two pike and plaster hooks, four rubber buckets, two fire axes, one gong, two solid brass screw top torches, and was finished in gold and vermilion over eight coats of paint.

On August 1, 1883, an Ahrens "second size" steam engine was ordered. It cost \$4,400 - to be paid in four equal payments over the next two years.

In May of 1885, Aldamar P. Elder became fire chief. Elder was president of the Ottawa Foundry Company and president of the Ottawa Gas and Heating Company.

In September 9, 1895, The OFD became the 23rd member department of the Kansas State Firemen's Association and is still a member department today.

In 1897, Chief Elder was elected President of the Kansas State Firemen's Association.

On April 13, 1898, Chief Elder resigned after 26 years of service. Henry C. Branson became fire chief.

In 1900, a new fire station was built on Walnut Street.

In 1902, Chief Branson was elected President of the Kansas State Firemen's Association.

In 1908, Lee Phares was "elected" Chief.

In 1912, changes occurred to the Walnut Street fire station. A large storeroom was added for apparatus and feed storage, and a new steel bell tower was erected. Later that same year a new hose wagon was purchased for \$1,376.08. The wagon was found to be unsatisfactory because of its great weight.

On April 18, 1913, seventeen members of the OFD resigned, including Chief Phares, over a dispute with the city council. S.T. Cole was named Fire Chief.

In 1916, Chief Cole was elected First Vice President of the Kansas State Firemen's Association.

On January 4, 1918, the Ottawa Evening Herald reported that the fire department had 14 volunteers and 2 paid drivers. The volunteers were to be paid \$2 per fire, if water was "thrown," and \$1 per fire if only chemical was used. They were also paid \$1 for false alarms, and firefighters were fined \$1 for not turning out for alarms.

In February of 1918, the OFD ordered its first automotive fire truck from the Hale Company for \$5,774. In July, the Hale Company cancelled the order because their entire production of motors was going to military equipment for World War I. In August the City Commission placed an order for a Kissel fire truck for \$4,800. This truck did not have a pump, but did carry a chemical tank, hose and ladders. The Kissel truck was delivered on November 19, 1918. The next day, it was involved in an accident while being driven by a representative of the manufacturer.

On November 30, 1918, the OFD sold the two teams of horses at auction. One team sold for \$205 and the other team for \$210. The hook and ladder wagon would now be pulled by the new fire truck.

In 1919, the OFD went professional. A second Kissel truck was purchased.

Sometime early in 1920, Willis Rodgers was appointed Fire Chief.

On December 17, 1930, the first OFD gasoline powered pumper arrived. The fire engine was an American LaFrance that could pump 750 gallons of water per minute at 125 pounds of pressure. It cost \$12,500.

On July 26, 1936, a gasoline truck overturned and caught fire at 9th & Main. The tragedy killed the two occupants of the truck and destroyed four residences in the 800 block of Main Street. Within two months, the City of Ottawa banned gasoline tankers larger than 600 gallons from entering the city and ordered a Seagrave fire truck. This truck had a 750-gallon per minute pump, 246 feet of ladders, and 1000 feet of hose. It was purchased for \$11,000.

At the 1938 Conference of the Kansas State Firemen's Association, hosted by the OFD, Chief Rodgers was elected Second Vice President.

On September 3, 1947, Harry W. Gilliland was appointed acting fire chief. Chief Rodgers was granted a leave of absence due to a serious illness.

In April 1956, Chief Gilliland was elected president of the Kansas State Association of Fire chiefs. Ottawa fireman Don Jones was elected president of the Kansas State Firemen's Association on the

same day. Jones was re-elected to the position in 1957 and 1958. His wife, Shirley, was elected Second Vice President of the Kansas State Firemen's Association Women's Auxiliary in 1957.

On October 9, 1956, Ottawa purchased a new Howe fire truck for \$18,442. It was delivered in February of 1957.

In February 1964, the City Commission accepted a bid of \$52,250 for a new Seagrave snorkel truck. One of the doors of the fire station had to be enlarged for the new truck. After missing five delivery deadlines, the truck was finally delivered on December 4, 1965.

In 1967, the fire station was remodeled again. A new fire engine was ordered to replace the 1930 American LaFrance. The new Engine 8 was delivered on January 23, 1968.

On March 1, 1969, Chief Harry Gilliland retired after nearly 44 years of service. G.A. Junior Diamond was appointed chief.

On March 21, 1973, the City Commission awarded a bid for \$282,220 to Sell Constructors, Inc., to build a new fire station at 720 West 2nd Street. The total bill was approximately \$350,000.

In April of 1973, the OFD acquired Engine 10, a Seagrave pumper for \$54,188.

On January 3, 1974, the 14 men of the Ottawa Fire Department moved into the new station.

May 3, 1976, it was announced that the Ottawa fire and police departments would merge on August 16th, and act as the Department of Public Safety. The Chief of Police, Orin Skiles, became the director, and Fire Chief Diamond became deputy director. Firefighters and police officers were cross-trained to perform in both roles.

In June of 1982, an American LaFrance pumper-ladder truck was purchased for \$203,000. This truck has a 1,500-gallon per minute pump and a 75-foot aerial ladder.

In January 1988, Deputy Director Diamond began serving as Acting Director of the Ottawa Department of Public Safety (ODPS). On March 23, Deputy Director Fred Espinosa became Acting Director. Diamond retired September 16 after 28 years of service. Daryl Shutt then became head of the ODPS Fire Division.

On February 23, 1989, City Manager Randy Wetmore announced that Jeff Herman was hired to be director of the ODPS beginning on March 13.

On February 26, 1990, Public Safety Officer Bruce Hanson was shot four times during a car stop. Hanson, who was participating in a firefighting training exercise near Poplar and Red Jacket Streets, was preparing to leave the area in his patrol car to help in the search for a bank robbery suspect when a car ran over a fire hose in the street. As Hanson stopped the car, the robbery suspect exited the car and began shooting. Hanson returned fire, killing his attacker. Hanson survived his injuries.

In April 1990, the City Commission posed the question on a mail-in ballot about splitting the ODPS. On June 1, the election tally was 1,853 to 1,252 splitting the department into fire and police departments. Five days later, the commission voted to split the department effective on January 1, 1991.

In May of 1990, Richard Towe was appointed to head of the ODPS Fire Division. In October, he was named Interim Fire Chief. On November 5, Towe was appointed Fire Chief by acting City Manager Jack Davis.

On January 7, 1991, the City Commission accepted a bid of \$222,536 for a Beck fire truck and associated equipment. Ottawa Truck built the chassis, and this truck becomes Engine 1.

In April of 1992, the OFD sold Engine 6 (1956 Howe) to Uniontown, Kansas, for \$5002.

On December 20, 1995, the city commission agreed to purchase a Pierce fire engine for \$226,697 and this truck became Engine 3. The truck was delivered in June of 1996. Later that month, Engine 8 (1968 Howe) was loaned to Harrison Township (Franklin County) Volunteer Fire Department.

On August 1997, the burning of trash is banned by city ordinance.

On November 19, 1997, Driver-Engineer Dennis Nowatzke was elected President of the Fire Education Association of Kansas. He had previously served this organization as Vice President.

In mid-1998, Construction began on an addition to the Franklin County Ambulance building. The new bay housed a south-side fire engine for the OFD. Driver-Engineer/EMT-I Kendall Broers was the first to staff Station #2 on October 20th.

On March 16, 1999, Chief Richard Towe retired. He served the City of Ottawa for 31 years. Assistant Fire Chief Jeff Carner became acting Fire Chief, and was later appointed Fire Chief.

On August 31, 2001, the OFD took delivery of a Pierce Saber fire engine. It replaced Engine 2 (1973 Seagrave). The new truck's price tag was \$296,000. It has a 1000-gallon booster tank, a 1500-gallon per minute pump, and carries over 3000 feet of hose.

On February 6, 2002, the City Commission gave its approval to build a new police and municipal court center. The police department and municipal court offices are expected to move out of the fire station in May of 2003. The building was shared since 1974.