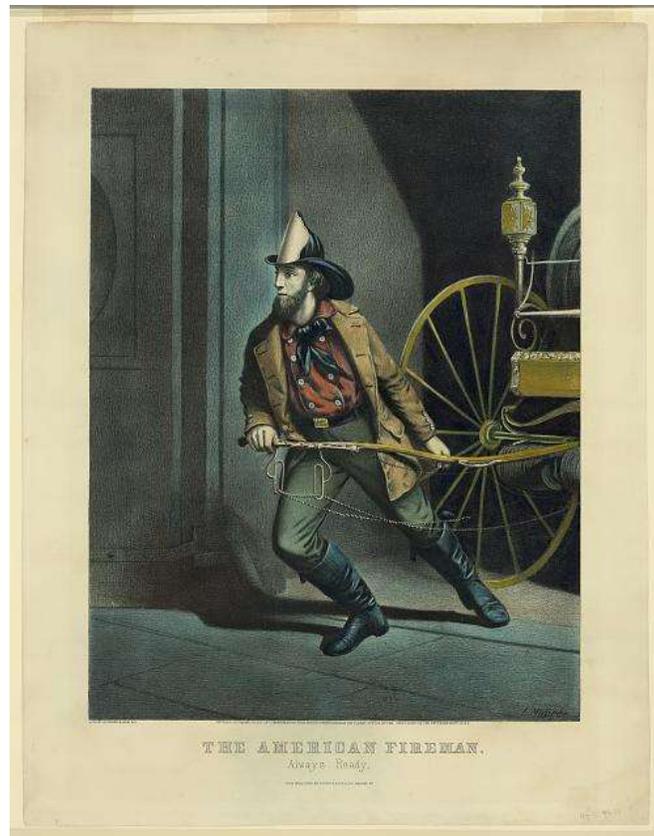


IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress
Drawing of fireman titled “American Fireman, Always Ready”

Dollar-a-Call Boys Get New Truck

“Fire! Fire!”

Arlo Everling, a guest at the Saylor Hotel in Harlan, Iowa, staggered from his second floor room at 1:30 a.m. on February 21, 1949. Nearly overcome with smoke, he raised the alarm. Twenty other guests were routed from their beds as smoke filled the rooms.

The fire was brought under control within 30 minutes by the quick reaction of the Harlan volunteer fire department. Although they successfully extinguished the flames, the department stayed on duty at the scene until morning. The men, under the leadership of Chief Elmer Potter, were keeping an eye on a hole that had burned through the ceiling in one of the rooms.

Ultimately, the fire was confined to two rooms. One was completely gutted, and a second adjoining room was slightly damaged. Owner J.W. Saylor was left with about \$3,000 worth of repairs. But he had the rapid response of the local firemen to thank for preventing massive destruction.

The men of the Harlan volunteer fire department had fought the February fire with old equipment that badly needed updating. Less than a year later, in December 1949, the firemen

were thrilled to announce the arrival of a new truck delivered from a GMC plant in Battle Creek, Mich.

The men of the department had been saving for years. Finally, at a cost of almost \$10,000 they had the most modern truck available on the market. And it was fully equipped. It could carry 300 gallons of water and had two “high-pressure reels” each having 500 pounds of power. The new vehicle allowed the men to “throw four lines of hose” on a fire without getting near a fire hydrant. And, it had an electric rewind for the hose, saving the men from a lot of back-breaking work.

Ten of the men were veterans of the department, having served for 25 years. The 30-man force included three of the seven “famed Hansen brothers.” Elmer Potter had been chief for 18 years.

“I’ve often wondered why a fellow ever becomes a fireman or, after the first fire, stays with the force,” Chief Potter told a reporter from the neighboring Council Bluffs *Daily Nonpareil* newspaper.

But the force had a waiting list of volunteers. A mechanic, insurance agent, plumber, justice of the peace and other business merchants comprised the force. When the fire siren sounded, they left their jobs to report to the station. When questioned about their motivation, the chief said the men had a desire to serve the public and had great concern for the town and its residents.

The men risked their lives when called to handle a fire. And they returned from many of the calls “feeling like we’ve played a good rough game of football.” For their efforts, they were rewarded with a dollar per call. Except for the calls to rural fires; there was no reimbursement for those.

The firemen were very happy with their new truck. They said it would enable them to “tear anyplace” in town and “knock out a hell of a fire in a hurry.”

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Sources

- “\$3,000 Damage in Harlan Hotel Fire,” *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, Feb. 21, 1949.
- “Harlan Firemen Wait Long Time for Their New Truck,” *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, Dec. 6, 1949.