

“Fires and Firemen: Weston’s Most Memorable Year”

By Grace Cogan

Weston has seen many fires since 1855 but there has not *always* been a fire department. This topic came around in 1896.

In the autumn of 1896 fire equipment was purchased and sent over for the city to use. There was a sixty gallon tank on two wheels; there was a large amount of a four inch hose along with twelve leather buckets. All this was kept at property owned by the Royal Brewery.

There were three hefty cisterns dug downtown that collected rainwater from all the buildings. In the dry weather, they were filled with a hydraulic well also kept on the property owned by the Royal Brewery which also contained two elevated water towers.

A man named Julius Rumpel was the driving force behind a volunteer firefighting group and he used his own money to make it work. George H. Sebus was the first fire chief in 1896 and Bob Light was the assistant fire chief.

On Sunday, November 30th, 1896, the volunteer fire department decided to have a trial run to test their new equipment. They burned a shack that was said to be an eyesore at the bottom of Main Street. When they pulled up to the building a wall came down burning holes in the hose prohibiting them to use the 60 gallon tank. There were complications with the cisterns that didn't let the firemen get the cover off. The pump car was then taken down to the riverbank. The intake hose was launched over the railroad tracks into the Missouri River. Four firemen ran the pump providing a four inch stream of water. During this time, they could hear train whistles in the distance. An unscheduled locomotive was coming from the north without stopping. It is believed that it cut the hose in half.

Liquid refreshments were provided by the Royal Brewery but the cups were forgotten. The firemen were forced to drink from their helmets.

In December of 1896 there was a massive fire beginning on the second floor of the old furniture factory and eventually, it made its way downtown. It destroyed the furniture factory, the Baptist Church and three warehouses along with damaging many businesses. This fire tested the firemen's abilities. It was soon put out.

This fire inspired Mayor August F. Walruff to go before the City Council and ask them to pass a tax issue to buy more equipment.

In May of 1897, small houses were built at the bottom of Main Street for another test run and this time the fire was put completely out. There was a dinner afterward and an evening ball in the Opera House.

In June of 1897, Weston's first fire bell arrived. It weighed six hundred pounds and was put up in the new fire station. The city also purchased a number of rubber buckets, extinguishers, a hose wagon and a large amount of a two and a half inch hose. There was even an electric night alarm near the Saint George Hotel!

The fire station was located on the north side of Thomas Street and would move to a new location in the years ahead.

Weston has had its share of fires dating from 1855 "Murphy's Fire" to a "Border War Fire" set by Kansans in 1858 to the "Saint George Hotel Fire" in 1890. There were also notable fires in 1896 "The old Furniture Factory Fire" and the "Perry Warehouse Fire" in 1914 and the "Curing Barn Fire" in 1936. More modern day fires included 1987, 1991, 1998, and 2011.

I believe the most memorable year in Weston was the fall of 1896 to the spring of 1897 because this is when the citizens of the town decided it was time that Weston should have a true

fire department. It was the efforts of these men that helped preserve the buildings of downtown to make Weston the town that we all know and love today. A thank you should be in order to *all* of Weston's firemen, past, present, and future. Thank you, firemen of Weston, for protecting the town we call home.

Information for this essay was provided by *Weston and Its Fires* by Carolyn Larsen and an article titled *Weston's First Fire Department* by Doctor R.J. Felling.