

## FONDA FIRE DEPARTMENT

During the early years of Fonda protection against fires depended entirely on rather loosely organized groups, equipped with primitive fire fighting apparatus which became available from time to time. By 1870 the village had acquired a double handle bar pumping apparatus which required 10 to 12 men on each side to operate it. It was equipped with leather buckets and hose and pumped water from cists or from wells or from the village creek. When a fire broke out the operation of the pumper and the fighting of the fire was supervised by several accepted leaders but every able-bodied man, who reached the scene, pitched in and became a fireman for the day. Yet the fact that there was some nucleus of an organization with some available apparatus provided a measure of safety and protection to local residents.

But with the growth of the village and the continued erection of new buildings, the need of a better drilled company with up-to-date equipment became more and more apparent. In 1878 a row of New York Central houses, located along the creek nearly opposite the present depot, caught fire. The houses were destroyed but the efficient work of the fireman saved the freight house on site of the present tower and several hay storage sheds to the west. A little later a number of buildings on Main Street, from site of the Maze Hotel to the site of the present Conte building, were destroyed by fire. But Fonda's most destructive fire occurred on the night of July 23, 1884. Starting practically where the fire of '78 had ended, this fire traveled westward destroying one frame structure after another and also a livery stable and barns and wagon sheds along the alley north of Main Street until it was checked at the brick building now the Wagon Wheel.

That fire aroused public opinion to a demand for better protection. The village board, which had been reluctant to authorize funds for the purchase of improved equipment, was succeeded by a Citizens ticket in the election of 1885. On the evening after the election, September 14, 1885, a meeting of all citizens was called at the courthouse. Over 100 people were present at the meeting. After some discussion 25 men from among those present volunteered as permanent firemen and proceeded to organize the Mountaineer Hose Company No. 1, an organization that, though it later changed its name and still later expanded into two companies, has functioned without interruption to the present time as the local fire department.

The personnel of the company included: Foreman, Charles Dunbar; first assistant, William A. Smith; second assistant, Thomas Glenn; secretary, Henry Siver; treasurer, Carlton Banker; pipeman, Charles McKenlay, James Dunbar, Henry Keiderling, W.K. Rosa; hydrantmen, C.B. Clute, Dr. Levi Klock, Barton Leonard, Seymour Johnson. Other members, G. W. Brown, E. Corning Davis, G. L. Davis, C. N. Ballou, F. H. Hodge, F. N. Sanderson, Charles Nare, J. O. Schuyler, T. D. Smith, Charles Lenegar, S. W. Putman and G. M. Neahr.

The newly formed company accepted possession of the apparatus from the village board, proceeded to furnish its members with uniforms, badges and

Taken from "1850-1950 Centennial Souvenir" by Millard E. Crane

other personnel equipment and scheduled drill sessions. With the water supply piped in from the newly built reservoir(1), the company was equipped with hose carts and hose as the fire hydrants were gradually installed, throughout the village, the use of the hand pumper was discontinued. During the early years of its existence the company participated in many parades, benefits and other social events both locally and as guests of fire departments of surrounding towns,

The minute book mentions only three fires prior to the turn of the century, though there must of have been other alarms to which the company responded. The first was a chimney fire in the G. H. F. Van Horne residence on December 31, 1885, only a little more than three months after the company had been organized. It was found then that the fire bell was not large enough and could not be heard. Only about one-third of the company members heard the alarm and responded. The second fire at the Michael Washington residence on September 11, 1887. It is recorded in the minutes that the company had two streams of water on the fire five minutes after the alarm had been given. The third fire was at the knitting mill late in the year of 1889. Unfortunately the village board had permitted the removal of the hose from the carts for use in the streets to the embarrassment and chagrin of the firemen.

The company had run into difficulties with the village board earlier in that same year. The board had appointed a fire chief and the company refused to recognize him. The company claimed the board had the right to approve or disapprove but not the right to appoint. In the heat of discussion a motion was made that the company disband but cooler heads prevailed to secure instead the appointment of a committee to confer with the board and iron out the difficulty.

A complete solution of the problem was concluded in 1894 when the Fire Council of Fonda was organized pursuant to Chapter 151 of the laws of the State of New York of 1870 and the subsequent acts amendatory thereto. This council was to consist of the foreman and the two assistant foreman of the several companies of the department. Its duties were: 1. to present to the village board nominations for the office of chief engineer and two assistant engineers of the fire department, the village to appoint or to reject the nominees; 2. to purchase, maintain and use all apparatus of the department under the supervision of the village board.

At this time the J. S. Sitterly Hook and Ladder Company had already been organized and the foreman and two assistant foreman of the Hose Company and of the Hook and Ladder Company automatically became the Fire Council and the combined membership of the two companies constituted the Fonda Fire Department. Unfortunately the records of the Hook and Ladder Company are not available but the minutes of the Fire Council show the service of the former as a company of the fire department from 1894 to 1901. Evidently they had disbanded before the end of 1901, when Hose Company No. 2 was organized.

In December, 1894, the fire department, consisting of the Mountaineer Hose Company No. 1 and the J. S. Sitterly Hook and Ladder Company had

joined the Tri-County Association. In December, 1895 the Mountaineers changed their name to the Snell Hose Company No. 1 and new by-laws were adopted. In September, 1897, an addition to the firehouse was authorized by the village board. In June 1901, the Snell Hose Company No. 1 joined the State Fireman's Association. On December 30, 1901, Hose Company No. 2 was organized and continued under that name until April 1, 1929, when the name Snell Hose Company No. 2 was adopted. These two hose companies, No.1 and No. 2 have continued as the Fonda Fire Department from 1901 to the present time. In that half century of service only two major, total loss fires have occurred: The Hotel Roy, better known as the old Fonda Hotel, in 1909 and the Weeper mill on East Main Street in 1947. This record of efficiency is the more remarkable because until 1938, the department operated with man-drawn hose and chemical carts. Since 1938, when the first motored apparatus was acquired, their service has become even more efficient as only a few minutes are required to reach a fire any part of the village.

Much might be written about the individual men, who over their years of volunteer service made substantial contributions to the fine record of the Fonda Fire Department. But two names, of outstanding interest as links between the present and the past, are particularly worthy of mention. the first is E. Corning Davis, the only surviving charter member of the organization of the Mountaineers in 1885. The second is Seely Hodge, said to be the only Fonda fireman to belong actively to both companies. Mr. Hodge began as a drummer with the old hose Company Drum Corps. In 1895 he was elected to honorary membership in the company and in 1896 to active membership. In 1903 he became second assistant, in 1904, first assistant and in 1923, foreman of the company.

In 1933 he became chief of the fire department and continued actively in the office until time of his resignation in January, 1950. Incidentally he is serving at the present time as the general chairman of the Fonda Centennial committee.

James Lippie was elected chief in 1950.