Over a Century of Service

By GERTIE ESPENAN

The flaming tongues licked their way along the walls of the building; smoke billowed out of broken windows. Firemen on the street below worked feverishly to put out the blaze, others poured streams onto nearby dwelling to keep the fire from spreading. Trucks swung their aerial ladders into action at the top floor.

This is not a report of a recent fire. This is about the courageous men of the Baton Rouge Fire Department, who in countless incidents each year engage in a strenuous battle with death and destruction.

Whatever the incident, the saving depends upon the quick, sure actions of the men who respond to the emergency. If the firemen win, they deserve full public acclaim, not only during Fire Prevention Week, Oct. 5-11, but every hour of every day, because no Baton Rouge fireman has ever gone "on strike."

Organized fire fighting in Baton Rouge dates back to volunteers of 1825 when the Washington "Victory" Co. No. 1 and the Independence Fire Co. No. 2 were started.

The Washington Co. passed through the stages of bucket brigade, hand engine company, steamer and "handsome hose carriage which was the result of the introduction of the present modern system of waterworks in 1889."

Independence Fire Co. No. 2, the rival of the Washington outfit, went through the same stages as No. 1 with the exception that it never possessed a steamer and went from the hand engine stage to hose carriage service.

Pelican Hook and Ladder No. 1, with the motto, "We raise to save," was organized in 1874 and used a light truck until Feb. 17, 1891, when the aerial truck of the most modern and approved pattern was secured.

Washington Fire Co. No. 3 was organized in 1884 and was composed largely of sons and relatives of the members of the older companies. The members were allowed the old hand engine of No. 1 and when hose carriages were adopted, they secured their handsome and staunch machine. Even when this company was burned out and lost all except the hose carriage, they never discontinued responding to the call of duty.

Drivers were full time employees of the company, and the horses which pulled the equipment were named in honor of outstanding citizens.

Schloss Hose Co. No. 5 served as "the guardian of the rear portion of the city, and though situated a mile from the business portion of the city, is always at the fire on time and almost as soon as its more conveniently located contemporaries." This company, organized in 1893 and named after Mr. Ed Schloss, was located on Main St. in what is now the Salvation Army office.

All of these volunteer companies were headed by volunteer chiefs, and every fire fighter was a volunteer. It was more than a fire-fighting organization. It was composed of the prominent men of Baton Rouge who made the fire department a part of their social life and even the wives and children were interested in helping the organization.

As one person remarked: "Unless you or one of your family was a fire-fighter, you just weren't in it." Many times, while attending a social affair, the volunteers had to rush to a fire in their best blue serge suits. Not only did they serve as volunteers, without pay, but they paid annual dues to belong to the fire departments until 1918 when the city took over the department and made it a part-paid organization.

In the days of the volunteer fire fighters, the purchase of a new horse or a hose wagon called for a celebration. Fancy invitations were sent for the ceremonies and the horse was christened with the name of a fire foreman or other prominent citizen. The hose wagons too, were named for socially prominent persons, usually young ladies, and bottles of champagne were broken to christen wagons.

Each year the six fire departments held a Firemen's parade on Washington's birthday, each vying for the honor of parading the best decorated fire wagon. The firemen proudly marched alongside their trucks whether the streets were dusty or muddy. Even carriages owned by the volunteer firemen were decorated and were in the parade. The parade preceded a grand ball when prizes were awarded to the winners. This annual celebration gradually disappeared from 1912 to 1918.

Few fire fighters in the nation can match the record of Baton Rouge's Fire Chief Robert A. Bogan, whose fire fighting began as a youth of 20, as a member of the old Schloss No. 5 Volunteer Co., which he joined in 1910.

Today, Chief Bogan heads one of the most modern of metropolitan fire departments with 11 fire stations, one fire alarm headquarters, 247 employees, and the most modern equipment and communications.

Chief Bogan learned fire fighting after the days of the handdrawn pumps and hose carts, but he was a fireman during the time when the fire carts were drawn by horses. He was very active on the first city-wide committee which studied the problem of switching over to motor-powered equipment.

In 1912 the committee recommended that a motorized combination hose and chemical truck be bought, and in 1917, on another committee, he recommended the purchase of the first two pumper trucks in Baton Rouge's history.

The change-over to a paid fire department was in 1918, when Chief Bogan became the first, and so far, the only paid fire chief in Baton Rouge. The local government provided him with four full time firemen. He also had a standby list of "callmen" who were paid for actual fire calls. These men were paid one dollar for a daytime call and two dollars to venture forth at night.

In 1922, the city voted a bond issue for various improvement purposes, including $175,000 for the building of four fire stations. Those four now serving the "old city" and known as the "four old stations" include the central station, Laurel St., S. 15th and St. Ferdinand. The seven "new" fire stations and the alarm headquarters cost approximately $611,000. There are over 1,500 fire hydrants and 441 fire alarm boxes.

When the "four old stations" were completed and dedicated in 1925, the department had grown to 40 men. By 1949, with the addition of more than 30 square miles to the incorporated area of Baton Rouge the manpower increased to 56. Between 1949 and Jan. 1, 1952, the manpower grew from 56 men to 226, and the number of stations from four to 11 plus a modern alarm headquarters. Fire hydrants were doubled from 800 to 1,600, the alarm system was enlarged from 74 call boxes to 400 and a major investment was made in six modern 750 gallon pumping engines, a new 100 foot aerial ladder truck and other equipment.

A program inaugurated in 1949 for a $1,200,000 fire system expansion was completed in 1951, with a decrease of fire insurance.

In 1948 the size of Baton Rouge had multiplied from five to 37 square miles, and all municipal services, including fire department, needed to be expanded to give adequate service to the new areas. The expansion program was recommended by the National Board of Fire Underwriters in 1948, otherwise the required protection needed for the new areas would cause Baton Rouge to lose its first-class fire protection status and insurance premiums would increase. When the city consolidation went into power Jan. 1, 1949, the new areas had virtually no sustaining service such as fire protection.

Today, the Baton Rouge Fire Department's equipment includes a $78,000 alarm system, three aerial trucks with three sections of 100 foot ladder each, 17 pumps with two pumping 1,000 gallons of water per minute and one pumping 750 gallons per minute, and 35,000 feet of hose.