The Professional is proud to join our advertisers and readers in saluting the Lafayette Fire Department, which celebrates 100 years of continuous operation this year. While some early records make mention of volunteer firefighting as early as 1877, those first volunteer companies had a tendency to form and then disband. Fire Captain Ron Broussard is writing a special, limited edition centennial book to commemorate the (see Firefighters, Page 12)
A SPECIAL, LIMITED-EDITION
COMMEMORATIVE BOOK
CELEBRATING THE LAFAYETTE
FIRE DEPARTMENT'S FIRST
HUNDRED YEARS WILL
FEATURE PHOTOS FROM
LOCAL MEDIA AND FROM THE
HISTORIC PHOTO COLLECTION
OF CLERK OF COURT O.C.
DAN GUILLOT. PHOTOS
INCLUDED IN OUR SALUTE TO
FIREFIGHTERS ARE JUST A
SAMPLE OF THOSE TO BE
INCLUDED IN THE BOOK.
THEY WERE PROVIDED BY THE
BOOK'S AUTHOR, FIRE
CAPTAIN RON BROUSSARD.

FIREFIGHTERS
(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)
department's first 100 years.

There were mentions of volunteer fire-
fighters before 1897," Broussard said. "So
when I first started writing this centennial, it
was a little hard to determine which of those
dates to use as an official starting point for the
department." The city didn't actually establish a fire
department until some years after 1897,
Broussard said. However, census taker
Charles Debaillion did make note of a well-
established group of volunteers – the Hobos
during his 1897 trek across Lafayette
Parish.

"That was the most comprehensive
record of what was here at the time," Broussard said. "And it was from that point
that we can say the fire department operated
continuously, first as a group of volunteers
and later as a division of government. So we
finally settled on 1897 as our official starting
point for the commemorative project."

A key factor in the start of continuous
firefighting operations was the establishment
of a readily available water supply, Broussard
said.

"There was a major turning point in 1897
when the water supply came online," he said.
"Before that, firefighting was limited to the
bucket brigade kind of thing. But in 1896 the
city voted to support a property tax, raising
$35,000 to develop a wastewater plant and
electric lighting system. That's when the city
was first able to install fireplugs, and volun-
teeer firefighting groups began turning up."

There were two or three of those groups,
Broussard said, including the Hobos, the
Pelican Volunteer Fire Company and the
Home Company. Membership fluctuated and
some groups merged or were reorganized.
The Hobos soon emerged as the most stable,
and the group has been in existence in some
form or another.

"I've been working on this book for a
year, and it's a much bigger project than I
expected it to be," Broussard said, pointing to
the stacks of looseleaf paper, spiral notebooks
and photo files littering his desk at Fire
Station Seven. "In 208 pages we'll have 16

SEE FIREFIGHTERS, PAGE 16
The photos include recent as well as historic shots, including some rare photos of Lafayette Fire Company No. 1, established around 1908 and supervised by one of Lafayette’s early city fathers, Dr. Felix Girard. He had also served as chief of the Hobo volunteers.

“Once the city established its own fire department, the volunteers continued to serve since the formal fire department had only a few firefighters. And some of those were unpaid or were only part-time workers,” Broussard said. “So the volunteers and the city firefighters responded to the same calls, and fought fires side by side.”

In 1915, Broussard said, Girard was able to convince city leaders to provide funds for Lafayette’s first fire station, Station No. 1, which stood at the same location where it sits today – downtown, across from Don’s Seafood & Steakhouse.

At the same time, the city hired its first full-time, paid firefighter.

Another landmark came in 1917, when the city purchased its first real fire engine. Before that, firefighters used what Broussard called a “two-wheeled contraption” to haul buckets and other firefighting equipment.

The Hobos continued to serve faithfully alongside city firefighters up through the 1920’s, Broussard said. In 1923, Lafayette built its second fire station and called it the Pelican Station, in honor of the earlier Pelican volunteers - many of whom had gone on to join the Hobo volunteers or the “regular” city fire department.

By 1925 almost all of the Home Volunteers and Pelican Volunteers had been absorbed by either the Hobos or the city’s department. And in that year, Broussard said, Girard hired the city’s first full-time fire chief.

By 1925 Lafayette had 16 paid firefighters; the city was growing by leaps and bounds, still faster than the department was growing, but the role of the Hobos began to change all the same,” Broussard said.

“The Hobos took it upon themselves to handle the task of reviewing the department’s needs for equipment, and to be involved in the purchase of firefighting equipment,” Broussard said. “They had expertise in these areas, and donated their time to review bids and make recommendations to the fire chief about what kinds of equipment to buy and how much to spend. Service in this role, as a sort of informal liaison group between the fire department and city government, lasted until about 1970.”

By that time, Broussard said, the remaining members of the Hobo and Hobo Junior volunteer groups were getting considerably on in years. Their functioning gradually slackened off until the loosely organized group became primarily a social club centering around gumbo and other “fire house cooking.”

“They do meet regularly even now,” Broussard said. “And the remaining volunteer departments in the area, in Judice, Duson, etc., still carry on with that same spirit of volunteerism that motivated the original Hobos. That’s where it all started, and it continues today with their volunteer service.”

STORY IS BY ALICE FERGUSON
Fire captain Ron Broussard has spent the past year researching a centennial book on the Lafayette Fire Department. The finished volume, which is scheduled for printing in July, will be available only as a special edition, so orders for the book need to be made early.

The book will be the only comprehensive history of the Lafayette Fire Department. At 208 pages, it will include not only articles and anecdotal material, but also a breakdown of the department’s advances in staffing, equipment and techniques.

It will also feature both full color and black and white photography illustrating the department’s development since 1897.

Copies of the book may be ordered for $60.17, which includes tax, by writing to:

Photo-Graphics
202 Cottonwood
Lafayette, LA 70506
LAFAYETTE'S FIRST FIREFIGHTERS WERE VOLUNTEERS WHO CALLED THEMSELVES THE HOBOS. THEY FOUGHT FIRES WITH BUCKETS, SHOVELS AND WHATEVER ELSE THEY MIGHT HAVE FOUND ON HAND. EVEN AFTER LAFAYETTE'S CITY FIRE DEPARTMENT WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1908, THE HOBOS CONTINUED TO SERVE, WORKING ALONGSIDE THE "OFFICIAL" FIREFIGHTERS.

EARLY HEROS: HOW THE HOBOS GOT THEIR NAME

Back in the late 1800's, the budding village of Lafayette received its sole fire protection from a group of dedicated, unpaid volunteers who called themselves the Hobos. They practiced their craft in bucket-brigade style, responding to fire emergencies whenever and wherever they were needed.

No one questions the dedication of these early volunteers, but there are a couple of stories as to how they came to be called the Hobos. One story holds that because most of the volunteers were blue-collar working men, they would show up at fires dressed in dirty and sometimes ragged work clothes - looking, basically, like a bunch of hobos.

The other story claims that the name was first applied by the new wife of Lafayette's first fire chief. He got married rather suddenly, without telling any of his fellow volunteers about the impending nuptials. When the firefighters heard the news, they showed up at the chief's house, ready for an impromptu wedding reception. The missus was less than pleased, and was quoted thusly:

"Get out of here, you bunch of hobos."

In either case, the name stuck to those early volunteers, and the volunteers stuck to the task of making Lafayette a safer place to live and work. Second and third-generation Hobos are still around, we're told, still proudly carrying on the tradition of volunteerism which began with their fathers and grandfathers.
The motto of Lafayette's earliest firefighters was as simple as their uniforms: "Safety and Protection." Today's staff of more than 200 firefighters and support personnel may seem a far cry from the early days of the Hobo Volunteers and Firefighting Company No. 1, but the basic idea expressed by the motto still remains at the heart of a firefighter's service.

The Story of Chief: Firehouse Dog Alive & Well

We've all seen the pictures and heard the stories of the firefighter's constant companion, the Dalmatian. Known for their intelligence and quickness, the spotted dogs have been the mascot of firefighting since who knows when.

Lafayette's fire department is no different. For years the fire station on Johnston Street near USL - which was recently remodeled - was home to Chief, the department's Dalmatian.

"Chief never really went out on fire calls," said Capt. Ron Broussard. "He lived at the station, though, and had pretty much free run of the place."

At least, he did until he became too smart for his own good.

"Chief was an intelligent dog," Broussard said. "He soon learned that life at the fire station operated on a certain cycle: Alarm sounds, men leave. And if the alarm happened to sound at lunch time, there would be food left on the table. The firefighters would return to the station to find their meal all over the floor."

Broussard said that was when Chief graduated from being an inside dog to an indoor-outdoor model, with his own pen on the fire station's property. When the alarm would sound, Chief would go to his pen and the firefighters would respond to the emergency.

"It turned out that Chief was also somewhat of an escape artist," Broussard said. "He would get out of his pen and go wandering around the USL campus. He was a pretty big dog, and so that was kind of a problem; the firefighters had to go over to USL and pick him up a time or two."

So it was decided that it would be in everyone's best interests, including Chief's, to relocate the dog to the private home of one of the station's firefighters. So now Chief has room to roam, and firefighters can safely leave the noon meal unattended.

And last we heard, this strategy has worked out well for everyone. The firehouse dog is alive and well and living a life of peaceful retirement.