REMEMBERING Old Baton Rouge

BY ED CULLEN

Young Eddie Bauer lavished attention on Fire Company No. 2, the way other Baton Rouge boys of the early 20th century followed professional baseball.

No. 2, with its wooden alarm tower and short balcony jutting over an arched engine bay, was on the lot next to Bauer’s grandmother’s yard. A 1904 souvenir history of the Baton Rouge police and fire departments lists the officers of Company No. 2, the engineer (Miss Irene Fudju), the horse (A.E. Prigge) and the engine driver, C.L. Mood.

One afternoon, former police chief Bauer, 87, smoked a cigar in the kitchen of his house on Glomar Avenue and talked about old Baton Rouge.

As a young man, Bauer worked at the Columbia Theater, a vaudeville house on Third Street and foreman of the Paramount.

Born at the end of Baton Rouge’s days as a big farm town, Bauer saw his city become an industrial center. Baton Rouge grew from a population of about 8,000 in 1862 to about 34,700 by 1940.

On Jan. 1, 1948, Baton Rouge went from a town of four square miles and a population of around 35,000 to a city-parish form of government with 100,000 residents spread over 40 square miles.

Bauer grew up in a little river town where people knew each other. As police chief, Bauer would be part of one of the bloodiest days in Baton Rouge history.

On Jan. 10, 1972, Police Chief Bauer was injured in a melee with Black Muslims on North Boulevard that left two police and three Muslims dead and 31 people injured.

Bauer was born on Africa Street, later renamed Louisiana Avenue. The Bauers were in the stable business on both sides of the Mississippi River. Bauer’s grandfather was on the city council.

“Our driveway was at the south end of the courthouse on Africa Street. Dad worked at Standard Oil, but we had a stable on Third Street. We’d rest you a horse and buggy to get you where you wanted to go.”

“The police were on horseback. My uncle was in the force. I’d go get the horse and bring it home.”

The old municipal building was built behind the former police station, located on North Boulevard. The old police station was razed in the late 1940s.

“The parish jail was on St. Ferdinand Street,” Bauer said. “My grandmother’s property went up to the wall of the jail. The Strelczaks lived next door. We’d climb the trees and drop candy to the prisoners.”

“We’d been over there one day when my grandmother would yell, ‘Edward! Mr. Kennedy (the warden) was just here. ‘That was the end of our climbing the wall.’”

The neighborhood produced three police chiefs, including Bauer, and a sheriff—chefs Shirley Arriaga, King Strelczak and Sheriff Bryan Clements.

It was 1918 when Bauer’s father left the stable in the 100 block of Third Street to go to work during World War I.

Fiomsen and their horses fascinated young Bauer. His favorite was Engine Company No. 2, right on St. Louis Street. Pelican Hook and Ladder Company No. 1 had two drivers, one for the horses, a second to steer the back end of the ladder wagon.
Then Capt. R.S. Trigg, left, and then Maj. Eddie Bauer are seen at work in the old police station on North Boulevard, across the street from the City Club. The Traffic Division boasted eight motorcycle officers and 25 to 30 squad cars in 1955, Trigg said.

Bauer

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at Standard Oil.

"Five million dollar company to build two million dollar plant here," said a headline in the Daily State Times.

Construction wages alone on the refinery, north of the city equaled two-thirds of the East Baton Rouge Parish cotton crop in 1969.

In the early 1920s, Bauer's grandparents' house, along with other houses, was torn down to make way for a new courthouse on St. Louis Street.

Bauer was selling newspapers by the time he was 12. Later, he jerked sodas at Stroube's Drug Store, sold music catalog items door to door, ushered at the Louisiana Theater at Third and Florida and worked as a movie projectionist.

"I worked on the stage as a stagehand for the acts. Sometimes, I was a property man. The Columbia had only a 12-foot stage. When Annette Kellerman, the swimming and diving star, came to the Columbia, we extended the stage over the first five or six rows of seats for her diving pool. The pool had a glass front so you could watch her swim."

If Baton Rouge vaudeville fans didn't like the bill at The Columbia, there was the Elks Theater on Florida at Third.

"They had road shows, wrestling matches, special movies. The cheap seats were called 'The Peanut Gallery.' You could eat anything you wanted in those seats. You took whatever you wanted to eat."

The Elks Theater burned May 13, 1923. Yoerg Bauer, the fire chief, remembers other spectacular fires, an LSU chemistry building fire and the Valley House fire.

"The Valley House was a saloon and gambling house in the 1500 block of Government Street. The train station was at Government and 14th, on the north side of Government. Valley House was on the south side. It burned around 1914. I was just a kid. I ran out there with the fire engine."

Engine No. 2, Bauer's favorite fire house, was in the 200 block of St. Louis Street.

"When the fire bell sounded, the horses would come out from each side and stop where they were supposed to and the harnesses would fall on them. The firemen would hook up the traces and off they'd go. The horses' stalls were back of the engine on each side. They'd come out and knew just where to stand. The harnesses were up in the air on ropes and they'd drop down on the horses."

"I loved to go to the fires. I was partial to No. 2 because I lived behind it."

"Everybody always says, 'Why didn't you go to work for the fire department instead of the police department?' That's a good question. Bauer worked as a movie usher during the Great Depression. "You got $1 a day, but you got to see the show."

"I had $45 in the Union Bank when they closed in 1933. It was my life's savings."

World War II changed things for Bauer and Baton Rouge. During World War II, Lt. Bauer checked security at defense plants in Ohio and Indiana. He was compound commander at a German POW camp in Trinidad, Colo. He retired at lieutenant colonel in the Army reserve.

"When I left Baton Rouge during the war, I knew everybody. I came back a stranger."

Bauer had begun a career in the city's traffic department before he entered the service. As president of the Young Men's Business Club, Bauer helped write the city's first traffic regulations.

Among the club's more radical suggestions were one-way streets to help move traffic through downtown and a higher speed limit on North Boulevard.

"We raised it from 8 mph to 20 mph in 1938," Bauer said.

"They wanted to put us under the jail in the 1940s when we raised the speed limit to 50 on Florida Boulevard."

One day, after Bauer had established himself as the traffic guru, a woman reminded him of the days when he drove his Model T with his feet.

"People said, 'That's who we've got running traffic in this town?'" Bauer laughed.

Before the war, trolley cars rumbled through Baton Rouge on the "city belt" — Lafayette Street to North Boulevard, St. Louis Street to Government, Dalbroo to Main and back to Lafayette. There was an East Boulevard line. The Dixie Trolley took riders to the North Baton Rouge neighborhoods on the other side of Scenic Highway from the Standard Oil Refinery.

Traffic had a different sound, then.

"The traffic lights had bells on them," Bauer said.

Bauer became head of Baton Rouge's traffic department in 1938. He returned from the war to head traffic signals in the Department of Public Works. He was head of traffic in the police department from 1954 until 1968 when he became chief. He was chief until he retired in 1975.

Baton Rougians got through the 1950s and 1960s with less racial turmoil than many cities. Bauer said.

"We had a lot of gatherings but nothing compared to a lot of other places. The biggest problems we had was with the Muslims. Everything else worked itself out."

We could always talk. As long as you're talking, you're all right."

"Here's what I'm upset about. The increase in crime in our city and the schools. People aren't talking. There has to be more dialogue."