

the Advocate, Thursday, September 27, 1979

# Provincetown Fire Department



Advocate photo by Susan Areson

**Pumper 1.** Kneeling (l. to r.) Richard Meads, Phil Roderick, Cpt. Joe Trovato, Mark Lambrou, Vaughn Cabral, Lt. Steve Zawalick, Stew. Mike Trovato. Standing (l. to r.) Lawrence Meads, Buddy Silva, Russell Zawaduk, Billy Costa, Engineer Joe Andrews, Ronald White, Francis Santos, John Meads.

**Pumper 2.** Kneeling (l. to r.) Ken Couto, Rudy Santos, Tom Santos, Bryan Perry, Jim Green. Standing (l. to r.) Jesse Ferreira, Stew. Manuel Martin, Ron Motta, Lt. E.J. Martinez, Engineer Jim Meads, Robert Perry. Not pictured: Cpt. David Carreiro, Manuel Souza, Bernard Santos, Dennis Santos, William Burrell.



By Mary Bauer

Anyone who finds himself passing one of Provincetown's five fire houses when the fire alarm sounds is advised to stand back and cling to something solid.

Because otherwise he could get swept up in a burst of frenzied activity that has made Provincetown's 66-man fire department a constant object of astonishment over the years for its lightning-quick response to calls.

The quickness has been developed and maintained as a matter of survival, the only way to keep Provincetown, a firefighter's nightmare, standing. The town's tightly packed, tinderbox houses make them a potential banquet for an inferno.

But only one major fire, the 1930 conflagration that flattened the old wooden high school, spread beyond the immediate area. Most have been confined to the original building. A handful have skipped to one or two neighboring houses.

Some credit for this great success at containing fires is given to cooperative winds, which during many major fires happened to be blowing offshore, old-timers say. Another great benefit, this a result of human forethought, was to divide the department into five houses, each in its own district.

But the single major factor, by far, is the men's unflinching willingness to bolt from any activity before

the sirens have reached full pitch.

"You would have thought some of those fellows slept in their clothes," said Phil Alexander, a retired volunteer who served 42 years with Pumper 5. "The whistles had hardly stopped blowing when we were on the trucks."

In addition to the hazards of firefighting and the cramped conditions of Provincetown, the men have endured odd predicaments in individual fires.

While dousing a fire at "the Castle", a medieval-looking home in the West End, the men had to dodge exploding ammunition from a gun collection kept by the owner. They also had to sidestep ricocheting wine bottle corks as the contents expanded and burst out.

Answering a call to a fire at Miller Paint Store, the men were entertained by multi-colored flames caused by burning turpentine and paint thinners. But at the same time they had to put up with an awful stench from the same source.

Other accelerants that fed flames and the firefighters' burden in past fires were the tar pit at the Puritan Cold Storage fire and the candle wax-soaked floors of the Walter Stiff building across the street from Adam's Pharmacy. At one time the building had been a candle factory.

Magnesium rods used by suspected arsonists at the "monkeyhouse", a West End building that housed Provincetown Inn summer employees, unnecessarily fed

the flames. Magnesium reignites even after being doused with water. The men could only smother it with sand, or stand by until the magnesium burned itself out.

But despite all the hazards faced, the department has never lost a man in the line of duty.

Because there is no way of telling how many men may be out of earshot when the alarm rings all houses answer all calls. Although a chain of command at the scene of each fire is established, it must always remain flexible.

Men may drive directly to the fire or to their own firehouse, whichever is closer. When their own truck arrives they take up their preassigned task on the truck but until then they use the equipment of the first truck on the scene. The key to making the system work is a high degree of cooperation, flexibility and experience.

Although firefighting requires a unified effort, the men indulge in a healthy rivalry between houses during cooler moments. One of the more fiendish delights is for a pumper to reach a fire in a neighboring district before the pumper assigned to that district gets there.

The biggest thrill is for a pumper to reach another house's home turf first where two or three districts separate them.

The community's tradition of pulling together during a time of need was demonstrated nearly four years ago when Joe "Ducky" Perry, a retired fireman who had served staunchly for 45 years, was left homeless by fire. The blaze at his 301 Commercial St. house broke out while

he was visiting his wife, then on her deathbed in Boston.

Firemen quenched the fire and resuscitated Perry's dog, Rebel. A week later the firemen sponsored a benefit at Napi's Restaurant to raise funds for repairing the house. Owner Napi Van Derek said at the time that the town wanted "to show Ducky how much we care about him and give him a boost during these troubled times of his."

Although the concern was directed at one man and his need, it demonstrates that Provincetown doesn't take its firemen for granted.

The town's single greatest inferno that temporarily conscripted the whole citizenry into the department was the 1930 fire at the high school. Some say the Puritan Cold Storage fire of 1927 was more terrifying but it didn't have the range of the high school fire, which was fueled by heavy coats of varnish on nearly all the furniture inside.

Sparks carried by strong northwesterly winds ignited roofs as far east as what is now Rosy's Restaurant and also started a healthy blaze in the roof of the church that is now the Heritage Museum.

The Coast Guard joined the battle. Fire departments as far off as Hyannis raced down the Cape to help with the secondary fires since the town department was nailed down battling the blaze at the school. Townspeople soaked their homes with garden hoses or used the department's then-outdated hose carts that the men had placed at various spots throughout town.

The town quivered throughout the night under shadows cast by the raging flames. From their yards people watched the sparks drift overhead and did what they could to extinguish them when they landed and caught fire.

Because of the firefighters' efforts, the only major damage, besides the destruction of the school, was to the roof of the church.

With the department's equipment, training has become more advanced and sophisticated, with volunteers now sent to Barnstable County Firefighter's School. But probably the largest part of a fireman's training, then and now, has been through hands-on instruction and coaching from the older men.