

# History of the Vernon Fire House Company #1 and Fire Protection in Rural Vernon

By Norman R. Strong

In the early times it was the responsibility of everyone to be very vigilant in the use of fire and anything that could cause it to go out of control. If a fire started in a barn or house, one would abandon any effort to extinguish it and direct their attention on the saving of any nearby buildings.

As roofs of buildings were all covered with wood shingles, a flying ember could easily start a nearby building on fire. Neighbors would run to help with ladders and buckets upon seeing a cloud of smoke, as there were very few telephones to use to call for help. Upon the extension of telephone service, the telephone operators interrupted any use of the lines and would ring ten on all lines in the vicinity.

One of the principal reasons for incorporating the City of Rockville was to have an organized fire department with fire fighting apparatus and a system of fire hydrants.

Calls for help in rural areas would go to the Fire Chief, who would consult the Mayor [of Rockville] for permission to have the city help. As the rural people did not pay taxes to the city, the caller would have to pay a charge to the city. Since the fire truck carried only 60 gallons of water and there were no fire hydrants, their services were not very effective.

Forest fires were common in the spring and fall, when there were dry periods. Many fires were caused by careless burning of leaves and rubbish. The steam engines of the railroad trains were also a cause of fires. If the screen on the smoke stack of the engine was defective, hot embers would fly into the grass on the side of the tracks causing grass fires.

Under the Statutes of the State of Connecticut, the State Forester was authorized to appoint a local Fire Warden in each town. His duty was to issue permits for all outside burning and be in charge of extinguishing them. He had the power to issue warnings, make arrests, stop traffic and order people to fight forest fires. In the beginning George Clark, a local farmer, was appointed the first Fire Warden of Vernon and held this position for several years.

The State had two fire look-out towers that were manned during high fire danger periods. One was on Somers Mountain and the other is Glastonbury. They would look out for smoke and call the Fire Warden to investigate. They were very accurate in pinpointing the fires' location by using trigonometry. There was a forest fire truck kept in Willington that would respond, carrying water and a flexible hose that would be carried on one's back to wet down the area.

During the 1930's, there was a CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camp in Somers State Forest that would respond to help establish a fire line to prevent the rekindling of a fire.

The lack of any dependable people to secure help on short notice proved to be very ineffective in fighting a forest fire. To solve the problem, the State Forester established a forest fire fighting crew. The name of this crew was "The Box Mountain Fire Fighting Crew." Besides me, the members were George Clark, Raymond Clark, William Clark, Oliver Clark, Edward Lewis, Harry Hill, Emil Klotzer and Daniel Shea. The year was 1929 and the pay was 50 cents per hour, paid by the State.

A piece of land was burned over each spring to give us instruction on how to properly extinguish a forest fire. One man would be the captain to direct us. Two men would put out the fire with the spray from 5 gallon tanks carried on their back called "Indian tanks." These tanks were mounted on the trucks. The firefighter stood with his back to a tank and pulled one strap over each shoulder. Two people would carry water to

refill the tanks. Two would sweep the fire line with stiff brooms and a fire tool that would cut into the earth. One person would patrol to see that the fire did not start up again.

With Pearl Harbor and the entering of the War with Germany [in 1941], the threat of incendiary bombs caused the federal government to issue spray tanks and pails with instructions on how to put out an incendiary bomb. Water can not be used on incendiary bombs. Sand has to be used. Wardens were appointed and sirens were installed to give warnings.

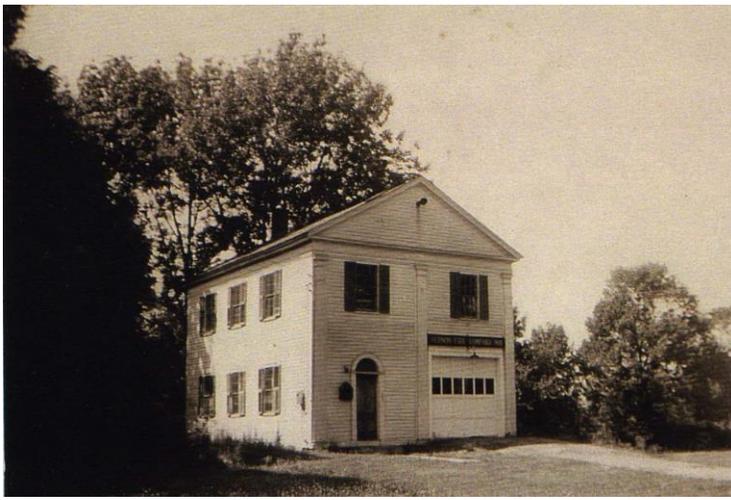
The Federal Government would also make available a 500 GPM pump with a 43 cylinder Chrysler motor, 400 feet of 2 ½ inch hose, and 200 feet of 1 ½ inch hose that were mounted on a two wheel trailer with no shut-off nozzles. Chief William Conrady of the Rockville Fire Department applied for two of these units. Not having use or a place to store them, he offered them to the rural areas if we would organize a fire department and secure a properly heated place to house them in. Chief Conrady and members of the Rockville Fire Department were very supportive.

On March 23, 1943, a meeting was called for all those interested in forming a fire department, in the basement of the County Home School. [Now the site of the Vernon Police Department] The rural town was divided into 3 areas with each to have its own district, naming Vernon Center to be Company #1, Dobsonville to be Company #2 and Talcottville to be Company #3. Three commissioners, one from each district, were also elected to have oversight of the whole area, with each district being responsible for raising its own financial obligation for housing and equipment. Thomas Hefferman was elected first Fire Chief of the three companies and Howard Huelsman was elected Assistant Chief.

There were two school properties that the towns no longer used for school purposes: one in Vernon Center between the First Congregational Church and the parsonage [now parking lot] and the other in Dobsonville on the Hartford Turnpike [now occupied by a vacant restaurant]. They were provided to us as a place to house our fire departments. Company #2 built a garage next to the school building and we at Company #1 converted our building by putting in overhead doors and reinforcing the floor by going through a crawl space underneath. As there was not place to house equipment for Company #3, Company #1 and Company #2 received the two trailers with the fire pumps. Through the influence of John Talcott and Franklin Welles, Company #3 had their headquarters in the basement of a Talcott mill building.

Company #1 was organized with the following officers and firemen: Thomas Hefernan, Chief, Captain Norman Strong, Lieutenant Herman Olson, Engineer Edward Clark, Secretary Saul Peizer, Treasurer George Brown, William Johnson, Norman Bell, Cecil Wood, James Wilson, George Clark, Thomas Wilson, Gaylord Paine, Joseph Matyia and James Shea.

In order to use the school house, the selectmen of the town were contacted to seek their permission. They informed us that it would have to go to a town meeting to get that permission. A town meeting was called and a resolution was passed, granting it.



Old Vernon school after conversion into a fire station

The school house was about 24 feet by 40 feet. It had two front doors: one on the south side leading to a long unused second floor and the other on the north side opening into a room for the children to hang their coats. This led to the original school room. By removing the partitions and installing an overhead door, we could have enough length to back in a truck and a trailer.

This would cost a lot of money that we did not have. Each company was responsible for raising its own money. So a letter was sent to home owners asking for contributions. We were grateful for the money we received, but it was soon gone with the purchase of a 1935 Ford 1 ½ ton classic truck from Victor Champ, who sold used trucks further up Hartford Turnpike

Chief Hefferman's brother-in-law worked for the State Highway Department and he secured a permit to have a driveway to Route 30. On a Sunday afternoon, all of us turned out with shovels and dug gravel from Harold Ellis's gravel bank. A lot was needed near the door as the level of the floor was quite high.

Since a tank was needed to carry water, two of our members took the truck to Hartford, (no markers, no insurance) to buy an old 400 gallon oil tank that was taken from an old delivery truck. This was mounted on the body. We proceeded to build cabinets around it and mounted our Indian tanks with a 24 foot ladder that we purchased. We also had to make a trailer hitch and an outlet from the tank that we could attach to the pump on the trailer. The body of the truck was painted a bright red and a siren was installed on the front fender. We were all ready for action.



Norman Strong, Deputy Chief Edward Clark and Chief Will Johnston celebrate 30 years of service in 1973.



The Vernon Center Fire Station has been the home of Company # 1 since 1961

Each member was assigned a week during which to provide daily care for the firehouse. The coal stove that was left by the school proved to be troublesome and so an oil stove was purchased to replace it. It was a fireman's duty to take care of the stove, keep snow from the doors and mow the lawns.

A central fire alarm system was established through the cooperation of Albert S. McClain, Superintendent of the [Tolland] County Home [for Children]. Since someone was there 24 hours a day, it was an ideal place to take fire calls. Through a chain calling system established by the members, all were notified of a fire. A siren was also used as a fire alarm. This siren was located on a telephone pole in front of the Tolland County Home and could also be used to sound the alarm for an air raid.

In responding to a fire, it was necessary to lower the dolly wheel on the trailer, unhitch the trailer, turn it around, and connect the suction to the pump. We used the 1 ½ inch hose to connect it to the pump with a nozzle that came with the equipment. With not having any shut off, our 400 gallons of water would last about 7 minutes. There was also a nozzle for the 2 ½ inch hose that also had no shut off.

Drills were held every Monday night to instruct the members in the procedures to put out different types of fires. A lot of credit can go to the Rockville firemen under the direction of Assistant Chief Frank Flaherty for their instruction that included teaching how to connect hoses and climb ladders.

Some of us took part in three ten week courses in fire fighting for which we received a certificate. Our instructor was furnished to us by the State and one trainer was a fireman from West Hartford.

Our goal was to get 1000 feet of 2 ½ inch hose with a 2 ½ inch shut off nozzle so that the home owner would qualify for a reduction in fire insurance. Having to purchase 600 feet of 2 ½ inch hose at \$2.50 per foot with all our other expenses was very discouraging.

After World War II ended, the Town discontinued giving us any money due to a state statute that forbade a town giving money to a fire department where there is also another city in the town that is supported by its own taxpayers.

A State Forest Fire Warden called me and asked me to meet him at the fire house. I met him there. He informed me that under the state statutes, the Forest Department could not furnish material or money to any organized fire department in any town. He had come to take back all the equipment that belonged to the Forest Department and he took it right off the truck.

Fortunately, one of our members, Saul Peizer, was a lawyer and informed us that we should incorporate with the State to guard each member from being responsible if someone brought suit against the Company. He filed the proper documents with the Secretary of State.

After doing this, we decided to have two different organizations. One would be Vernon Company #1, Inc. with a treasurer who handled all money related to the expenses of running the fire company. The other treasurer would handle all money related to the social activities which was financed by the payment of dues accessed to each member. A new ceiling was put up on the second floor of the fire house. The floors were sanded for meetings and social events. There were family gatherings, picnics and Christmas parties for the children held upstairs.

After the end of World War II, the State Highway Department renewed construction on Route 84 through Vernon. We decided a good way to make a lot of money for the fire department was to sell fireworks. As there was a grade crossing on Tunnel Road with a lot of interstate traffic, it proved to be an idea location. Ben Cantor gave us permission to put a stand on his land. Power was installed and members were assigned to man the booth. This proved to be very profitable.

The State Fire Marshall did not look on this enterprise very favorably. One day he paid us a visit. He arrested us and took all the merchandise. The law was that each individual firework should have the word "explosive" plainly written on it. A member appeared in town court, was found guilty and was put on probation. The next year, a state law prohibiting the sale of fireworks was passed, ending a large source of income. There were a lot of fire hoses, shut off nozzles, fog nozzles, portable pumps and other equipment purchased with this source of income.

Having lost the sale of fireworks, we then took up the sale of Christmas trees. This proved to be a good source of income as there were very few locally grown trees. We would buy a half load of trees from New Brunswick, Canada, until a disease in their trees damaged their quality. One year, we rented a trailer truck. A fireman went 200 miles north of Toronto and brought back a whole load. We worked with two other companies in running a carnival in Vernon Circle. This proved to be a lot of work for the amount of money we could make and after 2 or 3 years, it was abandoned. Christmas trees are still sold at Company #1.

We were granted permission by Civil Defense after World War II was over to take the pump off the trailer and mount it in back of the cab of the truck. This we did by pushing the body back about 2 ½ feet and making a direct connection from the tank. A hose reel with rubber hose was mounted on top. This proved to be quick and easier to activate when coming to a fire.

Adding all the weight to a chassis that was only built for 1 ½ tons slowed our response time, especially on a hill. To buy a new truck would be too costly for us to assume. The Town was unable and unwilling to help, so the only course available was to have a fire district. The other two companies were in agreement with us as they were having the same problems.

A bill was placed in the General Assembly in the late 1940's to have a commission of six and a tax collector elected at an annual meeting to run the Fire District. This was passed and we proceeded to get 3 new fire trucks and new firehouses.

The rural area of the town began to grow with the completion of Interstate 84. There began some objectionable development (i.e. the poorly designed trailer park that used to be located near Post Road Plaza and the commuter parking lot). A bill was presented and passed in the General Assembly to have zoning and planning included in the rural Vernon District Charter. The City of Rockville voted against zoning and planning.

As the rural area of Town continued to build schools and called for other services, the Rockville City fathers felt it should give up its charter and consolidate with the Town. A Charter Committee was formed and presented a Charter that would consolidate all departments except for the fire departments. After three referendums, it was finally passed in 1965 by a very few votes in the district, thereby causing an end to the city and district government.

In writing a history, it is very helpful to have minutes of the meetings and documents that are dated. However, I have found that all of the records of Company #1 have been destroyed and I have had to rely on my memory.

As the town of Vernon is about to celebrate its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it is pleasing to know that rural Vernon is protected by good firefighting equipment and volunteer firefighters.

I am glad that I had the opportunity to play an important part in the establishment of Company #1 in Vernon Center.

A life-long resident of Vernon, Norman Strong is the fourth generation to operate the Strong Family Farm. Mr. Strong has been active in the community, serving on town committees and in political and social organizations. Mr. Strong and his wife reside in the family homestead on West Street.