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Gearhart Volunteer Fire Department (Page 81)

Fire Chief Richard Schoenborn gave the writer the following history of the Gearhart Fire Department in 1956:

“The volunteer fire department in Gearhart was formed in 1906 with a hose cart for equipment and a bell sounding the alarms. The first four or five men to arrive at the city hall would pull the cart to the fire where practically everyone else had congregated. One night the cart overturned and one fireman broke a finger.

“During these early years, the most entertaining feature of a fire alarm was the race to the fire by two of the local citizens, Carl Habekost and William S. Badger. Mr. Habekost owned a span of mules and Mr. Badger a team of horses. When the alarm sounded, they would whip up their teams and try desperately to beat the other to the fire, with the rest of the people lining the streets, shouting encouragement to their favorite.

“In 1922, the first fire truck was purchased, a 1922 Model-T Ford. It was replaced in 1941 by the present truck, a 1941 Chevrolet. “The first Fire Chief was Bob Robinson in 1923. In 1924 and 1925, H. O. Poppino was the chief, and from 1926 to 1936, James Cutler, Sr. served in that capacity. During the following five years, several men were named as chief but no records were kept concerning them. From 1941 to 1945 Warren Megrath was the chief. In 1946 Richard Schoenborn was named chief and under his management ever since, the department has grown from an inexperienced group of local volunteers to a group of 18 well-trained firemen.

“In addition to the Fire Department, there was a Ladies Auxiliary formed in May of 1952 with Mrs. Richard Schoenborn as its first president. It was formed for the sole purpose of giving aid to the firemen. “This group helps raise money for the Fire Department, assists unfortunate families and people who have been burned out, with clothing and food. They also sponsor any civic event such as the County Health Mobile Ex-ray Unit and the Red Cross or the March of Dimes.”

Gearhart’s most unusual fire occurred November 13, 1956, at the “Oregon Trail Trading Post” building which housed the Cobra Gardens, a barber shop, gift shop, a cafe and the home of the owners—J. H. Knox family. Mrs. Richard Schoenborn told this version:

“The Oregon Trail Trading Post fire was discovered by a passing motorist when he noticed the flames shooting from the windows, and roof. By the time the alarm was turned in, nearly all the roof was ablaze and the flames were shooting hundreds of feet into the air. Because of the brisk northwest wind the fire spread rapidly throughout the entire building. The fire started in the furnace room which was located in the center of the northwest wing of the L-shaped building.

“The snakes were in a room lined with sheet rock so weren’t bothered too much by the heat and smoke. Peter Wascher and other men worked long and hard packing the snakes out the next day. About 35 snakes, including the python were lost due to cold and smoke. The rest were sent to some of Mr. Knox’s friends in Arizona for safe-keeping.

“Dick Hall’s barbershop was gutted by flames, but the boys saved all his barbering tools and dragged the barber chair out because they just couldn’t stand to see their pal wiped out. “Nothing was saved out of the cafe. “Due to the help by the Seaside, Cannon Beach, Warrenton, Astoria, Tongue Point fire departments and the Crown-Zellerbach pumper under the Mutual Aid plan, the Gearhart firemen were able to bring the fire under control in about two hours. No one was injured although one fireman, Vern Byers, was almost overcome by smoke. “The loss was only partially covered by insurance.” By the spring of 1957 the building had been completely re-built; the snakes were again in their quarters; barbershop and cafe businesses were continuing as though nothing had happened. In 1957 Richard Schoenborn moved out of Gearhart for several months at which time John J. Raniero was appointed fire chief of Gearhart’s fire department with two assistants -William Heckenberg and Bernard Anderson. They held these positions still in 1958.