

Ready for the Call

When the bell that once adorned the old Town Hall sounded, the members of the Ingersoll fire brigade were quick to respond. With water pails in hand, they would rush to the scene to extinguish the flames before the blaze spread to other buildings.

When Ingersoll's Reeve John Galliford signed the bylaw to establish its first fire brigade in 1863, Reuben H. Carroll was appointed Chief. The rest of his crew were volunteers so whenever emergencies occurred local citizens were expected to come to their aid. In fact, any male between the ages of 16 and 60, according to the law, had to assist in extinguishing fires or protecting personal property when asked by a brigade member.

For many years, the bell which summoned fire fighters was rung on a code system. Ingersoll was divided into three different zones, so depending on which ward the fire was located in, the bell would sound a specific number of times.

In the early days most of the buildings in town were made of wood, and fires were a common occurrence. One of the first significant fires occurred in 1856 when the first municipal building and its bell were destroyed. The structure was replaced in 1858 and the fire hall was added to it some 20 years later, following two more devastating fires.

Because of the risks involved with fire fighting, and the regularity of fires, volunteers were paid 50 cents a month. They certainly earned their money in 1872. On May 7th of that year, the fire department had 12 wooden buckets to battle the inferno which raged through both sides of Thames Street. Up until that time, no other Canadian fire had been so devastating.

Flames broke out in the vacant stable of the Royal Exchange Hotel at the southwest corner of Thames and Charles Street. Within a matter of minutes fire had spread in all directions. Eighty businesses were lost or significantly damaged that night. So fierce was the fury of the flames reported an eye witness, that "the main street was one large channel of fire."

A modern apparatus was added to the Ingersoll fire brigade the following year. The American-made Silsby steam-powered double piston pumper cost the town \$4750. That year also marked the introduction of horses to their roster. Within the next twelve months members of the brigade also started wearing helmets and protective coats to fight fires. In that same year, 1874, smoke once again filled the skies as several businesses along King Street East were totally engulfed in flames.

The men of the Ingersoll fire brigade were continually called into action throughout the subsequent decades. They have seen action during various train derailments and natural disasters like the flood of 1937, but their main duty of preventing and fighting fires continued.

In 1955 the fire in the Ingersoll Arena on Charles Street was described by Chief Alf Schaeffer as the worst the town had seen in many years, but the following year's Christmas celebrations were dampened when Featherstone's supermarket, Honey Moon's toy store, and Eaton's order office filled with gifts burned just days before Christmas.

In recent times, the most significant fire to strike the Town of Ingersoll occurred on June 4, 1991 when fire once again raged through several of the downtown businesses and apartments. More than 50 firefighters from the Ingersoll and neighbouring Oxford County departments battled the blaze for several hours before it was finally subdued.

Thankfully, not all of a fireman's days are spent fighting fires. Charity and coming to the assistance of others has been a cornerstone of the department. Their participation in parades and other municipal functions echoes back to the days when, under the direction of Chief Leslie Harlow in the 1960s, members were busily cleaning, repairing and repainting donated toys and dolls for distribution to unfortunate children during the festive season.

Ingersoll's Fire Department has seen many changes since its formation 150 years ago – from one chief and a handful of volunteers, to the present complement of 4 full time employees and 22 volunteers. In those 15 decades, under the direction of 15 different Chiefs, these courageous men and women have been ready for the call and have come to the rescue and aid of countless numbers of individuals – the elderly and the young, the poor and the privileged. From those first days, down to the present, they have upheld the tradition of serving and protecting the people and property of Ingersoll.

Scott Gillies

In 150 years of service, certain individuals gained the respect of the people of Ingersoll, its Council, and their peers. Those men are the fifteen fire chiefs who have served over the fifteen decades since the brigade was first formed in 1863.

The first Chief was Reuben H. Carroll. He served as chief engineer between 1863 and 1871. All members of the department were volunteers and held other full time employment in town. Carroll was a miller.

Two other members of the original brigade would later serve in the Office of Chief. These included James Brady and Robert Vance.

Brady, innkeeper at the Mansion House Hotel located at the southwest corner of Thames and King Streets, held the lead position from 1871 until 1883. It was under his term that the great conflagration of 1872 destroyed some 80 businesses in the downtown core. To counteract the threat of future fires, the town of Ingersoll purchased a steam-powered double piston pumper from the Silsby Steam Engine Company the next year. This necessitated the introduction of horses to the department as well. Previously, all fires were fought by men with ladders and buckets which they carried to each blaze. The investment in this equipment and livestock was timely. One year later, flames engulfed King Street East. Ironically, on February 1, 1876 flames broke out in the Town Hall itself and the bell which called firemen to their post was destroyed.

James Brady, who would later serve as Sheriff of Oxford County, was followed for the next five years by Vance. Being a carpenter by trade, Robert Vance must have had a keen awareness of building construction that would serve him well in his office.

For a total of 27 years George Cragg was a member of the local fire brigade, and when he acted as Chief between 1888 and 1899, chemicals were first used to fight fires.

Of the fifteen different men to serve as Chief of the Ingersoll Fire Department, only two have fulfilled the role for more than 20 years. The first was Roderick A. Sutherland. A tailor on King Street by day, Sutherland was Chief during some of the most significant and tumultuous times in Canadian history – the dawn of the 20th century and World War One - from 1899 until 1920. Assisting him at the Fire Hall was caretaker and bell ringer James Sherlock.

At this time in the department's history, the brigade was comprised of fifteen men, and all received remuneration for their services. Sleeping accommodations were provided for some of the men in the station house part of the old Town Hall; the other being occupants of residences nearby. The men had a furnished reading room, and occasionally they were called out for a test and drill. The annual expenses of the department, as provided in the estimates for 1906, was \$1110.00

The next seven years following Sutherland's duration were under the direction of John Radford. Like his predecessors, Radford had been gainfully employed elsewhere before

taking on the additional responsibility of extinguishing flames. In 1907 he and partner O.J. Mitchell operated a business on Charles Street East where funeral cars, ambulances and casket wagons were made.

The town's first full-time Chief was hired in 1927; he was 59 year old John H. Williams. Under his guidance, the 1927 Stewart Pumper truck was purchased for the town's department.

The most notable event during A. B. Handley's term as Chief (1930-35) was the twelve hour fire at Wood's Flour Mill on Mill Street.

Harry Gillespie was selected as the next fire Chief in 1935, the same year that he married Edith Dorthea Kritzer in Toronto. He served until 1942 when he enlisted with the Royal Canadian Air Force and served with the Commonwealth Air Training Plan.

Gillespie's successor was Fred C. Ellis, who by the time he left in 1955 had contributed 35 years to the force as a volunteer and full-time Chief. As was often the case, the fire department provided opportunities for brothers in arms to also be brothers by blood, or in Ellis' case it was father and sons. Fred had the honour of serving with sons Don, Bill and Tom.

Chief Alfred Schaefer filled the role for the next five years. This veteran of the Second World War had also been a volunteer fire fighter as well as being caretaker of the municipal building.

In 1960 Leslie G. Harlow assumed control of the ranks and this popular Fire Chief remained head of the department until 1978. Between being a volunteer member and a paid employee, Harlow served the people of Ingersoll for 30 years.

The thirteenth chief was Ken Campbell who filled the role from 1978 until 1990. Much of the early history of the department which has been written is thanks to Campbell. In some instances, his knowledge came from 41 years of first hand experience. Campbell volunteered in 1949, and worked his way up the system, becoming a full time officer in 1963 and Chief when Harlow retired.

The longest serving chief to date has been Darell Parker. First hired on as a volunteer in 1980 he became a full-time employee two years later. On July 1st, 1990 he became Chief and was responsible for coordinating the efforts of more than 50 fire fighters from different departments around Oxford County in October of 1991 when disaster struck the town again. This experience put him in good stead to take on additional duties as Fire Chief of Norwich Township in 1998 and Fire Coordinator of Oxford County from 1994 until 2012.

Parker's successor and the present Chief of the Ingersoll Fire Department is John Holmes, who like many of the other men who have filled this rank, comes from a long line of family members who have dedicated their lives to serving and protecting the people of Ingersoll.