



The Roarin' Twenties, Amalgamation and Jubilee Year

(1920–1936)



The morning after the Balmoral
Apartment fire, June 20, 1920.

Photo: CVA 99-3238

The Balmoral Apartment Fire

On the warm evening of June 20, 1920, the druggist on the corner of Davie and Thurlow Streets thought he saw smoke coming from one of the basement windows of the Balmoral Apartments, at 1148 Thurlow Street. Within moments, a neighbor next door to the apartment heard a muffled explosion and a cry of "Fire!" He immediately called the fire department.

Fire Alarm Operator Tom Burke, who tapped out Firehalls No. 2 and No. 6 to respond, took the alarm at 10:44 p.m. Both companies were somewhat hampered by the gathering crowd, but they were able to have several hose lines on the fire within five minutes of their arrival. Soon, the fire had gone through the roof of the six-story building. Assistant

Chief Thompson said that he could see the fire as he left No. 2 and thought that there must have been some delay in turning in the alarm, but the fire had spread very quickly.

At 10:54 p.m. the chief put in a second alarm then called for a third alarm at 10:59. Ladders were raised to effect rescues and for operating hose lines, and other lines were advanced from the ground floor to the roof, floor by floor, until the fire was knocked down. Finally struck out at 2:10 a.m., the fire had claimed five lives.

The first loss of life occurred when a man jumped to his death from an upper floor before the arrival the fire department. The next man was encouraged to jump from the fourth floor into a life net being held for him by a group of misguided bystanders who had taken the nine-and-a-half-foot (3-m) Browder life net from No. 2 Truck. He jumped, hitting the edge of the net and fell to the sidewalk, striking his head. He was then carried across the street to St. Paul's Hospital where he later died of his injuries. Chief Thompson ordered the men not to use the net again as they were untrained and not using it properly.

The next two victims, a man and a woman, were found on the sixth floor. They had died of smoke inhalation, and it was felt they would have survived had they not refused to go to the roof and await rescue with one of the survivors who had encouraged them to do so.

The last victim was the building janitor, Mr. S.A. Spencer, who, upon discovering the fire in the basement, ran through the building alerting people to the fire because the building did not have a fire alarm system. He managed to get through the building before he perished on the sixth floor, a hero who had saved many lives.

It was never determined exactly how the fire started, but the rapid spread was caused by combustibles in the furnace room, the lack of a fire door at the bottom of the elevator shaft, open stairways, no fire gongs, and flammable wall coverings on the first two floors. Total damage was \$93,600.

Star Fireman/Athlete Injured

The headline in the paper read, "Driver Turned For Street Car; Gene O'Connor Is Dying." On February 1, 1921 just after 10:00 p.m., Hose Wagon No. 1 responded to an alarm at Box 24, Abbott and Hastings. The driver, while trying to avoid hitting a streetcar at Carrall and Cordova Streets, swung his rig wide, skidded onto the sidewalk smashing two large plate glass store windows, and then struck a pedestrian who suffered a fractured leg, scalp cuts and internal injuries.

Fireman Eugene Major Connor (not O'Connor), popular local sportsman and wrestler, was thrown from the rig and struck his head on a lamp-post, fracturing his skull. He was rushed to the hospital by police patrol wagon and was not expected to live. The fire call turned out to be of a minor nature.

After missing 188 shifts at work, which were covered by his brother firemen, Connor returned to work. His recovery was no doubt a testament to his excellent physical condition as a wrestler. He was also a well-

VANCOUVER FIRE FIGHTERS' CRACK ATHLETES



Fireman Eugene Conner (doing handstand) is shown among the department's many athletes.

Left to right: Ralph Ravey, Lorne Foley, Tom Burke, L.O. Hillier, Gill Martin, Alf Smethurst, R.E. McLaren, J. Stewart, Archie McDiarmid, J. Wright, Tom Anderson, Jack Anderson, Fred Taylor, Gene Conner. **Inset** - Deputy Chief Charlie Thompson. *Photo: VFD Archives*

known daredevil and often entertained by walking on his hands on the cornices of downtown buildings. Gene was born in Sulphur Bluff, Texas, joined the VFD on September 30, 1918, and retired in 1955 as a captain. He died September 19, 1983 at the age of eighty-eight years.

Connor was one of many athletic fireman of that era. At the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp, Belgium, Fireman Archie McDiarmid, an athlete on the ten-member Canadian team, was the designated flag bearer for the opening ceremonies parade. For some unknown reason, a Canadian flag wasn't available, so Archie led the team into the stadium carrying a bare flagpole. He came fourth in the fifty-pound hammer throw.

Archie McDiarmid with some of his trophies and awards.
Photo: VFD Archives



Captain Thomas Tidy.
Photo: VFD Archives



The Fire Warden's Branch Is Formed

In 1921 the Fire Warden's Branch (fire prevention inspectors) was organized to replace the police sergeant who had been appointed fire warden years earlier. The first chief fire warden was veteran fire captain Thomas Tidy, who had joined the VFD in 1893, and his second-in-command was Captain Jack DeGraves. The remainder of the branch consisted of four lieutenants, nine inspectors and two clerks.

January 1, 1922 the "Rule of the Road" came into effect in Vancouver requiring all drivers to now drive on the right-hand side of the road. The VFD only had two fire apparatus on its entire roster with other than right-hand steering wheels; the new 1922 White chemical wagon at No. 2 Hall and No. 2 Truck, the old Webb aerial, which had its steering wheel right in the middle! No major driving problems were recorded.

On June 14, 1922, Chief Carlisle became the first recipient of the Appreciation Medal of the Native Sons of British Columbia, in a colorful ceremony that took place on the steps of the courthouse. With the mayor and other civic dignitaries, a parade of firemen, the police pipe band, school children and citizens in attendance, the chief accepted the medal and the many tributes praising his good citizenship and fine service to the community.



Captain J.H. DeGraves.
Photo: VFD Archives

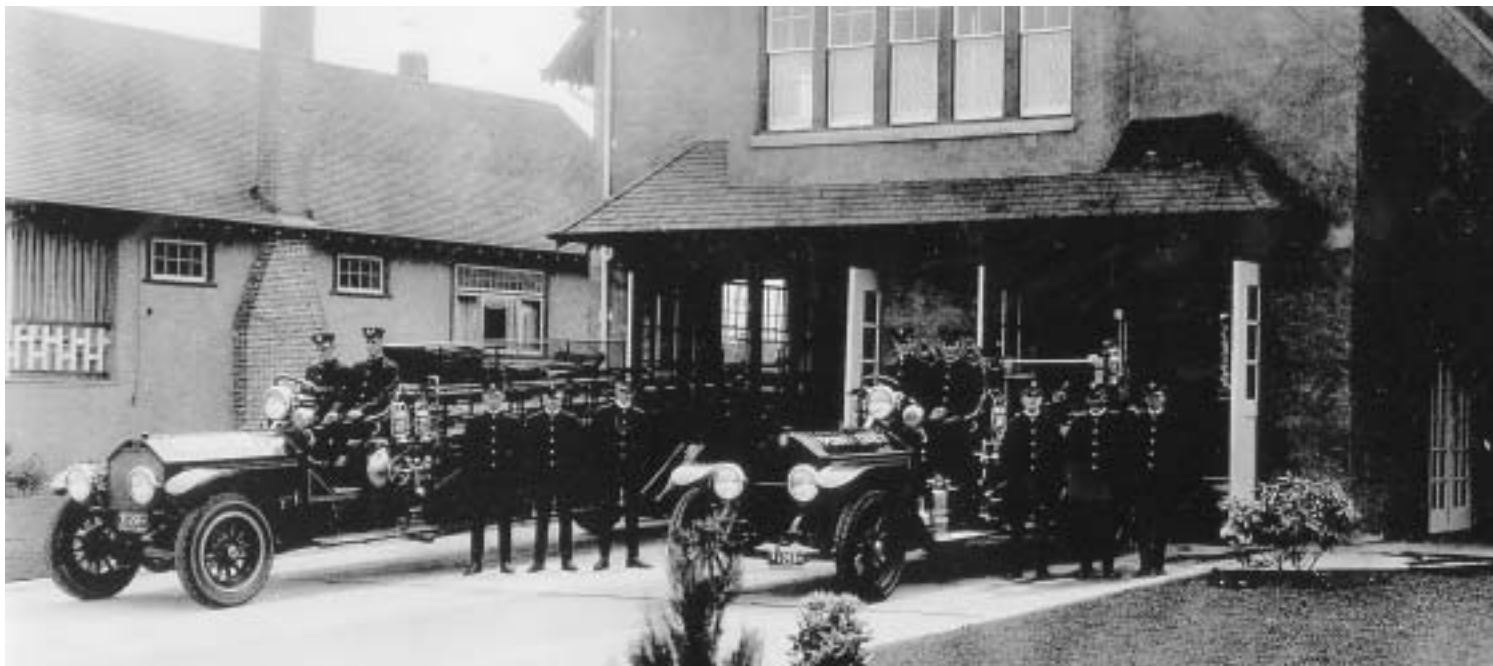
In the evening a banquet was held in the Hotel Vancouver, and the Native Sons announced that it was their intention to hold a similar citizenship ceremony every June 13, on the anniversary of the Great Fire of 1886.

Point Grey No. 2 Firehall was opened September 1, 1922 on the corner of West 12th and Trimble Street. The PGFD began serving that neighborhood in 1915 from a temporary hall, which wasn't much more than a garage, at 4411 West 11th Avenue. After about a year at that location they moved into rented quarters at 10th Avenue and Sasamat Street. Then on June 6, 1922 the owner of the property gave them notice to vacate and within three months the new quarters were built and ready to move into on 12th Avenue.

PGFD Firehall No. 4, at 70th Avenue and Hudson Street, opened October 22, 1922, but only after the final payment of \$2,250 had been paid to the contractors. (It appears that the municipality had some trouble paying its bills.)



Chief Carlisle accepts the Appreciation Medal from the Native Sons of B.C.
Photo: Stuart Thomson: VFD Archives



Point Grey No. 2 Firehall. *Photo: CVA 354-62*

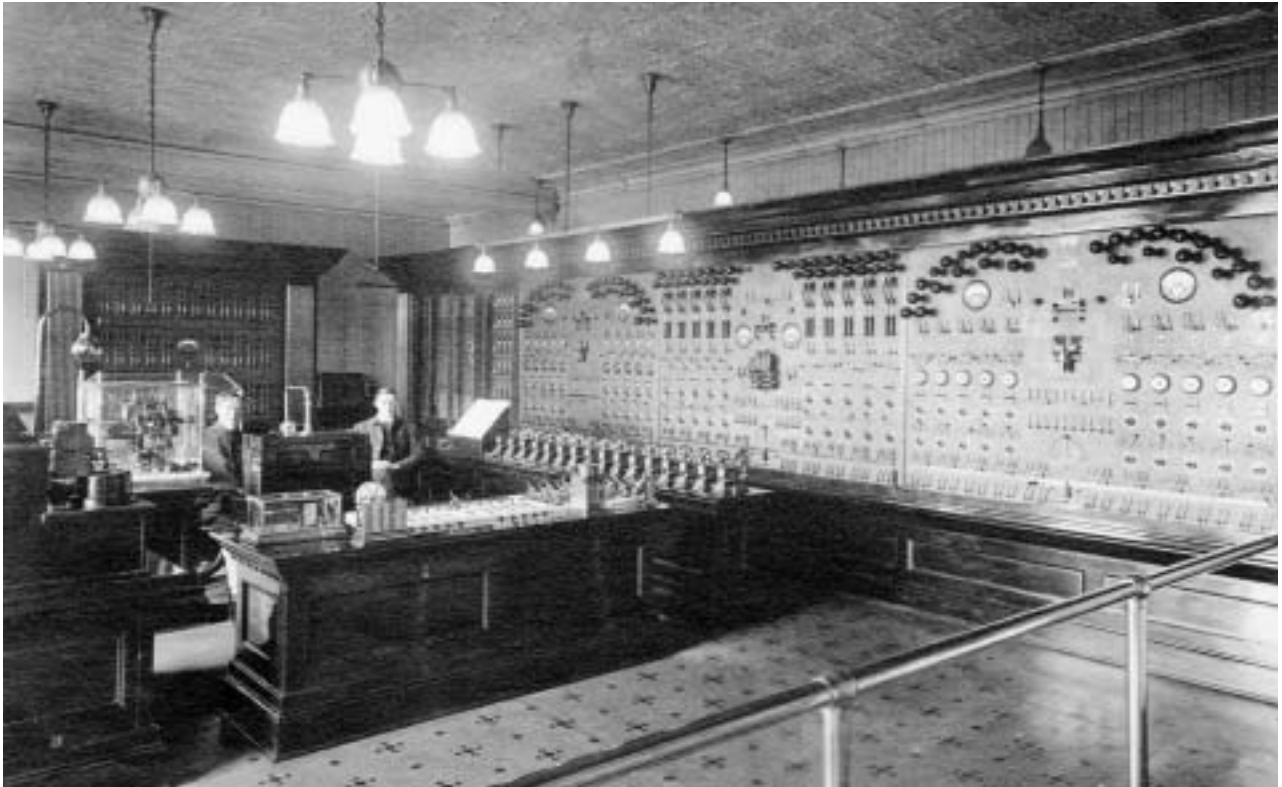
On April 8, 1923 Chief Carlisle was once again honored, this time by receiving the King's Meritorious Service Medal, awarded by King George V. This was the first time that a Canadian fire chief had received this decoration that was presented by the king's representative in British Columbia, Lieutenant-Governor Walter C. Nichol, in a special ceremony held in Stanley Park.

As president of the Dominion Fire Chiefs' Association (DFCA), Chief Carlisle hosted their 15th Annual Convention in Vancouver, July 31 through August 3.

In 1923, the VFD had eleven firehalls, (although city council had closed four firehalls, Nos. 5, 10, 13 and 15, under their retrenchment policy) and twenty-seven pieces of apparatus, including eight hose wagons, two chemical engines, four combination hose/chemical wagons, two aer-

ial ladder trucks, two city service trucks and three pumps, with a combined pumping capacity of 3,400 gallons per minute. The old Amoskeag self-propelled engine was in reserve and the chief, assistant chief and the three district chiefs all had cars.

The manpower consisted of 191 men and with the five senior chiefs; it included twenty-six captains, four engineers, six fire wardens, two secretaries, a mechanic and three assistants and 144 firefighters. The rank of lieutenant had been temporarily discontinued during reorganization.



Fire Alarm Office at No. 2. *Photo: CVA 354-25*

Vancouver's Fire Alarm System

The Fire Alarm Office (FAO), located on the top floor of No. 2 Hall, on Seymour Street, received more than 80 percent of its alarms via telephone through the emergency number, Seymour 89. The system had 318 boxes on thirty-seven box circuits and all alarms came through the fire alarm system and were relayed by the central station operator to the firehall due to respond.

The four operators on duty operated two large switchboards, one of which was always recharging. When the operators were alerted by the electric master clock that the board in operation had to begin its recharge cycle, then the changeover to the charged board took place. Power to recharge the batteries on the DC system was supplied by the power plant at the nearby Hotel Vancouver, and should that fail, there was a gas

engine-powered generator in reserve. Maintenance to the system was ongoing and was the responsibility of a foreman and four inspectors who ensured that the system was always operating properly.

A twenty-four-hour record of alarms received, department activities, apparatus movement, and alarm system maintenance was kept on a daily log sheet.

An example of a box alarm received at the FAO is as follows: When the street box was activated, a signal was sent from the box, through the circuit, to a panel in the alarm office which sounded a small gong and lit up a small red light. Simultaneous to the action of the gong and blinking light, a paper tape on a reel-to-reel was stamped with the date and time (hour, minute and second) that the alarm was received. On another register, a relay operated a master punch that perforated the tape with an orderly row of holes that indicated the box number. For example, if the box number was 126, then the tape would be punched, thus:



The first single hole indicated number “1”, the second two holes indicated number “2”, and the six holes indicated number “6”. The operators would identify box number 126 on the master list as, HASTINGS MILL, NORTH FOOT OF DUNLEVY STREET. Since No. 1 Hall was the closest to that location, the operator tapped out (alerted) No. 1 Company, as well as any supporting companies assigned to that box.

In the firehall watch-rooms there were two sets of registers or “jokers” that were similar to the ones in the FAO. The first was the primary register, with 3/4-inch paper tape and the other was a secondary register with a 1/2-inch tape, both running reel-to-reel. The tap-out signal sent by the FAO activated the 18-inch station gong, BONG-BONG, BONG-BONG, which alerted the crews to respond to their rigs. As the tap-out was sounding, the box number was being punched out twice on the primary tape, thus:



and then followed by two rounds on the secondary tape:



The captain(s) responded to the watch-room, counted the punches, making sure that they were all 1-2-6, checked the number on their district’s master list, then “coded out” by throwing a switch that advised the FAO that they had received the alarm and were responding to the box location.

For a telephone alarm, the FAO, after receiving the information from the caller, tapped out the firehall that was to respond, then transmitted a THREE-THREE signal, twice over each of the primary and secondary registers:



The captains receiving an alarm in the watch-room at No. 1 Hall.
Photo/clipping: Vancouver Sun

On receiving the THREE-THREE, the captain picked up the telephone and the alarm operator gave him the location and information regarding the alarm, which he repeated back to the operator and, once verified as correct, the captain coded out and the company responded to the fire.

Multiple, or greater alarms, were transmitted as follows: a second alarm was punched TWO-TWO-TWO; three-alarm was punched THREE-THREE-THREE; four-alarm was FOUR-FOUR-FOUR, etc. When a multiple alarm was transmitted, all halls were tapped out and the size of the alarm was punched out on the tapes, followed by two rounds of the nearest box number.

When a fire became a greater alarm, on the orders of a chief, all halls were tapped out and any apparatus movement — either to the fire or to fill-in at other quarters — was done by each company, referring to the “control card” being used. These control cards were numbered and found listed on every hall’s master list of alarm boxes. The cards told what each company’s movement would be; to either respond to the fire or to change quarters and “fill-in” at another firehall. Travel to fill-in was non-emergency.

When the fire was considered under control then it was “struck out” by the chief officer in charge at the scene. The FAO then transmitted the strike out with a ONE-ONE signal, once on each tape. If there were two or more incidents at the same time, they would be struck out in the order that they came in — second fire or incident, ONE-TWO; third fire or incident, ONE-THREE, etc. In the days before the apparatus had two-way radios, the chief transmitted greater alarm signals and strikeouts from the street box using the small telegraph key in the box.

Point Grey headquarters opening. Original Point Grey HQ on the left. *Photo: VFD Archives*



New Point Grey Headquarters Opens

On April 30, 1924 the Point Grey Fire Department opened its new headquarters hall at 38th Avenue and Cartier Street. Built at a cost of around \$35,000, it was officially dedicated June 1, 1924, which was also the date that the PGFD began the two-platoon system.

Around this same time, the South Vancouver Fire Department opened its new No. 2 Firehall at Wales Road and Kingsway.

On September 10, 1926 another department milestone took place when the last piece of fire apparatus painted white was placed in service at No. 6 Firehall. It was a 1926 American-LaFrance, 840-gpm (3,800-liter) Type 12 pump, built in Toronto and cost \$15,600.

It is said the reason that all subsequent orders of fire apparatus would be red instead of white is that the white rigs were very difficult to see in the fog.



Opening of South Vancouver No. 2 Hall.
Photo: VPL 6404

The Firemen's Band is Formed

The Firemen's Band was formed in February 1927 and the first bandmaster was Jean Coupland, a musician who wasn't a fireman. The city gave the band a start-up grant that was used to buy instruments and music. The band's first public appearance was in Vancouver's Diamond Jubilee Parade, July 1, 1927.

On June 1, 1927, after being closed for ten years, both No. 13 and No. 15 Firehalls were reopened with motorized apparatus, and a week later No. 15 received a new 1927 Studebaker hose/chemical combination, the only one of its kind on the fire department. It was built in the department machine shop.



Only known photo of the VFD's
1927 Studebaker combination.
Photo: VFD Archives

The first official photo of the Firemen's Band taken at the Exhibition Grounds June 1927. Pictured among the bandsmen are: a union president (Lucas), two centenarians (Betts, Smethurst) and four who died in the line of duty (Barnett, Ellis, Jenkins, Wilkins).

Photo: VFD Archives



VANCOUVER FIRE DEPARTMENT BAND
June 28, 1927

J. LEATHERBALL, A. LECH, H. WILKINS, J. LEACH, F. O. LEACH, J. LEACH, C. HODGSON, H. BETTS, D. SMETHURST, R. O. BARNETT, G. HARRIS, J. ANDERSON,
J. HARRIS, J. LEACH, J. WILKINS, G. HARRIS, A. H. HARRIS, H. HARRIS, J. HARRIS, F. HARRIS, H. HARRIS, G. HARRIS,
G. HARRIS, H. HARRIS, S. HARRIS, G. HARRIS, H. HARRIS, H. HARRIS, S. HARRIS

The Royal Alexandra Apartment Fire



The Royal Alexandra Apartment building fire, July 1927.
Photo: VFD Archives

The worst loss-of-life building fire in Vancouver occurred on Friday, July 8, 1927, in the six-story Royal Alexandra Apartment building at 1086 Bute Street. Eight lives were lost in the fire.

The first alarm came in at 1:43 p.m. and with No. 6 Hall located just four blocks away it was the first company to arrive, followed closely by No. 2 Hall. Immediately upon the arrival of Chief Thompson, a second alarm was called as the fire had already gone through the roof, and the twenty-four or so men on scene obviously needed help. Then moments later at 1:51 p.m. a third alarm was called, bringing in response from more than half of the city's fire-halls.

Except for the time of day, the scenario was almost identical to the earlier Balmoral Apartment fire in 1920: a six-story building, rapid spread of fire, daring rescues and death.

It took time for the needed aerial ladders to arrive on scene from Nos. 1 and 2 Halls so the first-in firemen laid the necessary hose lines and effected rescues where possible, with the help of several policemen and citizens.

When No. 2 Truck, the 1912 Webb, eighty-five-foot (26-m) aerial arrived, it was set up in front of the building and was used to pluck people from the upper floor windows, many of whom were suffering from smoke inhalation and burns. One woman had fashioned a rope out of blankets and slid down from the sixth floor to the fourth, where she dangled until a ladder could be put up to rescue her. The department's only other aerial was the seventy-five-foot (23-m) 1909 Seagrave from No. 1

Hall, Gore and Cordova, which responded on the second alarm. Using ground ladders from the two aerials and No. 4's Seagrave city service truck, many parts of the building were accessed for rescue and fire fighting. (It was said that this was the last fire at which the Browder life-nets were "officially" used for rescue purposes. They were still carried for many years on trucks, but were only used by firemen for drills and displays until all were disposed of during the late 1970s.)

More than a dozen civilians and twenty firemen suffered painful burns and cuts. A group of nurses from St. Paul's Hospital, which was a block away, hurried to the scene and treated the injured, with the help of doctors, a local druggist and bystanders.

Within an hour the fire was under control, with lines stretched throughout the interior of the building towards the top floors. At 4:20 p.m. the fire was struck out.

The eight victims were a married couple visiting from Winnipeg; a young mother and son, age nine, on vacation

The Webb Aerial at front of building.
Photo VFD Archives



from Edmonton; a young brother and sister, aged ten and twelve, respectively; a sixty-six-year-old woman visitor; and the building's housekeeper.

The cause of the fire was a highly flammable varnish remover that was being used by a painter in Room 404. He said he had just finished stripping the floor of the suite and was cleaning up, when a pail out in the hallway, containing his materials, suddenly exploded into a mass of flames. When he couldn't put out the fire, he immediately phoned the fire department, yelled to the building engineer for help and tried to get a house line operating. Because of the flames and heat, he had to abandon his plans and he then activated the fire alarm and got out of the building. The fire completely destroyed the top three floors of the building, with damage estimated at more than \$200,000. The rapid spread was attributed to a shaft venting system that opened to the roof for the apartment's built-in beds.

An analyst, giving expert testimony at the inquest, stated that flames would leap over seventy-five feet in a fraction of a second on a floor coated with the volatile paint remover that had been used in the apartment. The painter's only explanation of how the fire started was possibly someone passing down the hallway had discarded a match into his pail of materials. The painter was charged with manslaughter, but the outcome of the case is not known.



Rear of building showing fire damage to top floors.
Photo: VFD Archives



No. 2 Hall's tractor aerial at a house fire on Cambie Street. *Photo: Jack B. Thompson*

The question of old, out-dated fire apparatus was also the subject of the inquest and steps were taken to begin replacing more of them immediately. On August 18, 1927 No. 2 Hall put its new truck in service. It was a LaFrance Type 17 tractor-drawn aerial with an eighty-five-foot (25-m) ladder and was a much-needed addition to the fast-growing downtown and West End districts.



Three Vancouver apparatus being prepared in the paint shop at the LaFrance Company of Canada in Toronto.
Photo: VFD Archives



No. 6 Hall's new 1928 LaFrance Type 31, front-wheel drive aerial.
Photo: VFD Archives

In the spring of 1928 more new apparatus arrived. Among the first were two LaFrance Type 145 Metropolitan 840-gpm (3,800-liter) pumps and a LaFrance Type 75 combination hose/chemical. By July a new LaFrance Type 31, front wheel drive eighty-five-foot aerial was in service at No. 6, and a new LaFrance Type T-70-6 city service ladder truck was in service at No. 12 Hall.



The Pierre Paris Tannery and BC Box Company fire.
Photo: CVA 99-1720

Paris Tannery and BC Box Plant Destroyed

Described as the fiercest fire in many years, flames destroyed the BC Box Company and the adjacent Pierre Paris Tannery in a very hot mid afternoon blaze on August 28, 1928. Two major structures were destroyed within an hour and the resulting damage totaled more than \$200,000 and caused several firemen to suffer minor injuries and heat stroke. The fire required more than half of the fire department's resources to respond. The cause was not determined.

The Fireboat *J.H. Carlisle*

On September 1, after almost twenty years of recommending to the city council the need of a fireboat, No. 16 Fireboat Station, on the north shore of False Creek opened with the new *J.H. Carlisle* in service.

The boat was fifty-five feet long by fifteen feet wide (17 x 4.5 m), had a draft of about five feet (1.5 m) with a capacity of 4,500 gpm (20,450 liters). The boat was funded partly by the property owners around the perimeter of the creek. It was launched August 14 at the Burrard Dry Dock Company yards in North Vancouver and christened by Miss Iris Gibbens, the daughter of Acting Mayor P.C. Gibbens. (Miss Gibbens, who later married a city policeman, became Mrs. McIlroy and was the mother of retired Captain Neil McIlroy, who joined the VFD in 1964.) The first pilots of the new fireboat were Captain R. Frank Ross and Captain John A. McInnis, with relief pilots George McInnis and Hector Wright. All were federally licensed mariners.



Iris Gibbens launching fireboat *J.H. Carlisle*.
She was told she had to break the champagne bottle on the first swing for good luck. She did, and sprayed the official party.
Photo: CVA 99-1971



The Tunic Request

The union went to the chief on December 14 and requested that he consider a uniform change from the old-fashioned high-collared tunics to the more modern, double-breasted lapel style. After all, they'd had this same style since 1889 — almost forty years. After due consideration, the chief's response was that he felt if the men had the newer style that they would be inclined to wear their uniforms out in public, on their leisure time, as suits. He denied their request.

In 1936 the double-breasted tunics were issued, and after more than seventy years they're still being worn on parade and dress occasions.



Fire Chief Frank Raymer and his Point Grey firefighters before amalgamation. *Photo: VFD Archives*

Amalgamation Day

On January 1, 1929 the municipalities of Point Grey and South Vancouver joined the City of Vancouver, giving the city a total of forty-four square miles. As a result, the VFD grew by six firehalls and about eighty men. South Vancouver's headquarters Hall No. 3 on Wilson Road (later changed to 41st Avenue) and Draper Street became VFD No. 17 and SVFD No. 2 Hall at Wales Road and Kingsway became VFD No. 20. PGFD headquarters hall became No. 18, their No. 2 became No. 19; No.

3 became No. 21 and PGFD No. 4 in Marpole (70th Avenue and Hudson Street) became VFD No. 22.

The two fire chiefs, William E. Clark of South Vancouver, and Frank Raymer of Point Grey were appointed the district chiefs in their respective areas. No. 17 Hall became the DC's hall for #3 District and No. 18 was the DC's Hall for #4 District. (Chief Clark was the father of VFD Captain E.C. (Bim) Clark, who retired in 1984.)

South Vancouver and Point Grey fire captains reverted to firemen ranks as most only averaged about ten years service, which was considerably less than city fire captains. Their future promotions would be based upon their positions on the new integrated seniority role.

The firemen's unions of South Vancouver, Local 259 and Point Grey, Local 260 had earlier joined the Vancouver union, Local 18, IAFF, on June 1, 1928, and their local numbers were abandoned.



The fire alarm box system for Point Grey (forty-one boxes) and South Vancouver (fifty-nine boxes) were connected to Vancouver's system giving the city a total of 475 boxes.

The following fire apparatus were put on the new VFD roster:

From South Vancouver: two 1914 Seagrave hose/chemical combinations; a 1927 Studebaker city service ladder truck; and a 1928 Ford Model 'A' roadster, the chief's car.

From Point Grey: a 1912 American-LaFrance hose/chemical combination; a 1914 American-LaFrance 625-gpm pump; a 1914 American-LaFrance city service ladder truck; a 1922 Packard 625-gpm (2800-liter) pump; two 1926 American-LaFrances, a 625-gpm pump and a city service ladder truck; a 1926 Dodge Brothers-Graham bush fire/service truck; and a 1924 Studebaker roadster chief's car.

South Vancouver fire fighters with Fire Chief William Clark posed in front of SVFD No. 3, which, upon amalgamation, became VFD No. 17. The sixth man from the left in the back row is Ralph Jacks who became Vancouver's ninth fire chief.

Photo: CVA 354-84



Charlton William Thompson

C. W. Thompson

Born: March 25, 1875,
Simcoe, Ontario
Joined VFD: June 17, 1895
Appointed Chief: Feb. 1, 1929
Retired: December 31, 1934
Died: July 6, 1957

Carlisle Retires: Fire Chief Thompson Named



Chief J. H. Carlisle's retirement picture after forty-two years' service.
Photo: VFD Archives

At the end of January 1929 Chief J.H. Carlisle's retirement became official after more than forty-two years of faithful service to the city. He had seen the city grow from virtually nothing after the Great Fire, to a large and prosperous city known throughout the world, and he had nurtured and guided the fire department from very modest beginnings to one of the finest to be found anywhere. At the age of seventy-one years he probably felt that he still had a few good years left, but it was time to turn the leadership over to someone else, and this is how he informed the city council on January 17 that he was leaving, "As it is the desire of the chairman of my committee, I hereby tender my resignation as chief of the Vancouver Fire Department, and I strongly recommend that Assistant Chief C.W. Thompson be appointed my successor, that Chiefs Clark and Raymer of South Vancouver and Point Grey be retained in the rank of District Chiefs in their districts, and that all captain ranks be revised and that appointments be according to years of service and ability."

Chief Carlisle's long-time assistant Charlton W. (Charlie) Thompson, age fifty-three, became the department's second fire chief

John Carlisle enjoyed many years of retirement and passed away in Burnaby on November 28, 1941 in his eighty-fourth year. He is buried in the Masonic Cemetery in Burnaby.

On May 9, 1929, all firefighters who were driving fire apparatus were told that they must get driver's licenses. The cost would be \$1.

On May 15, the citizens voted yes on a referendum for the city to build a new combination fire alarm office and police dispatch building at a cost of \$350,000 with the criteria that it be: a) fire-proof; b) not within 150 feet (45 m) of any building; and c) in the geographical center of the city. The site chosen was on Cambie Street at West 20th Avenue.

Two more replacement pieces of apparatus arrived and were placed

in service in the fall of 1929. They were the LaFrance Type 112 combination hose/chemical, which went to No. 11 Hall and the 840-gpm (3,800-liter) Bickle “Canadian” pump, which went to No. 6 Hall.



1929 LaFrance Combination. *Photo: Frank Degruchy*



1929 Bickle Pump at No. 6 Hall. *Photo: Jack B. Thompson*

On March 17, 1930 a midday fire occurred at the A.P. Slade warehouse at 157 Water Street. The three-alarm fire was made more difficult to fight by the black, oily smoke produced by sacks of burning peanuts. Considered by many to be one of the city’s best spectator fires, the cause of the \$25,000 fire was never determined.



The Slade fire looking west to Cordova Street. *Photo: CVA 99-2450*



A.P. Slade Warehouse fire looking east. *Photo: CVA 99-2449*

The inhalator service, which was started by the first aid crews, had been serving the city since 1927 and continued to grow with the training of all members of the fire department. On May 10, 1930 after winning the city first aid competition, the team proudly posed with the Vancouver

Shield, and the *Daily Province* Shield as provincial champions.

By May of 1931, there were 269 qualified members with everything from first-year certificates to an instructor's rating, the latter being held by First Aid Captain Jack Anderson

VFD first aid champions.

Standing: Capt. J. Anderson, Instructor; L. Leavy, T. Anderson, Chief C.W. Thompson.

Sitting: J. Ettinger, W. Bailey, W. Barnett.

Photo: CVA 354-390



Funeral of Fireman Herb Ellis.

Photo: CVA 354-90

Fireman Herb Ellis, thirty-eight, a ten-year veteran, was fatally injured at the Beach Avenue drill grounds on April 17, 1930 when he fell about thirty feet (10 m) from No. 2's aerial ladder. He was climbing down when he missed a handhold and fell, striking his head. A war veteran, he joined the department on May 26, 1920 and was one of the original members of the fire department band, in which he played the saxophone. A civic funeral was held at Christ Church Cathedral, April 21. He left a wife and four children, one of whom, son Bernie, served on the VFD to his retirement as a captain in 1981.

Canadian National Dock Fire

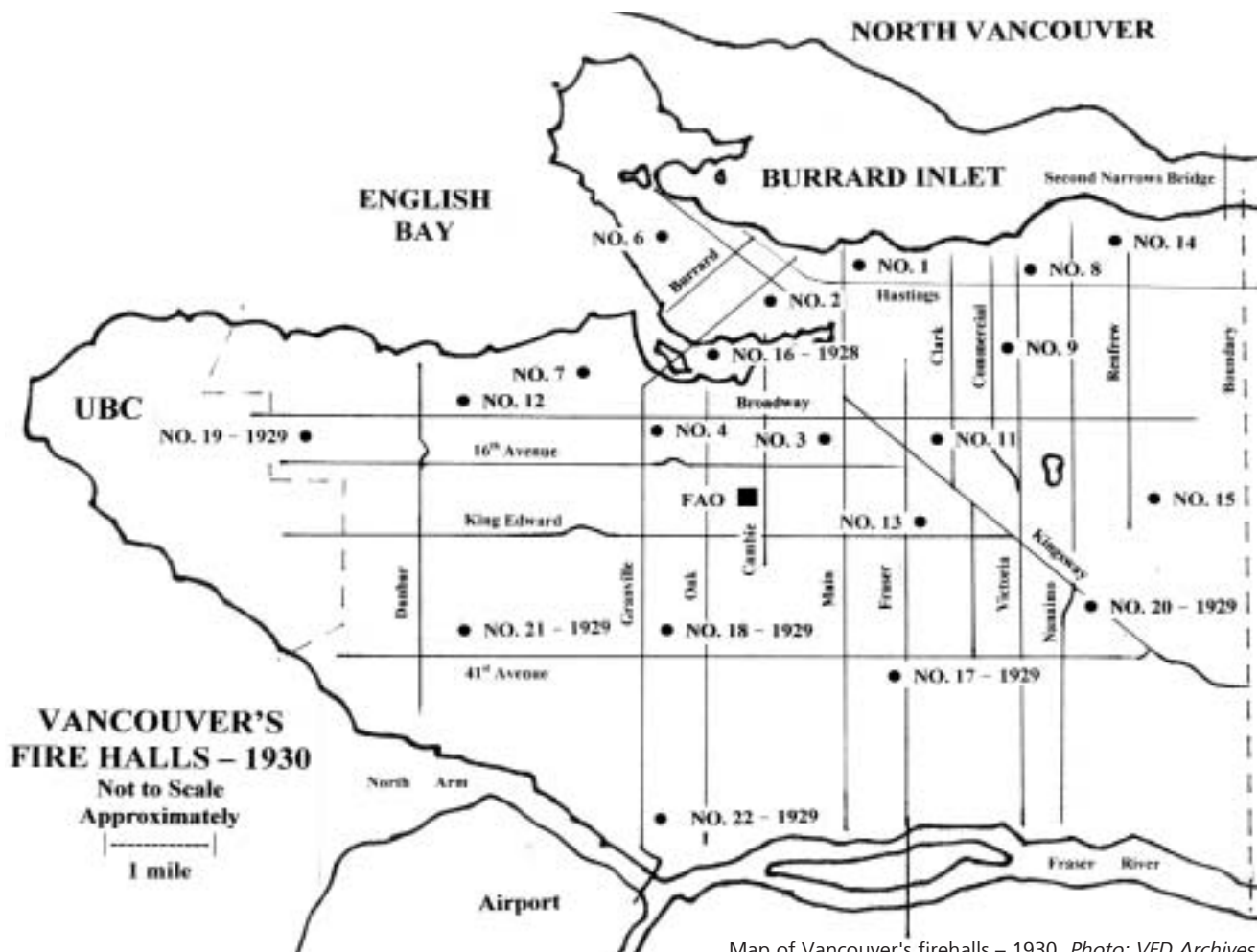
The Canadian National (CN) Steamships dock fire of August 10, 1930 was the largest of the year with a dollar loss in excess of \$1.25 million. The newly constructed, 1,000-foot (308-m) long structure was within two days of being turned over to the federal government by the contractors when fire destroyed it in half an hour. Nearby No. 1 Company was on scene within minutes but all that could be done was to cover the exposures and three large fuel tanks at the south (land) end of the pier. A general alarm (four-alarm) was called.

The crews had difficulty reaching the fire because of the thick smoke as the fire quickly burned its way to shore. With the new creosote-coated pilings it would have been suicide to attempt to fight it from the dock because of the speed with which the fire traveled to shore after starting at the harbor end. In spite of care taken, more than 1,700 feet (565 m) of hose and several nozzles were lost. Fortunately, the many CN coastal ships were out of port, otherwise they would likely have been damaged or lost.

The decision to rebuild the dock was made and the question of the lack of a harbor fireboat was once again raised. Mayor Malkin stated that he didn't think the city was responsible for protecting property from which taxes were not received.



Canadian National Dock general alarm fire. Photo: VFD Archives



Map of Vancouver's firehalls – 1930. Photo: VFD Archives

The First Baptist Church Fire

Most firefighters will agree that most church fires are bad, and difficult to fight because of the large space with a lot of wood and combustibles. The First Baptist Church at Nelson and Burrard Streets in downtown Vancouver was no exception. The alarm on February 10, 1931 came at 7:00 a.m. and went to a second alarm before it was brought under control an hour later. The bell tower and the Sunday school were saved, but the main part of the structure was totally destroyed. The fire appeared to have started behind the organ, cause unknown. Damage was almost \$100,000 but the church was rebuilt and still serves that area of downtown today.



The VFD Band advertising an upcoming baseball game on the B.C. Electric's Observation Car. *Photo: Harry Bullen: VFD Archives*

From May 27 through 29, Chief Thompson hosted the First Annual Convention of the British Columbia Fire Chief's Association in Vancouver.

On July 4, at Athletic Park, the firemen's baseball team, one of the city's best and winners of many championships, beat their opponents, Arrow Transfer, 5 to 3, in the first night baseball game played under lights in Canada. Athletic Park was the first Canadian stadium to have floodlights for night games.



Fire Alarm Office at 3637 Cambie Street. *Photo: VFD Archives*

New Fire Alarm Office Opens

The Fire Alarm Office was moved from No. 2 Hall into new quarters at 3637 Cambie Street, on July 11. The emergency phone number was changed at this time from "Seymour 89" to "Fairmont 1234". Shortly after this move the operators, who were under the city electrical department's control, became members of the firemen's union.

During 1931, in an attempt to reduce the incidence of false box alarms, the Fire Warden's Branch sent a member around to the elementary schools with a street box, to show the children how it operated and to tell them what a danger it was to pull boxes maliciously. It was found that this ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure, and false box alarms declined. Although the program was successful it was discontinued.

In 1932, over bitter opposition, the city council reduced all civic wages by 10 percent, and in 1933 a further 10 percent cut was made, with a thirty-five-day unpaid lay-off for firemen only.

On February 28, 1933 the city announced major budget cuts to all departments with a reduction to the fire department of \$202,000. Chief Thompson stated that with this reduction, he would have to let 138 of his 368 men go, close up to nine firehalls, including No. 16 Hall, the fireboat station and take *J.H. Carlisle* out of service, "if the city can induce the False Creek property owners to release the city from its agreement." He further stated that, "these reductions would leave the fire department with 83 men on duty per shift which is totally inadequate to protect the city from fire."

The eventual outcome of the budget cut was that two Firehalls, No. 7 and No. 8, were permanently closed on May 1. There were no lay-offs but the firemen's wages were reduced by 20 percent plus the thirty-five-day unpaid lay-off days, which meant a 14.5 percent greater loss than that of other civic workers.

On September 12 the Dominion Photo Company destroyed 1½ tons (2,250 kg) of nitrate photographic negatives on the beach at Spanish Banks in accordance with the city by-law, which prohibited the storage of more than thirty pounds (14 kg) of such film. This was part of a Fire Warden's Branch program to get rid of this highly flammable film. A photograph was taken of the event — using nitrate film!

On October 16, 1933 Fireman Andrew Grant collapsed while on duty at No. 6 Firehall and was rushed to St. Paul's Hospital in an unconscious



Inside the new Fire Alarm Office on Cambie Street.
Photo: CVA 354-99

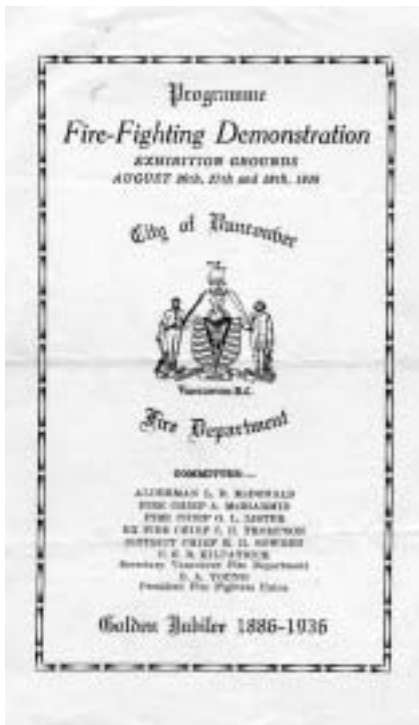




Archibald McDiarmid

Archibald McDiarmid

Born: December 8, 1883,
Renfrew, Scotland
Joined VFD: September 16, 1907
Appointed Chief: January 1, 1935
Retired: December 8, 1941
Died: August 11, 1957



state, where he died. Fireman Grant, in his mid-twenties, left a wife and young daughter. It is believed that he died from the effects of a fire he had attended earlier. A well-known bandsman, he was given a civic funeral at the Salvation Army Citadel under the auspices of the Firemen's Benefit Association. His grandson, Grant Muir, is currently a member of the VFD.

Con Jones Park Fire

A spectacular fire destroyed the Con Jones Park grandstands July 29, 1934. The first alarm came in at 4:30 a.m. and within a very short time, the old, wooden stands that circled the grounds were gone. The caretaker and his family escaped with only their nightclothes, losing everything, including their car. It was believed that a cigarette carelessly discarded after the previous evening's ball game caused the three-alarm fire, which had a loss estimated at more than \$32,000. The stadium was rebuilt and opened as Callister Park and became the site of many of the firemen's soccer team games as well as horse shows, rodeos and demolition derbies. It remained an important sports venue until it was torn down in 1971.

The Year 1935

On December 28 the city ratified District Chief Archie McDiarmid's appointment as fire chief on the retirement of Chief Thompson, December 31. He was selected over three more senior chiefs: First Assistant Chief Loftus, Second Assistant Chief DeGraves, and District Chief Plumsteel. With the appointment, AC Loftus retired, DeGraves became First AC and Plumsteel became Second Assistant Chief. Three captains were appointed acting district chiefs, among them Ed Erratt, who would later become the department's fifth fire chief.

The large fires of 1935 included a warehouse fire on Water Street, with damage of more than \$500,000, an apartment fire that, fortunately, had no loss of life and two steamship fires, on board the SS *Cape York* and SS *Frederika Lensen*, with damage totaling \$75,000. The bunker fire on the *Frederika Lensen* took two days for the fireboat *Pluvius* to extinguish.

Vancouver and the VFD's 50th Anniversary

The year 1936 marked Vancouver's Golden Jubilee, and on July 3, before a crowd of almost 2,000 people, the cornerstone for the new city hall was laid. The Firemen's Band, under the direction of Bandmaster Will Edmunds, entertained the gathering.

July 17 was Vancouver's Jubilee Parade day with the fire department playing a large part. Led by the VFD band, the parade entry consisted of retired Fire Chief Carlisle driving an old horse-drawn Democrat buggy followed by a team of firemen pulling one of the original hose reels, a

steam pump pulled by a team of three horses, the self-propelled 1908 Amoskeag steam pump, and a variety of current aerials, chemical wagons and pumps. A group made up of the last remaining 1886 volunteers also took part.



Retired Fire Chief Carlisle in the 1936 Jubilee parade.
Photo: VFD Archives

The Arena Fire

Vancouverites have always had a penchant for remembering dates and times by referring them to the big fires, such as the CN dock fire that occurred at the end of a Depression-designated “Prosperity Week,” or the “Great Fire” for the old-timers, or the Balmoral or Royal Alexandra apartment fires. They were remembered much the same way as people today remember 9/11, the Kennedy assassination, the Moon landing, or when their favorite team won the championship. The Denman Arena fire of August 20, 1936 became known as the “The Jubilee Fire.”

The arena at Denman and Georgia Streets was opened on December 21, 1911, and was within a few months of celebrating its twenty-fifth year. Built by the Patrick brothers of NHL fame, the building was used for everything from hockey — as the home of the Stanley Cup Vancouver Millionaires of 1915 — to lacrosse, boxing, wrestling, religious gatherings, political meetings, ice shows, and was at one time the scene of a

PROBE \$500,000 ARENA FIRE

FIERCE BLAZE SWEEPS WEST END BLOCK



FIREFIGHTERS in their struggle to save the arena which burned for hours in the early morning hours of today while neighboring houses within a block of the arena.



FIREMEN used an amount of water in their struggle to save the arena. The arena burned for hours while neighboring houses within a block of the arena.

beauty pageant judged by the famous silent movie star, Rudolph Valentino.

On the evening before the fire it was the scene of an exhibition boxing match between heavyweights Max Baer and James J. Walsh and was attended by a crowd exceeding 4,000 people.

At 1:36 a.m. the first alarm came in for a fire behind the arena, in one of the boat works on Coal Harbour. No. 6 Company responded with No. 2 and DC Beaton, who, on arrival, called for the help of Nos. 1 and 3 Companies. Within minutes, the fire had spread and soon involved several nearby marine businesses, a houseboat and several small boats. A second alarm was called at 1:54 a.m. using Box 1558, then a third-alarm call came at 2:02 a.m. It finally became a four-alarm (general alarm) fire at 2:10 a.m.

During the height of the blaze Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 12 and 18 Companies attended, for a total of nine pumps, two hose wagons, three aerials, four trucks and almost sixty-five men, including the senior chiefs. As well, the old National Harbours Board (NHB) steam fireboat, *Pluvius*, was on the scene, but was unable to do much. In spite of the intensity of the fire, the adjacent auditorium was saved, although it suffered some major damage. Also of great concern, because of the many flying brands, was the Horse Show Building situated across Georgia Street from the arena, as well as the many homes in the area. Had there been a wind that

night, the city might very well have had its second Great Fire.

A large crowd was attracted to the fire and the police had a big job keeping the area clear of people, many of whom were in pajamas and nightclothes and in a partying mood. Many people also remember this fire as one of the last attended by the old 1908 Amoskeag self-propelled steam pump, which was kept in reserve at No. 3 Hall.

By 4:30 a.m. the fire was knocked down, but many more hours were spent overhauling to ensure that it was completely extinguished. Three firefighters went to the hospital with pulled muscles, burns and cuts. In the following days, the men received much praise for their valiant efforts in newspaper editorials. But Provincial Fire Marshal J.A. (Jerry) Thomas described the arena as “the worst fire trap in the City of Vancouver, ever since it was built.”

Captain H.G. Bowering, of the Fire Warden’s Branch, investigated the fire and no definite cause was ever determined. The estimated fire loss was more than \$600,000.



Fireboat *Pluvius*. Photo: Courtesy Vancouver Maritime Museum

Local No. 18, IAFF, Loses Charter

The International Association of Fire Fighters revoked the charter of Vancouver, Local 18, on October 16, 1936. On April 1, 1935, the union, in an attempt to restore previous pay cuts by the city, had taken a strike vote as a statement of their feelings and by doing so had violated the constitution of the International.


City Fire Fighters' Union, Local No. 1

CITY FIRE FIGHTERS UNION NO. 1.
of VANCOUVER, B.C.

MEETING NOTICE.

The next regular meeting of the above Union No. 1. will be held on
THURSDAY NEXT

NOVEMBER 26th,
10. A.M.

NOVEMBER 26th,
8. P.M.

at

195 - E - PENDER ST.

A full attendance is very important in order to complete our reorganization. Our new Constitution and Bylaws will be up for discussion and adoption, and if you have anything you wish to have inserted in them this is your golden opportunity.

Hall Delegates are urged to turn in their November dues as soon as possible to Bro. Howell Acting Man/Sec. No. 2. Fire Hall.

Members note,-

This will be the first real meeting of your new Union No. 1. so please turn out in force and give it the start it deserves.

Officers and Committee reports will be interesting, so let all members set aside next Thursday as their Union Day.

fraternally yours,

P. H. Cairns
Sec-Treas.

The new association then became known as the City Fire Fighters' Union, Local No. 1, with Ernest A. Young as president.

By this time one of the city's oldest traditions, the annual Firemen's Ball and Supper, was held November 4 in the Hotel Vancouver under the auspices of the Firemen's Benefit Association. This was the thirty-seventh ball held by the FBA.

At the end of 1936 firemen's wages were restored the 10 percent they had been cut in the early thirties, with 5 percent restored on both May 1 and December 1. The \$506 cut returned the annual wage back to \$1,890. Prior to this change, first-class Vancouver firefighters ranked sixteenth in Canada on wage scales. The city also reinstated the seventy-two-hour workweek, which, in 1932 forced the firefighters to take an extra thirty-five days off without pay.



The Vancouver Firemen's Athletic Club (VFAC) sponsored many department sports, and had a championship hockey team in 1932.

Photo: VFD Archives