

THE HISTORY OF THE ALBERTVILLE FIRE DEPARTMENT

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The modern day Albertville Fire Department is one of the best trained and most efficient departments in all north Alabama. From its three stations strategically placed throughout Albertville, units are can be quickly dispatched to most any location within the city.

The genesis of the modern Albertville Fire Department began during the mid-1920, when a group of concerned citizens organized under the direction of the town's Chief of Police, R.L. "Bob" Amos. Prior to this, like all the other frontier towns, Albertville found itself at the mercy of fire, aided only by so-called "bucket brigades", the literal passing of buckets of water from hand to hand to the fire. As one might expect this was ineffective most of the time. But, it was the only recourse the citizens had.

Today's citizens would probably be amazed to know that when Albertville was incorporated, there were no provisions for a fire department in the original town ordinances. Other than the Mayor and Council, there were only three positions in the town's government, Clerk, Treasurer and Marshall, which was the forerunner of today's Chief of Police.

In addition to upholding law and order, the ordinance stipulated that the Marshall was to keep a record of the hired hands that worked the streets, as well as maintaining the town's wheelbarrows and shovels, but nothing about a fire department. It was just an excepted fact that in the event of fire everyone was expected to pitch in and help one another.

The dawn of the twentieth century witnessed the introduction of the town's first fire alarm. In February of 1903, Harry Herzfeld, manager of the newly constructed oil mill company at the corner of McKinney and Railroad Avenue's, informed the townspeople that as soon as the plant was alerted, they would begin making short, sharp blasts of the mill's whistle until the town was alerted.

Prior to this it was simply one neighbor watching out for another neighbor, like one September morning in 1891 when, Albertville physician, Dr. W.M. Scarbrough awoke at 1:00 a.m. to administer medicine to a patient. Through an open window, he noticed a fire in the downtown area and was able to alert his fellow townsmen. .

During those early years, Albertville's chief fire hazard was its frame structures, primarily business houses. This was the same problem that had almost laid waste to the city of Chicago years earlier and would almost do the same to Albertville in 1905.

Around 2:30, the morning of July 15, 1905, the oil mill fire alarm was sounded. By the time the townspeople arrived downtown, fire had engulfed three business houses on the north side of Main Street. It was apparent to one and all that the entire block from Broad to Simpson was doomed. The only buildings to survive were those made of brick and stone, like the Marshall Drug Company. In addition to its stone construction, the Marshall Drug Company had one additional device used for fire safety—a metal awning that could be rolled down over the front of the store.

To address the subject of frame buildings, the Mayor and City Council met in special session. During the meeting they passed ordinances restricting wooden buildings within a newly designated fire district. Ironically, Guntersville was grappling with this same issue; a fire had struck its business district the week before.

Amazingly, on September 5, of that same year, another fire devastated the south side of Main Street.* A staggering total of 18 buildings were destroyed, when coupled with the July total it made a grand total of 29 business houses destroyed within a two months span.

In 1908, another great advance occurred when the town of Albertville dug a city well in the vicinity of Albertville's present day Post Office. Then, with the use of the town's horse drawn apparatus, an ample supply of water could be ferried to the site of a fire.

In 1910, Chief Amos had to contend with a prisoner in the town's jail who had an ill conceived plan for an escape. He set the jail on fire. Not only was the jail destroyed but the prisoner was almost killed.

**One humorous incident coming out of the September fire concerned Police and Fire Chief R.L. "Bob" Amos. Apparently, Chief Amos had taken his coat off and laid it and his "artillery", as The Marshall Banner called it, down to fight the fire. In all the ensuing turmoil, someone picked both items up and walked off with them. Upon realizing his things were missing, he passed on a message to certain segments of the community. The message was this, unless his coat and gun were "forthcoming, at a certain hour he would arm himself with a full grown club and proceed upon an investigating expedition." The coat and gun both showed up, with nothing removed from the pockets, prior to the dead line hour that Chief Amos had specified.*

With fire destroying the grand Agricultural School building in 1912 and the Public School building in 1916, it was clear to the townspeople of Albertville that the organization of a trained fire department was imperative.

With no organized chain of command or inadequate knowledge of proper firefighting, a volunteer citizenry in many instances became a recipe for loss. The late Charlie Graham once remembered that a downtown businessman, upon hearing reports of a fire downtown, raced to his store to lock it. There were many times that the "firefighters" destroyed more than the fire did.

On August 3, 1926, the town of Albertville organized a standing volunteer fire department. Command of the department would be under the auspices of Albertville Police Chief Bob Amos, who for years had informally performed the duty. The roster of firemen consisted of:

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| Greene Hatley | Shack Windsor | Eskey Mann | Amos Pheny |
| John Davis | Henry Stephens | Marion Hatley | Clarence Williamson |

In addition to organizing the department, the Albertville City Council passed ordinances aimed at assisting the firemen in their work. They decreed that at the sounding of the fire alarm all vehicles running on streets must be parked at once and remain so until the fire engine had passed. They further added that if a driver failed to yield right of way and sustained damage to their vehicle there would be no recourse for damages or a damage suit and, in addition, they would owe the town if damages were done to the fire truck or equipment.

That very same week, the fire department contended with its first fire at the home of, Ford dealer, J. Van Waldrop. With pride, *The Sand Mountain Banner* proclaimed in the next newspaper saying, "Amateur Fire Fighters Accomplish the Work of Professionals." For twenty years, the volunteer system served the residents of Albertville well, but by 1950, the city had entered the modern era, complete with a marked growth in population and business expansion.

The year 1950 was watershed year in the evolution of the Albertville Fire Department. The unfolding of events began during the third week of April when an early morning fire destroyed the Smith Motor Company, located on North Broad Street.

Though he praised the efforts of the volunteer fire department, business owner, Paul Smith said that if there had been a full-time, manned fire department, in his opinion, his business could have been saved. Smith went so far as to say that if monetary issues were constraining the city from hiring full-time employees, he believed that Albertville businessmen would be happy to contribute.

Since the time of its organization the cities fire truck and equipment had been centrally located in the City Hall building on South Broad Street, behind the King Hotel. The problem was in the time it took for the all volunteer force to arrive at the station. Three to ten minutes response time does not seem like a lot of time, but in relation to a looming fire, it was an eternity.

On August 11, 1950, *The Albertville Herald* published the first of a series of articles by the Albertville Jaycees, written by, Jaycees reporter and Albertville attorney,

T.J. Carnes. Through the fall of that year this and subsequent articles would serve as a clarion call for prompt action. The first article contained a challenge, quoting John Greenleaf Whittier, "For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: 'It might have been!'"

During this period of civic re-evaluation came the sudden death of Albertville Mayor A.B. Hooper, Jr., on September 4. On Tuesday, September 12, City Councilman, Floyd Brown was elevated to the post of Mayor by the City Council and, Albertville businessman, A.E. "Andy" Chiles was named as Brown's replacement on the Council.

By the mid-part of November, under the leadership of Councilman Andy Chiles, the Albertville Fire Department had begun to make a slow but steady change. In a follow-up article in the November 10 edition of *The Albertville Herald*, T.J. Carnes wrote of the changes:

"Mr. Chiles, who has had experience with fire department work before accepting his present responsibilities is far from pessimistic about the present condition of the Albertville department but is quick to caution against undue optimism. He says, 'A good fire department cannot be bought; it must be developed.'...The city, following Mr. Chiles recommendation, hopes to soon employ two permanent firemen, who will alternate on duty in 12 hour shifts. Plans are also being made for the purchase of a 3-4 ton truck, which will carry 100 gallons of water, 250 feet of hose, and three times the chemical fire fighting apparatus normally carried by fire trucks. When an alarm is sounded the firemen on duty will take the small truck and immediately proceed to the scene of the fire..."

In that same edition of the paper, an article talked about plans for razing the King Hotel and constructing the new "fire-proof" Horsley Hotel on that same site.

By 1955, the Albertville Fire Department had truly come along way, both in manpower and equipment. When A.E. Chiles first joined the Albertville City Council the Fire Department had one 1940 1 1/2 ton truck with a 115 gallon tank and a 500 gallon pump. After the devastating fires of 1950, the city had acquired a 1951 3/4 ton Ford truck that the firemen called the "little pick-up" with a 105 gallon tank and 500 gallon pump.

The little pick-up soon became the cornerstone of the Fire Department's response program. Either or both of the department's full-time employees, Chief George Garrison and Assistant Chief Harold Moore, would immediately respond to the fire, with the volunteer force following closely behind with the other trucks and equipment.

The volunteer force in 1955 consisted of the following men, all of whom received special training in both fire fighting theory and practice:

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| J.M. Rollings, Jr. | Frank Brooks | Kenneth Bagwell | Hackel Boozer |
| Hollis Hendrix | E.K. Patterson | Bill Newland | Edgar Canfield |
| Leon Carr | Lecil Harrison | Cecil Harrison | Alfred German |
| O.L. Grizzard | L.M. Moore | | |

At the dawning of the sixties, the City of Albertville was finally able to answer the issue of over crowding that had plagued the Albertville City Hall for years and move into

a new municipal building. What with the city's newest fire truck having to be parked in a temporary building due to a lack of space, the city had begun planning in August, 1955 for a new city hall to be built on the old Irvin Boarding House property that the city father's had previously acquired. August of 1955 also saw the Albertville Fire Department play host in Albertville to the yearly gathering of the Alabama Firemen's Association.

On June 5, 1961, Albertville once again sustained the loss of one of its schools. This time it was the S.J. Chandler School building that had replaced the structure that had burnt in 1916. For years, conscientious leaders in the community had desperately tried to halt the use of the building that was frankly considered a fire trap.

On June 11, the Albertville Fire Department hosted the most unique open house ever held in the city of Albertville. During the tours through the burned out remnants of the Chandler building, John Mack Rollings, who in 1957 had been named Fire Chief, and his staff educated the citizens of Albertville on fire safety and on the importance of fire drills in public schools.

By 1963, the Albertville Fire Department was made up of four full-time firemen, Chief Rollings; Assistant Chief Travis Harrison; Inspector Harold Moore and Fireman Coy Williams, as well as a large compliment of volunteer firemen.

**ALBERTVILLE
FIRE
CHIEFS**

R.L. "Bob" Amos

John Davis

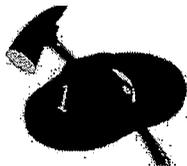
Homer Maltbie

George Garrison
(first full-time chief)

Johnny Mack Rollings

Roger Lathan

John W. Hix



That year also saw the introduction of a new system of alerting the city's volunteer fire fighting force. Prior to this, the city's fire whistle was susceptible to going off anytime during a twenty-four hour day. Therefore, during the overnight hours, not just the volunteer firemen were awakened by the fire whistle, but so was the entire town. For out of town guests staying at the Brown Hotel, this often made for an unpleasant stay in Albertville.

On July 12, of that year, the city began utilizing the Plectron radio alert system to alert the volunteer firemen after 11:00 p.m. Just after 1:00 a.m. that following morning, the department was notified of a house fire on West Main Street. Immediately the dispatcher alerted the receivers in the homes of the volunteer firemen to respond to the station. Within seven minutes of the initial call, all the department's personnel, with fire fighting equipment had responded to the scene.
