

Kentfield Greenbrae Historical Society Historian

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President's Message

Hot weather, dry grass and an occasional whiff of smoke remind us of the ongoing need to be diligent about fire prevention safety measures. But those of us in Kentfield and Greenbrae know that somebody always has our back: for decades the firefighters of the Kentfield Fire Department have been protecting residents from fire danger, supplying emergency medical care and providing an ongoing definition of what public service is all about. Paul Smith of the Kentfield Fire Department will offer his reflections on the history of the department at the October 26 meeting of the KGHS (details below) sharing photos and memorabilia of firefighting through the years.

Please join us!

Susan Morrow
KGHS President, 2015-2016

**KGHS Member meeting October 26, 2015
features Kentfield Fire Department !**

With every fire season, we count our blessings that we in the "Heart of Marin" have been spared. With gratitude for all of the firefighters this year, we want to pay tribute to the Kentfield Fire Department who has been a partner with the Kentfield School District in creating, protecting and enriching the Kentfield-Greenbrae community for over 100 years.

Please join us for our annual KGHS members meeting:

**Monday, October 26 from 6:30-8
Community Room at Jason's in Greenbrae.**

Following a short update on KGHS plans for the year, Fire Chief Paul Smith will make a presentation with slides on the history of the KFD. Bring a friend!



Keeping firefighting equipment up to date has been a priority at the Kentfield firehouse. The 1960 Van Pelt/White truck. (Kentfield Fire District Collection)



Membership Update

Thank you to everyone who has renewed your membership already! We are having a very hard time deleting members who joined for our Centennial and did not renew. We don't want to lose you and are sending this newsletter in hopes that you will reconsider. We hope that you will remember the Kentfield-Greenbrae Historical Society by renewing your membership at a level that is comfortable for you.

DO IT NOW before you forget! ...
www.kghs.org

- \$20 - Students & Seniors
 - \$30 - Individuals & Families
 - \$50 - Business Membership
 - \$100 - Patron
 - \$250 - Benefactor *
 - \$500 - Historian *
 - \$1000 + - Lifetime Membership*
- *tote bags

You can also send a check: KGHS Membership, Box 236, Kentfield, CA 94914. Please include your name, level of membership, address, email and phone number. Included with your membership is the bi-monthly/quarterly newsletter, special invitations to member events and an invitation to volunteer on one of our committees. **If your membership has expired, this will be your last newsletter!**

Community Firefighting: the Kentfield Fire District Excerpts from "In the Heart of Marin" by Dewey Livingston.

Old Ross Landing during the 1860s through 1890s was unincorporated, like most Marin towns at that time, and so the citizens relied on the county government for services such as fire protection and police. This usually led to locals creating their own informal volunteer squads, although little is known about such activity in Ross Landing. The source of most fires, other than structural, was the oft-dry slopes of Mt. Tamalpais, frequented by campers and hunters.

Early Kentfield relied on its local citizens and nearby fire departments in Larkspur, Ross and San Anselmo for most protections, absent a strong county presence. With the successful civic growth beginning in 1900-including creation of the Kentfield Improvement Club, which stressed the need for fire protection-local residents in 1920 formed the Kentfield Fire District, as part of the countywide district system. In March of 1921, Kentfield voters funded a volunteer fire department by a margin of 105 to 2. Later that year the district purchased the J. E. Lewis property located on the county road between Maple and Stetson Avenues. At the time, the only equipment was a hose cart ("for use until such a time as they may be able to get a 'regular' fire engine," noted the San Anselmo Herald), but they soon acquired a 1½ ton Model T Ford fire truck. The chief was Al Rampe, the assistant chief Elie Faure; there were 19 volunteers. The department's firehouse was a tiny building-originally Lewis's real estate office-only big enough to hold a small vehicle.



The original Kentfield firehouse was located in the tiny, former J. E. Lewis real estate building between Maple and Stetson. (Kentfield Fire District Collection)

By 1927, with a volunteer membership of 48, the KFD needed a modern facility. The Kentfield Fire District floated a successful bond issue and constructed a \$10,000 firehouse on their property on the state highway where it turned west towards Ross (now Sir Francis Drake Boulevard at College Avenue). The new local firehouse opened with a gala party on the night of May 7, 1927, with speeches (Congressman William Kent was scheduled to speak), dancing on the building's second-story "excellent dance floor" to a Marin Junior College orchestra, songs by the college's Glee Club, and free refreshments provided "by a committee of ladies."

With the new firehouse the department needed a new fire truck. One year after opening the KFD saw its sparkling 500-gallon capacity LaFrance fire truck arrive and park in the building. The new engine reportedly reduced insurance rates in the Kentfield district. The improvements spurred installation of modern fire hydrants around the town, and also a house numbering system began in 1928. All residence numbers started from the station, with two numbers for every 50-foot lot. The landowner would apply to a local man for their new house number.

The Kentfield firemen saw only a handful of major incidents, the most memorable being the Mt. Tamalpais fires of 1929 and 1945. The former, which burned hundreds of houses in Mill Valley, took most Kentfield men for three days straight, and these may have kept the conflagration from reaching their home town. The 1945 fire burned from San Geronimo Valley to the coast, but also threatened Fairfax and San Anselmo; Kentfield also provided strong support.

Otherwise, most of the action the Kentfield men saw was small grass fires and occasional minor house fires. An active time was the winter flood season. "We had a rowboat that the county department of public works would deliver to the entrance to Granton Park," recalled longtime volunteer Jim McConnell, "and then the volunteer firemen would go and man it. When the people were going to work in the morning, e'd row them out of there-some of them had business suits on, they had to catch the bus-and in the evening when they would be coming home we would row them home around the circle."



Fires on Mt. Tamalpais, like the one at the above, in 1912, have always been common, and KFD waits in preparation to respond. (Sylvia Thoelecke Collection)

Becoming a volunteer fireman was a rite of passage in Kentfield. "There was sort of an unwritten law or custom that when you became 17 years of age, you became a volunteer fireman and went to drills every Tuesday night," recalled McConnell. "You didn't have to join, but we all did. A lot of them were Italians that I grew up with at Kentfield grammar school." Another former volunteer put it this way: "Frankly, if you were a young man and you were living in Kentfield and you didn't become a volunteer fireman, everybody kind of looked at you like what's wrong with you. It's just the way it was."

World War II sent most men into the military service, creating a lack of volunteers. "I was too young to be a volunteer," said McConnell, "but we always ran over there and helped out in some way or another, pulling hose or something." The Kentfield Fire Department was then staffed almost exclusively with women.



Among the more spectacular events in fire department history is the hot blaze that destroyed the old College of Marin gymnasium on College Avenue.

(College of Marin Archives)

Without a radio system, the volunteers were called to action with a horn. "The only way we knew back then was they had a horn," recalled David Manahan, "It would blow at the fire house, and, if you heard it, you came running."

The Kentfield Fire District had a good reputation for its community service, which continues to this day. Besides the traditional schoolchildren tours, the Kentfield Fire District's main annual community outreach was the Christmas party. Volunteer firemen sold tickets and bought and wrapped presents for different age groups. On the second floor meeting hall, the firemen hosted a party for the kids in town. Each got a present and a big stocking full of goodies, and there was a raffle and entertainment. The event ended when, according to Manahan, the population became too big to handle. Later, the Kentfield Association of Firefighter's annual pancake breakfast replaced the Christmas party, continuing a long tradition of KFD involvement in the community.

The old firehouse was replaced by a modern facility next door dedicated in 1968. A Sheriff's substation also occupied the new building. The firehouse was renovated and modernized in 2009. Today the Kentfield Fire District, governed by a five-member board of directors, operates off of an almost \$5 million budget. Eleven full-time firefighters are backed up by 20 volunteers who protect the nearby communities with four modern engines and additional support vehicles. The 1927 American LaFrance fire engine from Fred Ruhland's early days as Chief has been lovingly preserved and is used occasionally in parades and special events.

-Dewey Livingston from In the Heart of Marin pages 188-193

KFD Pancake Breakfast Sunday, October 11

Everyone is welcome to attend the Kentfield Association of Firefighter's Annual Pancake Breakfast on Sunday, October 11, 2015 from 7:30 am to 11:00 am. Breakfast will be served by the Firefighters and their families at the Kentfield Fire Station, 1004 Sir Francis Drake Blvd., across from the College of Marin in Kentfield.

Adults \$7.00, Children 12 and under \$5.00, 3 and under free.

Come and enjoy yourself and meet the professional and volunteer firefighter's who serve the community! You will leave well fed and well informed.

Get Involved!

We have many plans for this school year and would like to include you in them. We are establishing several working committees. If you are interested, please contact us!

- Events Committee: helping to organize and publicize member and community events such as the Painters of Mt. Tamalpais and the May Day Celebration.
- Research Committee: collecting more oral histories and generating the historical background of sites in the Kentfield and Greenbrae area...developing curriculum, creating walking tours...
- Membership & Outreach Committee: reaching out to local businesses and alumni to expand our membership

If you would like to be on one of the above committees, please send a message through info@kghs.org and we will get back to you.

Kentfield Greenbrae Historical Society
P.O. Box 236
Kentfield, CA 94914

Send us your stories...

Our next KGHS Newsletter will feature stories about **School Memories...your days at Kent, Greenbrae, Wolfe Grade or Bacich**. What memories stand out when you were in school? Send them to: info@kghs.org with the Subject Line "**School Stories**". Please include the approximate time period in which these activities occurred.

The KGHS Board of Directors

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