

Kentfield Greenbrae Historical Society Historian

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President's Message

Knock on wood! We've been very lucky this season to not have smoke-filled skies. Even though the fire season is not yet over, we can be very thankful that our Kentfield Fire Department has been at work all year making our community fire safe. While rereading our book, *In the Heart of Marin*, I realized that fires on Mt. Tam were common although I can't remember one in recent years.

Growing up I remember the loud fire horn calling the volunteers who lived locally. Everyone in the community would know that a serious fire was happening. Volunteers took great pride in their responsibility and would drop everything if they were needed.

The Kentfield Fire District is celebrating 100 years of dedication to keeping our community safe. Even though Covid protocols are keeping them from having a big celebration or pancake breakfast this year, the KGHS would like to share some of its history and a few stories. A special thank you to KGHS Board Member Paul Smith who served the Kentfield Fire District for 41 years, retiring as fire chief in 2016. He is currently researching and writing the history of the District.

Enjoy this glorious fall weather and hope for more rain and a fire-free season!

Marilee Rogers
Co-president, 2021-2022

Kentfield Fire District is 100 Years Old!



Community Firefighting: The Kentfield Fire District

by Dewey Livingston *In the Heart of Marin: The History of Kentfield and Greenbrae*
p. 189-193

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. Local newspapers offer a few tidbits: in August of 1881 a fire on Mt. Tamalpais was "threatening the residences of Mr. A. E. Kent and Mr. Richardson, with their elegant residences and deer park." With no organized local help, 'Mr. Kent telephoned to San Rafael for aid, to which great numbers of willing citizens responded...' The residences were saved but part of the deer park burned. Ten years later, in July of 1891, another fire raged above the Kent estate, but the family was better prepared: "Mr. Kent's people rallied in great force," reported the *Marin Journal*. "The expenses and trouble of these annual fires to Mr. Kent is something fearful," the writer continued. "His house force buys provisions and coffee at wholesale, and the labor of supplying the firefighters with

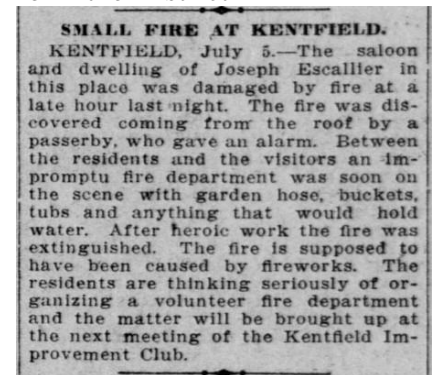
food and drink turns the whole place into something like a restaurant.

Early Kentfield relied on its local citizens and nearby fire departments in Larkspur, Ross, and San Anselmo for most of the protections absent a strong county presence. With the successful civic growth beginning in 1900—including the 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 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 1 ½ 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 1930 was located in the tiny, former J. E. Lewis real estate building. (KFD Collection)

There were several documented fire incidents in the Kentfield area prior to the District being formed in 1921. On the night of the Fourth of July 1905, a fire was reported at the saloon and dwelling of Joseph Escallier. The San Francisco Call newspaper reported that an impromptu fire department, consisting of residents and visitors, used buckets and tubs along with a garden hose, extinguished the fire. The fire was apparently caused by fireworks. After this incident, the residents seriously considered forming a volunteer fire department and discussed it at the next meeting of the Kentfield Improvement Club. However, no decisive action was taken. It would still take another sixteen years and several more serious incidents before the residents voted to form the District



Fires in Kentfield before 1921

By Paul Smith

(as printed in the Anne T. Kent Room Newsletter 6.3.2022)



Postcard view circa 1910, looking southeast along today's Sir Francis Drake Boulevard. College Avenue begins near the second utility pole on the right, foreground. Anne T. Kent California Room Collection

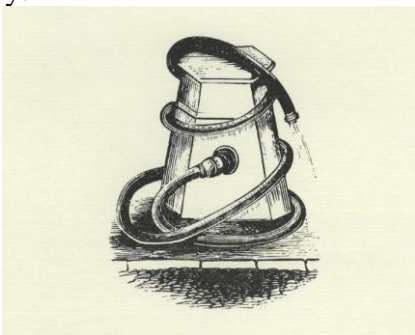
On Saturday morning May 27, 1911, the Austin Cottage, on Laurel Grove, just across the Ross town line, was destroyed by fire. An alarm was set to the Ross Fire Department and Chief Green responded with his men. The Cottage was completely destroyed but the adjacent structures were spared. The loss was estimated at \$1500.



Ross Fire Department with their Seagrave Chemical Engine, purchased in 1910. Jim Staley Postcard Collection, Anne T. Kent California Room.

Another fire on October 18th later that year, the Johnson Hotel was destroyed. This building was near the old Kentfield School House, where the Terrace Apartments stand today. Again, the Ross Fire Department was summoned. The Marin Journal reported that Ross's "big auto engine" struggled over the rough roads to reach the scene. Due to the lack of hydrants and water pressure, there was little that could be done. "The firemen used their chemicals and succeeded in saving the schoolhouse," the article stated.

In those days liquid acid and bicarbonate soda containers were stored on some fire apparatus. Upon arrival at the fire scene, these chemicals were added to the water tank and an almost instantaneous chemical reaction occurred. That chemical reaction created the necessary pressure in the tank to produce an effective fire stream through the 1-inch chemical hose, which was typically colored red, hence the term "redline." Using this method, the Ross firemen successfully kept the fire from damaging the adjacent schoolhouse. These chemical lines evolved into the modern era "booster lines" that were typically standard equipment on fire engines until recently.



On Christmas Eve 1913 a fire of unknown origin broke out at the Hart residence in Kentfield. According to the Marin County Tocsin, Mr. Hart had left his residence earlier that evening to assist with the search and apprehension of an escaped convict from San Quentin prison.

Mrs. Hart awoke about three in the morning to the smell and roar of the fire below her second-story bedroom. She was unable to descend the stairs due to the heat and smoke but was rescued when a ladder was placed to the bedroom window. The Ross Fire Department was called but due to a lack of a fire hydrant in the vicinity, the home was destroyed.

On December 14, 1916, The Marin Journal reported that the Hotaling property, an old Marin Landmark in Kentfield, "went up in smoke." Again, Ross Fire Chief Green and 21 of his men responded. They had 1600 feet of hose but the closest fire hydrant lay more than 2000 feet away. Chief Green must have been extremely upset as he was heard to say, "We had to stand there like boobs," as fire destroyed the entire structure. He recommended that fire hydrants be installed a maximum of 1000 feet apart on Laurel Grove, a county road.

In the early morning hours of June 5, 1919 fire destroyed a large ten-room residence owned by Baldo Ivancovich at Kent Ave and Bridge Road. A call was sent to the Ross Fire Department and the fire was confined to the second floor. Faulty electric wiring was the reported cause. The building and contents were insured. This is the first fire in Kentfield where an insurance policy was reportedly in place.

Additionally, it is interesting to note that this fire was caused by electricity, a relatively new addition to twentieth-century homes. Several of the above-referenced fires were reportedly due to faulty fireplace flues, not an uncommon source of heat in those days.

This segment, written to memorialize some of the significant structure fires in Kentfield prior to the formation of the Fire District, has a remarkable ending. In October 1921, just before the newly approved Kentfield Fire District was staffed and equipped, a fire

broke out in a two-story garage owned by J.G. Hecker. His property was in the vicinity of the Kent Estate but again, due to the absence of a hydrant, the building burned to the ground. The fire loss was estimated at \$1000. Remarkably, Mr. Hecker had just been appointed as a Fire Commissioner of the newly sanctioned Kentfield Fire District.

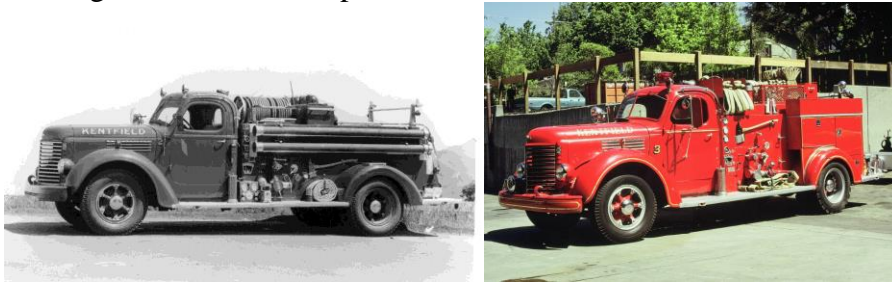
Kentfield 1941 International Fire Engine

By Paul Smith

(as printed in the Anne T. Kent Room Newsletter 6.3.2022)

Let's go back in time to more than eighty years. It's September 1941 and Kentfield is still a sleepy village in bucolic Marin County. The war in Europe wages as the production of munitions and war materiel increases in America to assist the Allies.

The Kentfield Fire District wanted to order a new fire engine to supplement its existing 1929 American La France. The District attempted to place an order for their desired fire engine but was told that the production of vehicles was geared toward the War effort. The fire engine cab and chassis would not be available for Kentfield but would be assigned to the War Department.



1941 KFD Engine #3 International FABCO

Foto credits to Jim Schultz, Jack O'Sullivan and Kentfield Fire District Archives

The Fire District Board of Directors and Fire Chief Ruhland requested reconsideration stressing local preparedness and citizen safety. Their efforts paid off and the Kentfield Fire District took delivery of their new 1941 International/FABCO fire engine. The District was extremely fortunate to be able to obtain this new piece of apparatus. It was not until about 1950 that trucks' chassis were again manufactured for non-military use. In the mid-1980s the Fire District sold the 1941 International to the Marin Municipal Water District. It was used to supplement the firefighting apparatus at the Sky Oaks ranger station for another 20 years.

Get involved!

We are looking for more community members to become involved with KGHS. If you are interested, please contact us!
Special Events, **Volunteering at our Pop Up Store & Gallery**,
Research, Membership & Outreach

Please send a message through info@kghs.org and we will get back to you.

Giving back to the Community:

It's never too late to renew, join or make a donation! We are shifting our renewal notices to annually so expect to see them in November. If you want to get an early start, feel free to sign up now. www.KGHS.org
DO IT ONLINE NOW
before you forget!

- \$25 - Students & Seniors, Non-Profit organizations
- \$35 - Individuals & Families
- \$50 - Sponsor
- \$100 - Patron
- Donations of any amount are always welcome!

Or you can send a check:
KGHS Membership
Box 236 , Kentfield, CA 94914.
Please include your name, level of membership, address, email, and phone number. If you use a credit card number, please include your CVV code and zip code

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