

Kentfield Greenbrae Historical Society Historian

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President's Message

The last few days have dawned with frost on the ground, brilliant sunshine and temperatures that have me reaching to the back of my sweater drawer for those extra cozy garments, rarely worn but so appreciated!

In this issue of The Historian, KGHS board member and former KFD fire chief, Paul Smith, highlights the varied roles the Kentfield Fire Department has played in our community: as firefighters and as a community-building resource, bringing families together to celebrate the season. For over 40 years their annual toy drive has brightened Christmas morning for generations of children! Please consider dropping off new toys at the fire department this year too!

I hope that this season of celebration brings peace and hopefulness to you and your families. Stay safe, keep warm and open your hearts to the beauty that surrounds us, here in the heart of Marin.

Susan Morrow
Co-president, 2022-2023

Happy Holidays from KGHS



KFD ... Celebrating Christmas in the War Years by Paul Smith

The late 1930s and early 1940s were not a time of great prosperity in sleepy Kentfield. As the country was recovering from the Great Depression, war loomed in Europe. Life in Marin County was at a much slower pace than today. Local businesses served the community long before big box stores and supermarkets. Home delivery of groceries and goods was provided by local merchants, not Amazon.

In Kentfield, the Fire Department and Civic League were primary community groups. Membership in both was limited and provided a measure of social status. Meeting minutes of the Kentfield Association of Volunteer Firemen during the late 1930s and through the war years indicate that they played a major part in spreading Christmas joy in the community. Initially, the members held a small gathering for the local children at the fire station. Most local families attended and were very grateful when their children received an orange and a handful of nuts carefully wrapped up in a cellophane bag.

In just a few years the children's Christmas party became a much-anticipated event. The "fire hall" was decorated with fresh greens and by 1942 Santa Claus arrived providing small bags of candy and a toy for each child in

attendance. Several of the firemen formed a choral group and sang carols as the children with their families enjoyed the evening. Stories from the “old-timers” said that this party was the highlight of the season when they were youngsters.

During the war years, the Kentfield Volunteers petitioned the local ration board to provide additional coupons in order to purchase goods for the annual gathering. The primary fundraiser for this event was a special dance night at the Rose Bowl in Larkspur sponsored by their volunteer firemen.



*The original Kentfield firehouse decorated for Christmas 1942
(KFD Collection)*

After the war, the population of the Kentfield Fire District swelled. The neighborhoods of Kentfield Gardens, Kent Woodlands, and Greenbrae were developed. The community prospered and the children’s party became a nostalgic memory.

However, prosperity was not universal and in the late 1970s Tiburon fire chief Frank Buscher initiated a Toys for Tots program in partnership with the U.S Marine Corps and the other Marin fire agencies. Kentfield was traditionally one of the top donors as community members dropped off new toys for distribution to underprivileged children. Today many Marin County public safety agencies participate in the Santa Cop program in which new toys are collected, wrapped, and distributed by local volunteers to local Marin families as community generosity continues to provide for those less fortunate children.

The KFD Annual Toy Drive is now accepting toys and gift certificates at the Kentfield Fire Station!

Author Paul D Smith is a former fire chief with the Kentfield Fire District. He is writing the history of the Fire District which was founded in 1922. Chief Smith has recently researched the minutes from the meetings held by the Kentfield Association of Volunteer Firemen in the 1930s and 1940s.

College of Marin Gym

Fire 1963

By Paul Smith



*College of Marin Gym in 1931,
shortly after completion.
Photographer unknown.*

The original Gymnasium at the College of Marin was constructed about 1930 when the school was known as Marin Junior College. By 1960 numerous hazardous conditions resulted in the building being condemned, disallowing public assemblies, such as basketball games. However, it continued to be used for basketball practice, Phys Ed classes, and a catch-all storage area. The old gym was scheduled for demolition and plans for the new physical education facility were well underway.

On Tuesday, December 16, 1963, Fire Chief Kenneth Kamp was meeting at the Kentfield fire station with contractors. They were discussing installing new fire hydrants and water mains at the College, including around the new physical education complex scheduled for construction. They were suddenly interrupted by a report of a fire at the old gym. At 3:24 pm phone calls began pouring into the Kentfield Fire District “red line”. The 9-1-1 phone system did not exist in Marin until the 1980s and callers reporting an emergency dialed a

seven-digit phone number that was answered by an on-duty fireman.



Several large hose streams are shown flowing water on the fire, before the ladder truck was in use. Photo courtesy of Paul Penna

The fire horn was set off to call the volunteer firemen and off-duty staff. Mutual Aid was requested and received from Larkspur, San Anselmo, and Tamalpais Valley fire departments. "About 50 firemen and five trucks," fought the fire as reported by the Marin Independent Journal. "College students and youths from nearby Adeline E. Kent School assisted the firemen with hose lines." Firemen were unable to get close to any entrances due to the fire and heat. Hundreds of spectators lined the area but were kept at a safe distance by ropes put up by Sheriff's deputies. Traffic into the area was also diverted with the assistance of law enforcement personnel.

Chief Kamp said there was "...no hope to save the building, as it was tinder dry, and the basketball court had several decades of varnish applied." Small explosions were heard throughout the fire, thought to be from stored rifle ammunition.

The steel and wooden beam construction eventually collapsed in sections, with loud crashing noises. The gym was eventually destroyed in the fire and was declared to be a loss of \$300,000. This was covered by insurance.

All of the equipment used by the basketball team was destroyed. In addition, the contents of lockers used by 800 students were ruined, along with weight equipment and supplies used by the tennis, track, and golf teams. Trophies and all of the records of the coaching staff and Physical Education Department were lost. Kentfield firemen would later stand by the smoldering pile of ruins all night to put out hot spots.



Kentfield's Van Pelt Engine pumped for hours at the fire. Photo courtesy of Paul Penna

Arson was initially thought to be the cause of the blaze as a witness saw a man running from the scene at about the time the fire was reported. Local fire and law enforcement investigators spent days rummaging through the rubble and debris. Upon conclusion, Chief Kamp reported that a portable electric floor heater had been left on in the building. Basketball uniforms had been hung above the heater to dry and it was determined that one must have fallen onto the heater and caught on fire. He stated, "We are completely satisfied that the fire was accidental."

*Much of the information came from the Marin IJ December 17,18,19 1963



COM Gym Fire. COM Archives

Many thanks to Paul Smith and his endless research!

KGHS in transition...

We apologize for any inconvenience...

We've been having difficulty with our email... info@kghs.org. Due to changes with the Google Non-Profit format, our email and other Google accounts have been frozen. Our low-tech board members are working hard to restore it... **It looks like it is finally back in action! Just in time!**

We have other exciting news to be shared with you in 2023.

- New Board Member
- A new purchase for KGHS
- Archival cataloging and storage at the Anne T. Kent Room Annex of the MCFL
- Special events planned for 2023
- May Celebration partnering with Bon Air Center...

Get involved!

We are always looking for more community members to become involved. If you are interested, please contact us!

- Events Committee: helping to organize and publicize member and community events; **Volunteering at our Pop Up Store & Gallery**
- Research Committee: collecting more oral histories and generating the historical background of sites in the Kentfield and Greenbrae area...developing curriculum for third-grade students, 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.



KFD TOY DRIVE!

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. You should have received a notice already..

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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