

# RUSSIAN RIVER RECORDER

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*Photo circa 1952: Left to right, Fire Chief Harold Sullivan, Assistant Chief Albert Chapman, Captain Jack Relyea*

## The First Century of the Healdsburg Fire Department

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### RUSSIAN RIVER RECORDER

*The Official Publication of the Healdsburg  
Museum and Historical Society*

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## IN THIS ISSUE

We often take for granted the services offered by such city departments as fire and police. In this issue our curator Marie Shobe and our research curator Holly Hoods give us an historical view of Healdsburg's Fire Department. Marie shows us the historical significance of our fire fighters and Holly, through an oral interview, gives us a glimpse into the workings of a fire department and what it took to keep up with the times.

We think you will find both these articles of immense interest in light of what fire fighting and fire departments have come to mean in the wake of the tragedy of September 11, 2001.

We believe that you will find equally interesting the story about the historic Bellerose Winery and how the new owners, Anne and Jack Air, decided on a new name for the winery located on West Dry Creek Road not far from the renowned Madronna Manor Hotel and Restaurant. June Maher Smith's recounting in her very special style makes fascinating reading.

We hope you enjoy the Autumn 2002 issue of the *Russian River Recorder*.

Arnold Santucci  
Editor

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## HISTORIC



## BUSINESS

### THE HISTORIC BELLEROSE WINERY

## EVERETT RIDGE WINERY:

### Owners Were "Guided" to Choose the Winery's New Name

By June Maher Smith

The historic winery we know as Everett Ridge Winery at 435 West Dry Creek Road has had other names and several owners over the years. The first name that surfaces in connection with this land is J. F. Pickle. He came to Sonoma County from Missouri in 1857 and 20 years later is listed in the Sonoma County Historic Atlas as owning 48 acres in Dry Creek Valley. He planted a vineyard and in 1875 built the sturdy red barn with stalls for 14 horses. It is still the dominant building on the hill, the one you see as you come up the drive. However, it has been lovingly renovated by the current owners, Jack and Anne Air. More about this project later in the article.

The next owner, Edward Everett Wise bought the property in 1885. A native of Massachusetts, he attended the U. S. Naval Academy before coming to California. In 1880 Wise married Marion McAllister, daughter of a wealthy San Francisco attorney, at "a very grand wedding." The newlyweds lived in Los Angeles for five years before moving north to the Dry Creek Valley, buying the property next to Paxton's Madrona Knoll Ranch. (The Paxtons and the Mc Allisters were friends in San Francisco.)

Soon Wise was building a stone winery on his Healdsburg property which he called The Everett Ranch. A short time later, in 1888, he entered into a five-year partnership with William B. Bourn, II, of Napa. Their goal was to have cellars in St. Helena that would hold 2,000,000 gallons of wine and brandy. They achieved this storage space by constructing the three-story Bourn & Wise Cellars. Built of blue-grey volcanic stone,

this was the largest stone winery in the world. It is still standing in the Napa Valley—we know it as Greystone. (It's now the home of the Culinary Institute of America's Napa Valley campus.) The partnership lasted for only two years because of financial problems as the wine market deteriorated. Bourn bought out his partner and Wise returned to his Healdsburg vineyards



*Edward Everett Wise*

and winery. His property here was in sad shape. He had leased it to an old schoolmate who let it run down. Wise estimated even \$2,000 would not repair all the damages and he wrote that the "wine trade was poor." As if the financial depression was not enough, Wise began to have health problems, too.

When his daughter, also named Marion, was born in early 1891, Wise was quite ill with tuberculosis and throat problems. He never recovered. He died on May 2, at the young age of 37. His widow held on to the

property for a while and then sold it a few years later to James Matthews Higgins.

Higgins called the property "The Emerald Ranch" and built a house on the site of the Airs' present home. Higgins not only had his vineyards, he also had prunes. In May of 1905, *The Healdsburg Tribune* reported a group of prune growers met and permanently organized the Healdsburg Prune Growers Union. J. M. Higgins was elected vice-president. In later years this group became part of the Sunsweet Growers.

In 1918 the Passalacqua brothers, William and Alfred, owned the ranch. When Alfred died in 1924, William bought his brother's share from his widow. William planted more grapes and used Belgian draft horses to plow and cultivate the vineyards. Of course, the big red barn provided shelter for those horses. William's son Bill, who was born on the ranch, remembers well the old winery building and the old barn. He says the barn was well built and finished as if it were a house. In fact, it did provide housing for some of the hired help. In an efficient arrangement for the horses' fodder, the hay and grain was stored on the second story and could be dropped directly into the horses' grain boxes on the first floor.

The old stone winery had three-foot walls and was three stories high with a 250,000 gallon capacity. Passalacqua renovated the first two stories and built a wooden addition in the front. There was an upper road which was on the same level as the second story

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and grapes were hauled up there and put directly into the crusher. Gravity provided the power for the juice to flow into the storage room on the first floor. He did not use the third story of the winery in his operation. During Prohibition the Passalacquas put in more prunes, some apples and other fruits. Bill says the winery was full of good wine; but, of course, it couldn't be sold legally at that time. His father finally made the hard decision to just get rid of all that fine wine. He pulled the plugs and let the wine flow out of the casks and down the hill into Dry Creek—which literally turned red!

In 1940 William Passalacqua built his family's home on the site of the old Higgins house. The lumber came from 12 of the ranch's redwoods. After Prohibition, in the early 1940s, Passalacqua was planning to start bottling his wine and bought the necessary equipment for this new operation. However, disaster struck while he was away on a hunting trip—a fire destroyed the winery before the bottling ever started. Only the thick stone walls survived.

Passalacqua sold the ranch to Irving Bliss about 1947. Bliss put in prune trees and built another home further up on the property. He, too, used Belgian draft horses for plowing. Back then Dry Creek flooded annually, so Bliss took steps to stop his land from washing away. He had wharf pilings driven into the banks of the creek and they were then covered with flattened autos. He thus succeeded in stopping the erosion of his land along Dry Creek.

In 1975 a group of three long-time friends, originally from San Francisco, bought the ranch. The name of their company was Kaban, based on their surnames—Kady, Butler and Andrews. (They also invested in other properties in northern California and elsewhere.) They lived on the property and had 170 acres of vineyards, including 20 acres of cabernet sauvignon. In addition there were walnut trees, both English and



Old Barn (Museum Collection)

black varieties. Their ten Mexican workers lived in the barn, maintained a vegetable garden, and were always on hand for the grape harvest.

In 1978 Charles and Nancy Richard became owners of this land. With his master's degree in music, Charles had originally intended to be a music professor. Instead, he became a successful vineyardist who produced wines in the Bordeaux manner at his Bellerose Winery. He, too, used Belgian draft horses to prepare the soil for his vines. The Richards sold the property in 1996 to the present owners Anne and Jack Air.

Both Anne and Jack were born in rural Long Island but did not meet and marry until they'd both moved to California. After living in California for 25 years, and after visiting friends living in Kenwood, they realized they, too, wanted to live in rural Northern California. They first purchased land in Nuns Canyon, over near Sonoma, and still own 12 acres there planted with Syrah vines. They "discovered" the Dry Creek property, with its Bellerose Winery, in December of 1996 and were soon the owners.

After a couple of years of trying to come up with a new name, they decided on Everett Ridge Winery. After making that decision they discovered Everett Wise had called his

property "The Everett Ranch". And Higgins had called the land "The Emerald Ranch". The initials E and R seem to go with the land and Anne believes they were somehow "guided" to choose the winery's new name.

They were soon busy turning the property into the attractive showplace it is today. Besides the vineyards and the winery operations they were soon involved with updating the buildings. In 1998 the Airs rebuilt the Passalacqua house, using a variety of woods, including some of the redwood from the former home and the barn. It is a charming, spacious home nestled under shady redwoods. In the year 2000 they turned their attention to the barn. The 125-year-old building was deteriorating and needed a foundation, which it had never had. Restoration was painstakingly slow and precise. Every redwood plank was removed by hand, stacked carefully, and replanned before it was returned to its proper position in the new barn, which now rested on its new concrete foundation at the same site under the old oak trees. Instead of housing horses or ranch hands it now functions as barrel storage space. Speaking of horses, the Airs also have a Belgian draft horse. However, Anne says he is a "pleasure horse who never worked a day in his life!" The grapes that

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produce Everett Ridge's prize winning wines are grown organically in four different vineyards—at the home ranch, the Pena Creek Vineyard, Nuns Canyon and the Powerhouse Vineyard in Mendocino County.

The Airs are truly fascinated with the history of their land. They have been visited by, and learned from, several relatives of those who lived there in the past. Every visit provides them with more information. Each of those previous owners contributed to the history of the Dry Creek Valley and the Airs are upholding that tradition.

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*Anne and Jack Air in old barn*

**CORRECTION**

The article about the Simi winery in the previous issue of the Russian River Recorder (No. 77) contained two errors. First, Pietro Simi died before his older brother, Giuseppe, died. Pietro died on July 19, 1904; brother Giuseppe died on August 13, 1904. Second, the two brothers pictured in the photo are Pietro on the left and Guiseppe on the right.

Thanks to Mel Amato for setting things straight.

## HISTORIC



## CITY FACILITY

Fire Chief, Harold Sullivan, 1949

### Introduction

*"There used to be four or five hose companies, hook and ladder boys and band pump engine operators. They had drills on the streets that were thrillers. They competed against each other and against time. They even held big competitive drills against firemen from other cities in the county, and they defeated bad blazes by main force and determination, by means of bucket brigades and wet blanket extermination."  
(HT 1940)*

From the very beginnings of the town in 1857, Healdsburg residents have always thought about fire protection: "In the early days the glamour of being a fireman drew large numbers of young men into voluntary service" (HT 1940). The earliest fire fighting groups were all volunteer. The first recorded organized fire group was in 1858. A hook and ladder company was organized with Henry D. Lee as foreman, and the money for operations was raised by subscription among its members and the merchants of Healdsburg. This hook and ladder company fought two large fires in 1859, but lost all of its equipment in those fires and the company disbanded. Several attempts at reorganizing a fire corps were made.

In 1876 a hose company was started with T.C. Carruthers as foreman. The organization consisted of twenty members. In 1878 the recently organized Healdsburg fire department (a loose coalition of the fire companies in town) rented Pat Lannan's hall and used it as their headquarters. Various meetings were held there. The department's equipment consisted of a hose carriage, hose and nozzle. By this time, the town was growing, and the need for more equipment was obvious.

# The First Century of the Healdsburg Fire Department

By Marie Shobe

### Fire Bell

In January of 1880 the City Trustees authorized the purchase of a "fire extinguisher" for the department - a Babcock chemical engine from the Consolidated Fire Extinguisher Co., of Chicago. "The machine is a two-wheeled concern, handsomely painted - the predominant color being vermilion; it is embellished with pictures . . . the boiler is made of steel and has a capacity of 100 gallons of solution equal to 4,000 gallons of water from a hydrant, as a fire extinguishing element . . . there are 150 feet of hose, one axe, one jimmy, two lanterns, plenty of rope, tools, etc. The weight is 1450 pounds . . . the engine and truck are pronounced by local mechanics to be first class" (HE 1880).

In December of 1880 a room was rented from Mrs. M.J. Downing to shelter the hose carriage, chemical engine and other fire fighting apparatus. Also in December, the City Trustees purchased a bell - for use as a fire bell - from the defunct Christian College of Santa Rosa. They ordered the building of a bell tower in the center of the Plaza. This was Healdsburg's first fire alarm system! The tower was built by Adna Phelps, and was 12 feet square at the base and 7 feet square at the top. A floor was placed at 12 feet from the ground, with a staircase leading up to it. The bell rope was suspended to this floor. The bell weighed 778.5 pounds and was bought for 30 cents a pound. The total cost was \$233.55. Healdsburg was proud of its bell: "With a vigilant Nightwatch and so good a bell our citizens may be assured of hearing every alarm hereafter sounded" (HE 1880).

In 1896 the bell was moved to City Hall, and placed on top of the building. The thought was that the firefighters could hear the bell at longer distances from that height.

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Bob Logan on top of the truck. Photo circa 1887

By the year 1900 a whole system of signals was in place:

**Fire Alarm Signals**

**District No. 1 - One tap after rapid ringing.**

Bounded on the north by North Street, east by East Street, south and west by railway track.

**District No. 2 - Two taps after rapid ringing.**

Bounded on the north by city limits, south by North Street, east by Johnson and East Streets, west by railway tracks.

**District No. 3 - Three taps after rapid ringing.**

Bounded on the north by city limits, south by North Street, east by city limits, west by East and Johnson Streets.

**District No. 4 - Four taps after rapid ringing.**

Bounded on the north by North Street, south by railway track, east by city limits, and west by East Street.

A signal was developed for indicating a false alarm or an extinguished fire. This signal consisted of three taps of the bell repeated three times, a pause between each three taps.

By 1903 there were cards placed around town for Healdsburg citizens that listed the fire districts and their respective bell signals.

**Rescue Hook and Ladder**

In June of 1881 the City Trustees received a petition for acceptance into the fire department from citizens who had organized a hook and ladder company. It wasn't until October 1882 that the Rescue Hook and Ladder Co. No. 1 was added to the department. The charter members of this company were: Tandy Allen, F.E. Curtis, W.H. Currier, Peter Dirvin, Sr., Sam Englehart, G.P. Gammon, L.L. Gale, Robert Lee, A.W. Smith, and John Sewell. This hook and ladder company remained active for ten years and was disbanded in 1892 and replaced by another.

In 1894 the Hook and Ladder Company received permission from the City Trustees to increase its membership from ten to fifteen. Also, in October of that year, the trustees ordered that a hook and ladder truck should be purchased and delivered before Thanksgiving. The truck was purchased from F. Downey and Sons of San Francisco for \$325.

**Chief Engineer**

The fire department was growing so big that in 1884 the City Trustees decided to elect a "chief engineer" to oversee all the companies. John Favour was elected with the title of "Chief Engineer of the Healdsburg Fire Department."

**List of Chiefs, 1884-1900 (year elected)**

- |                      |                      |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| John Favour (1884)   | Pete Dirvin (1886)   |
| H. Fried (1889)      | W. F. O'Leary (1890) |
| L.A. Norton (1891)   | E.I. Beeson (1894)   |
| J.E. Ewing (1895)    | S. Higerloh (1896)   |
| L.A. Norton (1897)   | A.W. Garrett (1898)  |
| S.E. Phillips (1899) | G.J. Gebauer (1900)  |

In 1894 the department purchased from L.A. Norton for \$6.00 a hat band, hat shield, belt and badge to be worn by the chief engineer.



P. A. Kerns, Fire Chief, 1940 to 1949.  
The first fire chief who was paid on a full time basis.

**List of Chiefs, 1900-1940 (year elected)**

- |                        |                         |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| C.J. Gebauer (1900)    | Q.V. Sewell (1902)      |
| W. H. Waldrop (1903)   | Ben H. Barnes (1903)    |
| M.M. Rosenberg (1904)  | Pete Dirvin (1905)      |
| E.H. Hyman (1908)      | W.H. Priest (1912)      |
| E.J. Hyman (1914)      | Harold Rosenberg (1915) |
| Oscar Tellefson (1920) | Quim Sewell (1922)      |
| Harold Sullivan (1937) | P.A. Kerns (1940)       |

**New Ding**

In 1886 the city of Healdsburg built a large City Hall on the southeast corner of Matheson Street and Center Street. This building housed, among other things, the government offices, the police department and city jail, the library, and the fire department. In 1940 the *Healdsburg Tribune* described the fire department in City Hall as: "the fire house is in the City Hall, motorized equipment on the ground floor on Matheson Street, with firemen's quarters directly overhead on the second floor. In these quarters are five beds, shower, complete kitchen facilities including electric range, and other household facilities." (HT 1940)

In 1889 the City Trustees purchased for the fire department a new hose carriage, built by the California Fire Apparatus Manufacturing Company of San Francisco. The *Sonoma County Tribune* reported the carriage as being one of the finest four-wheeled hose carriages on the Coast." (SCT 1889). It had hand-forged Norway iron frame and parts, a hose reel that could carry 700 feet of rubber or 1000 feet of cotton fire hose.

**Fun and Games**

The membership in the fire department was all-volunteer, and over the years there were many social activities in which the firefighters could partake. Banquets were held for members and their wives and friends. These banquets not only had food and drink, but elaborate decorations, raffles and storytelling competitions.

Companies competed against each other in various games, such as races and shooting competitions. Healdsburg's fire department also competed against departments from other cities and towns. In fact, these competitions were quite festive and drew crowds. There were parades and decorations, exhibition drills and then various races. These races featured speed as well as agility, and entailed timed events (best time wins) such as: a team of fire-

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men running with a ladder and then raising and climbing it, a team of fire-fighters running with a hose to a hydrant, hooking it up, and shooting water. While competitive, it also allowed departments to hone their fire fighting skills and teamwork.

The firemen also had a serious side. By 1940 every Christmas time they would repair toys which would then be distributed to poor children.

## Fighting Fires

What kind of fires did the department have to fight? The following is a summary of the fire report for the year 1905. The types of fires listed are typical of those fought year to year.

January 13th - Healdsburg Mill and Lumber Company, caused by a spark from emery wheel. Damage about \$50; no insurance.

January 20th - Robert Haigh's residence. Chimney fire; no damage.

January 24 - Mrs. E. Pritchett's residence. Chimney fire; no damage.

February 10th - Holiness Church. Chimney fire; no damage.

May 2nd - Dr. Wheeler's office. Cause unknown. Damage to Dr. Wheeler's office and Mrs. Dugan's millinery parlors about \$350; insured.

May 16th - White's barn; horses hay and barn consumed. Damage about \$4000; hay insured.

July 5th - Dr. Hewitt's residence and part of contents destroyed. Damage about \$4000; insured for \$32000. Cause unknown.

October 15th - Professor Henchy's wood pile. Damage about \$50; no insurance.

December 25th - Holiness Church; edifice and contents destroyed. Loss complete; cause unknown.

(HT 1906)

## Fire Companies and Fire Police

By 1899 the fire department consisted of four companies: Albert Chemical Engines Co. No. 1, Alert Hose Co. No. 1, New Rescue Hook and Ladder Co. No. 1 and the Fearless Hose Co. No. 2. These companies stayed relatively the same over the next few decades. Each company had a foreman and consisted of eight to ten men. Each company had its own meetings, which were called by fire bell signals. Healdsburg also had what was called "fire police". These individuals were on the lookout for fires and patrolled around town.

## Automatic Alarm System

In 1917 Healdsburg got an automatic fire alarm system. At the March 1917 City Trustee's meeting M. Rosenberg made a case for the installation of the system. He showed diagrams and declared the suggested cost to be \$650. Superintendent R.C. Nelson attended the meeting and checked out the diagrams. He felt that he could install an electric tapper for less than \$100. Subsequently, he was directed by the water and light committee to go ahead and install the tapper. His electric tapper was worked by a motor with a cam wheel, which raised and lowered a tapper when a button was pressed. This made an electric connection, setting off the alarm at the telephone office or the fire apparatus house. The bell could then be rung and signals sent out to the firefighters.

In 1925 the bell was removed and an electronic siren was put in its place.

## A City Department

As early as 1920 there was a movement to make the fire department a part of the city government. While the fire department had many dealings with the City Trustees, it operated under its own management. And while it petitioned the Trustees for equipment and the money to buy that equipment, it also funded many of its activities on its own. Many people felt that the department should be put under the auspices of the City: "Let the Fire Department become an integral of the city government. Let it be put upon a business basis as such part of the government and kept there. Let at least one professional fire fighter be employed by the city at a reasonable salary and be put in charge of the fire fighting equipment, and kept on duty all the time at the most fire hazardous hours." (SS 1-30-1920)

While the fire department did not become a part of the city at that time, it needs to be pointed out that the city had been paying a small sum to certain of the firefighters over the years. The Chief Engineers received a token payment per month from the beginning. Also, if a man stayed in the fire house all night to catch any alarms, he was paid a small salary. In 1936 the City Council approved an ordinance that salaried the chief (\$20), the engineer (\$60), the assistant chief (\$20) and three firemen (\$10 each) who resided in the fire house. All other firefighters were volunteer. This was the first time that Healdsburg had any kind of paid fire department.

It wasn't until 1941 that the fire department came under the jurisdiction of the City of Healdsburg, and became a regular department of the City.

In July of 1949 Harold Sullivan became Chief of the Fire Department. He was joined by Assistant Fire Chief Albert Chapman, and Captains Tony Pavoni and Jack Relyea. These four were regular employees of the City of Healdsburg. There were 12 volunteers firefighters registered: William Maher, Rollin McCord, Claude Nosler, Dee Walker, Clarence Shaffer, Lenard Avilla, Don Cadd, Morse Lownes, Dick Clary, Jack Goff, Ted Propes and Russell Hudson.

## Fire Fighting Equipment

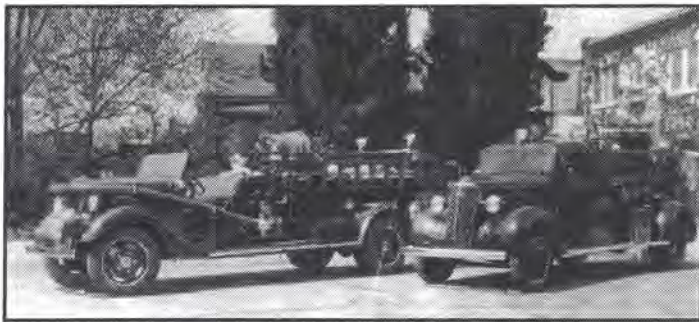
There were many different kinds of fire fighting equipment used over the years. Early fire fighting consisted of bucket brigades, with firefighters passing canvas or leather buckets full of water down the line. Hoses became a necessity as did nozzles, and other apparatus needed included axes, lanterns, rope, shields, ladders, hydrants and of course the various types of trucks and pumbers.

In 1892 Healdsburg got its first pumper. "The little machine is about the size of a St. Bernard dog, has small wheels, a hand pump with rails along each side for four men to stand abreast on each handle, pumping up and down, moving their entire bodies. The machine was specially made in the east and was the pride of the local department" (HT 1940). In 1909 250 feet of hose was purchased from Murphy and Rose and 250 feet from Garrett. In 1910 the Ladies Improvement Club donated \$25 to the department for the purchase of a shut-off nozzle. In 1919 in response to a plea from the fire chief for more equipment, the City Trustees bought 500 feet of hose.

In 1920 the City Trustees authorized the purchase of a modern automobile chemical and hose wagon. "And so at last Healdsburg is to be up-to-date in respect to fire fighting equipment. The bid of the La France Fire Engine

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1935 American La France Ford and 1932 Chevrolet.

Company for a two-tank combination fire truck was the one accepted. It is to cost \$2550" (SS 1920).

In 1929 500 feet of water hose was bought for the fire department, and 1000 feet of chemical hose. At the City Trustee meeting Fire Chief Quim Sewell made the case for the new hoses describing the old ones as worn out and damaged.

A new pumper fire engine was acquired in August of 1935. Again, the American La France Company won the bid, and a 500-gallon pumper was ordered. This pumper was factory built (the losing bid by Seagrave was for an assembled pumper). The La France pumper had a Ford chassis with a 157-inch wheelbase. It had four inch suction, which was bigger than the earlier ones. In September 1935 the City Trustees bought 450 feet of a 2 1/2 inch hose from the American La France Company.

In 1937 the department bought a new truck with a Chevrolet chassis (purchased by the City). It had two 25-gallon chemical tanks, and the carriage at the back could carry 850 feet of 2 1/2 inch hose and 200 feet of 1 1/2 inch hose. A searchlight was installed on the top of the cab. This truck, along with the Ford truck from 1935 gave the department "as fine a set-up for fire protection as will be found in any city of this size" (HE 1937).

By 1940 there were 82 fire hydrants scattered around town, 43 of them being double hydrants.

In 1949 the City purchased a 1/2 ton pick up truck for the fire department. In 1951 the service clubs in Healdsburg purchased a Resuscitator.

## The Fire House

In September 1941 groundbreaking ceremonies were held for a new firehouse. Until that time the fire department was housed in the City Hall. The new building was located on Center Street. The contractor was Landers of Healdsburg, whose winning bid was \$9,921. The firehouse had lawns and gardens out in front and in the rear, and the house consisted of space for equipment storage, sleeping quarters and cooking facilities. The department was missing an electric alarm system. In the event of a fire the department would set off the siren, located on the roof of City Hall.

By 1958 the firehouse was in disrepair. There was an idea to move the building to another site and renovate it, but the City Council decided against this plan. Instead, the City's building and grounds committee recommended

that the old firehouse be out for bid, dismantled or sold as a unit, and that a new firehouse be built. A new firehouse was built and dedicated on May 17, 1958. The firehouse contained an apparatus room big enough for 6 trucks, and had an electric hose dryer. It had a kitchen, a main reception room, a dormitory and bath facilities, a main office plus an office for the fire chief. Architect J. Clarence Feliciano designed the house. The contractor was David Walker of Cloverdale.

## Conclusion

The early history of the Healdsburg fire department is interesting and exciting. From a boisterous group of volunteers to a professional department of the City of Healdsburg, the fire fighters have served their town.



Healdsburg Fire Department located on Center Street, circa 1958.



Healdsburg Firehouse on Center Street, July 4, 1942.

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### Sotoyome Scimitar

1-30-1920

## ORAL



Jack Relyea

## HISTORY

# Firehouse Days:

## An Oral History Interview with Jack Relyea

By Holly Hoods

*Jack Relyea was born in 1920 and grew up in Healdsburg. This article highlights some of his recollections of Healdsburg and his job in the Fire Department, 1947-1977.*

### Born in Healdsburg

I'm 82 years old. I was born at the Plaza Hotel, December 19th, 1920. Two rooms were set aside there by Dr. Sohler for laying-in rooms. The hospital on Johnson Street-I guess not everybody could afford it. You could get a room in a hotel for a dollar a day.

### High School to U.S. Navy

I grew up in Healdsburg. I finished high school in 1938. I started working [for the Healdsburg Fire Department] in October of 1947. I'd put in three years in the Navy during World War II. We were Navy gun crew on merchant ships. We lost 710 ships, but I didn't get lost, thank goodness.

I was out for almost a year and then the Navy recalled me. I went up to Eureka as a Navy recruiter. I was there for a year. Then, they didn't fund the Navy-the other branches too, I suppose. The Navy practically shut down.

### At the Firehouse

The hiring process for the Firehouse was: I walked in and said, "Is there a job?" and they said, "Yeah." That was very much the way it was up until not

too long before I retired [1977]. There wasn't any "academy" as the Police had. It was remarkable that we got mostly good people.

I went to work for the City [in 1947] at \$150 a month; 84 hour weeks. You worked regardless, sick or not. There was no relief. There was no retirement. There was no sick leave, no hospitalization. Nada. On your day off, you took another job. At a hundred fifty bucks a month, you took another job! I got married to Shirley not long after. She came out from Minnesota, her folks did. She died of cancer fifteen years ago.

### Around Town

We lived on the Skeet estate up on 532 Fitch Street, a whole group of houses. I knew Old Man [James] Skeet. He built that whole group of houses-other than that middle house-up on the 500 block of Fitch. He built two houses around the corner on Piper Street. These houses were all shipped in, if I remember right, from Tennessee. He would go down to the depot and would haul these loads up to the site

I got a job putting up TV antennas up on the roofs of houses. You'd put this antenna up as far as you could 640-50 feet. You got a very grainy picture in Healdsburg. If it was a ball game, you'd watch the ball go up the



*Fire Department, 1967. Left to right, Fire Chief Tony Pavoni, Joe Barrett, Charles Avilla, Jack Relyea, Assistant Chief, Howard Bingham, Rod Keck and Bob Rogers.*

screen and disappear. Really! If a car drove by your house-especially if it was a Ford V-8, your picture disappeared. I worked for Herb Solem-a good, good person. I had no complaints. Made a dollar an hour; that was twice as much as I was making at the Firehouse. Now I'm not bitching-I walked into it with my eyes open. People who worked in grocery stores, the girls that worked in the banks, were making less than that. My wife was bookkeeper for JC Penney's for seventeen years until we had a child. She made five dollars a month more than I did.

### Healdsburg Fire Crew and Equipment

There were four men, counting me, but we did have a varying amount-maybe a dozen-volunteers. Many of the volunteers had been volunteers all

through WWII, and many of them had been volunteers back in the 1910s and the 20s. We had Claude Nosler who was a volunteer for over 50 years.

What equipment did we have? A 1935 Ford that was then in good shape. We had a '37 Chevy truck that the City bought under P.A. "Slim" Kerns. He mounted the back end off our 1923 REO Speedwagon.

### Emergencies

Healdsburg had the only Hresuscitator. It was an inhalator-it didn't help you very much. It helped you breathe a little, but it was an antique piece of machinery. But Santa Rosa didn't even have one, and no one else, so we made emergency runs with it to Cloverdale, on the River; we went to the Geysers one time; to Skaggs Springs. Almost

from day one, we had drownings. We had five in one weekend between the mouth of Dry Creek and the Railroad Bridge.

## Saving the Model T

Our first power truck was a 1919 Model T Firetruck. In 1935, it had been sold by the Ford Garage and it was laying out on Red Winery Road, buried up over the frame in mud. Claude Nosler told me about it-good old Claude.

The City had a 6-wheel drive Army truck, brand new, that we borrowed. My friend Chet Boehm, now dead, went out with me to Alexander Valley. It took that 6-wheel drive to pull the Model T out of the mud. Immediately the front wheels collapsed, but we got it into town. Tony Pavoni, the other fireman, and I worked on it for a year: it was solid rust. It took months of soaking the engine in gasoline and oil to remove all that rust. But we did and we got it running. Tony was the one, for hours every day on his shift, who buffed it. I painted it and put it back together again.

## Work Life

In 1949, we had a Chief that we inherited politically (the worst kind). Don't mention the name. We didn't get along with him, but he got along with himself. He wouldn't fight for our wages, but we co-existed. You were scared for your job in those days. Police were scared; Street [maintenance workers] were scared. You could go at the drop of anger. You had no recourse. Tony Pavoni was Chief ahead of me, after "Sully" [Harold Sullivan] retired.



*Dinner at the Healdsburg Fire House, December, 1949. Left to right, back row: Mrs. Sullivan, Fire Chief Harold Sullivan's mother, Russ Hudson, Clarence Shaffer, Jack Relyea, Joe Howard, Al Chapman, Bill Maber, Dee Walker, Tony Pavoni, Claud Nosler. Front row, from left, Mrs. Russ Hudson, Carol Shaffer, Mrs. Tarwater (mother of Carol Shaffer), Shirley Relyea, Mrs. Harold Sullivan, Rossaline Maber, Barbara Howard, Ethel Howard, Mildred Walker, Ralph Pavoni, Lynn Pavoni, Jeanne Shaffer, Miss Nosler, Mrs. Claud Nosler.*

## The Walkout

The City Council, without meaning to, was a little tight with us. They were tight with the Police Department. Let me say that before I was Chief, we had eight raiders counting myself. Tony [Pavoni] was Chief; I was Assistant Chief. Well, they blamed Tony for poor wages and poor hours and this and that and not getting a new truck. I agreed with them, the pay was poor. They says, "Jack, we're gonna walk." I says, "Well, give us time to get things together," but four of them walked off the job. And I agreed with them in essence, but I don't think that any public service-and that means the garbage service or the one that gets you water or keeps your bathroom working-you don't just walk off the job. It was pretty messy.

The walkout [in the 1960s] worked out so good for us that the Police walked out-almost one hundred per cent. We got a 32 per cent raise after a month.

## Volunteers

I went to work in '47 and I got out in '77. There were 40 drownings in that time. They didn't have mutual aid so much, but we did go to Cloverdale twice with our 1937 truck to huge fires that burned out many businesses downtown. They had very little fire department; it was all volunteer. Let me say that when I started and almost up the time I was going to retire, Cloverdale had no regulars. But they had a lot of volunteers-good men. Sebastopol had no regulars: it was all volunteer.

With volunteers it's a different thing now, rightly so, they try to train them to be able to do every job. Well, you couldn't do that with volunteers in those days. So if one man was good with the pumps, he just went to that job. If another man was good on entering... Clarence Schaeffer, he was on the roof, the first man up there! Chop a hole in the roof and let it ventilate. Claude Nosler, he would knock out the windows. If you were a regular, you did everything.

## Fire Hazards

A lot of fires started because after WWII, people started buying refrigerators and freezers. A lot of houses didn't have them before that-my mother didn't have a refrigerator. People would hook them up with little zip cords like the ones that go to a lamp, and they would run it over to the wall. Or else they would plug it in to a light coming down from the ceiling. There was no such thing as plugs all around the old house. The first thing you know, the house was on fire. Well, the houses were painted many, many times with oil paint, lead paint, inside and out. It was clear, dry redwood, one hundred years old. And houses didn't have fire stops in them, like over on Tucker Street, maybe some of them still don't. The first thing you know the attic was on fire, and they were sleeping, they wouldn't know it.

To call a fireman, there was no such thing as radio. We blew the

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town siren, and it was a blaster, really noisy. Days were quiet then, no TV. Radio, you didn't run it too much. When the siren went off, everybody responded. We would go to the fire and everyone would look out all around to see what's happening, all concerned. The town wasn't all spread out like it is. It was the railroad tracks, more or less, on the west; on the east, Second Street and on down to the bridge;

and Powell to the north, but not on the other side of the street. The town had 85 fire hydrants.

### **Rewards of the Job**

**W**henever you made a good stop, or you saved somebody's property, or you got 'em out of a wrecked car, it gave you a good feeling. It did. Other than that, you got good feelings once in a while. I enjoyed more than anything getting the '35 Ford out and taking the kids on Easter; bringing Santa Claus in. We fixed

it up after we took it out of service so we could pile kids in the back. A volunteer raider would stand back there and keep the kids calm-let 'em ring the bell and blow the siren. Incidentally, I still have a gray-haired person say to me once in a while, "Do you remember, you gave me a ride?" [laughs] Well, then I feel good!

Excerpted from an interview with Holly Hoods, 30 September 2002