

HISTORY OF THE BRIGHTON VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT AND THE GREATER BRIGHTON FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT

1888-2005

Fire protection in the Brighton area, as in many areas, had its beginning with the growth of a new community. The construction of homes and businesses was close enough to allow rapid and easy fire spread. This brought the essential need for something more than ones own self-protection. Man was once again faced with the fear and need to survive someone else's fire loss. Men who had the ability and desire to help their fellow man were brought together with one common civic interest; the need to form a unified effort to combat fire; the Brighton Volunteer Fire Department.

The area that is now Brighton had its start in 1870 with the construction of the Denver Pacific Railway (now the Union Pacific) from Cheyenne to Denver along with the construction of a train depot. By the late 1880's a large number of homes and businesses had sprung up in a central area around the depot and the need for fire protection and other public services was evident.

On July 26, 1887, Brighton became an incorporated town. The Town Council acknowledged the need for a fire department due to the rapidly growing population of the town. It is evident that fire protection had been on the minds of many concerned businessmen and citizens for some time. As records show, less than one year after the town incorporated, a committee from "The Fire Company" asked the Town Board for assistance in getting apparatus. The town agreed to furnish a building should the Fire Company succeed.

Thomas A. McMutie built a 24 x 50 foot building in 1888, between Cabbage and Main (the site of the municipal building, then the Brighton Police Department, at 36 S. Main). The building was originally used as a residence on the first floor and a Mason Hall on the second. The building was sold several times before the City of Brighton purchased it for use as a Town Hall. Following that purchase the lower floor east side of the building was used to house fire equipment.

By January of 1890, the Fire Company, under the direction of a three-person committee (headed by J.C. Twombly Lovelace, and Judge Has MacKeon). The committee presented the Town Board with \$390.00 in pledges for a completely equipped hook and ladder cart. The estimated cost of the cart was \$525.00.

The committee agreed to continue to attempt to raise the balance needed. The Town Board declined the offer at its February 4th meeting but the Fire Company ordered the ladder cart on their own. By February 13, by-laws had been drafted and signed by 25 members under the name of J.C. Twombly - Hook and Ladder Company #1. The hook and ladder cart arrived March 1, 1890. The town elections followed in April of 1890 with four firemen seated on the Town Board.

A water system with mains and hydrants was installed in October of 1891. It should be noted that the water system would not have become a reality without the initiative of D. F. Carmichael. An election in September gave the Fire Company a 20-year franchise on the new water system, which was installed by the city for \$13,000.00. The City signed a petition in January of 1892 to purchase 300 feet of canvas-covered hose for \$250.00. Records show that \$47.75 was still owed on the hook and ladder.

A Hose Company, or Hose Team was immediately formed and the "Fire Company" was now a Fire Department, consisted of the Hook and Ladder Company and the Hose Company. With the two companies, the Fire Department began holding regular meetings in rented room at the Town Hall beginning in January 1892. It was there that the first by-laws for the "Brighton Fire Department" were drafted. It is interesting to note that originally the Hook and Ladder Company was set up as a more commercial type company with foremen and assistant foremen, as was the Hose Company two years later. However, each of the two separate companies fell under the parent by-laws of the fire department when it was formally organized.

The first test of the new hose blew the wooden hydrants located near the Catholic Church; later to become Rice Funeral Chapel. The town bought a 22" bell for alarms from H.J. Rego for \$50.00 and had it installed in August of 1892. A short time later, a fire occurred in the Rego Hardware Store, located in the alley behind the Opera

House. The fire hall was locked and had to be broken into. There was no steam in the boiler for water pressure and the hydrant was plugged up. The company finally put out the fire without it spreading.

An electrical fire alarm was installed in approximately 1893, between the pump station and the Carmichael home (located at 34 South 5th). The department had a few ups and downs, and the attendance dropped, in 1894, the City Fathers saw a need to give funds to the department. In late August of 1894, the Brighton Creamery experience a fire and the department performed well. In 1895, there were 40 members, but there were no fires reported for that year. In March 1896 a storm set fire to the M. R. Bromley barn killing fifty-six cows and two horses. In 1897, the fire department was active only twice: the annual election of officers and the Fourth of July celebration.

On March 21, 1898 fire destroyed the corral of the Carmichael building and out buildings located behind the bank. The cold and wind hampered the Fire Company. If the fire had not been discovered early, the bank could have been lost. In early April, of that same year, the barn at the R.P. Richardson residence burned.

After the April election, the Hose Company and Hook and Ladder Company merged, forming one department. Things were quiet until December 29, 1899 when the alarm sounded for a fire that developed when a Union Pacific train struck a vehicle opposite the Brighton Hotel at Bush and Cabbage Avenue. The firemen experienced trouble with the fire hydrants, several of which were frozen. Several leaks developed in the hose. The fire was brought under control without casualties but the wrecked train coaches were either damaged or consumed by the fire. Some trouble was experienced with water pressure, also.

It was in 1900 that the City decided to put \$50.00 each year into a special "Fire Department Fund" instead of the general fund. Five hundred feet of hose was purchased for \$375.00. P.R. Sillstrop built a wagon for chemical extinguishing materials, lanterns, and any hose that the hose reel wouldn't hold. The equipment wagon was not utilized significantly as there was only one fire that year - behind the livery hay mound (hayloft), which was put out by a bucket brigade.

A considerable amount of time past before the department could convince Brighton's town trustees that it deserved recognition and aid for equipment. Such a resolution was passed and adopted on April 10, 1903, and signed by S.M. Stouffler, Mayor.

On January 22, 1904 at 1:55 a.m., fire struck at the "Carmichael House" owned by Roswell Skeel, Jr. of New York, and occupied by Adams County as a courthouse. N. S. Throckmorton and Sam Harden sounded the alarm when they saw flames from the building. Members of the department turned out quickly. When the hose cart arrived, both front rooms, the front hall and the upper front part of the building were almost all in flames. Hose lines were placed on the north and south sides, and a third from the rear. The roof collapsed when the front sidewalls fell outward minutes after the firemen arrived. The fire was brought under control and held from burning the rear room and jail rooms. The safe fell into the basement and the tax lists and other records were lost.

What was probably the first large gift to the department for the time came when W. G. Lovelace appeared at a later meeting of the department on behalf of Roswell Skeel Jr. Mr. Lovelace thanked the department and offered as a token, a check for \$100.00. He indicated that Mr. Skeel was in Europe; otherwise the amount might have been larger. The County Commissioners voted to contribute \$50.00 to the department in appreciation for their services. Money donated to the department over the years was used to buy individual equipment such as rubber boots and coats.

On October 5, 1908, the night watchman reported a fire in the Brighton Mercantile Company, an occupant of the Dryer Building on Division Street (North Main). The firemen quickly brought the fire under control. The fire was said to have been similar to the one there on April 7, 1904.

After many years of pleading with the City Council the Fire Department received it's first pumper, a 1927 American La France, arriving in July of 1928. It wasn't what the department had asked for, but at last the council chamber doors were finally open to the Fire Department.

In 1937, George Williams tried to start a fund for a truck. Promises were received, but no money. On July 5, 1938, the department was legally incorporated as the Brighton Volunteer Fire Department, Inc. Another attempt to raise funds for a truck was made in 1942, when it was decided to sell bingo tickets. The City then donated an

old truck (a 1915 Republic), but it was too small. The 1915 Republic took the place of the old wagon and was used as a chemical truck and also held the hoses and lights. On December 6, 1943, an old Dodge truck was bought for \$700.00 and \$300.00 was paid to repair it. In early 1944, Bill Wittke and Fred Starbuck started rebuilding the truck and an old body was purchased for \$50.00. Bridge iron was used for running boards and steps. An old tank, which had been used by the sewage department, was secured and a pump purchased for \$416.00. The members donated their labor. Total funds collected and spent on the truck were about \$2,000.00. In early 1944, the truck made it's first run to a fire at the Wattenburg Store.

After World War II, the city and the surrounding area grew. In 1947, the old fire station was torn down and a new station built on the same spot, with more room downstairs for equipment and a meeting room upstairs. The 22" fire alarm bell was taken down and replaced with an air raid siren. The bell was stored for many years and was later located at the second fire station site on the corner of Bridge Street and Firehouse Road.

In midyear 1954, fire consumed the Rex Theatre, (immediately adjacent to the west wall of United Lumber's present location on Bridge St.). Police officer Everett Dean discovered smoke coming from the building and turned in the alarm at 4:30 a.m. Dean roused theatre manager Selby Doty, his wife, and baby from their apartment on the second floor, but they had no time to save anything of value. Bernard Prostman suffered a broken heel fighting the fire, and Wayne Kendall was overcome by smoke. The theatre building was 34 years old. The accumulation of smoke and heat was so great in the building that a backdraft occurred when firemen broke through the windows. The explosion like effect shot flames most of the way across the street. Loss on the Rex Theatre was estimated at \$250,000.00. The absence of wind, plus the help of four fire departments, saved the United Lumber Company Store next door, as well as other places of business.

Another large fire occurred on July 25, 1955, involving the Wire Building. The building, located on the Southwest corner of Bridge and Main, was built in 1887. The fire reportedly started in the closet in one of the apartments about 7:30 a.m. on Monday morning. The building had been used during the previous 15 years to house businesses and apartments. D. F. Carmichael, foremost area pioneer, originally built the large building to house a large hall upstairs for meetings, dances, and theatre. The building was later sold to James A. Wire, thus the building became known as the Wire Building. Wire sold the building in 1946 to F. A. Erienborn of Denver for \$50,000.00. The fire damaged was so great that the American Red Cross proclaimed it a disaster.

Businesses that occupied the building at the time of the fire were Sharp Jewelry, Skelgas Appliances, Brighton Federal Savings and Loan Association, Austin Dry Goods, Brighton Beauty Spot, Merrill Realty, veterinarian offices of Dr. John Timmig, and Dr. Robert G. Scott, David Sarvas Law Offices, Walts Barber Shop, Blaise J. Jacobucci Law Offices, Brighton Grocery and Market, L.C. Fulenwider Realty, and Covert's Café. There were twelve - second and third story apartments destroyed by the fire as well.

In 1961, The City of Brighton determined it could no longer support fire protection outside its boundaries. Rural residents later formed a Rural Fire District to provide protection. The Rural District took in approximately 196 square miles, one of the largest in Colorado. The Rural District entered into a contract with the City of Brighton to purchase fire protection on a cost-sharing basis.

A third major fire occurred in Brighton on October 23, 1966. Flames destroyed half of a city block on the east side of the unit block of North Main adjacent to Strong Street. The \$500,000.00 fire destroyed the Walls Clothing Store and the large Nitske Building that housed several stores on the corner of North Main and Strong Street. The fire was discovered at 11:20am on Sunday morning by Mary Ellen Kilker; a receptionist for Dr. Fujisaki who went to the office to complete some records. She found the whole upstairs filled with smoke. Luckily, the records of Dr. Fujisaki, and Dick Butz were saved. Destroyed by the flames were Walls Shoe Store, Dempsey's Barber Shop, Butz Insurance Agency, Mumford Real Estate Agency, Ladies Toggery, Walls Clothing and Sporting Goods, and the second floor offices of Dr. Charles Fujisaki and Dr. Kenneth Urehara. Nitske later rebuilt the modern building now on the same site as Wall Clothing Store (now occupied by The Salvation Army) and the Ladies Toggery.

Over the next ten years few fires occurred, some tragic and some not. With change and growth came more traffic to the city and the surrounding area. The number of calls increased with the addition of auto and aircraft accidents. This was an early growing period for the fire department with the addition of Station 2 located at 5 Firehouse Road (just west of East Gate Mobile Park on Bridge Street) in the fall of 1972. The station was expanded in 1978; doubling the truck capacity and enough space for truck maintenance.

On the night of December 7, 1978 the fire department was called to an explosion and fire at the Kitayama Greenhouses on Weld County Road 4. A high-pressure fuel "feeder pipe" broke filling the boiler room with combustible fumes - causing the explosion and ensuing fire. The call was received about 10:20 p.m. The temperature was nearing twenty below zero and the winds were in the range of twenty miles per hour, a wind chill factor of nearly fifty below zero. The fire destroyed the equivalent of one square city block of greenhouses. Before the night was over, assistance from South Adams, Fort Lupton, Hudson, and Dacona Fire Departments were needed to contain the fire. Total losses were estimated at between two and five million dollars. The last truck cleared the initial call at about 8:00 am the following morning.

In 1980, the City Council of Brighton and Rural District Board entered into a joint process evaluating the working agreement between the two entities. In a joint agreement, the two entities established the present Fire Protection District, a special district under Statutory Law within the state. As a self-reliant District, the need for full time personnel quickly developed. Positions in administration, fire prevention, and maintenance were added within the first two or three years of the District's existence.

During the next seven years few major fires occurred; mostly weed fires and a good snowstorm or two. During the storms, Fire Station 2 became a lodging house for stranded motorists. Then in May of 1985 a fire occurred at the Tagawa Greenhouses northeast of Brighton. The call came in at 12:00 p.m. The temperature was about 85 degrees (as opposed to the Kitayama fire with temperatures of 20 degrees below 0). It took four fire departments (Brighton, Fort Lupton, Hudson, and South Adams County), approximately 50 firefighters, 16 pieces of fire equipment, and 2 ambulances over four hours to control the fire. Thick black smoke could be seen as far away as Aurora. A barn, some propane tanks, and a few pieces of farm equipment along with 1/3 of the greenhouses were lost in the fire. The fire was thought to have been started by a welder's torch. Losses were estimated to be around 2.5 million dollars.

In 1987 the voters of Adams County approved the sale of 44 square miles of land to the City and County of Denver for a new airport to be completed and opened in the fall of 1993. The site of the new airport would occupy nearly 40 square miles of the Fire District with the completed facility to be "bordered" on three sides by the District. The area of the District was reduced by those 40 square miles of area. Due to construction delays, Denver International Airport was not formally opened until February 28, 1995. Because Denver was not able to complete a fire station on the Airport quickly enough, Brighton Fire continued fire service on the airport site until 1992. The new airport construction created something new for Brighton Fire; increased volumes of auto traffic and calls related to heavy construction at the airport.

4 Subdivisions and growth in the rural area of the district created a need for another station and plans were drawn to build a station outside the city limits. The Brighton Fire Station #3, located at 120th Avenue and Buckley Road, was built in late 1987 and occupied in the spring of 1988. The new station provided closer access to the new airport and the future growth generated by the airport and expansion needs of Commerce City in the southern portions of the District.

The two most recently purchased pumpers, E501 and T-500 (purchased in 1981) were sent to Supervac in Loveland, CO. to be refurbished and painted in 1991 and early 1992. Refurbishment included the enclosing of the rear of cab jump seats. A new test pit for apparatus pump training and testing was completed in 1992 at Station #2, as well as providing 20,000 gallons of less corrosive (as compared to the municipal water) water storage. The plan was for the less corrosive water to be utilized for tank water on all apparatus saving significant costs for apparatus water system repairs.

1992 saw the arrival of a new KME pumper/rescue; given E-507 as its designator. Put into service in early 1993, this truck replaced the existing Rescue R-507 and old pumper, E-503; with both pump and roll capabilities as well as being equipped with rescue equipment. This unit was purchased as a more versatile piece of equipment for the operations in more rural areas around Station 3. Due to other District needs, this unit was not moved to Station 3 until 1996 where its special operation abilities were needed to protect the new Commerce City Golf Course.

In July of 1993 Fire Chief, Scott Gerhardt was injured at a fire requiring an extensive medical leave with a medical disability as the final outcome; the first recorded major injury in the history of the Department. At about the same time, the Board of Directors determined it necessary to hire a consulting firm to oversee the District operations

and to research the need for possible changes in administration of the District. The review conclusions lead to the creation of a career fire chief position.

In January 1994 an additional position of maintenance supervisor was created. The workload in buildings and equipment maintenance had exceeded the capabilities of one person. In late 1994, the consulting firm released its findings and the search for a paid chief was started. Due to the increasing proposals for growth around Station #3, the District entered into an agreement with Platte Valley Medical Center to house an ambulance at Station #3. During this same year, the City of Brighton began several major municipal projects; including the construction of new water and drainage systems, a reverse osmosis water treatment plant at Bromley Lane and Tower Road, and a new Recreation Center on North 11th. The largest project for the Fire District was its plan review and inspection of the construction of a new 1.2 million square-foot K-mart Distribution Center, just east of Tower Road on Bromley Lane.

The subdivision at Sunflower Estates, located at 152nd and Hayesmount Mile Road had deeded land to the Fire District for a future fire station in the early 1980's. At that time a well was drilled and a cistern was installed to provide a source of water in the eastern part of the District. In 1994, it was determined that the well had gone dry and a new well was drilled to the depth of 1,180 feet to provide adequate water for a station and truck refill.

In late 1994, the Board of Directors announced that William Malone would be the first full time Fire Chief of the District. With the addition of the new chief, it brought the number of full time employees to six; two in the Prevention Bureau, one secretary, two maintenance personnel and the District Chief.

In 1995, a new Smeal 1500 gpm fire engine was added to the fleet. Also in 1995 the command officers were placed on a 3-shift system and the newly designated Battalion Chiefs were placed in charge of each three groupings of firefighters. The officer line was expanded to place a Captain and two Lieutenants on each shift grouping also. Battalion Chiefs were outfitted with individual command vehicles to aid them in their direction of fire/rescue operations.

In 1996 in-house work began on a new type of apparatus for the District. Utilizing a donated beer truck box, the District's shop personnel created a "Support Unit." The Support Unit was outfitted with several pieces of miscellaneous fire, hazmat, and rescue equipment. An SCBA refill station was also added for on-scene refilling purposes. 1996 also saw the hiring of a full time training position.

The District continued to operate with a consistent number of staff members and numbers of apparatus until July of 1998 when the District's first paid fire chief retired from the Fire Service. The District immediately began the search for a successor and the position was filled in January of 1999 by Chief George Glenn.

In early 1999 replacement of two existing weed fire/quick response apparatus (squads) was begun. Delivery was planned for late 1999 or early 2000. The existing auto-extrication power tools were also noted as requiring replacement and in May 1999, 4-sets of new extrication tools were purchased. By the end of 1999, the list of apparatus had swollen to 4 engines, 1 engine/ladder unit, 3 tankers, and 3 squads, a support unit, and 11 staff and District support vehicles. The number of stations remained at three and full-time staff had dropped to 5.

Through the years, several municipalities other than Brighton began annexing land within the Fire District. With the addition of these new cities areas, it became apparent that the District's service provisions were not solely for areas that had been historically kindred to the town of Brighton. As a result, it became apparent that the district name – most affiliating it with the City of Brighton, was not in the best interest of the District and the name of the District organization was changed to the **GREATER BRIGHTON FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT** in late 1999.

Early 2000 saw the retirement of long time employee, Carol Reasoner. Mrs. Reasoner had been the secretary/accountant for the District for many years. Late February of 2000 also saw the resignation of Fire Chief Glenn. With the resignation of Chief Glenn, the District Board named Fire Marshal Robert Parker to the position of Fire Chief of the District in March. With the hiring of two personnel to fill administrative positions and the hiring of a new training officer, the number of staff had again climbed to 6.

During March of 2000, the District Board made the concluding decision to seek a property tax mill levy increase from the property owners and residents of the Fire District. In May of 2000, the voters supported the tax increase

and the property tax mill levy within the District was doubled. The planned for 2001 budget would be the largest in the history of the District – over \$2 million.

During the month of May 2000, delivery of the previously ordered weed fire/quick attack trucks was made and the new units were quickly placed in service. Due to some of the unique capabilities of the units, extensive training was required before all driver/operator personnel were able to operate the vehicles. With the addition of the two new "Attack" units, several other vehicles were determined obsolete and were sold. Three new Ford-Expedition Command Units were also added to the fleet in the early summer of 2000. These command vehicles would enhance the response capabilities for the Battalion Chiefs as well as allow their rapid response from their residences.

The spring and summer of 2000 was a horrific year for large wild-land fires in Colorado. Large fires not only occurred in mountain areas throughout the State but also in the more flat lands of the State; the Fire District was not spared. As well, Fire District apparatus and personnel were also called to assist many of the fire stricken areas in the Front Range Mountains of the State. As the summer came to a close, it became apparent that many smaller fire departments and districts in the foothills of the State had been devastated, losing large amounts of equipment and apparatus to the fires. To do its share to aid those departments, the District Board determined that it was appropriate and prudent to donate a piece of apparatus, planned for retirement, to one of those small mountain departments. In December of 2000 that donation process was completed and the apparatus was turned over to the North Fork District. The North Fork District was most deserving, as they had sustained loss of their fire station and several pieces of apparatus during floods that resulted from a large forest fire two years prior.

Growth and change in and around the District continued at a record pace through the late 1990's and into the new millennium. As Commerce City continued its expansion into the southeastern portions of the District, an agreement was struck between South Adams Fire District and Commerce City to allow South Adams to serve the "new lands" within Commerce City. Negotiations to protect the Greater Brighton District were immediately begun with both South Adams and Commerce City. Those negotiations were finally concluded in late 2000, limiting the loss of district area to approximately 18 square miles. The Greater Brighton District had once again shrunk and was now covering 168 square miles but the District was safe from future land loss to the south. Through the year, an assistant was added to the Maintenance Division and a second Fire Prevention Officer was added to the Bureau bringing the full time staff numbers to 8. 2000 also saw the resignation of the District' second career Fire Chief and the appointment of Robert Parker to the position. The demand for services, as well as the growth placed significant demands on the financial capabilities of the District and the needs of the District for the next five to seven years indicated that a mill levy increase was critical. In May of 2000, District electors approved a large mill levy increase for the District.

With the tremendous growth, the number of calls for service escalated rapidly and within two years, the number of incidents increased from the 800's to nearly 1400 in 2000. With the phenomenal growth in workload, it became evident that the all-volunteer response capabilities of the District were not going to be able to handle the situation. In June of 2001, nine career firefighters, all former volunteer force members, were placed in full time positions and headquarters station was staffed by three people, 24-hours per day, every day. The calls for service continued to climb and it became obvious that additional staffing would be needed within the next year or two. In addition, it became obvious that additional fire stations would be needed to provide service to the rapidly developing far eastern and western regions of the district.

In the Spring of 2003, the District Board of Directors gave direction to begin development of a design for new fire stations. The stations were to have three apparatus bays and bunking space for six firefighters. In late 2003, financing was approved to construct the two new stations, one at the existing Great Rock "re-water" site and at a site donated by the Todd Creek developers on Havana Street at Highway 7, to the west of Brighton. In addition, it was determined that additional apparatus would be required for operations from those stations and replacement and addition of water shuttle "tenders" would be needed. To replace the existing apparatus at the headquarters station and to improve elevated water protection capabilities, a "75-Quint" was purchased for headquarters and two new tenders were purchased for operation from the two new stations.

The new fire stations were completed in the Spring of 2004. It was apparent that 24-hour staffing for one of the two stations would need to be a priority for 2004. 2004 was also the 10-year re-assessment point for the Insurance Services Office and its Fire Department Rating determination. In anticipation, Staff began an intense effort to establish any needs that the District might be assessed as deficiencies, jeopardizing the District's existing

ISO 4 Rating. At the conclusion of the ISO assessment, it became extremely obvious that the District had not kept pace with growth and staffing of additional stations would be the only means to retain the existing rating. In July of 2004, the District Board gave direction to add 24-hour - full time staffing at all five district stations. Minimum staffing levels were set at two for all stations with the exception of headquarters which remained at three. Each shift in each station would be headed by a career Lieutenant and a driver/firefighter.

In late 2004 it became extremely obvious that additional leadership as well as additional staffing levels would be required to manage and operate the daily operations of the District. In the Spring of 2005, three career Members were promoted to the rank of Captain and additional career firefighters were hired from the existing volunteer firefighter group to maintain staffing levels as well as increase the staffing level at Station 2 to three persons. By June of 2005, a total of 36 full time firefighters were staffing stations on a constant basis. Tremendous growth continued through 2004 and 2005 and large retail outlet stores were opening in a new development area southeast of Brighton. With that development, it became obvious that Fire Station 3, in its existing size and capability, would not be able to handle the staffing and apparatus needs necessary to provide services to the new commercial development and growth regions to the southeast of Brighton. In the Spring of 2005, efforts to design a significant remodel of Station 3 became a priority. Six bunkrooms and an additional apparatus bay were planned with construction to begin in the fall of 2005. In addition, the District's apparatus was known to be aging and the need to update the response equipment/fleet was also determined a priority and in May of 2005 a new fire engine was placed on order.

Status -- July 2005.

