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the actual number of fire-fighters who respond to calls. In 1981, the city of Plymouth's insurance rating went from Class Seven to Class Five, and then in 2005 the rating went to Class Four. Other fire departments, such as Goshen or South Bend, have Class Four ratings with a team of all full-time fire-fighters. Plymouth has achieved that rating with a mostly volunteer fire department.

### **The Darkest Day**

On July 31, 1982, Plymouth experienced what is often referred to as the "darkest day in Plymouth Fire Department history." The city lost five fire-fighters in an accident as they responded to a house fire in West Township. Four of the men who perished were volunteers, with the exception of Al Kriscunas, who had begun his career as a volunteer and later became a full-time driver and fire-fighter. Attempting to round a curve on State Road 17, their engine flipped, landing upside down in an area of wetlands adjacent to the road, killing five of the six men in the vehicle. The fire-fighters who perished were Al Kriscunas, Dan Hoffler, Brian Samuels, Gary Van Vactor, and Randy Hansen. Each year the fire department holds a memorial service to remember their service and sacrifice.

In West Township, where State Road 17 sharply curves near the intersection of Sycamore Road, five white crosses still hang on a light pole in silent testimony.

Volunteer Shawn O'Keefe survived the tragedy. To this day, he continues to serve the Plymouth Fire Department as a Captain, the highest rank for a volunteer fire-fighter, and only third in rank behind the full-time Fire Chief and Assistant Fire Chief.

### **A Dynamic Department**

As it has since the city of Plymouth was established, the Fire Department continues to serve the city, plus Center and West townships, answering approximately 2500 fire and medical calls a year in an area of 104 square miles. Volunteers still make up the bulk of the department. Every day of the year, twenty-four hours a day, they respond to the call summoning them to an emergency, continuing a long, strong tradition of community service begun 150 years ago.

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The Ambulance Service used the building until 1990 when the “new” fire station was remodeled and an addition added. Now both the fire department and the ambulance service are housed in the same building. But the “old” fire station still stands. In 1995, after a complete restoration to its original state, the building became the home of the Marshall County Convention and Tourism Commission, Marshall County Blueberry Festival Office, the Plymouth Arts Commission, and the Human Resources Director for the City of Plymouth.

### **Recent History: New Equipment, Strong Leadership, and High Ratings**

Currently the Plymouth Fire Department is located on Center Street, a block south of the Old Fire Station. It provides coverage for the city of Plymouth, as well as Center and West townships. There are six full-time fire-fighters/paramedics, six full-time fire-fighters—two of those six are also EMT-B’s—and the full-time Fire Chief is also an EMT-B. In January 2005, the six full-time paramedics were integrated into the fire department. With this addition, the Department is able to improve its response time and service to those it serves. The department still relies on volunteers: along with full-time personnel, there is a roster of forty-four volunteers.

One of the newest pieces of equipment, often referred to in town as the “big ladder truck,” is a Pierce-Arrow ninety-five foot aerial truck with a mid-mount platform and with a cost of approximately \$750,000. In February 2008, for a cost of approximately \$250,000, the city acquired a new Seagraves tanker capable of holding 3,000 gallons of water (previous tankers employed by the department had been used models). In April 2008, the city will acquire a new Seagraves engine, costing approximately \$400,000. The department has come full circle: the Seagraves Company manufactured the first motorized piece of fire-fighting equipment Plymouth ever owned.

The fire department has been well-served by its Fire Chiefs, all of whom began their careers as volunteer fire-fighters:

- Sam Shaffer was the first full-time Fire Chief for Plymouth from 1968 until his retirement on September 31, 1980.
- Wayne Smith was appointed on October 1, 1980 and served until 2000. Under Fire Chief Smith, the ambulance service became the first service of its kind in Marshall County to become a paramedic service. Also, in 1983, the Plymouth Volunteer Fire Department went from twenty-four to forty-eight members, required under city ordinance.
- John Brown served as Fire Chief under Mayor Jim Yeazel until he succumbed to cancer in September 2003.
- George Cook was appointed to interim chief in 2003 by Mayor Bonnie Yeazel, following John Brown’s death. On January 1, 2004, George Cook was sworn in as Fire Chief under Mayor Gary Cook. He was reappointed under Mayor Mark Senter on January 1, 2008, with Andy Metzger serving as Assistant Fire Chief.

Insurance ratings are a window into the effectiveness of any fire department. The best rating is a 1; no fire department in the state of Indiana has earned that score. Insurance ratings are determined by the Indiana Service Office (ISO), taking into account training, equipment, water supply, communications, and

truck was described as “very powerful, with 60 or 70 horse power.” The wheels, dual in the rear, used solid tires, and it was expected to traverse all road or off-road conditions without difficulty. The Weekly Republication of November 14, 1912, in describing the truck’s arrival, stated, “When the truck was run down LaPorte Street, with the horn sounding the signals, everybody was out to see the new truck and exclaim, ‘It’s a peach!’”

Since the delivery of that motorized Seagrave truck, the Plymouth Fire Department has purchased and replaced many engines, trucks, and pumpers. Decades later, in 1970, the “pride of the fleet” was an American-LaFrance pumper, equipped with an eighty-foot snorkel, delivered to the city in November of 1971 and costing around \$72,000. At that time, there were six pieces of equipment manned by six full-time personnel and twenty volunteers.

### **On the Payroll**

As the Fire Department acquired larger and more sophisticated firefighting equipment over the years, more “manpower” was required. Today the trend toward growth continues: there are thirteen full-time fire-fighters and forty-four volunteers

In the beginning, fires were fought totally by volunteers, who rushed from their homes or businesses whenever the alarm rang. In the 1950’s, several retired businessmen and volunteer fire-fighters took turns working as drivers for the fire department. On the nights that they were on duty, they would sleep in a room above Bergman’s cleaners, just across the alley from the fire station.

In 1964, the city of Plymouth hired three paid drivers. These men, Les Bunn, Al Kriscunas, and Ernie Webster, were the first full-time, non-volunteer fire-fighters in Plymouth. They worked a twenty-four hour shift and were off for forty-eight hours. In 1965, the roster of full-time fire-fighters changed to include Eddie Writer, Elmer Emond, and Al Kriscunas. In 1970, the full-time staff increased to include three more full-time fire-fighters: Lowell Kline, Larry Starr, and Jerry McCann. This would put two men on duty at a time. To this day, Plymouth full-time fire-fighters work twenty-four hour shifts with forty-eight hours off.

The volunteer fire-fighters are on call twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year. They are expected to respond immediately anytime there is a fire.

### **A New Home for the Department**

The brick station built in 1876 had served the department well. The old station house was not only a fire station, but had, at one time, been the center of life for the city of Plymouth. Here decisions were made and rescues were initiated. However, the Plymouth Fire Department outgrew the building and, in 1970, they moved to the former Coca-Cola Bottling Company, renovated to hold three engines, the snorkel, a grass truck, and a tanker.

The Plymouth Ambulance Service moved into the old station house, which had been formed under its own director—Fire Chief Wayne Smith—in 1978. The second floor served as a bunk room for the EMTs, who also worked twenty-four hour shifts, and a classroom/meeting room.

At one time, Plymouth had a juvenile hook and ladder company. Its outfit was smaller in size and length than its regulation counterpart. Occasionally, it would enter tournaments on a non-competing basis. Ladder “monkey” for that group was Frank Ellis.

### **New Equipment and the Horses to Pull It**

As time went on, the fledging Plymouth Fire Department added new equipment that required the use of horse-drawn vehicles to transport it. Though it has not been determined if horses were ever owned by the city, it appears that local stable owners provided the horses instead. The first team that answered an alarm was awarded a fee. Stables were nearby, one located across the street on the WTCA building site and one further east on Washington Street. The station floor was designed with grooves to provide traction for the horses as they raced to answer an alarm.

Equipment was sparse in those days. In 1833, Wide Awake Hose Company #2 purchased a hose cart for \$160.00; both the hose cart and the receipt are stored at the Old Fire Station, along with the large alarm bell mounted just to the north of the station, several roster pictures from over the years, and pieces of antique equipment.

In 1905, the department presented a “solid gold honor badge, weighing 22 penny-weights” to their chief, Fred H. Kuhn. Kuhn had served as a volunteer of the Wide Awake Company since its organization in 1883, and, at the age of twenty-six, became chief of the department. He was described as “riding a horse with a stirrup going” in order to reach the scene of a fire quickly.

### **Sounding the Alarm**

During a meeting in May of 1912, the Plymouth City Council decided to install a Gamewell Fire Alarm System, the town’s first automatic alarm method. It was installed by August 22 of that year. Twenty alarm boxes were placed strategically around town, and residents received operating instructions: break the glass, then pull down and then release the lever. Residents were also advised to stay at the box to direct those answering the alarm to the fire. In October of that year, the Council made it a misdemeanor to hitch a horse to the box pole, with a fine from five dollars to fifty dollars on conviction. Minnie Swindel Harris Norris was the first woman to try the system; during the initial testing period, she was passing by an alarm box when she was recruited to pull the lever and set it off!

### **A New Kind of Horsepower**

At that same meeting in May 1912, the City Council also passed a resolution to purchase Plymouth’s first motorized fire vehicle, and it appointed Council members Farmweld, Bergman, and McCrory to make the purchase of a hose and chemical wagon. It was noted that “the fire department had received little attention by the city government for many years.”

In June of that year, the truck purchase committee reported that they had agreed to buy a Seagrave chemical truck for \$5,000, for delivery on October 1, 1912. However, delivery was delayed until November 11, 1912. Shipped by rail from Columbus, Ohio, the truck was equipped with a fifty-gallon chemical tank, a special hose, and a large variety of firefighting tools. Housing a four-cylinder engine, the

## **The Fireman's Ball**

The city took possession of the building on February 21, 1876, and the dedication was marked by a grand ball, proceeds of which were \$165.00. The volunteers had been holding balls for some time prior to this dedication; past records indicate that a ball in January 1868 garnered receipts of \$80.40.

The annual Fireman's Ball was held in February for many years. Since 2001, however, the Plymouth Volunteer Fire Department has held a February letter campaign, in which local businesses have the opportunity to contribute to a fund that purchases new equipment not budgeted for the fire department, as well as training for volunteers.

## **The Water Supply**

Long before modern water systems were in place, Plymouth city fathers solved the problem of a dependable source of water for fire-fighting when they oversaw the construction of brick-lined cisterns at convenient points in the business and residential districts of the town. The driver of the sprinkling wagon, used in the summer to lay the dust of the unpaved streets, was charged with seeing that the cisterns were kept full at all times. Water was still pumped from the Yellow River if fire occurred near enough for the hose to reach it, but installation of the city water works systems finally replaced this antiquated method of supplying water with fire hydrants.

## **July 4<sup>th</sup> Festivities**

Plymouth volunteer firemen challenged fire companies from nearby towns to annual contests of fire-fighting skill, vying for coveted prizes and trophies, not to mention great civic honor and bragging rights. Festivities opened with a parade headed by the Plymouth brigade, followed by the contesting companies, town bands, local fire-fighting equipment, and assorted small boys.

The contest committee set up the games for the day. Hose cart companies would make their run down a designated number of blocks. At the end of the run, the members would unreel the hose, attach it to a hydrant, screw on the nozzle, turn on the water, and exhibit a shooting stream of water. The team requiring the least amount of time for the operations became the reigning champions.

Likewise, the hook and ladder companies made a prescribed run, withdrew the ladder from their cart, swung it upright, braced by the company members. The most agile volunteer climbed the ladder's rungs, swung one foot over the topmost step and waved his right hand to signify completion of the event. Again, the shortest time determined the winning group. Often these contests were followed by a huge picnic for all the companies and their guests.

The uniforms have changed since then, of course, but the Plymouth Volunteer Fire Department leadership still consists of a foreman, a treasurer, and a secretary. They meet in the “back room” of the current fire station, where volunteer fire department business is conducted.

### **Early Facilities and Equipment**

During the early years, the Protection Hook & Ladder Company used a two-story frame building built for them, located on the river bank of Adams Street. Volunteers held meetings on the second floor, and the first floor was used for equipment storage. The company later moved to the Dawes wagon shop on the south side of Michigan Street.

Ironically, the January 3, 1866 fire that leveled LaPorte Street also destroyed early fire department records, but it is known that, by that time, two other fire companies had been organized by volunteers. The Adriatic Engine Company and the Torrent Hose Company were formed December 8, 1865, just days prior to the fire. With the organization of these companies, the Protection Hook and Ladder Company had to share credit for fire-fighting services, but it is entitled to special recognition for being the first volunteer organization for the protection of property against fire in Plymouth.

The City Hall and Engine Building was completed late in 1875, having been contracted and built by Robert McCance and W. P. Beaton for a cost of \$4,200. Alfred Morrison, Platt McDonald, and W. D. Thompson supervised the construction for the city. The original building was thirty-four feet wide and fifty feet long, with brick walls thirty-five feet high and eighteen inches thick to the second story, with twelve-inch thick walls from there to the roof. The hose and bell tower was nine feet square and fifty-nine feet high. The first floor, one large room, housed fire-fighting equipment.

At that time the fire department owned one hand engine, one hose cart, the hooks, and the ladders. The first fire engine was purchased sometime between 1863 and 1868 and was, from all indications, a “side stroke” engine. Five or six volunteers to a side, pumping up and down vigorously, produced a respectable pulsating stream of water procured from a cistern or the river. “Hooks” were long pike poles, usually with a pointed end as well as a hooked end, used for smothering and containing the fire.

The second floor had two rooms, one used for the fire department and the other used as a city council chamber and the Mayor’s office. The building was described as being “large enough for the city to use for many years to come,” and so it has been.

## **Beginnings**

Years ago, when a town caught fire, the citizens had to put it out themselves.

Early Plymouth history is dotted with accounts of devastating fires that swept the town business district. One of the worst occurred March 22, 1857. Beginning on the east side of Michigan Street, in the early hours of the morning, the blaze eventually swept the entire block. Plymouth citizens struggled to save store merchandise, which they hauled from the burning buildings and piled in the center of the street, but when a strong northeast wind carried the fire to the west side of the street, all was destroyed. The fire leveled all the buildings on that side, too, except for the Horace Corbin residence.

At that point in their history, not even a bucket brigade had ever been organized by the citizens of Plymouth. All the buildings in town were made primarily of wood, and the only available water supply was drawn from wells, cisterns, or the Yellow River.

The morning after the March 22th fire, four-fifths of the business district lay in ruins, with a loss estimated at \$70,000, nearly all uninsured. In a newspaper account of the disaster, a reporter wrote: “Our town is now in ashes—desolation reigns supreme, and our once thriving and beautiful village presents a sorrowful appearance. But we trust that the energy and enterprise which has ever characterized the businessmen of this place will import to our town the cheerful appearance of former days.”

The “energy and enterprise” of the town’s businesspeople did prevail, and the businesses were rebuilt, but on January 3, 1866, another fire devastated eleven business establishments between LaPorte and Garro Streets. By then, however, Plymouth citizens had gotten organized.

## **The First Companies**

Following the fire of 1857, in 1858 the first volunteer firefighting company was formed. On February 28, 1858, the Protection Hook and Ladder Company filed its constitution with the Clerk’s office. Plymouth’s leading citizens enrolled first, intent on preserving the community they were working so hard to create. Jacob B. Klinger was foreman of the group, with Stephen Francis as assistant, William Shirley as treasurer, and Daniel McDonald as secretary. Fifty-seven townsmen joined the company: members were to procure a “black, glazed cap, a red woolen ‘warmus’ with a black velvet collar and cuff and a black leather belt” as uniforms. The group also organized a bucket brigade.



# The History of the Plymouth Volunteer Fire Department

*From 1857 to the Present*

*Edited by Marianne Peters*

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