

# The Historian

A Quarterly Publication of the Fallbrook Historical Society

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## Origins of the Fallbrook Fire Department



Fallbrook Volunteer Fire Department (circa 1950s)

Circa 1950 (standing on left) Dr. Simon in white hat, unknown nurse, unk nurse, Ralph Lash, (kneeling L-R) unk, Don McLean, white hat Floyd Ahernd, unk, John Haworth, white hat Thurber, unk, John Eberlain, unk.

(2<sup>nd</sup> row standing from middle) Dick McDonnell, Ross in suit, white hats Jack Cornell, Hoke Norville, Francis Gillan, unk, Hy Burnham on far right;

Fire was always a danger in 1885 when the town of West Fallbrook was first beginning. A bucket brigade was the only method of firefighting. If the church bells rang on any day other than Sunday, townspeople ran to the fire with their buckets carrying water from the nearest well. In February 1904, a fire in one shop on the east side of Main spread to its neighbors: A drug store, a barbershop, a shoe shop, and the Fallis Brothers' general store, all burned reducing the whole block between Alvarado and Hawthorne to ashes.<sup>1</sup>

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An even bigger threat were the brush fires that quickly became uncontrollable. With just shovels and wet gunnysacks to fight with, large land fires were sometimes allowed to hopefully burn themselves out. However, it wasn't always that easy. In November 1911 a wildfire threatened the town. Under the direction of H.O. Eaton of the Forest Service and George A. Byron, the County Fire Warden for the district, all able-bodied men including high school boys were turned out. Battling day and night on the lines, West Fallbrook, the train depot in the canyon, and nearby homes on Rancho Santa Margarita were saved.<sup>1</sup>



*Circa 1951 Volunteer Fire Dept training at Thurber's welding shop on Main Ave.*  
 (standing L-R) Bell, Richard McDonnell, Don McLean, chief Bill Thurber, John Haworth  
 (kneeling) Ass't chief Hoke Norville, Eberline, Early, Eugene Nix, Deputy Chief Francis Gillan,  
Hy Burnamen, & State Fire Instructor Ward Ensley.

After the Fallis Bros fire disaster, several merchants and landowners were digging additional wells to fill private water tanks and installing nearby hydrants to provide water to protect their buildings. In 1920, The recently founded Fallbrook Chamber of Commerce recognized that a larger public water system was needed. The town could not have a fire department until there was a water supply. Rollin Blacklidge, first president of the Fallbrook Chamber of Commerce, and a civil engineer, submitted a detailed report in March 1922 that estimated the cost of a Fallbrook water system to be more than fourteen thousand dollars including the well, a pump, reservoir and pipes.<sup>1</sup>



The Chamber moved to have a Fallbrook Public Utility District (FPUD) created to raise the funds and to manage the project. By September 1922, following public votes, FPUD was incorporated with elected directors.<sup>1</sup> FPUD immediately acted to issue a bond to finance the water system. By 1925, wells dug on the high school property on Ivy street were filling a 221-thousand-gallon reservoir that sat up on the east end of Dougherty St., on what was then known as gravity hill. Testing demonstrated the water pressure down at Main Ave. was strong enough to be directed up a multistory building.



1946 Volunteer Fire Dept. Ed Pollack & Bill Thurber with the fire suppression cart. Note train tracks behind them. Since 1927 the cart had been kept at the citrus packing house where many of the volunteers had jobs.



Fire suppression cart on display at Fallbrook Historical Society museum

With the water source established, the Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Club raised several hundred dollars to purchase 500 feet of 2 ½ inch fire hose with reel cart. The hose cart arrived in November 1927.<sup>1</sup> This was Fallbrook's first firefighting equipment. It could be pulled by hand or towed to a fire by someone's truck and connected to a hydrant. Eventually it was decided to keep the fire hose cart at the citrus packinghouse, the largest employer in town. The packinghouse had a night watchman and crews were around most of the time to supply manpower in case of an emergency.

San Diego County stationed a Model “A” Ford fire truck in Fallbrook in 1930. With the truck came obligations. The Fallbrook crew had to maintain the truck and respond, as directed, to other fires around the district. Fallbrook did not have a fire station. Volunteers needed their ‘day jobs’. Carl Palm ran the mortuary, Vic Westfall had the Hardware store and so on. These were the Depression years and jobs were hard to come by. The County eventually reassigned the truck to the California Division of Forestry (CDF) at Red Mountain leaving Fallbrook with just the hand drawn hose cart. Today, this historic hose cart is on display at the Fallbrook Historical Society.



1968 Early professional Fire crew at Fallbrook Fire Dept HQ Station 1 at Ivy St & Orange  
 Standing ; Andy Harrison, Eddie Versham, Ron Parkinson, Steve Bacon, (mechanic), Ron Rune, John Ankles,  
 Dennis Casteel standing on right  
 Sitting in front L to R; Marvin Moore, (Thurber secretary), Bill Thurber with dog, (office volunteer), Ralph Lash

In December 1927, the Chamber of Commerce President Lee Ellis appointed a committee of Vis Westfall, James Potter, and Gil “Tex” Maze, to organize a volunteer fire company. This committee initially elected Lee Ellis as the first Fire Chief<sup>1</sup> although soon after, in 1929, Westfall was Fire Chief. Bill Thurber was only a high school student in 1932 when he served as Assistant Fire Chief, first to Carl Palm then to Carroll Huscher. Thurber had permission to leave school to fight fires.



Fire Chief Bill Thurber

Thurber and others were called away to military service during WWII, but after the war the Volunteer Fire Department was reconstituted with 13 members in April 1947. Bill Thurber was elected Fire chief. The Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Club donated money to buy a war surplus Fire Truck which was housed at Thurber's welding shop. Today this building, Fallbrook's first fire station, is the Firehouse Que and Brew restaurant. The volunteers and their families organized dances at the High School gym and at Live Oak Park to raise money for the department. Donations were used to buy war surplus radio equipment. Jack Cornell, a veteran navy radioman, joined the volunteers to use his considerable experience with the radios. Money was raised to buy an ambulance which Cornell fitted with radios.

After years of surviving on donations, in a May 1954 special election, Fallbrook voters approved funding the Fallbrook Fire Protection District voting 700 to 129 in favor. William Thurber continued as Fire Chief until his retirement in 1977. Bonsall was annexed to the Fallbrook Fire District in 1972. In 1987 Fallbrook merged with the Rainbow Volunteer Fire Department to become the North County Fire Protection District.

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**Acknowledgement:** Much of this was taken from 'Volunteer Fire Dept' written May 2000 by Don Rivers, Historian for Fallbrook Historical Society.

**Additional footnotes:**

- 1 San Diego Evening Tribune, February 10, 1904.
- 2 Fallbrook Enterprise December 1, 1911 and February 23, 1912.
- 3 Fallbrook Enterprise March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1922
- 4 Fallbrook Enterprise September 1st, 1922
- 5 Fallbrook Enterprise November 11, 1927
- 6 Fallbrook Enterprise July 23, 1928

**Fallbrook Historical Society**  
P.O. Box 1375, Fallbrook, CA 92088

*The Mission of the Fallbrook Historical Society is to collect, preserve and display the history and artifacts of the Fallbrook area. The Historical Society accepts donations that are related to Fallbrook history and are of interest to the general public.*

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New Member

Renewal

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (    ) \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_

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*Each membership has one vote. Patron receives a lifetime membership and has name placed on Patron Plaque.*

*Business/corporate sponsors will have space for signage inside the Heritage Center fence.*

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**Mail check to: Fallbrook Historical Society**

**P.O. Box 1375**

**Fallbrook, Ca. 92088**

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*Thank you for your support.*

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*The Fallbrook Historical Society's mission is to bring history to life by educating the community and others about Fallbrook's rich heritage*



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### Fallbrook Historical Society

P.O. Box 1375  
Fallbrook, CA 92088-1375  
[www.fallbrookhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.fallbrookhistoricalsociety.org)

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