



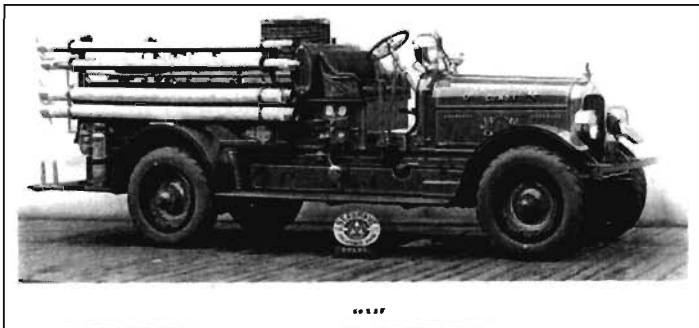
The Historian

The Newsletter of the Summit Historical Society

Autumn 2011

84 years of Summit history – on wheels. . .

By Sheila Duetsch and John Grasso



WHEN IT WAS NEW – *The brand new Chemical Engine No. 1 was readied for delivery to the Summit Fire Department on Nov. 21, 1927. (Notice the missing windshield.) Currently, the Summit Historical Society and the city's fire department are joining forces to restore the truck and place it on permanent display at the Carter House on Butler Parkway. (Photo courtesy of the Seagrave Fire Apparatus Company, LLC)*

Tucked away in a cramped space in the Summit Fire House on Broad Street is an aging icon of the city's past. Chemical Engine No. 1, as it is known, became part of the city's lore and tradition when it was purchased in 1927 from the Seagrave Fire Apparatus Company of Columbus, Ohio. The new fire truck was officially designated as a 750-gallon combination pumping engine and hose car with water tank. The price was \$11,250, and, according to an official at the Summit Fire Department, comparable engines of today are in the \$500,000 to \$700,000 range.

Current plans call for the venerable fire truck to be moved to the Summit Historical Society's Carter House property on Butler Parkway as soon as sufficient funding for its housing and improvements is in place.

The city actually took delivery of two identical trucks that year. No doubt, then-Fire Chief Cole was beaming with pride. One was assigned to Hose Company No. 2

located on the corner of Ashwood and Park avenues and the other was originally housed in a firehouse at 92 Summit Ave. on the corner of Bank Street, in a building that was an extension of the old city hall that is now known as the Colonial Building at 350 Springfield Ave. When the companies were consolidated into the main fire house on Broad Street in 1949, the Hose Company No. 2 truck was sold to Sussex County and moved to a new fire center in Walpack.

Both vehicles were state-of-the-art for their time and represented a significant technological leap in the Fire Department's ability to serve the city. The shiny new trucks had 24-inch tires, which allowed them to traverse difficult terrain much better than previous apparatus and get closer to a fire more quickly. They had powerful in-line, six-cylinder engines with dual ignitions that made them more reliable in colder weather. They had large and very strong brakes on the rear wheels only, making them easier to stop but providing some adventures along the way. The transmissions were three speeds with reverse, and required some frequent training to master. Not unusual for those times, neither had a windshield when delivered, but one was added later.

The name "Chemical Engine" may seem to indicate that it was intended primarily for use on chemical fires. In reality, the term refers to the method of mixing soda with acid to create a chemical reaction, resulting in sufficient pressure in the tank to force the water through the hose. In later years, as the hydrant system expanded to more parts of the city, this method proved impractical and a pump system was installed on the engine along with an enlarged water tank. In the 1940's, the truck was repainted in the distinctive and somewhat darker maroon color of other Summit fire apparatus.

Chemical Engine No. 1 was involved in numerous fires throughout its years of dependable active service, including a major residential fire on Oak Ridge Avenue

in 1932 and the famous Lyric Theater fire of 1951 on the corner of Beechwood Road and Bank Street. That was one of the most spectacular blazes in Summit's history. Today, a municipal parking lot is on the former site of the Lyric.

The truck has been an invaluable resource in training hundreds of Summit firefighters over the years, and has



ENJOYED BY ALL – During the city's July 4, 1990, celebrations at Soldiers' Memorial Field, Chemical Engine No. 1 was put on display for all to view and enjoy. (Photo courtesy of the Independent Press)

appeared in dozens of parades and at events commemorating national and local historical milestones.

While Chemical Engine No. 1 retired from active service in the late 1950s and was subsequently used only in backup roles, it remains more than just a machine. It encapsulates a great deal of the history and quality of the city and beyond. In recent surveys of the nation's attitude about various occupations, firefighters and police are consistently named among the most respected professions with particular emphasis on "bravery." At its core, it is the personal character of the men and women who choose

these professions and other first responders who have earned a reputation of selfless sacrifice in the face of danger and sudden disasters. The training and the equipment they use to get their job done are other factors that all should be thankful for.

As this antique vestige of a bygone era waits for its new home at the Summit Historical Society, the men and women of the Summit Fire Department look after it, volunteering their time when they can to keep it as up-to-date as possible. It needs some new hoses, fittings and wiring to restore it to full working order. The transmission is in need of overhauling. Soon, it will need replacement tires. Despite best efforts to preserve this indispensable element of history, time does take its toll.

The president of the Summit Historical Society, Chris Siepert, said she feels strongly that the addition of this living piece of Summit's history will be a major asset in preserving our history and will provide an invaluable aid in educating our children and all citizens of our city.

She said, "I think all of us at one time or another were fascinated and excited by a fire engine zooming through traffic with lights flashing and sirens blaring. It is such a part of Americana, and we are fortunate to have this



EARLY HEADQUARTERS – Summit's first firehouse stood on Park Avenue. (From the collection of the Summit Historical Society)

wonderful asset along with so many other tangible elements that give us hands-on appreciation of our past and a better perspective on the present.”

In addition to Chemical Engine No. 1 eventually being permanently on display on the Carter House property, it is planned to be part of the Summit Historical Society's regular schedule of educational events. Group visits, parades, rides and a soon-to-be-announced contest to name the engine are some of the events that we can look forward to.

Authors' note:—The authors wish to express appreciation to the members of the Summit Fire Department past and present who contributed their time and expertise to this article. Particular thanks to Bill Murphy, Tom Murray and Rich DeGroot. The Seagrave Fire Apparatus Company also provided information, as well as a photograph of the engine when brand new.



PROUD HISTORY— *In this 1950s photo, members of the Summit Fire Department posed outside their Broad Street headquarters with the vehicles and equipment in service at that time. (From the collection of the Summit Historical Society)*