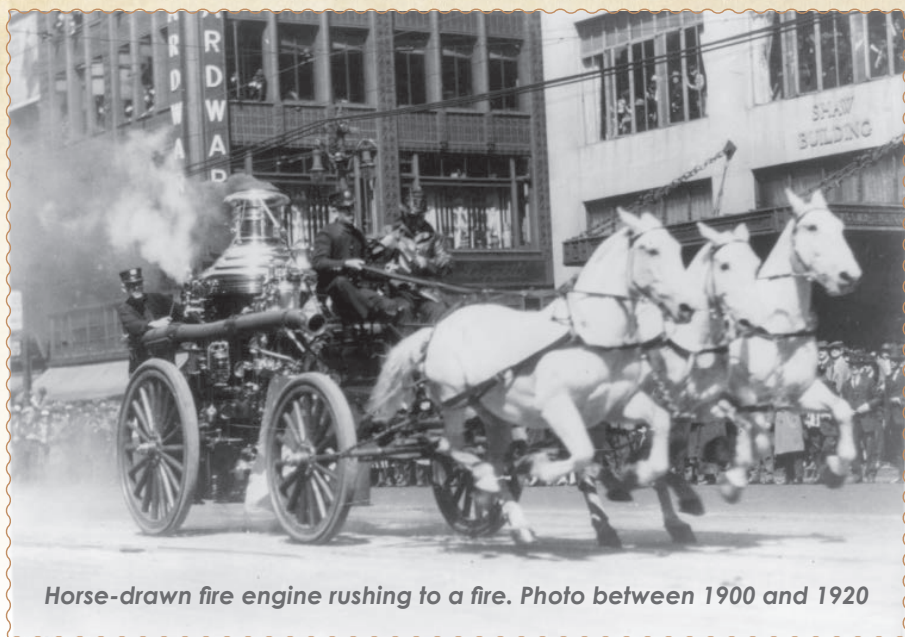


A history of horses in the US fire service



Horse-drawn fire engine rushing to a fire. Photo between 1900 and 1920

The era of the fire horse lasted roughly fifty years stretching from the end of the Civil War until the end of 1915. More time and expense was incurred buying one fire horse than ten fire fighters.

In 1832, the New York Mutual Hook and Ladder Company No 1 volunteers purchased a horse to pull their engine. One of the reasons may have been due to a shortage of fire fighters caused by a yellow fever epidemic. The other stations were unsympathetic. One evening the anti-equine element crept into the stable, shaved the horse's mane and tail and painted a white stripe down the horse's back, embarrassing the company. To add insult to injury, the Oceanus volunteers beat the horse-drawn Mutuals to a fire.

As steam engines gained popularity they grew in size and weight. Fire fighters reluctantly accepted the need for horses. As Paul C Ditzel quotes, "A firehouse ain't no place for no stinkin' horse!" At first, horses were stabled near the stations. When the alarm sounded, it took valuable time to unlock the barn, fetch the steeds and harness them to the engine. Before long, the horses lived at the station and the reluctance to

accept them, was replaced by a deep affection for the noble animals.

The stalls were positioned behind or next to the rigs. In 1871, a quick hitch was developed. Two years later, Charles E Berry, a Massachusetts fire fighter, created a hanging harness with quick-locking hames. His invention was so popular, he left the fire department and sold his patented Berry Hames and Collars nationwide.

Not every horse could serve as a fire horse. The animals needed to be strong, swift, agile, obedient and fearless. At the scene, they needed to stand patiently while embers and flames surrounded them. They needed to remain calm while the fire fighters fought the blaze. This was the case in all weather conditions and in the midst of a multitude of distractions.

The fire departments carefully selected their horses. Veterinarians for the departments evaluated each animal. Both stallions and mares were eligible to serve.

In Detroit, weight requirements were issued for the animals. Those pulling hose wagons must weigh 1 100 pounds, to haul a steamer 1

400 pounds and to cart a hook and ladder 1 700 pounds. Stations also tried to create matched teams of two and three horses when possible.

Training

Fire horses required much stamina, strength, and natural ability. One expert of the time said it was usually a one-in-a-hundred selection. Their training took between one and two years.

Some cities had training stables but most provided on-the-job training. Detroit had a horse college. They claimed to be the only fire department that trained their horses by this method. Ditzel stated, "There was a fire station with apparatus, training stalls, hanging quick hitches, a feed room, a horse hospital and a 700-foot racetrack." Each horse received progress reports and report cards at the conclusion of their training. The horses that successfully completed their education, were placed in the city's fire stations. Departments added horse ambulances and horseshoeing wagons to their city's rigs. A horse might work at a station for four to ten years. In 1858, the Philadelphia Fairmount Engine Company gave their fire horses a vacation. This became a tradition in the Philadelphia fire department. This was long before fire fighters received vacations.

The Epizootic Fire

In the fall of 1872, a form of distemper called epizootic, spread among the horses. Within a period of twenty-four hours, 300 horses died in Buffalo. The epidemic spread rapidly to many cities. The cities relied heavily on horses for transportation and became paralysed. Fire became a major concern. It was late October 1872 in Boston. Out of a total of 75 to 90 horses, four had died and 22 were unfit for duty. Until the epidemic ended, fire fighters, with the aid of citizen volunteers, often found it necessary to drag the equipment to fires manually. On 9 November 1872, the Great Boston Fire burnt continuously for sixteen hours. It consumed 776 buildings, left 20 000 unemployed and

1 000 homeless. There were fourteen fatalities, including eleven fire fighters. A century later, John P Vahey, a Boston fire chief, wrote about this catastrophe and renamed it the Epizootic Fire, after the disease that felled so many horses.

It was a sad day at the fire station when a horse was declared unfit for duty. Many retired fire horses continued to work for the city in less strenuous positions. Some were put out to pasture. Occasionally the noble beasts were put up for public auction. The gallant steeds might be purchased by junk drivers and delivery men. At times, the fire horses would forget their new roles and charge down the streets hauling a wagon after hearing a fire gong.

Just like the Dalmatians, the fire horses also faded with the use of motorised fire apparatus.

In 1923, on a Monday morning in Chicago on 6 February, Fire alarm box 846 at State and Chicago Avenue

was pulled at 12h40pm. With the horses scrubbed and groomed, the old steamer rolled out of the swinging doors at Fire Engine 11 for the last time. Buck, Beauty, Dan and Teddy galloped out of the fire station at 10 E Hubbard Street with their coach and the fire fighters riding on the engine. Their Dalmatian escort led them to a false alarm. It was their last response.

The alarm was pulled at a box at Chicago Avenue and State Street as part of a planned event to mark the retirement of the horse drawn engines and fire fighting equipment in the City of Chicago. It was the first department in the United States with more than 500 000 residences to serve, to become completely motorised.

The Detroit Fire Department acquired the first motorised fire engine in the world, a Packard. Objections by fire fighters and Detroiters over the replacement of their beloved horses continued for years. The horse, it was argued, was much more reliable.

Motorised vehicles started with difficulty and broke down frequently.

The firemen joked about the ridiculous purchase, nicknaming it the "Hustle Buggy."

Over the years, some 500 horses served the Detroit Fire Department, with an average working life of four or five years. Pounding hard city pavement at high speeds took a heavy toll on the animals. Always, after dousing a blaze, the fire fighters cared first for their hard-working horses.

Inevitably, the reign of the horse ended as engineering improved on automobiles.

References:

Ditzel, Paul C, Fire Engines, Firefighters: the Men, Equipment, and Machines, from Colonial Days to the Present. New York: Crown, 1976.

Smith, Dennis. Dennis Smith's History of Firefighting in America: 300 years. New York: Dial, 1978. ▲



Los Angeles Fire Department Walter S Moore Engine Co No 4 Circa 1888



Two firemen sit on a horse-drawn fire ladder wagon as a boy walks by admiring the horses



Saskatoon Fire Department, Canada 1880s



Detroit Fire Ladder Company