

A Legendary Fire truck

Records in the Pioneer Museum indicate that Fairmont's first fire company, as it was called at that time, was organized in 1882 with fifty-four members. It was said to be comprised of a wide range of local residents, including the rich and the poor, and the laborer and the capitalist. Within the organization, there seemed to be considerable rivalry for the important positions of foreman, first and second assistant foreman, and other positions deemed of significance by the members. They held an Annual Firemen's Ball in that era, however, the earnings were usually minimal, and in one instance netted a mere \$3.50.

Fire protection and public safety is certainly vital to every community. Fire departments and fire equipment have evolved significantly over time. Early fire trucks were hand drawn or horse drawn and had little capacity for fighting fires as compared to today's elaborate equipment. As time went on, motorized equipment was developed and additional firefighting equipment was introduced and included with fire engines.

Locally, firefighting equipment has also evolved significantly. Looking back in time, the city of Fairmont purchased its first motorized fire engine in 1923. "Fairmont Fire Engine Arrives, She's A Beauty," read the *Sentinel* headline of March 14, 1923. On that date, the Fairmont Fire Department was awaiting the arrival of an "expert" from the American La France Fire Engine Company in Elmira, New York, to instruct the Fairmont Fire Department of that era in the use of this fire fighting machine. The "expert" was expected to stay in Fairmont for about two weeks. He would also assist in moving the new fire engine, which was delivered and located at the Milwaukee Depot in Fairmont, to the Fairmont fire station.

This article went on to describe the fire engine. It was an American La France Type 75 combination pumping, chemical, and hose car, said to be the ideal type of fire apparatus for general fire protection purposes. It could pump 750 gallons of water per minute; it had a forty gallon chemical solution tank, and included 1,200 feet of hose. It had a six cylinder engine, two ladders, two lanterns, and two extinguishers.

The March 23, 1923, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* included a story reporting on the test results of the new fire engine. The headline read, "New Fire Truck Hurls Water 30 Feet Over Trees," emphasizing the efficiency of the new equipment. A cub reporter from the *Sentinel* staff was permitted to ride along on a test run of the new fire engine. He reported that it took only a few seconds to rush the department, fully equipped, to the imaginary fire, and that the fire engine could do speeds of sixty miles per hour. Their tests included taking water from hydrants on North Avenue as well as directly from Lake Sisseton.

The first real test of the new equipment, as reported in the March 27, 1923, edition of *The Fairmont Daily Sentinel*, was a corn crib fire at the W. I. Boyce farm located northwest of Fairmont. It was reported that the \$12,000.00 fire engine made the three and one-half mile run to the fire in exactly five minutes from when the whistle blew. It apparently

could have even been faster if not for the fact that the regular driver of the fire engine was out of town and, as a result, there was a slight delay in getting the fire engine started. The truck pulled out of town with eighteen men aboard on a muddy road toward the fire. The truck reportedly held the road very well, and the firemen were back in Fairmont exactly one hour after the first alarm. The fire was completely extinguished by emptying the forty gallon tank of chemical. The estimated loss due to the fire was estimated at \$300.00.

There have been many advances in firefighting from the time that the American La France began its lengthy tenure of local firefighting in 1923. The Fairmont Fire Department continues to do an excellent job of protecting local residents from fires, and over the years has also done an admirable job in keeping the American La France fire truck in first-rate condition. This fire truck served the area for many years and according to Martin County Historical Society Board member Randy Musser, former Fairmont Fire Chief and Fire Marshal, one of the last fires it encountered was the Stokely Van-Kamp fire in the later 1960's. It was said that the American La France literally pumped for twenty-four hours straight before being replaced by a newer truck. Shortly after that fire, it was retired.

The 1923 American La France fire truck referred to in this article, which has recently been used in local parades, is on display and can be viewed by the public in the Carlson Room of the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont. The Martin County Historical Society is grateful to the local firemen who have helped to maintain this vehicle and have kept this historic reminder of the past in superb running condition.