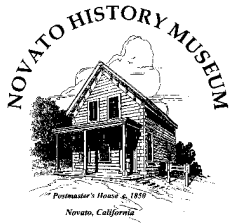


The Novato Historian



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and the Hamilton Field History Museum

Preserving Novato's History

Feature Section

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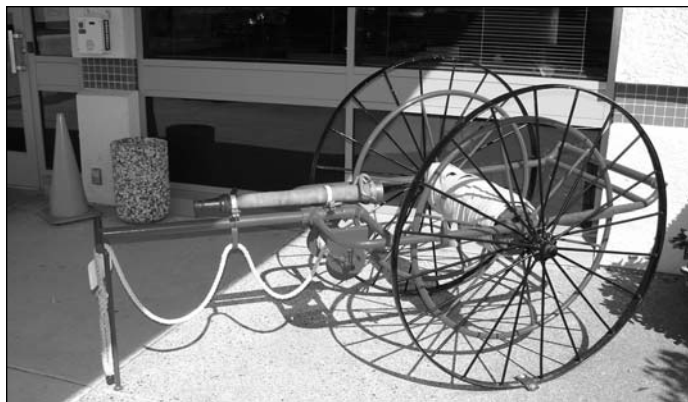
Fire, Fire

by Mike Read

These words would strike fear in any community and a town without fire protection was even worse.

Novato became a township on September 15, 1850 when the Marin County Court of Sessions divided the county into four townships - Saucelito (as spelled in 1850), Bolinas, San Rafael and Novato.

For many years the people of Novato had no fire protection, and they have had their share of fires. One of the early fires was July 1870, when Sweetser & Delong, owners of the Novato Ranch, suffered nearly \$2,000 by fire, in the destruction of a vast area of pasturage by the devouring element. In



This picture of the hose cart donated by the Ken Cavallero family, can be seen at the Novato Fire District headquarters on Rowland Way. It is what the Novato Fire Department might have had back in 1894.

November 1889, Judge J.Q.A. Haven had his home destroyed by fire. In May of 1894 the newspapers read, "It is about time Novato was organizing a fire department as we came very near having a dangerous fire at the new distillery."

June 1, 1894 - The Sausalito Newspaper report-

ed "A fire department has been organized: Chief, M. Joseph; Assistant Chief, W. Hoskins; Engineer, S. Porcella; Hose cart No. 1, C.W. Hayden; Hose cart No 2, A. Haven."

September 22, 1900 - The San Francisco Call reported that; grass fire sweeps over a Novato ranch, fifteen square miles of timber desolated. Thousands of dollars probably will be lost in timber alone, as the Novato Land Company's ranch is covered by a thick growth of oak trees. George Clark, the representative of the Burdell ranch which adjoins that which the fire is burning, says that this is the biggest conflagration in this section since the destructive fire at Black Point thirty five years ago. After burning eighteen thousand acres of land in the center of this county, the great fire has been checked. The fire spent its fury in burning the Miller and Pacheco ranches near Ignacio. The damage to farm buildings has been light. Fences and cord wood have nearly all been destroyed. Hundreds of head of livestock have perished. It is said that a great number of cattle perished in the Cat Gulch on the Miller ranch.

April 1915 - The Fire Association asked the county board of supervisors to set aside \$1,000 for fire protection and prevention and the board was asked to employ two fire patrol men, one for the northern part of the county and one for the southern part, at \$85 per month for the summer months commencing with May.

December 21, 1918 - Novato is considering seriously the plan of incorporating the village. This project was discussed at a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce, and it met with the approval of the members present, numbering among them most of the leading citizens. There appears to be some opposition to the plan among the non-members of the Chamber of Commerce, and a thorough discus-

sion for and against incorporating will be heard at the next meeting of the Chamber (it would not happen until 1960). Bond of the Novato Banner, says: "Some near sighted people will raise the time worn hue and cry of higher taxation. Many other now prosperous little incorporated towns have proven to the contrary. Even if it increases taxation, it also increases property value and gives the citizens the benefit and security. A town without a water supply (1948), sewer system (1925) and fire protection (1926) isn't fit to live in or to do business in."

The Making of a Fire District as reported in the Novato Advance (unless noted)

August 19, 1922 - The Novato School District trustees have donated the school bell to the Novato Fire Department, may it ever be dead property, only to call the boys to drill. (Mac Manzoni found it in the back of Station #2, brought it home and his son Bob gave it to the Novato History Museum where it is hanging in front of the Museum)

September 2, 1922 - Like most small towns, Novato seems to neglect one essential, and that is good fire protection, and a wide-awake fire department. A town is always more or less in danger of fire, and when built of wood is sure to be doomed



This picture is of one the hose cart's from the 1894 Fire Department. It had to be modified to a chemical cart and to be towed by a Model A. Notice the end will clamp on to the bumper. This cart also can be seen at the Novato Fire District Museum.

should a conflagration occur. We have a chemical engine, but whether it is constantly kept in readiness or not we are not prepared to say. There should be plenty of hose, buckets and ladders, and a fire drill once or twice a month is really necessary, so that many can learn how to handle the apparatus and know how and where to obtain it on a minute's notice. This is a very important matter and should no longer be neglected. One small fire would cause a loss sufficient to equip the town well with a fire-

fighting apparatus. The time to lock the stable door is before the horse is stolen.

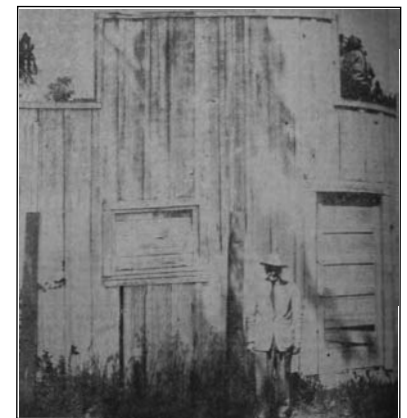
If the party who borrowed one of the fire company's hand extinguishers, or knows where it is, he would do a community service by returning the same.

September 16, 1922 - Two disasters were narrowly escaped in town Labor Day. In the forenoon a fire started in the kitchen of E.R. Samuel's home from an oil stove which was left burning. No one was at home at the time, and the flames were noticed by a little girl who gave the alarm. Bud Hiribarren, a lad of 14 years, broke into the house and with a garden hose fought the fire manfully and had it under control when help arrived. His quick action saved much damage being done, if not the destruction of the house and the adjoining dwellings. Shortly after noon an alarm was turned in for an incipient blaze at the home of O.W. Hall. Speedy action saved the home before much damage was done. A stiff breeze was blowing that day, and had the fires got fairly started we hate to think what might have happened.

With the warning of two near fires, it is opportune to again remind the people of town the necessity of better fire protection. This is certainly a matter that should appeal to everyone, and it is necessary to go into a lengthy discussion of the matter. Our fine board streets give firemen an opportunity to fight effectively, but there must be firemen drilled in the business and equipment to fight with. Shall we act first, or wait until a disaster overtakes Novato?

When shall Novato have the next fireman's drill? The company has not yet attained the highest efficiency.

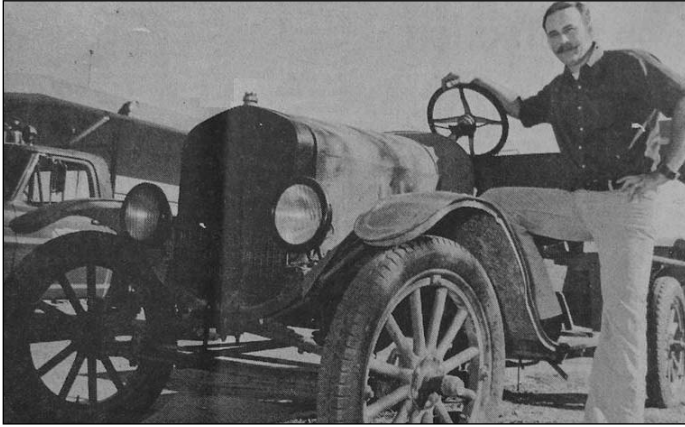
October 7, 1922 - Fire Protection - A fire meeting was recently held in the Community House. The attendance was not as large as the importance of the occasion warranted, but those who were



This picture in the Novato Advance was taken in 1955, the story talks about "The small frame structure was the home of the Novato Banner, published here by J. Bond in the early years of the century. The banner perished about the time of the end of World War I." William E. Cole, one of the first fire commissioners is seen standing in front of the building just before it was razed. The building was next to the Pini mill and was the first Novato Fire Department station from October 1922 to July 1924

present realized the necessity of better fire protection and seemed willing to do their part in securing that end.

President R.H. Trumbull called the meeting to order, and after reading the minutes of last



The first fire engine was a 1923 Model T truck bought by Gene Fox seen here in 1976.

February by Acting Secretary Dr. Busher, the entertainment committee reported that the amount of \$39.76 was placed in the Novato Bank.

The following officers were elected:

President, J.A. Stutt; Secretary, J.J. Merryman; Treasurer, Dr. W. H. Busher; Chief, R.M. Cantwell, Lieutenant, Chas. Olsen; Engineer, Albert Cain; Second Engineer, A. DeBorba.



The next Novato Fire Department station was located where the Novato Theater is now. It was the fire station from 1924 to 1929, when Pini built their store in 1929. The building was on skids and was later moved to South Novato Blvd. where the building became a garage.

It was decided to accept the offer of H. Pini & Co. for the use of the old printing office building as a fire house, the same to be moved onto some place convenient for ready access. The officers were instructed to take charge of moving the building and placing the fire equipment.

A demonstration of the use of the chemical

engine was deemed a necessity in order that a number could learn how to operate it, the demonstration to be held at the call of the president.

February 2, 1924 - Novato Fire Department - This is an organization which has been greatly neglected and needs the attention of every person in this community. It has been decided to build a fire house on skids, to be located on Grant avenue, and mount the following equipment, now on hand, on a new Ford ton chassis: two 35 gallon chemical tanks, 10 buckets, axe, crowbar, 2 fire extinguishers, 2 lanterns, 2 extension ladders, bell, chemical hose, 50 gallon tank for water and other miscellaneous equipment.

It will be necessary to raise \$1,000. It has been proposed to pay \$2.50 per year and conduct a series of dances, the first to be given March 8. J.J. Merryman, the secretary, will take your yearly dues. Join now and ask your neighbor to do likewise. Friday evening, February 8, will be the first meeting in the Community House. With the above equipment the fire department can offer splendid protection to every property owner in Novato.

April 5, 1924 - The committee conducting the drive for membership in the Novato volunteer fire department have been quite busy, and have produced about 150 members, who have paid their dues of \$2.50 for 1924. With the money raised by subscriptions and by the dance given in the Community House, we have been able to purchase a Ford one ton truck chassis, on which will be mounted the equipment on hand at the present time. We have some small bills yet to pay for the labor and material used in mounting the equipment. If those who have not yet paid their 1924 dues will kindly do so at once; it will relieve the financial stress at the present time. Come early and



You can now see the first fire engine in the Novato 4th of July parade or at Fireman's Fund, the current owner of the fire truck. It is on display inside their building on San Marin Drive.

avoid the rush. It was gratifying to see the number of people interested in the fire department respond to the call when the splendid home of R.L. Lowry was recently burned. Although the fire had such a

start that it was impossible to save the building, the other buildings were saved by the efforts of those there. We never know who will be next, so let us pull together, and when we are again called to assist, let it not be said that someone's home burned to the ground because our citizens would not let loose of \$2.50. Through co-operation we will succeed, and it cannot be done any other way.

July 5, 1924 - Fire House Building - The new fire house, built on skids, is being constructed on H. Pini & Co.'s lot under the direction of E.R. MacDonald, who is giving much time to the fire department. The lumber was generously donated by the Henry Hess Lumber Company of Novato, and the roofing paper, nails, hardware and chemical to fill the tank of the chemical engine are the gifts of Novato business men, while G. Trabucchi donates the doors for the building. Such co-operation is to be commended and those who are doing this work deserve the thanks of the community. The finishing touches are being put on the fire house, and Mr. MacDonald expects it to be ready for use in another week.

October 1924 - Landmark Destroyed - At 11:35 Saturday forenoon the fire siren announced a fire, which proved to be at P. Nave's barn. The fire company and a large number of fighters responded, but before the scene was reached the flames had spread, making it impossible to save the building. The nearby slaughter house was prevented from going up in smoke. The destroyed barn was an old landmark and was well filled with hay and straw, owned by H. Pini & Co. and Mr. Nave. The estimate of hay ranges from 150 to 200 tons, which is a heavy loss to the owners. The origin of the fire is not determined, but the belief that a discarded cigarette stump is responsible seems to be the accepted theory. The fire was first noticed in the passage way about the middle of the barn, which eliminates the possibility of spontaneous combustion.

February 1925 - Chamber of Commerce - The parking of autos in front of the fire house was called to the attention of the Chamber and "No Parking" signs were ordered to be posted. The fire company being short of funds for necessary improvements, Supervisor Sweetser passed the hat among the members present and secured \$8.25, which was handed to the treasurer of the fire department. Other substantial assistance will be given later.

April 1925 - The Novato Fire Company met Monday in the Community House, L.J. Nave presiding. A check for \$36 was reported by Secretary Kiser as having been received from the railroad company to compensate the fire department for chemicals used in fighting the fire recently started in a freight car at the depot.

Mr. Newman, of San Anselmo, spoke on the law governing the forming of a fire district, and also on the need of an effective siren as a fire alarm.

May 1925 - Novato Fire Department, Novato: Gentlemen: I wish to express my sincere thanks for the service your department rendered me in my recent fire. The response to the call was immediate, and the boys went about the work like drilled men. I am also enclosing my dues for the current year. I am sending \$5, instead of the customary \$2.50 as I feel that the dues should be raised to that amount a year. It surely is little enough for the feeling of fire protection that we may all realize when we are under the protection of the Novato Fire Department. Very truly yours, J.S. Peoples.

Guild V.P. Tom Keena tells their story: Two young high school boys (Tom Keena and Lon Bertucchi), working part time for Pini & Co after school, were given buckets of red paint, brushes and directed by William Cole to paint the truck down at the feed mill, red.

Gene Fox found the truck in the 1970's and bought it somewhere on Lakeville Hwy. Bill Tomrose purchased the truck from Gene, had it restored in Lodi for approximately \$10,000. Bill in turn sold it to Fireman's Fund.



This 1916 picture shows the sales office for the Sweetser Ranch. The fire station built in 1930 would be built behind the Sweetser Ranch Subdivision sign. DeBorba's would add on to the sales office in the 1920's, converting it to an ice cream parlor.

May 1925 - The fire company, under the leadership of foreman W.E. Cole, is taking great pride in their apparatus. The truck and chemical engines have been painted red, making an impressive appearance. The boys deserve the moral and financial support of the whole community, as they are always ready to save you great loss in case of fire.

June 1925 - A false alarm came in from the country Saturday, and the chemical engine reached the scene and was returning before a gentleman got there in a machine going forty miles an hour. This proves that folks living in outlying districts are as well protected against fire as those in town. Our fire

laddies act quickly and work fast when occasion demands and are entitled to liberal support by all our people.

The fire company has installed a siren on a thirty days trial, and if long distance alarm is what is required it certainly fills the bill. It has been heard in Indian Valley and at Marin Meadows, and has caused palpitation of the heart of all those who experienced air raids in the Old World during the late war. The siren is an alarm sounder all right, and the people should make it possible for the fire company to retain it.

July 1925 - Grass Fire - The shriek of the fire siren Wednesday evening at 6:30 alarmed the town and soon automobiles were exceeding the limit on their way to the scene. It was a grass fire, started on C. Anderson's place. The flames spread up the hill to the Kimes residence, but the army of willing workers checked them and soon had the fire under control.

The origin is only conjectured but the dangerous cigarette stub is given the blame. People cannot be too cautious, as the abundant grass is getting dry, and a fire may mean ruin to some struggling fellow man. Help prevent fires. Fire Warden C. Olson wishes to thank all who so promptly responded and did such effective work Wednesday evening.

August 1925 - Help Fire Company - The Novato Fire Company held a meeting Friday evening of last week. A large number attended and steps were taken to improve the fire fighting efficiency.

To do this money is needed, and it was decided to give a dance in the Community House on August 8, a week from tonight. A small admission of 50 cents will be charged, and tickets are now on sale. If you don't dance or can't go, buy a ticket anyway and thus contribute a little toward encouraging the boys to keep in readiness to protect your property against fire.

The injustice of a few maintaining fire protection, which is a benefit to the whole surrounding country, was considered, and it was agreed to ask the people to organize a fire district. The expense would be light and all would share in the work. The fire company needs money, and the loss of a chicken house would cost the owner more than his taxes would amount to in many years. G.D. Morrison, J.W. Cain and William Hanen were appointed to bring the matter to an issue. J.A. Stutt, C.A. Olson and L.J. Nave were recommended as fire commissioners.

May 1926 - Again we have been reminded of the need for better fire protection, and the only way to secure this is by the installation of water hydrants

and the purchase of sufficient hose to cover buildings between each hydrant. Two good streams of water work wonders in quenching a fire even after it has gained headway. Our chemical engine is good in many cases, but is of no avail in a big blaze. Now is the time to act, and every property owner and every resident depending on the community should assist in securing fire protection. This matter was revived at the last meeting of the Chamber of Commerce, and the committee was instructed to proceed with the matter of forming a fire district embracing the whole of the Novato Township. By taking in so much territory will reduce the cost to a minimum and bring all within the protected district. The necessary petitions for calling an election are being prepared and will be circulated at an early date. Fire protection is something all our people should be able to come together on, and the district should be formed within a month or two. No one knows who will be the victim of the next disaster, and the destruction of a chicken house would cost more than the tax for protection for many years. Let us have the fire district without delay.

June 1926 - A petition is being circulated asking the Board of Supervisors to appoint three fire commissioners for the purpose of organizing a fire district here. It is proposed to take in the whole of Novato township. This is a matter in which all can agree for no one can tell when the services of fire fighters will be needed. Most of the calls come from outlying districts, and it is proposed to so establish the district that all of our people can be served without the interference of law, which forbids taking the apparatus out of the district.

One fire would cost more than the tax for many years. See J. W. Cain and sign the petition at the earliest date so that the election can be held before September, when the tax rate is fixed for the coming year.

July 6, 1926 - The meeting of the Board of Supervisors this week was an interesting one, and if all the requests are granted some of us will be surprised at taxpaying time next fall. The petition from Novato asking that three fire commissioners be appointed was granted, and W.E. Cole, Dr. W.H. Busher and L. Nave were appointed by the Supervisors. These gentlemen will designate the fire district boundaries and call an election for the purpose of forming the district.

October 1926 - We are calling an election this Saturday for \$6,600 within the Novato Township to purchase the following equipment: A 4 Cylinder chemical engine truck \$3,300; Firehouse \$1,000; Lot for firehouse \$500; Acid and soda \$100; Fireman to care for equipment \$150; Shovels, 6 dozen \$ 90; Wire

brooms, 1 dozen \$25; Galvanized fire blots, 1 dozen \$18; Gas, oil and tires for new and old equipment \$250; Electricity for siren and firehouse \$50; Present debt of N.F.D. \$300; Summer protection, burning grass on highway \$150; Emergency fund \$500; 1 dozen axes \$24; 18 Fire mops \$18; 18 Rakes \$27; 5 fire boxes for tools to be placed in districts \$50; Miscellaneous \$48; Total \$6,600.

In voting for the above equipment on a valuation of \$1,665,000 it will mean a 41 cent tax for the first year only, and will not be charged in to your taxes until 1928, but will give us the equipment for 1927.

This tax, or amount, will be only for the one year, after that we firmly believe that the department can be run for less than \$1,000. For instance, a man owning property assessed for \$1000 will pay for the first year \$4.10 and for the years thereafter about 60 cents.

This protection is something we have been in need of for a long time, as we have been handicapped with our present equipment and lack of funds. At present the department is in debt about \$300. W.E. Cole, W.H. Busher and Louis Nave are the Board of Fire Commissioners of Novato, California.

October 9, 1926 - Today the electors of Novato township are asked to vote for fire protection.

November 13, 1926 - W.E. Cole, L. Nave and Dr. Busher, Novato fire district Commissioners, spent Wednesday in San Francisco looking over fire apparatus, and expect to have a machine here soon for demonstration. While the chemical engines have the value, it is held that water tanks are more efficient and cost less. By a pumping system hose can be attached to any hydrant and water turned on to fires with wonderful effect.

The commissioners are also considering a lot for a fire building to house the new apparatus and expect to have a fire company of merit in a short time.

December 18, 1926 - On Monday a demonstration of the proposed fire engine for Novato was given at Wright & Owens mill. Pumping water from the mill pond, four streams through on and a half inch hose and one through an inch hose were thrown at the same time with great power. Water was thrown one hundred feet, and all who witnessed the demonstration agreed that the engine was a wonderful success.

Another demonstration was given at the corner of the highway and Grant Avenue, which also showed the pumping qualities of the engine were all that could be desired. With such an engine and an adequate supply of water Novato would be amply

protected against fire.

The truck also carries two chemical tanks which can be removed and water tanks mounted in their place.

What Novato needs now are water hydrants with a good supply of water always on hand. The chemicals and water carried by the truck and a reasonable supply of water at the place a fire may occur will be a great protection to outlying places in the district.



This state of the art fire station was built in 1930. It is currently the parking lot of Redwood Credit Union.

The fire commissioners are thoroughly investigating the best methods of protection, and will undoubtedly establish fire protection of the latest and most efficient kind.

February 15, 1930 - The completion this week of the beautiful new building to house the equipment of the Novato Fire District, marks the culmination of three years of planning and effort on the part of the Board of Fire Commissioners.

The new building is a commodious structure of reinforced concrete, containing room for two engines, sleeping quarters for men, a kitchen, a squad room containing lockers, shower bath, lavatories and all modern conveniences for the comfort of the men who volunteer to man the equipment.

Permanence has been the watchword throughout the building, and no effort has been spared to make the building one of lasting beauty and utility for the district.

The plans were prepared and the construction supervised by Horace E. Spaulding, a San Francisco architect; and Ralph E. Murphy, of Berkeley, was the contractor, who has completed the structure. The total cost of the building completed will be about \$6,000 which amount is being derived from the regular tax moneys assessed for the maintenance of the Fire District.

The Board of Fire Commissioners extend an invitation to all to visit the new building and inspect both building and equipment at any time.