

**A CENTURY OF SERVICE**

**SOUTH HAVEN FIRE DEPARTMENT**

**SOUTH HAVEN, MICHIGAN**

**1888-1988**

# A Century of Service

HISTORY OF SOUTH HAVEN, MICHIGAN

FIRE DEPARTMENT

Organized October, 1888

Like so many communities, an important part of the history of South Haven, Michigan has been shaped by fire.

The land that today is South Haven was purchased from the federal government by Judge Jay R. Monroe in 1833 and the village was platted in 1852. It became a city in 1869. In October, 1871, a raging forest fire, believed to have been started by wind-blown embers from the Great Chicago Fire, ravaged Michigan's lower peninsula and threatened to destroy South Haven.

The *South Haven Sentinel* gave this vivid account in its October 14, 1871 edition: "The people of South Haven witnessed the rising of the sun with the feeling that the citizens of no other place ever experienced. On every side we were surrounded by fire, and extreme hard work was necessary to keep the flames from destroying the entire village. On the south side one building was torn down to save the balance. The wind was a perfect gale from the south and west, blowing cinders over the village in every direction, and giving the stoutest hearted a reason for packing their valuables, preparatory to a general flight. The fire burned up to and entirely around several buildings, and yet the almost superhuman efforts of those engaged in the work succeeded in staying the flames. This village is indeed fortunate, yet in their rejoicing at their own escape our citizens should not forget the sufferers in other localities, and thus demonstrate to our friends that South Haven is not deaf to the cries of her neighbors in distress."

Ironically, much of the lumber needed to rebuild fire-ravaged Chicago came from South Haven sawmills and was shipped across Lake Michigan by schooners.

Somehow, the South Haven area managed to survive the first half-century of its existence without an organized fire department. Other community priorities came ahead of establishing municipal ser-

vices so it wasn't until October, 1888, that a fire department was organized.

The fire department's first equipment consisted of a wagon designed to carry ladders and two dozen pails. This wagon was pulled through the streets by the firemen. In addition, a tank capable of holding 100 barrels of water was constructed in the central business district.

The August 22, 1874 edition of the *Sentinel* recounted early fire protection attempts: "Through the foresight of our fire warden, barrels of water have been placed at stated intervals in the village. The fires are still raging to the south and east, and large amounts of grain, hay, fencing, wood and bark have been destroyed. The only buildings we have heard of being destroyed were an unoccupied house of Mr. J. G. Webb and the schoolhouse of District No. 9 of Casco. The loss of the later was about \$850, with an insurance of \$500. The settlement at Ludwig's Pier has been in imminent danger, the roof of the mill of Mr. James Monroe having been torn off to keep it from catching fire, the machinery being removed to safe quarters."

## LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

The first fire chief, known then as the fire warden, was William Moore (1888-90). The department did "good work although sometimes laboring under great difficulties," noted the *Sentinel*.

In 1892 the city constructed its first waterworks and the fire department was expanded with the acquisition of two hose carts, again pulled by humans. With F.R. Cady serving as chief (1890-92), the department personnel was comprised of two hose companies and a hook and ladder company.

Except during the founding years and for a short period of time in the late 1970s, the South Haven fire department has been guided by a fulltime chief.

In a short period of time during the formulative years there were several changes in fire chief, primarily because it was a one-year appointment subject to the approval of the village council — Dell Miller (1892-96), Frank Wheeler (1896-98), E. W. Edgerton (1898-1901), Seward W. Ross (1901-02), E. W. Edgerton (1902-08).

One of the longest tenures as chief was held by R. L. (Rudy) Welch who served a quarter of a century (1915-39) until he resigned due to ill health.

J.C Myers was the next chief (1939-42), followed by Norman Wyers (1942-54). The second longest term of chief was held by Leslie Olmstead (1954-77). Ironically, Olmstead died three years later in a fire at his home.

Oliver Morehead was acting chief for a short time in 1977 before Richard Lundy, a volunteer member of the department for many years, was appointed chief (1978-80).

Sherman Dykstra served as chief for five years (1980-85) until his retirement. The department's current chief, Dion C. LeMieux, a third generation member of the fire department, was appointed chief on March 9, 1985.

South Haven's fire chiefs have been active on the state level, too. Three have served terms as president of the Michigan State Fireman's Association — Rudy Welch (1934-35), Leslie Olmstead (1962) and Richard Lundy (1974-75).

More than 200 persons have served as members of the South Haven fire department since its founding. The person with the longest tenure was Joseph Wheeler who served 51 years (1926-77) until his retirement. Three generations of the Wheeler family have served as South Haven firefighters.

\* \* \*

The authority of the fire department as we know it today was established by ordinance by the village council on July 6, 1906. The department was to consist of a chief, a driver (known than as a teamster), an assistant chief and seven other citizen 'volunteers' who were subject to call. (In 1988 the department has 11 fulltime members and 20 volunteer (part-paid) members.)

The fire chief in 1906 received a salary of \$60

per month and the volunteers were paid \$1 for the first hour of duty and 50 cents for each additional hour. (In 1988 volunteers are paid \$8 for each hour of duty.) The ordinance stipulated that one of the paid members was to be on-duty at the firehall at all times. (Presently a minimum of two fulltime members, and at times as many as four, are on duty.)

The ordinance gave authorities what might today be viewed as extraordinary powers. For example, the officer in charge, with concurrence from the mayor or any two aldermen, could order any building to be pulled down or destroyed to stop the progress of a fast-spreading fire. Code enforcement got its start then, too, with the fire chief expected to inspect every building in the city each four months.

## FACILITIES

In 1888 the community's fire-fighting equipment was housed in the Metcalf Blacksmith shop, located at Phoenix and Pearl streets. The first real firehall was constructed in 1890 on Center Street near the present site of the Michigan Theatre.

In 1892 a new firehall was built on Phoenix street between Broadway and Center streets, site of what would later serve as South Haven's city hall.

The idea of having a sub-station to serve the city's north side is not new. In June, 1896 a petition was presented to have a hose cart and 50 feet of hose placed in Pomological Hall which was located just east of the World War I monument in Stanley Johnston Park for the fire protection of the north side.

The present fire station on Broadway avenue was completed in April, 1930 at a cost of \$16,724.

During the fire department's centennial year (1988) the city council authorized construction of a new fire station and acquired property for it on East Wells street near Blue Star Memorial Highway.

## EQUIPMENT

The fire department's first piece of equipment was a human-powered wagon containing buckets and a ladder, purchased in the founding year (1888).

In 1892 two hose carts and two chemical extinguishers were purchased.

South Haven continued to have man-powered equipment until 1906 when a hose wagon that could be pulled by a team of horses was purchased for \$500. A team of horses back then cost \$200. However, these animals weren't 'specialists' as they were also expected to pull the city's street sweeper.

The equipment acquisition also caused the department to make the fire station doors larger 'so the driver can pass through the doorway without being obliged to 'duck' his head.' Some things never change. The 1970 arrival of the department's first modern ladder truck caused the doors at the current fire station to be enlarged. Even at this writing, the doors at the antiquated Broadway station remain a problem as the equipment acquired in 1987 cannot all be stored under one roof.

Responding to fires near the turn of the century was hazardous duty. The August 7, 1912 *South Haven Daily Tribune* reported the right rear wheel on the fire wagon broke as the department responded to a call (a false alarm at that) on the north side. "Although a dozen firemen and others were on the wagon at the time, all of them escaped injury," the newspaper reported. The newspaper account also carried a warning to citizens: "While the department appreciates the assistance of volunteers, the request is made that spectators refrain from catching rides on the wagon when (it is) running to fires, but leave the places on it to firemen. Once or twice it has happened that members of the department were unable to find places on the wagon as it dashed past, and have been compelled to catch a ride on some other rig, while the fire wagon was loaded with fellows whose chief concern was to get to the fire, without much intention for helping in fighting (the fire) after getting there."

The department's first motorized fire truck, built in Charlotte, Michigan was delivered in March, 1917. The department continued to add equipment in response to a growing community with the addition of a 1,000 gallon American LaFrance pumper in May, 1923.

In 1915 the department's budget was \$4,000. In contrast, the budget in 1988 is more than \$300,000. In 1987 the city invested more than \$500,000 in new equipment.

In its centennial year the South Haven Fire Department is well equipped, operating with state-of-the-art diesel-powered pumpers, a ladder truck and support vehicles (tanker, grass truck and air van). Its members are also provided the latest in protective firefighter clothing, modern self-contained breathing masks and excellent communication equipment.

Since 1978 the department has been responsible for emergency medical services in the community. The department currently has three ambulances. The personnel provide limited advanced medical care with support from South Haven Community Hospital and the Van Buren County Medical Control.

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In 1907 the city initiated a signal system whereby the location of a fire was indicated by blasts from the whistle at the powerhouse. The community was divided into 21 districts. When a fire was reported, a siren was blown to alert firefighters. Then the whistle was activated with a series of blasts to indicate the location of the blaze. For example, a fire near Phoenix and Center streets resulted in two long blasts while an alarm on the northside near North Shore Drive and Wells street caused three long and four short blasts.

In 1926 a Gamewell notification system was installed that allowed firefighters to be alerted at their homes by bells activated through a closed circuit system installed by the Board of Public Works. Again a code would indicate the location of the emergency. Alarm boxes were located at strategic locations throughout the city and incorporated into this system.

A radio dispatch system was put into service in the early 1960s. All firemen are presently equipped with pagers that alert them to fires. In addition, all volunteer officers and full-time members are equipped with two-way radios.

## FIRES: SOME SERIOUS, OTHERS NOT

Twice within a year toward the turn of the century, major fires nearly wiped out the South Haven central business district. In 1890 fire destroyed 11 buildings near Center and Phoenix streets. A year later a fire that started in the rear of Zeedyk's Livery near Phoenix and Broadway leveled 22 buildings at the intersection of Broadway and Phoenix. Firemen were unable to contain the conflagration because the only water was available from wells and cisterns. The spectacular fires drew equally sizzling editorial comment from the *South Haven Sentinel* which criticized the village council for failing to provide the resources needed to fund adequate fire protection. "In consequence of a prevailing spirit of false economy, when three o'clock came last Sabbath morning, the village was fully prepared to let the flames again toy with her business blocks and keep toying until the fortunate dying down of the wind gave them no more to feed on. Where or when the next fire will be no one can tell, but at that fire the people will assemble and watch the destruction with a spirit of economy a village of this size ought to stamp out." Noted the *Buchanan Enterprise*: "Bucket brigades are not found in the category of modern fire appliances." Editorialized the *Allegan Gazette*: "What will South Haven do now as to a system of waterworks? A couple of years ago South Haven decided against waterworks and other public improvements. There is something left of the town yet, and perhaps it will now be deemed worth saving."

Following the 1891 fire, the citizens voted to pay \$35,000 for a water system — a 100-foot tall standpipe located near Quaker and Center streets and a grid of water mains that serviced 63 fireplugs. That 5 standpipe served the city until the late 1950s. The steam-operated waterworks pumps were capable of drawing 750,000 gallons of water per day from a crib located 2,500 feet out into Lake Michigan. In 1988, the South Haven water filtration plant can pump four million gallons of water a day.

There have been many serious fires in the central business district over the years. The most recent

occurred in December, 1968 when fire destroyed Holly's restaurant at Center and Quaker streets.

\* \* \*

One of the most spectacular fires in the early history of South Haven occurred September 11, 1907 when the town's largest resort hotel, the Avery Beach, and eight nearby summer cottages immediately south of it in the Monroe Park subdivision, were destroyed in a wind-swept blaze. Damage was estimated at \$125,000, a tidy sum back then! In recent years, the most spectacular fire was a 1974 blaze that destroyed the Lappo Lumber Company on 14th Avenue in South Haven Township. Flames turned the night's darkness into day for miles around as the glow from the fire could be seen from as far away as 25 miles.

\* \* \*

One of the first recorded fatalities as a result of fire was reported in the January 8, 1912 edition of the *Tribune* when an elderly woman, Julia Jones, accidentally set her clothes on fire while trying to light a kerosene heater.

\* \* \*

Fortunately, no South Haven fireman has been killed in the line of duty. Our firemen have made many an heroic rescue, and not always of human beings. For example, in December, 1905 the *Tribune* reported this rescue of a horse from a barn fire: "Messrs Reid and Wheeler rushed into the barn and succeeded in getting the mare about two-thirds of the way to the door, Reid leading her by the nose and Wheeler pushing, but she got away and ran into one of the stalls. The smoke was so dense that they were obliged to crouch to the floor and make for the open air, and it seemed as if they would have to abandon the attempt. They made a second sally and were driven back, but on the third attempt they found her in a stall about half way back. Realizing they could not lead her out, they got behind her and fairly boosted her out of the barn, their appearance at the door being greeted with a cheer from the crowd. The mare was not burned and apparently not injured by the smoke."

\* \* \*

The show doesn't always go on. In March, 1906

a play, "Six Cups of Chocolate," which was being presented by the young ladies of the Congregational Church, was cut short by a furnace fire. Damage was minor, but tickets were returned to patrons and the play presented again a week later.

\* \* \*

The Selkirk Opera House, described by the *Tribune*, as "a center of dramatic interests and hub of the political world," was destroyed by fire on August 25, 1935. The downtown landmark had been constructed in 1879 and had a seating capacity of 500. The newspaper account noted that many national political figures and entertainers had appeared at the opera house until its demise.

\* \* \*

The landmark Avery Beach Casino on the north side, one of the largest covered dance halls in the United States and described in advertisements as "The Atlantic City of the West," was destroyed by fire on March 21, 1937. Just two weeks earlier, a fire destroyed the Androfsky Resort north of South Haven. The huge Casino had been erected on the same site as the Avery Beach resort hotel that was destroyed by fire 30 years before. The Casino had been a popular dance hall during South Haven's heyday tourist years and just prior to the fire had been a roller skating rink.

\* \* \*

Destruction by fire has not been a deterrent to South Havenites. For example, the North Shore Pavilion, built at Dyckman avenue and North Shore Drive in 1904, was destroyed by fire in 1915. It was quickly rebuilt and served many purposes over the next five decades until it was destroyed by fire in 1967. Today beachfront condominiums occupy the site.

\* \* \*

Protection by the South Haven Fire Department goes beyond the community's corporate limits. Presently, the city has fire protection contracts to serve all of South Haven Township and parts of Casco and Geneva townships. In addition, the department is part of a mutual aid pact involving all fire departments in Van Buren County and some in Allegan and Berrien counties.

\* \* \*

There have always been many helping hands from the community at times of emergency. In August, 1920 a group of Boy Scouts from Streator, Illinois, helped firemen battle a blaze that destroyed Walter Winkel's planing mill at Kalamazoo and Huron streets and was threatening many other buildings. "The Scouts plunged into the fight immediately on their arrival here by truck from St. Joseph, they having just missed the boat to South Haven," according to the *South Haven Tribune*.

\* \* \*

One of the more serious fires in modern days occurred December 14, 1950 when explosions and fire extensively damaged the Standard Oil storage depot on the city's southwest side. The fire, started when a delivery truck struck a fillpipe causing an explosion that engulfed the truck and a gasoline storage tank, was controlled before it spread to the nearby 7 neighborhood. The state police fire marshal praised the action by the fire department describing it as being "as well handled as any I have ever seen." There was also praise from the *Tribune* which wrote an open letter to the fire department on behalf of the people of South Haven. "These men typify the finest spirit that a community can have. Big city folks might think it strange when they watch our department fight a fire. With hoses all run out and in action you see some dressed in the accepted rubber clothing of a fireman, others in good suits with white shirts, ties and fashionable oxfords, still others in hastily donned garments not meant to withstand the rigors of fire fighting. Still and all, these men fight with a unified effort that belies the clothing worn. They are fighting for the good of their own community." This fire was not without its quirks. Some South Havenites, according to the *Tribune*, were listening to a radio program on the atomic bomb at the time of the depot explosion, sending them from their homes "fearing one had actually fallen in this area."

## NOT ALL HARD WORK

For many years, starting in 1892, the fire department sponsored a masquerade ball at the Opera House. The January 6, 1900 *Sentinel* reported that "Mrs. Frank Humphrey, as an Italian girl, carried off the prize for having the most complete ladies' costume. Garrett Overhuel, as a "hobo," took prize for having the most complete gentlemen's costume, and Ward Alvord, as "our German friend," took the prize for having the most comical costume. In January, 1906 approximately 30 couples attended led by Fred Salmon, dressed as Uncle Sam, and Miss Blanche Misel, representing a school girl. After circling about the room in a number of pretty figures, the music by the five-piece orchestra swung into a waltz and dancing continued until 2:30 a.m. Admission was 75 cents per couple and 25 cents for spectators.

\* \* \*

Even though his business, the Willow Beach Resort, was destroyed by fire in February, 1900 owner William Mackey treated fire department members to an oyster supper two weeks later.

\* \* \*

Three times during its first century (1930, 1955 and 1962), the South Haven fire department has been host to the state convention of the Michigan State Firemen's Association. This year's centennial celebration in October promises to be as big an event as those memorable state conventions were.

\* \* \*

The fire department has a dedicated auxiliary comprised of wives of firefighters and other friends of the department. Auxiliary members frequently are on the scene of major fires, providing refreshments for firefighters. They have many fund raising projects to support department activities most notably a souvenir cookbook containing local recipes published in conjunction with the department's centennial year.

\* \* \*

The community has generously supported the fire department's endeavors. South Haven was the first fire department in Van Buren County to acquire state-of-the-art hydraulic rescue tools, known as the Jaws of Life. This \$7,000 purchase in 1978 was

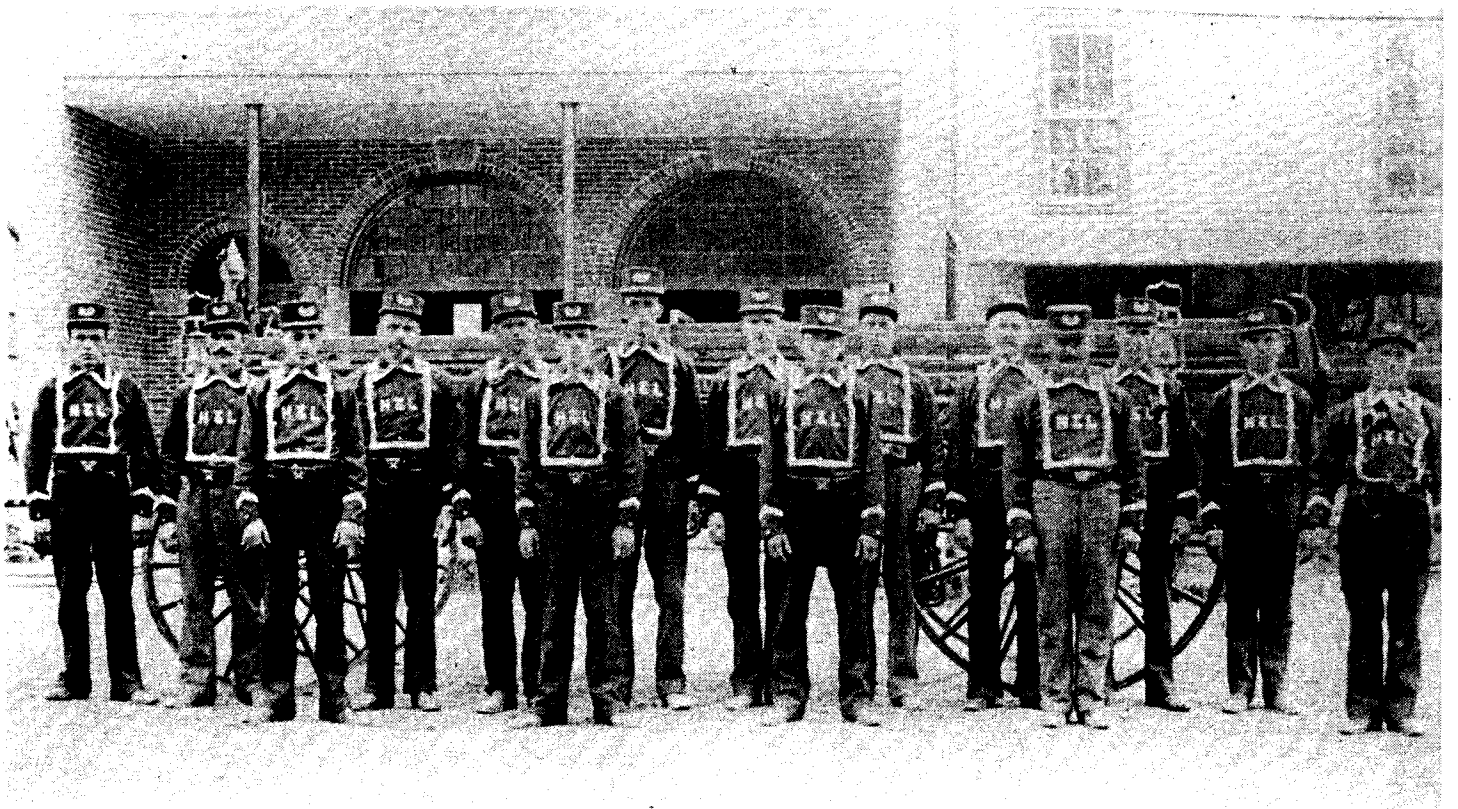
made possible from contributions and departmental fund raising activities.

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The fire department has an endowment fund established through gifts in memory of fireman Greg Smith who died in 1980. The proceeds from this fund provide scholarships for the post-secondary education of children of active and retired members of the fire department.

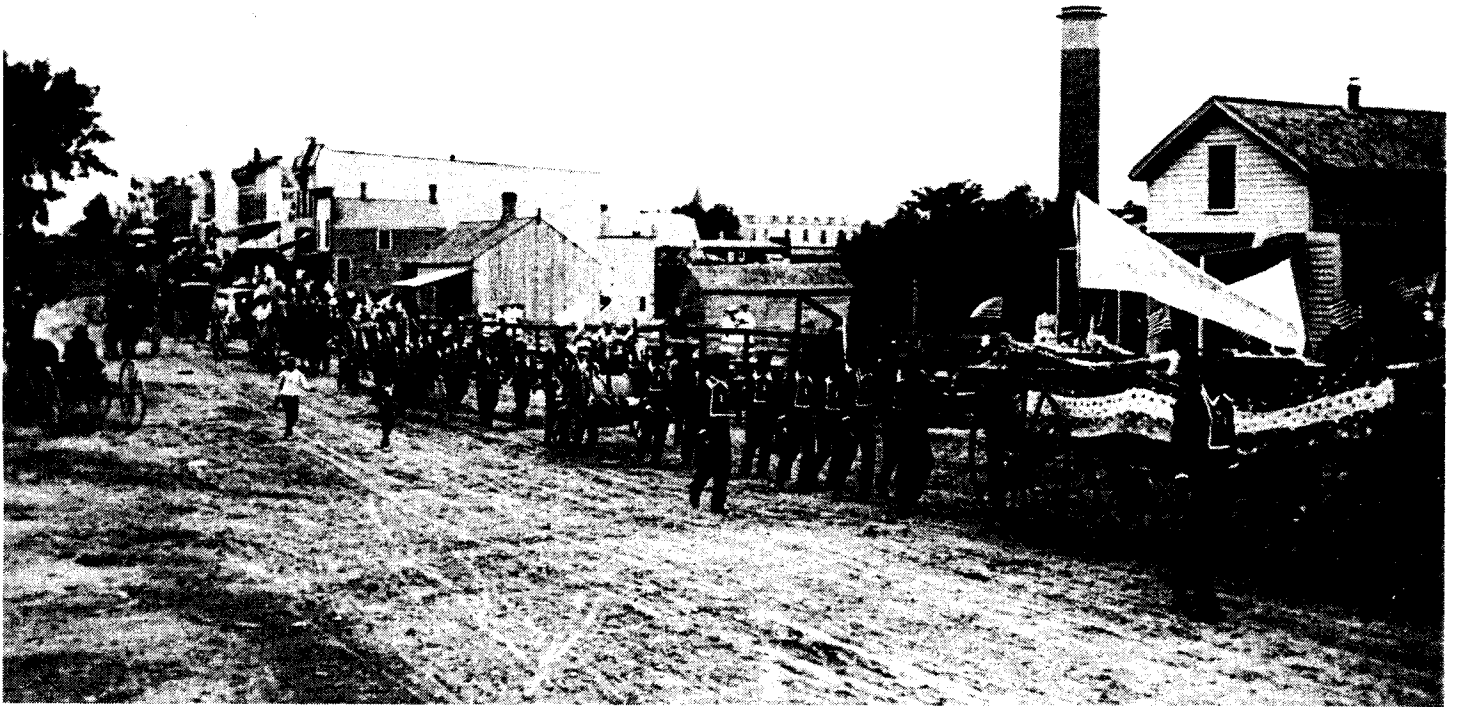


Members of South Haven's first hook and ladder company (1892)

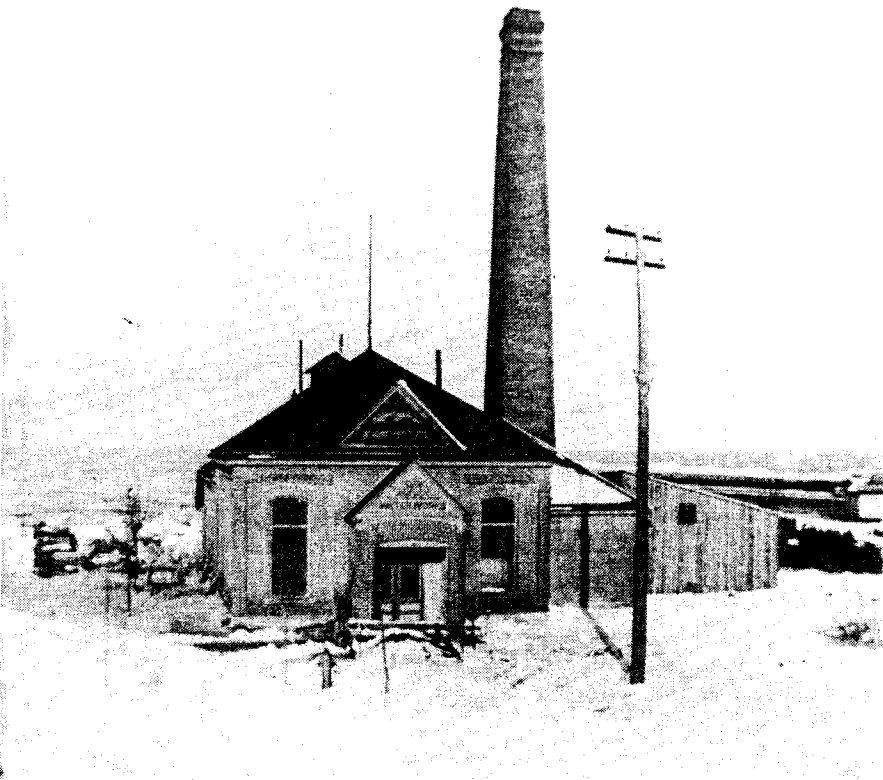


South Haven's first piece of fire equipment was human-powered wagon that carried ladders.

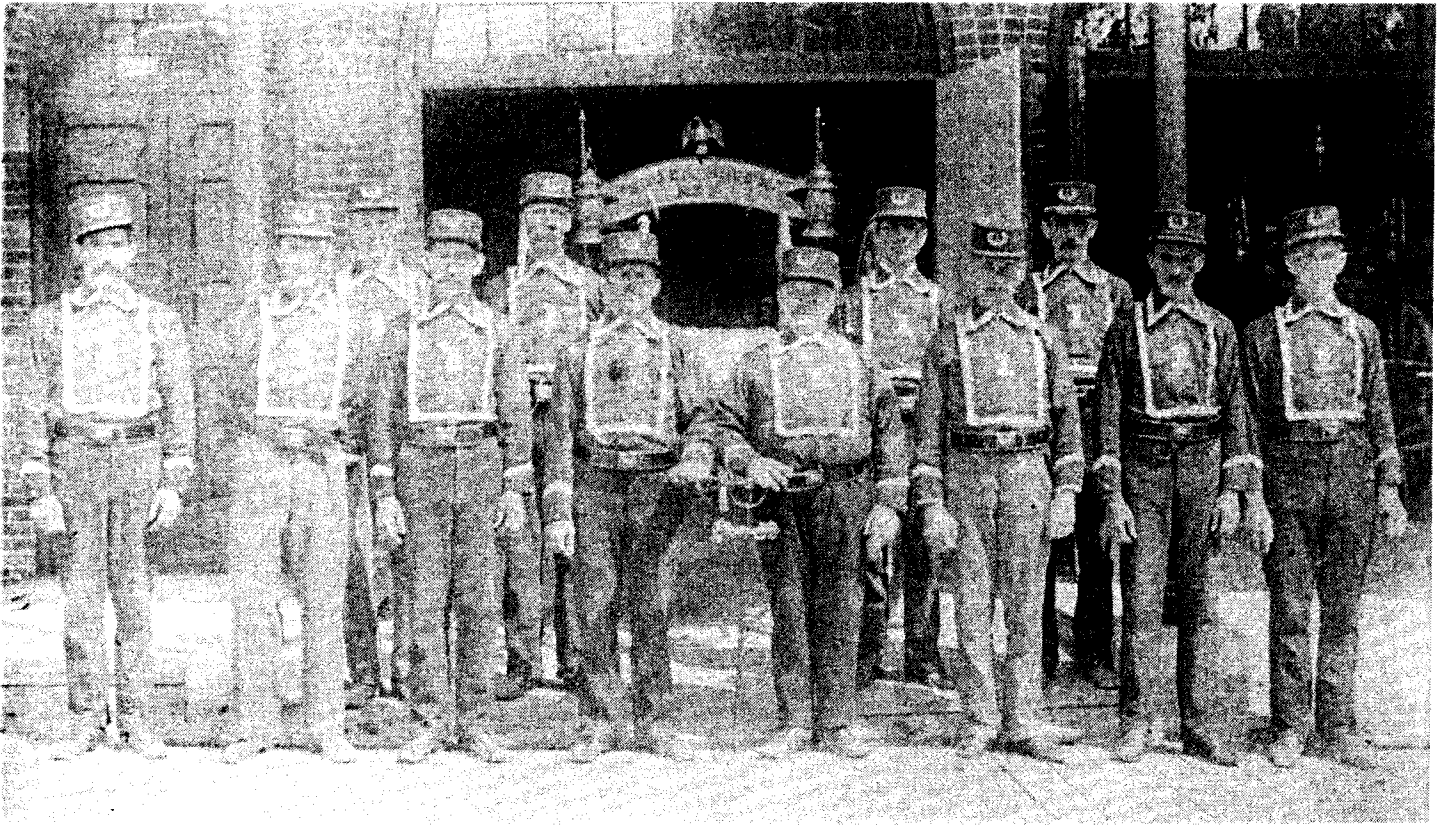




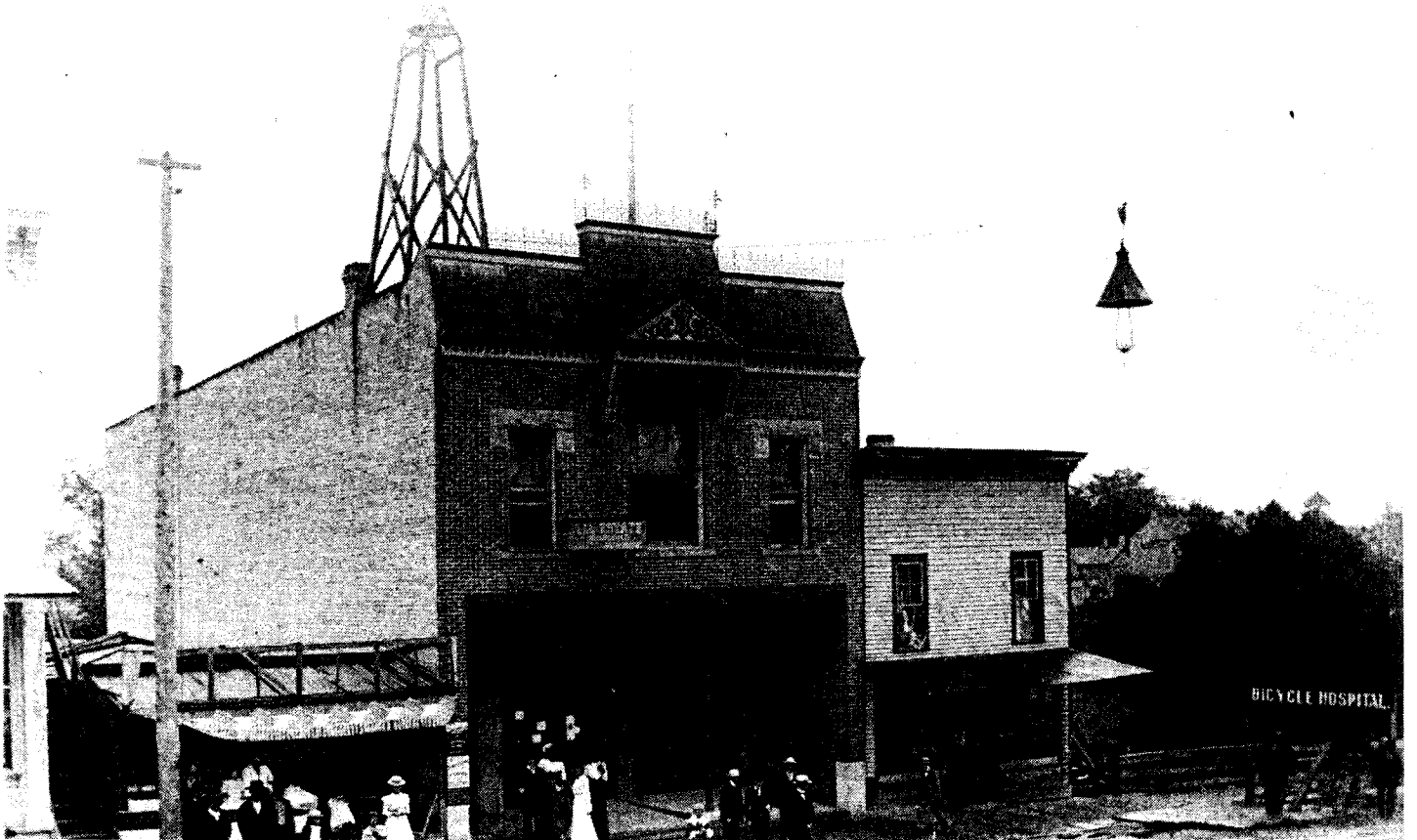
Firemen led South Haven's Fourth of July parade as early as 1893.



South Haven's first waterworks was constructed at the turn of the century after several major fires ravaged the central business district. It first fed 63 fireplugs.



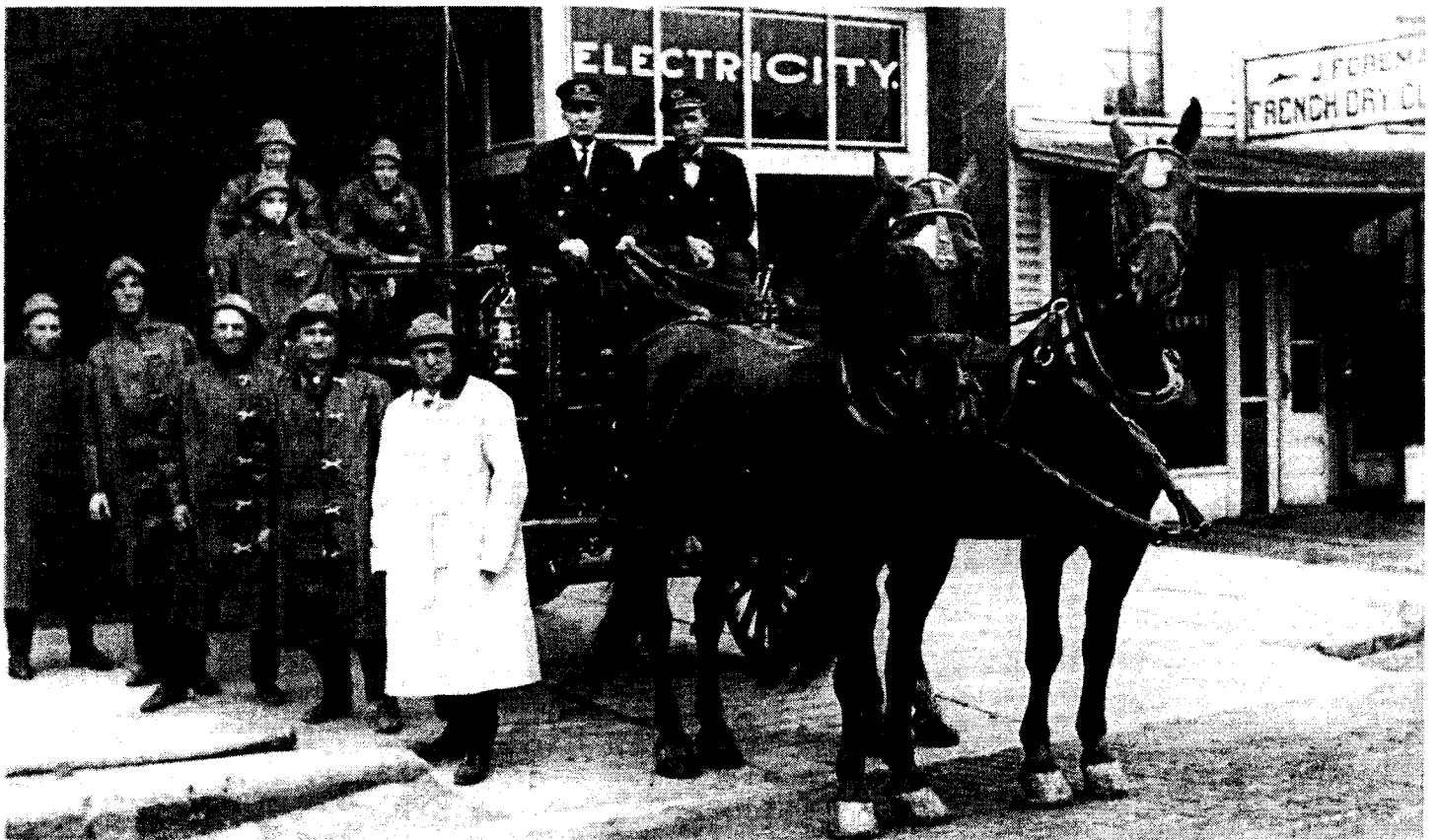
Engine Company No. 1 with a hand-drawn hose cart in 1901.



South Haven's town hall in the early 1890s also housed the fire department. Bell on roof tower alerted firemen.



Horses were used for the first time to pull South Haven fire equipment in 1906.



The 1913 fire crew consisted of, front row from left to right, Ben Suhr, Bert Beardsley, Bill Ocobock, Charlie Bellville, and chief Rudy Welch; center, Bob Ludwig; back row, Cliff Borge and Norm Wyers; and drivers Irv Chambers and Ray Lundy.



South Haven's horse-drawn fire wagon was decked out for the 1910 Fourth of July parade.



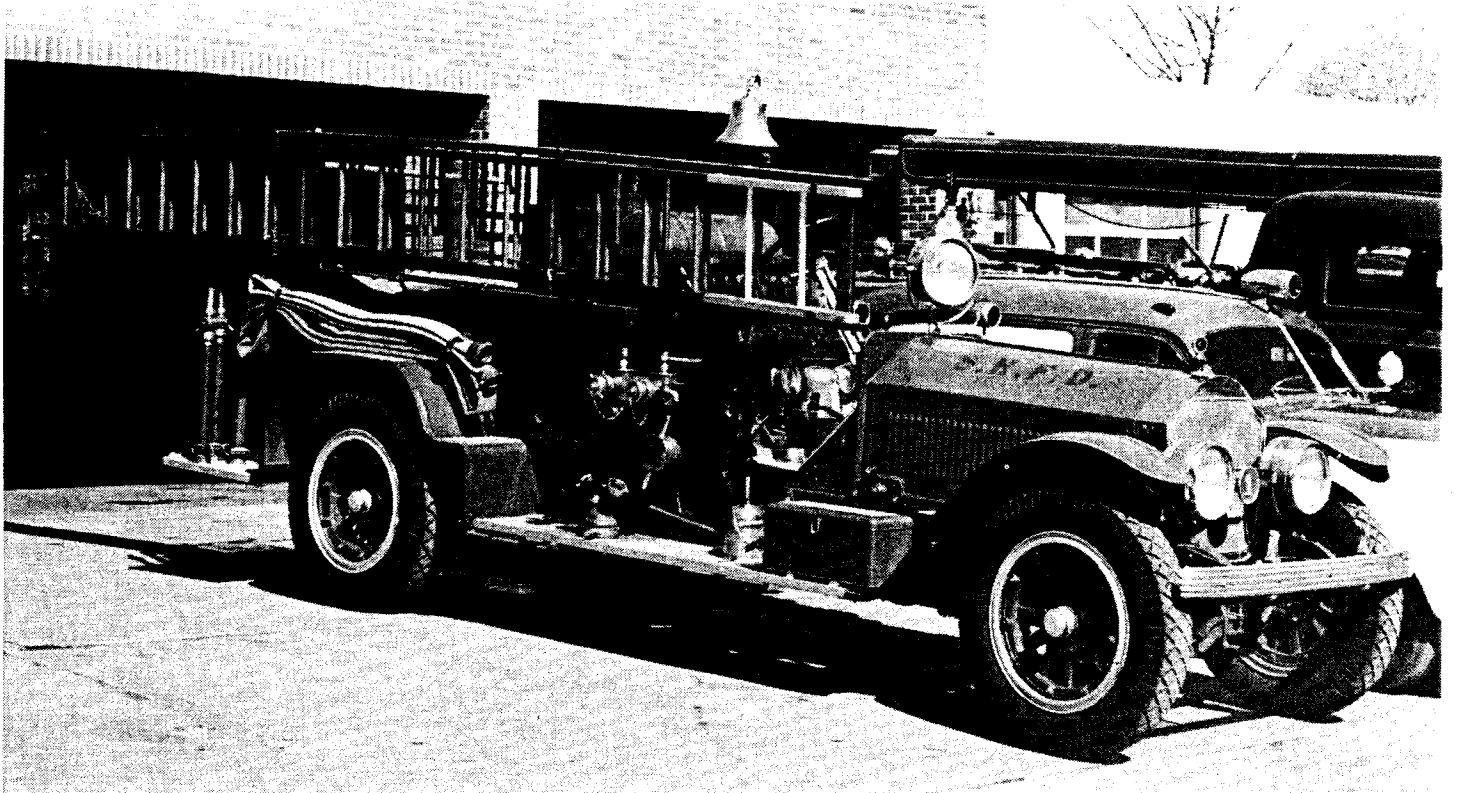
The Fire Department provided the honor guard for the 1914 funeral of retired fire chief Frank Wheeler (1896-1898).



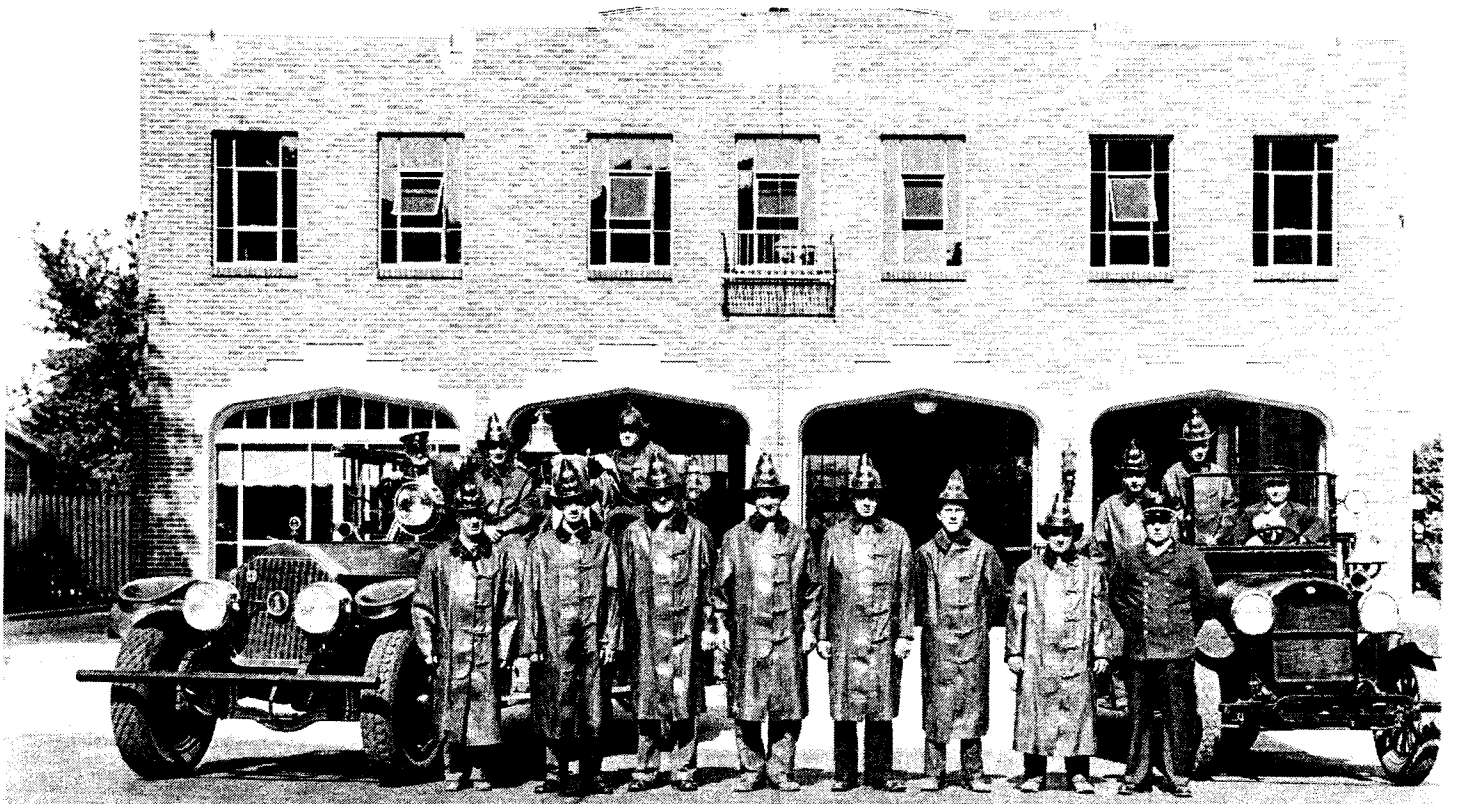
South Haven's first motorized fire truck was delivered in 1917. The wagon which horses had pulled to fires was attached to the back of new acquisition.



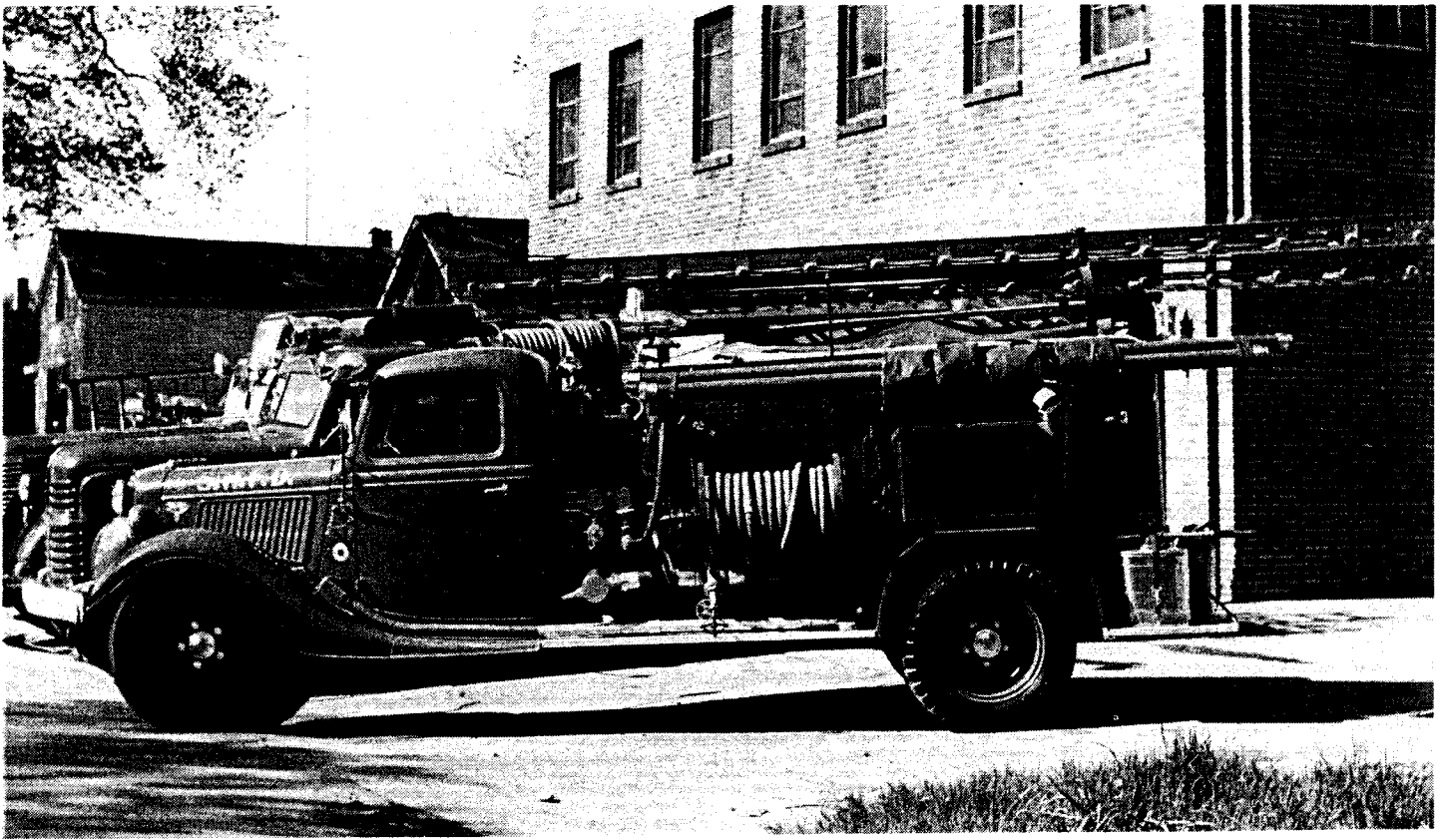
By the mid 1920s South Haven had a well-equipped department. This photo was taken inside the Phoenix Street station in 1926.



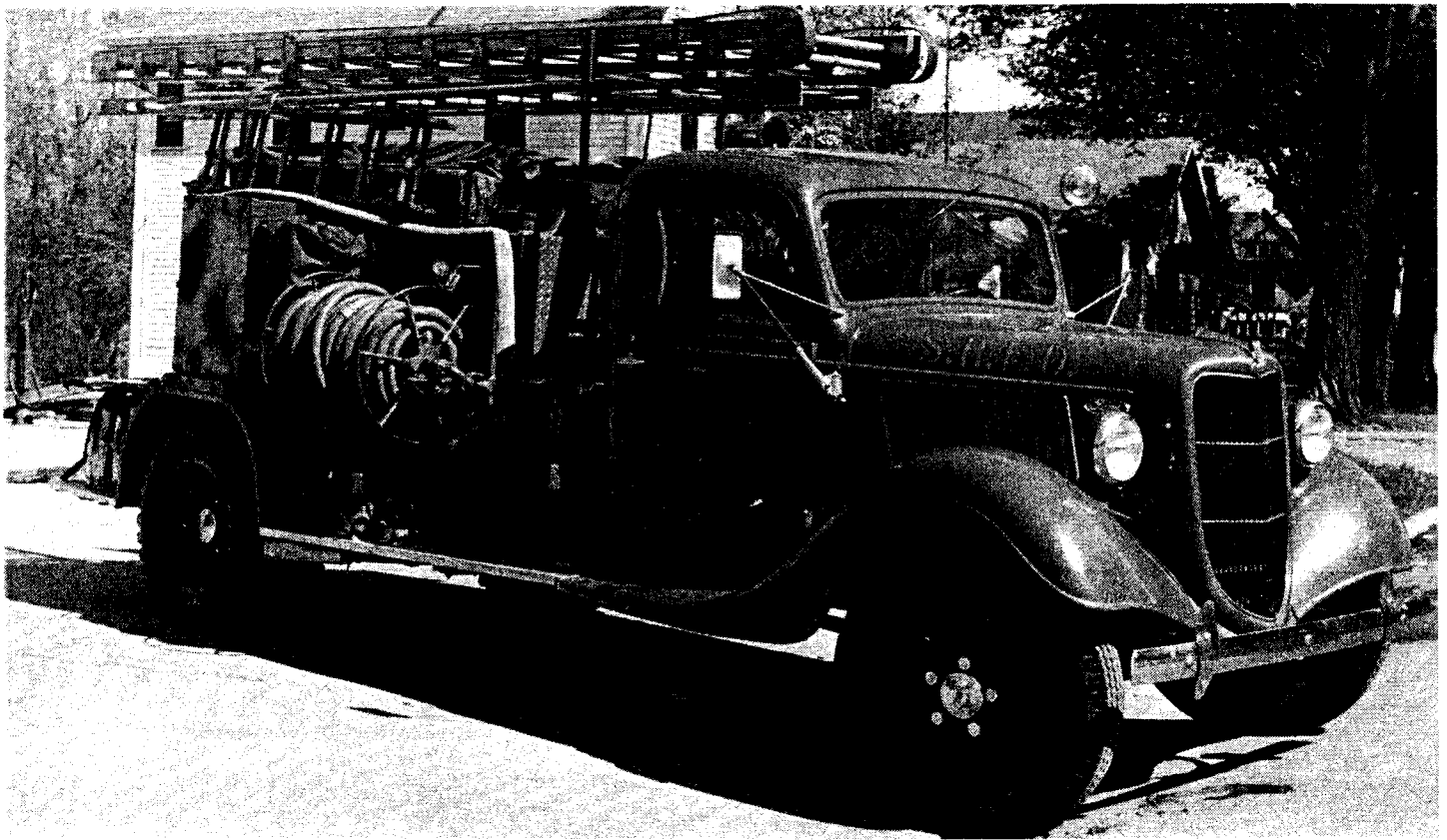
This 1923 American LaFrance pumper was South Haven's first "modern" fire truck. It was capable of pumping 1,000 gallons of water per minute.

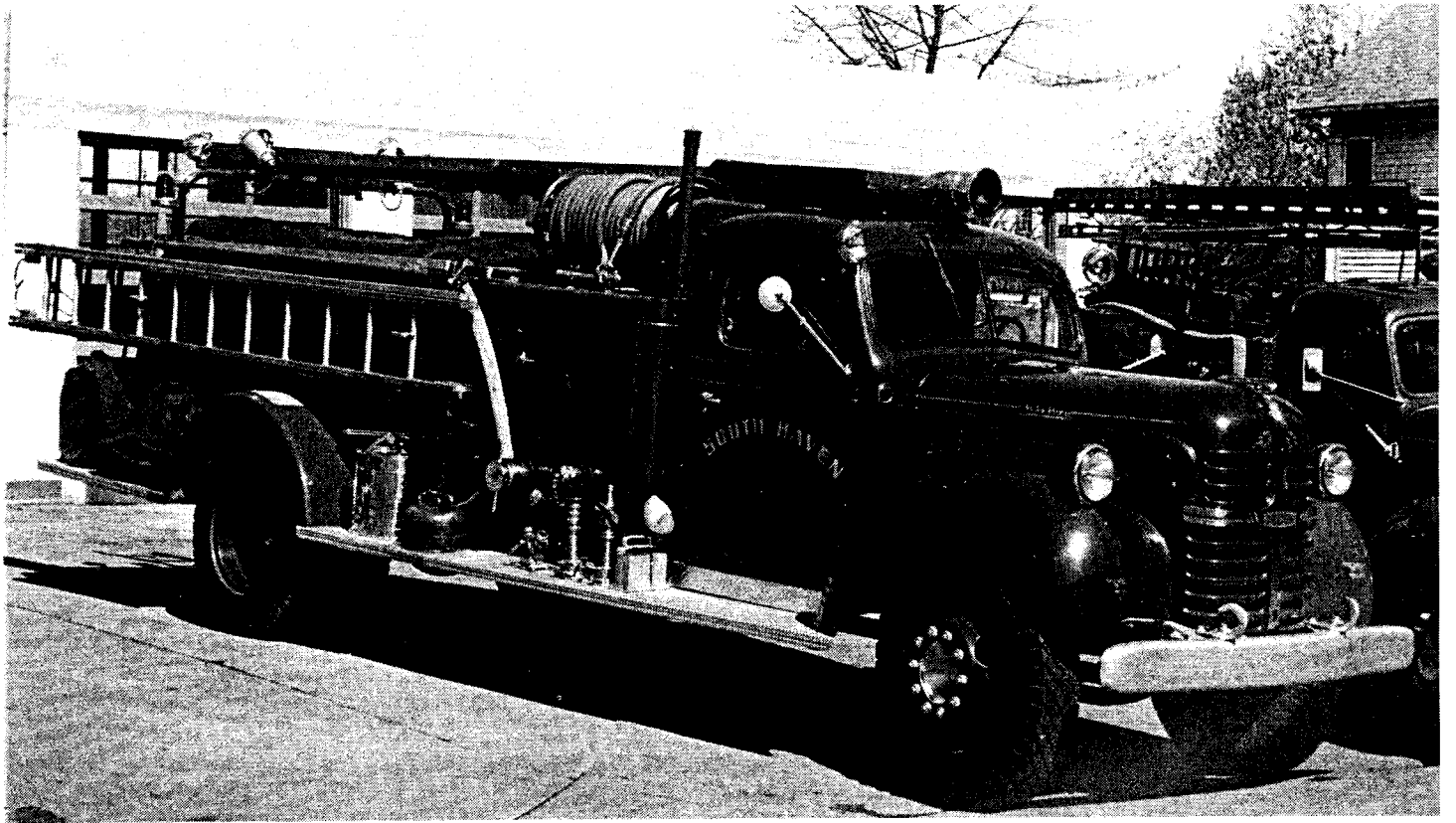


The fire department moved into new quarters on Broadway Avenue in 1930. The department of the early 1930s was the best equipped in Van Buren County. Pictured in the front row, from left to right, Cliff Burge, High Schabell, Norm Wyers, Claude Twitchell, Cecil Myers, Sr., chief Rudy Welch; back row, Lloyd Funk, Del Prentice, Herb Parker, George Moore, Frank Wheaton, Cal Wheeler, Herb Suhr and Robert Kellogg.

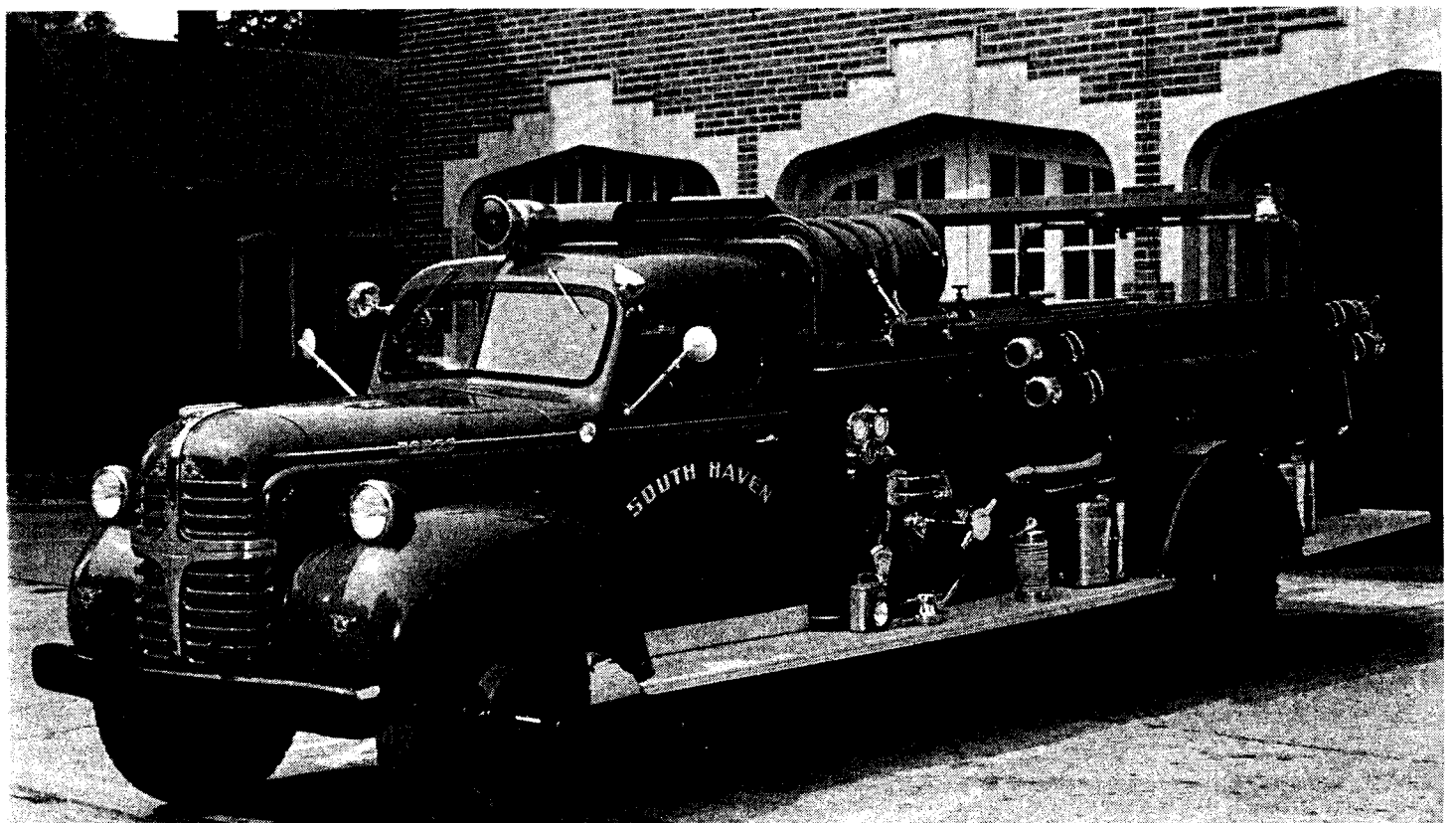


Members of the department built the truck pictured on this page in 1936. They purchased the truck chassis and a Hale pump and then added equipment. The truck was later converted into a tanker capable of carrying 800 gallons of water.





Two new fire trucks were put into service within a span of an year in the mid 1940s. Top photo shows American LaFrance pumper with a 1,000 gallon per minute pump while bottom photo is a 500 gpm pumper built on a Dodge chassis by the American Fire Apparatus Company of Battle Creek.







This 1946 model American LaFrance had a 12-cylinder engine capable of pumping 1,000 gallons of water per minute. It remained in service more than a quarter of a century.

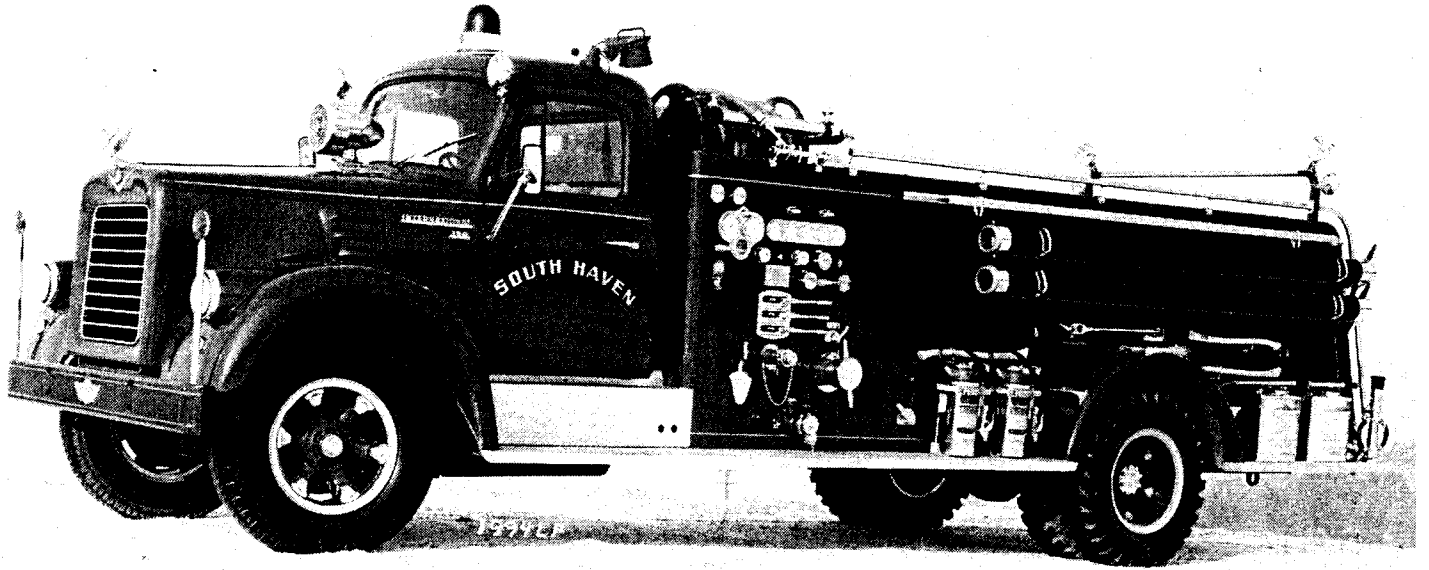




The 1954 fire department contingent was comprised of, front row from left to right, Chief Les Olmstead, Gil Wyers, Harold LeMieux, Art Smith, Oliver Moorhead, Herman Hinz, Chuck Grano, George Wickham; back row, Ed Twitchell, Joe Wheeler, Cal Wheeler, Cecil Myers, Jr., Evert Wheeler, Al Sarno, Chuck Tourtellotte, G. Yacher, Charles Reimer and Richard Lundy.



This vehicle, acquired in 1955, was used by the fire chief and served as a utility van.



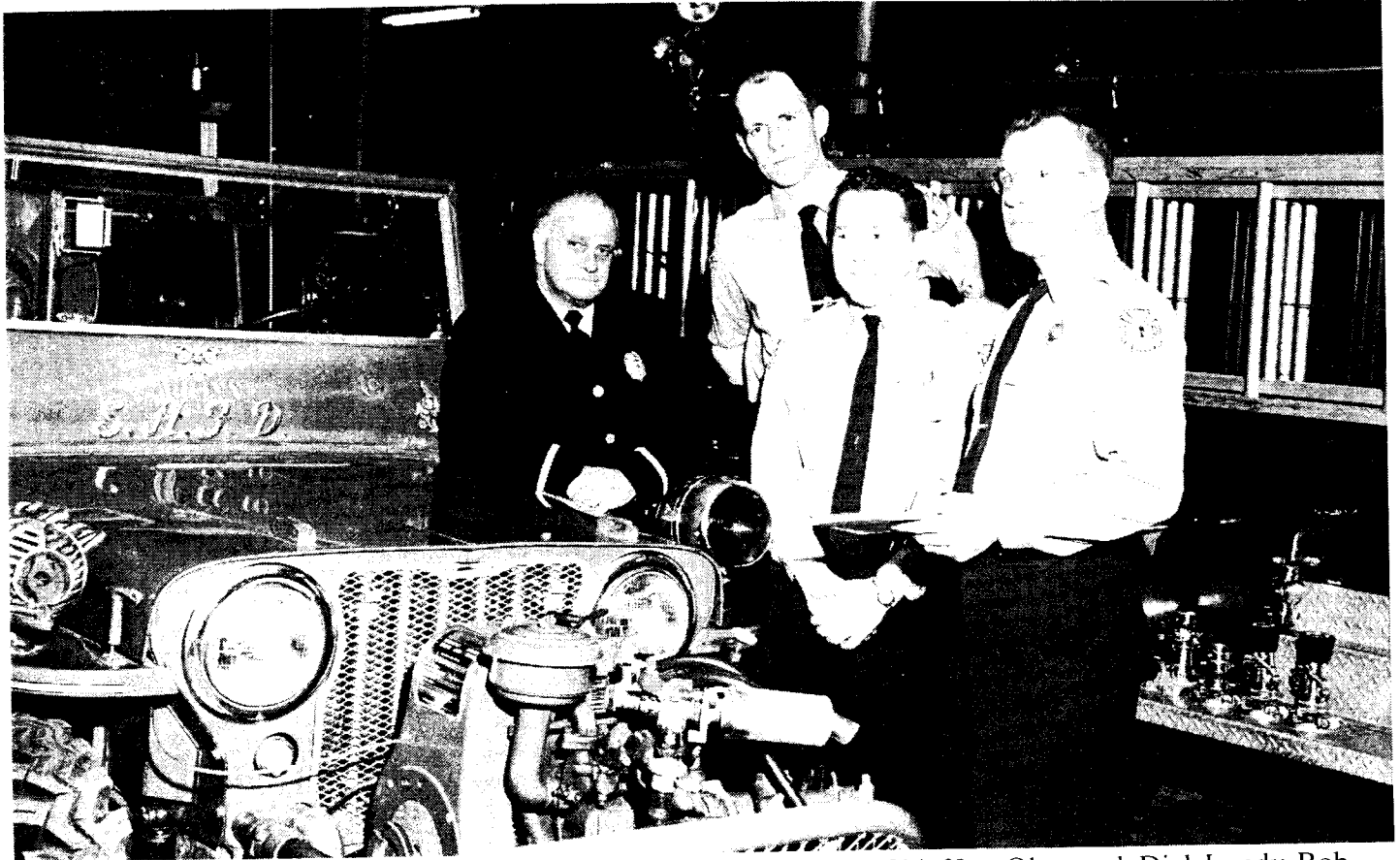
This American Fire Apparatus engine, capable of pumping 750 gallons per minute, was put into service in 1956.



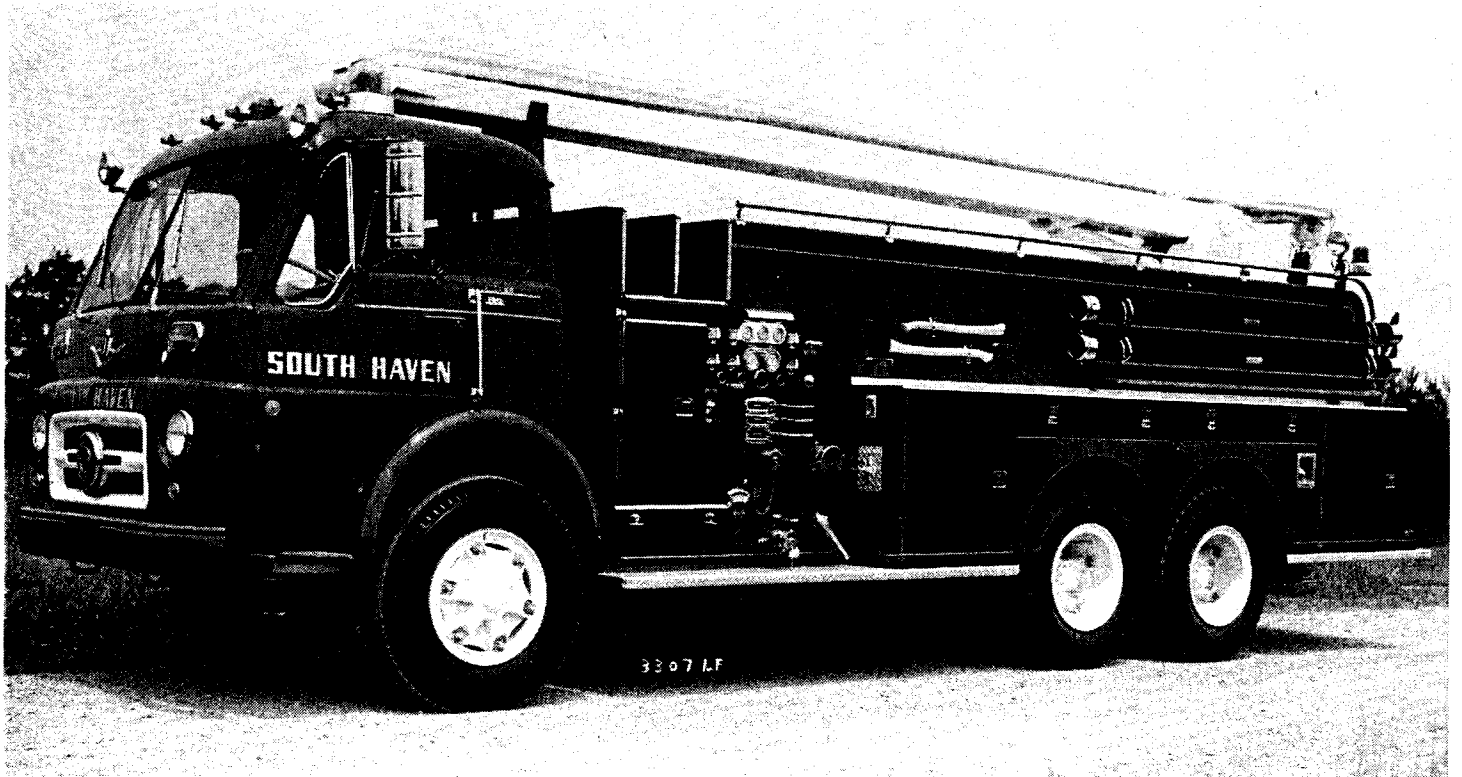
Members Chuck Grano and Norm Nelson prepped this fire prevention car in 1962 in conjunction with the state convention held in South Haven.



Working hard for the Muscular Dystrophy drive in 1961 were Bob Poindexter, Tead Morehead and Chief Les Olmstead in the front row and Don Muske, Bob Henry and Dick Morehead in the back.

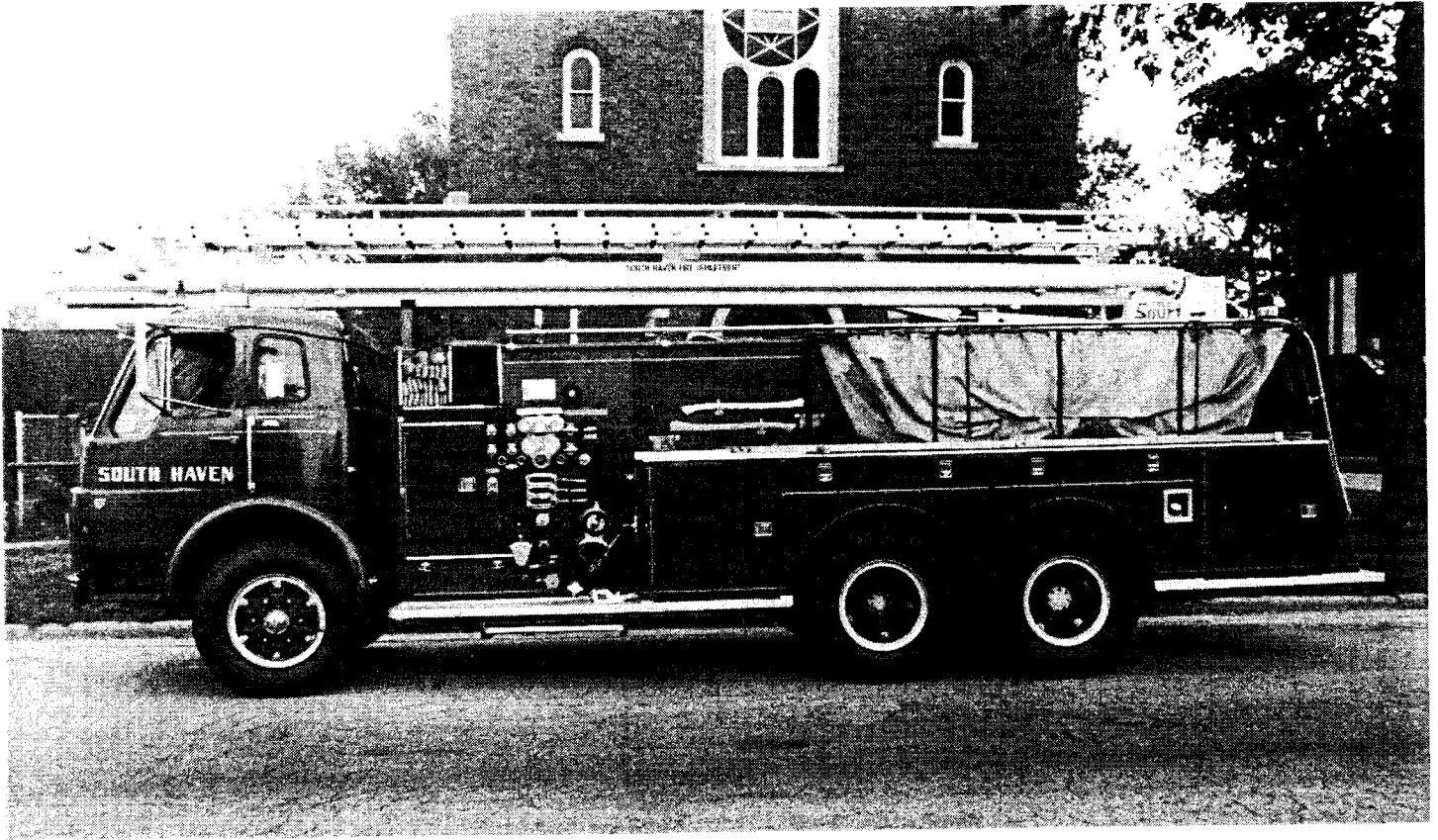


Department's new grass rig was put into service in 1960. Pictured are Chief Les Olmstead, Dick Lundy, Bob Henry and Norm Nelson who later became South Haven's first city manager.

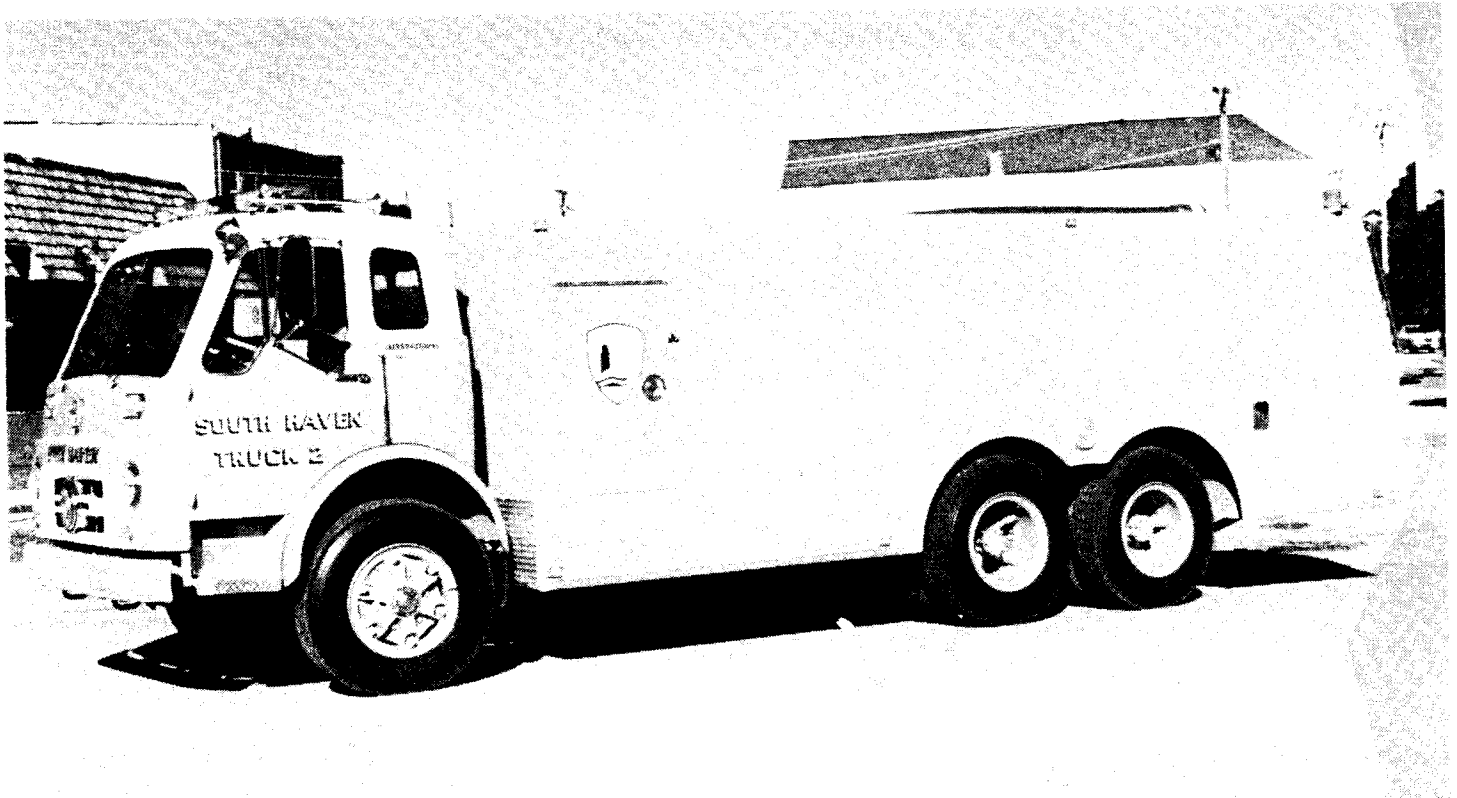


Firemen received a major boost in 1971 when department received delivery of its first aerial, a Squirt capable of extending 55-feet into the air. The engine contained a pump capable of delivering 750 gallons of water per minute. Pictured on the equipment in this 1975 photo are from, left to right: Dick Lundy, Stan Wakild, Ed Bierhalter, Stewart Szymczak, Les Olmstead, Tead Morehead, George Wickham, Sherm Dykstra, Robert Tromotola, Joe Wheeler; back row: Tom Renner, Ted Jones, Greg Smith, Jerry Couturier, Harold Linden, Bob Henry, Jack McCloughan, Jim Hunt, Jim Anderson, Dion LeMieux, Chuck Rehfeld and Evert Wheeler.



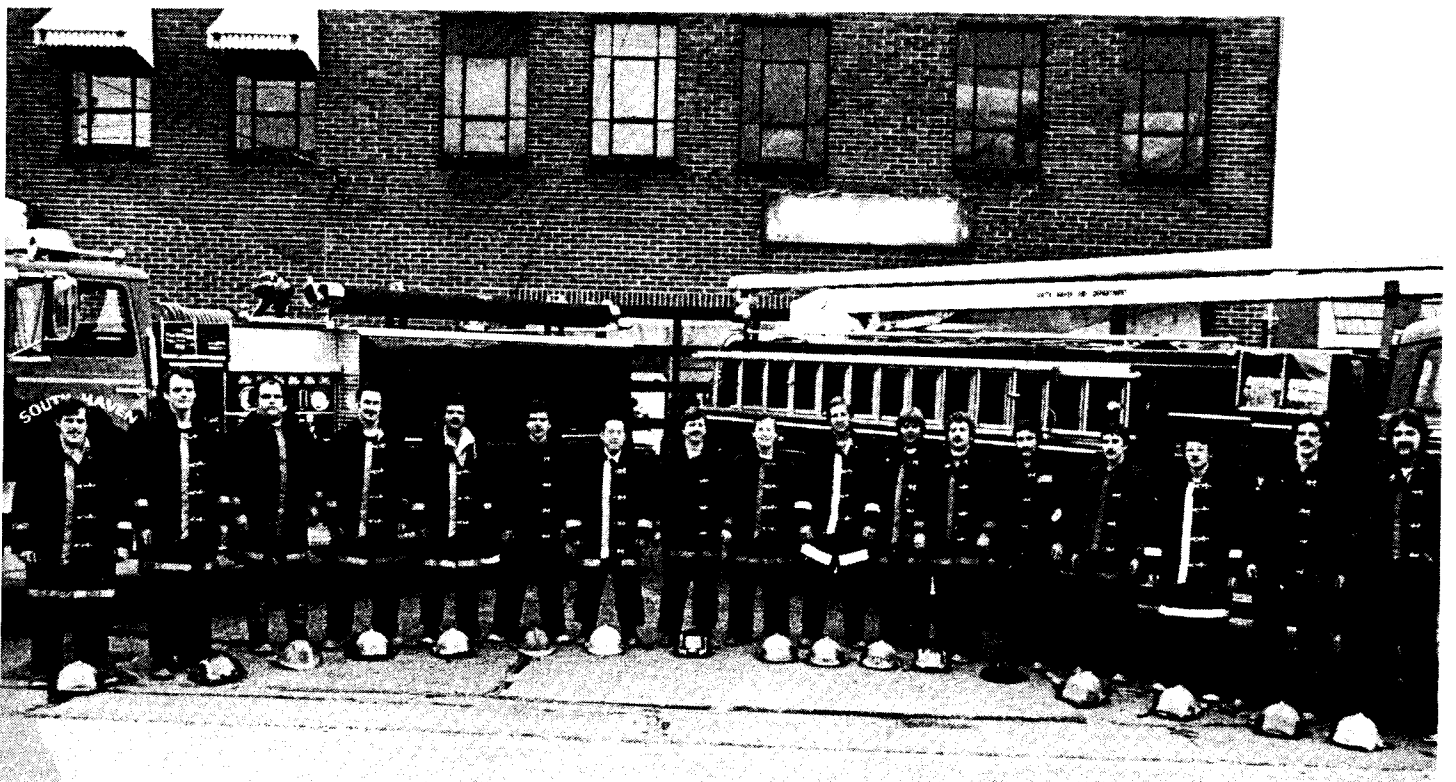


The Squirt was replaced with a telescoping ladder late in the 1970s (top photo) and the truck was converted into a tanker in the mid 1980s (lower photo).

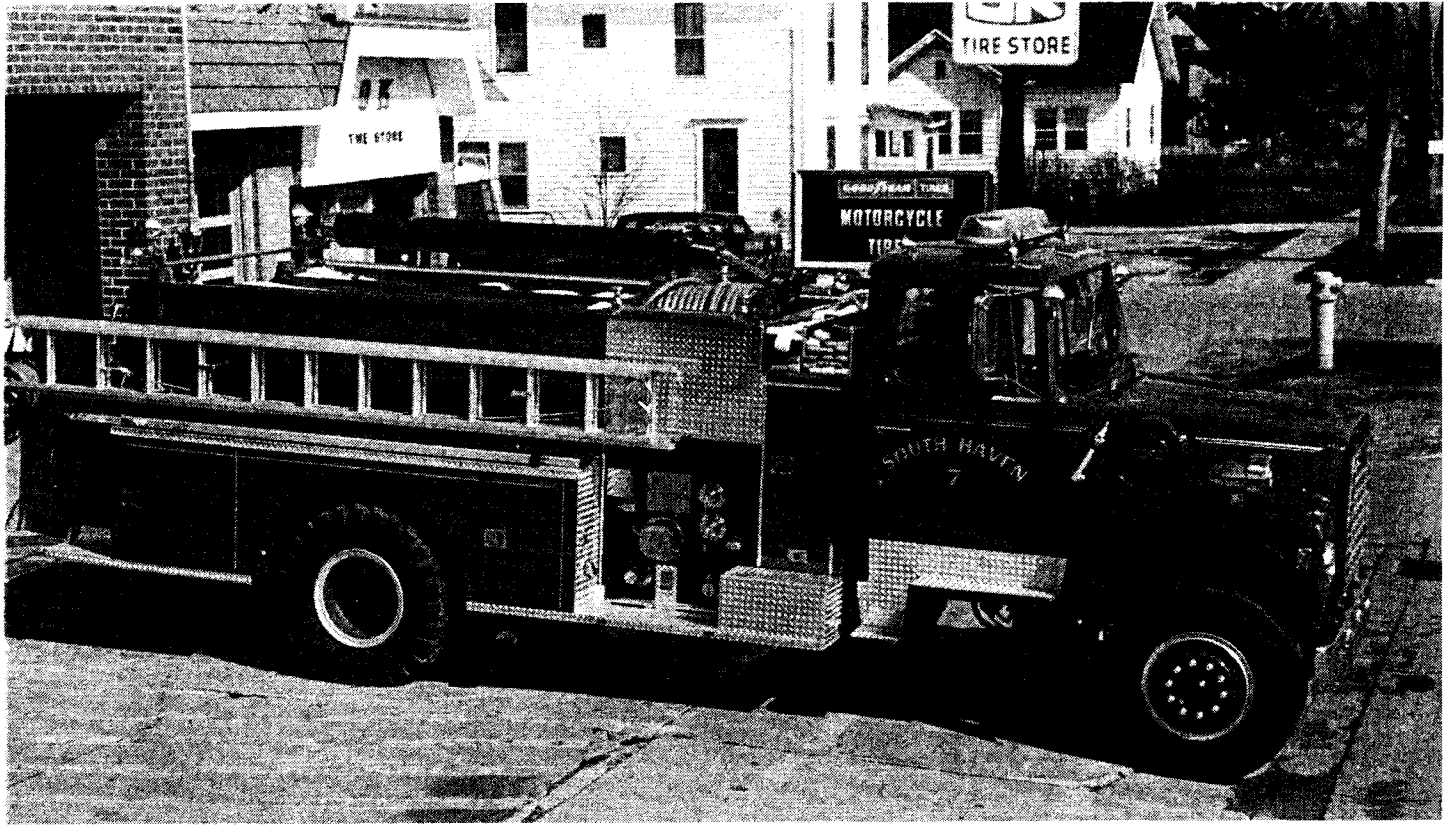




South Haven's fulltime contingent in the early 1980s included, from left to right: Bob Garvison, Art Landry, Duff Parrish, Stan Wakild, Sherm Dykstra, Bob Tromotola, Ed Bierhalter, Dion LeMieux, Tim Wheeler and Randy VanWynen.



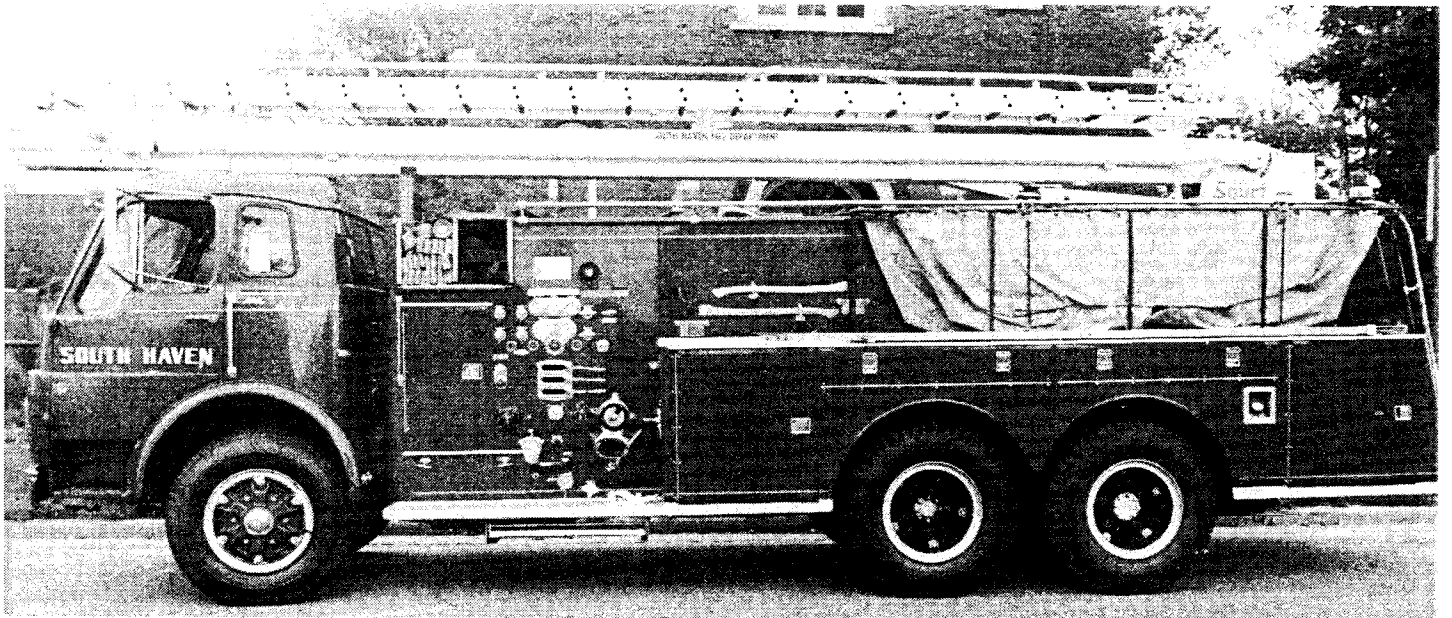
Volunteer members in the early 1980s included, from left to right: Randy Peterson, Tom Renner, Mike Todd, Brian Horan, Jim Hunt, Tom Dykstra, Bob Henry, Jack McCloughan, Dave Henry, Keith Olson, Chuck Rehfeld, Jim Anderson, Joe Underwood, Joe Koller, Tim Wheeler, Ted Jones and Paul Bollwahn.



First of South Haven's current fleet of modern equipment is a Pierce engine delivered in 1980.







A telescoping ladder was added to this truck under Chief Sherm Dykstra.



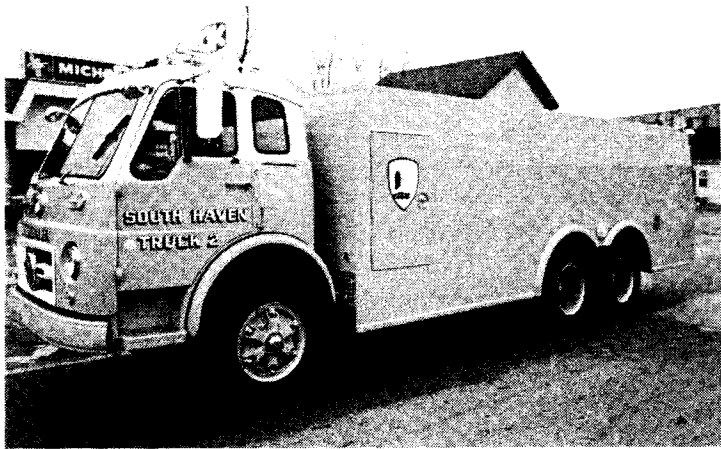
Four-wheel drive grass truck with power winch in front was added to the fleet in 1983.



Many members of the department have received EMT training. Pictured from left to right are: Stan Wakild, Randy VanWynen, Dion LeMieux, Art Landry, Joel Carpenter, Alan Antonson, Al Hosier, Bob Garvison, Duff Parrish, Brian Horan, Robert Tromotola, Keith Bierhalter, Ed Bierhalter and Keith Olson.



The responsibility for emergency medical service has the responsibility of the South Haven Fire Department since 1978. Pictured are members who are EMT specialists, from left to right, Stan Wakild, Randy Van Wynen, Art Landry, Bob Garvison, Joel Carpenter, and Al Hosier. Pictured at the far right is Bill Pesel, director of nursing at South Haven Community Hospital who has been active in training fire department personnel.



South Haven's emergency response fleet is state of the art during the Centennial year.



100 YEARS



1888 - 1988