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Provincetown volunteer firemen

By Mary Bauer

Out-of-town fire chiefs visiting Provincetown cast a professional glance up and down Commercial Street, see a forest of potential tinder, and wonder how any of it can remain standing once a fire gets out of control.

But a fire has never gotten out of control. The fire hazards of closely-packed wooden buildings and onshore breezes have created the need in Provincetown for a tight-knit army of firefighters. For more than a century the town has been served by an all-volunteer department that prides itself on its Cape-wide reputation for quick responsiveness that nearly outraces the smell of smoke.

"A truck can be at any door in town within minutes of the sound of that horn," said Clem Silva, deputy fire chief. Unless a fire is deliberately set and stoked with a lot of gasoline or lighter fluid, "there's no big problem, because we get there so fast," he said.

Fire Chief Wilbur Cook agrees that only the department's expertise in quick response and coordinated work has prevented a conflagration from eating through a full block of buildings. He said visiting chiefs can't believe how quickly the trucks roar up to a fire.

Visitors often assume the men live in the town's five pumper stations. But the buildings only come to life in the minutes after the horn blows.

Old timers and observers of the town's history say it's amazing that large sections of the town have never burned down. In fact, even the town's worst fires have

only demolished the building directly affected, barely damaging its neighbors.

Provincetown has seen some first-rate infernos, including the blazes that took the Puritan Icehouse in 1927, the old high school in 1930 and the former Town Hall, which once stood where the Pilgrim Memorial Monument now looms.

Compared to some of these historic show stoppers the blaze that took the Provincetown Playhouse in 1977 was "popcorn," said Frank Taves, owner of Taves Boatyard.

Taves employs three men who also serve as fireman. For decades he has watched the pulse-pounding sight of men streaking from their homes and jobs when the fire horn's first blast squawks above the roof tops.

The key, of course, has always been cooperation, intense training and the implicit knowledge that if the town is to be saved from a conflagration, only the townspeople can do the job.

Years ago, long before the current system in which volunteers' homes are equipped with one-way radio receivers, each pumper would call the town's central telephone switchboard to learn the location of the blaze.

At the same time nearly everyone else in town began ringing the town operator to get the same information. As the board blossomed with lights, the operator plugged into the calls one by one, shouted the address, yanked out the plug and plugged into the next light.

From its earliest days Provincetown learned to answer such an emergency with nearly absolute unity.

Although technology has advanced from the days when icehouse whistles blasted fire warnings, the hair-trigger readiness born of necessity has always been a part of the town's fire preparedness.

centuries of brotherhood

Silva and Cook both agree that the department's cooperation and unity of purpose is strengthened by support, both moral and financial, that the department gets from townspeople.

Though unity is essential, competition between fire houses drives volunteers to hone their skills. The inter-house rivalry reaches its fiercest peak during fire prevention week in October when the department holds its yearly muster.

The muster is a clocked race by each separate house in which the men scramble through a dry run of the procedures they use for fires, the techniques they drill twice monthly throughout the year.

"Sometimes houses drill five times a week for a month before the muster," said Wayne Perry, representative to the board of engineers from Pumper 3. He believes the department is strengthened both in its morale and its effectiveness by the heat generated between houses for the muster.

"The month of intensive hands-on training gets everyone fired up," Perry said. "For the first few fires afterwards you can see that performance is above the norm." He said the champion house, which receives a trophy and a check for \$100 from the White Dory Inn, hosts a party for the whole department following the muster.

"There's a lot of pride in the individual houses," Perry said, adding that when the fire horn blows "some gung-ho guys" get a charge out of reaching a fire in a rival district first, beating out the pumper assigned to cover that district. All of the five pumpers answer any alert. If only one truck is needed the first to arrive handles the call. The rest roll back to their berths.

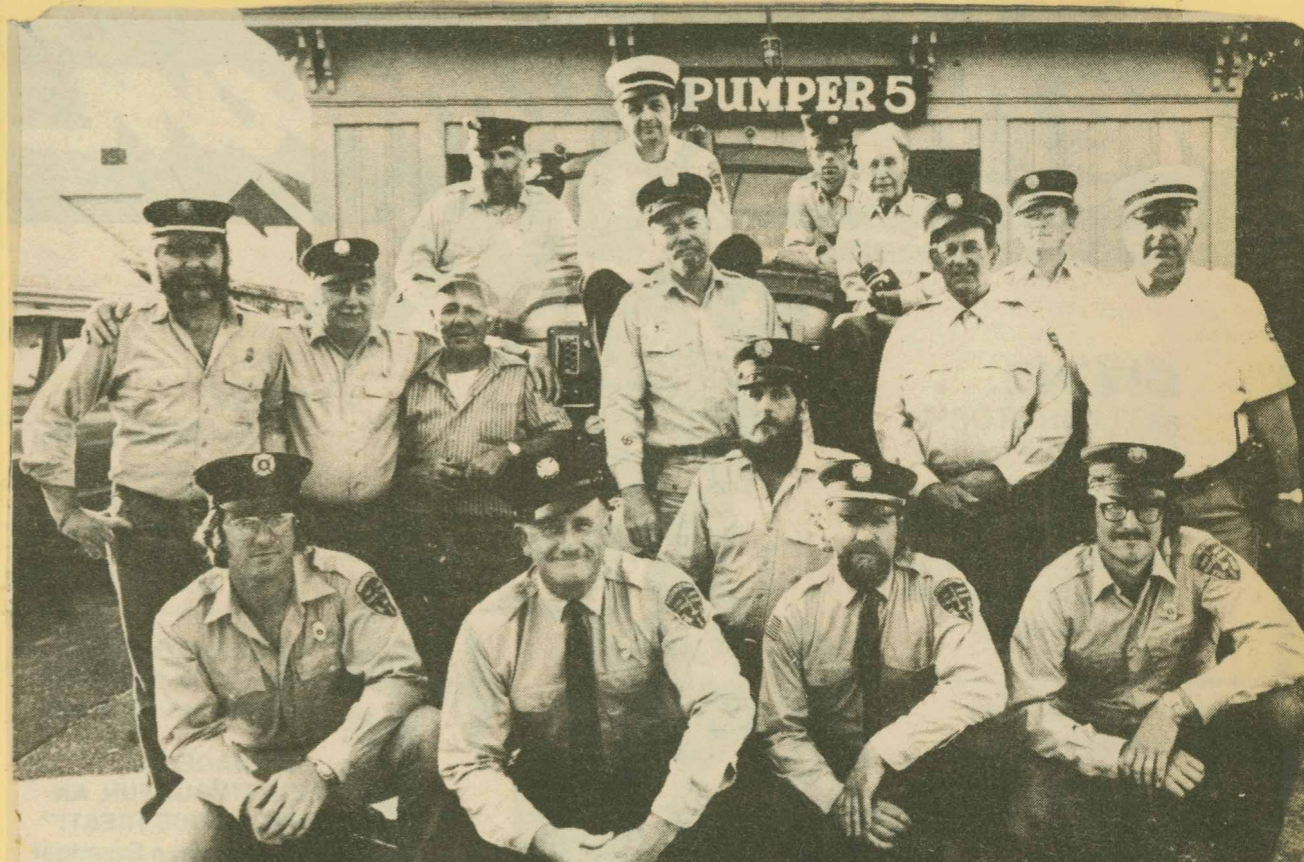
The houses also hold monthly meetings, when the full compliment of 14 men, including its engineer, captain, lieutenant and two auxiliaries, get together to strengthen ties and take care of business. Often these fraternal meetings are preceded by a big feed that a few men may cook up for the group. Other times the dinner takes place at a local restaurant.

Some men speak of the volunteer department as a sort of "brotherhood" or a fraternal organization. These references are not merely figures of speech but are often literally true, as young men join brothers, cousins, or follow in their fathers' footsteps by joining the ranks of a given house. The men usually join the house closest to their homes or the one in which their fathers served.

Silva, in 1941 at the age of 14, became the third generation of his family to volunteer his services to Pumper 5 in the East End.

Warren Alexander, the captain of Pumper 5, breaks the Silva family record as the fourth generation of his family to willfully tear out of home or work at any hour the ominous sound of the horn beckons.

Pumper 5 keeps a gallery of pictures, both staged photos and action shots, which chronicle the house's



Advocate photo by Mary Bauer

Front row, left to right: Paul Colburn, Dave Colburn, Lieut. Joe Notaro, Steward Doug Trumbo. Second row: Capt. Warren Alexander, William Allison, Phillip Alexander, Mark Robinson, Steve Busa, Louis Silva, Deputy Chief Clem Silva. Back row: Conrad Malicoat, District Chief Adam Wolfe, Tom Rand, Joe "Ducky" Perry, Bill Fitts.

Fire fighting in Provincetown is a family affair. Both of these photos were taken at Pumper 5, on the corner of Commercial and Anthony Streets. It was Pumper 4 when the older photo was shot about 1948. Many of the same family names and some of the same faces appear in both pictures.

Louis Silva, an active volunteer, Joe "Ducky" Perry and Phillip Alexander, both retired, are shown in both photos. Phillip is the great-uncle of the pumper's captain, Warren Alexander. Captain Warren Alexander's grandfather and father, Warren and

John, appear side by side in the 1948 photo. Arthur Silva, father of Deputy Chief Clem Silva, is shown in the older photo. Clem appears in the contemporary picture. This picture also shows another father-son team, Dave and Paul Colburn.

The town's five pumpers were renamed and renumbered several times through the department's history. A rundown of the names for the Pumper 5 begins in 1869 with "Ulysses 1," converted in 1920 to "Hose 1," in 1947 to "Pumper 4," in the early 1950's to "Pumper 5." Its official title now is "Engine 5."