

STARTING WITH NOTHING – BUT LOOK AT US NOW

Raccoon Twp. Ind. Vol. Fire Department No. 1

History Memories – Beverly Vinisky

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The year was 1947 in the lightly populated township of Raccoon. Lights of homes at evening were far and few between. Holt Road is where Mr. Staub lived raising chickens. For no known reason the coop caught fire. Closest neighbors saw the smoke and headed for his farm. With buckets of water from the outside pump men tried vainly to put the fire out, but to no avail. Everything was gone.

This fire is what caused the men to talking about starting a fire department for the protection of their homes if needed. So one evening this group of men got together at Lawrence Christy's home to plan how to go about it. After the first meeting they continued their plans meeting at the Greengarden (one room) schoolhouse. The group collected money from among themselves to purchase five Indian Tanks. Five other men purchased their own tanks.

Next came their purchase of a construction water truck. Then the work began making it into their fire truck. They had to purchase a front mount pump that went on the front of the truck. The tank held 500 gallons of water. The first garage for the truck was Lawrence Christy's cellar under his home. There was no siren, so the way the firemen were notified of the fire location was by telephone. The first person sighting the smoke or flame called Mr. Christy's home. Mrs. Christy had five members to call, and each number she called had five calls to make. The beginning total of firemen was 28.

Next came the project of buying a piece of property and getting a building to officially establish the Raccoon Fire Dept. The property purchase posed a problem because every time they selected a piece of property, it was blocked for some reason. Then, one day someone offered them ground on Patterson Road so the officers quickly called a special meeting, two firemen loaned them the money they needed, and they quickly made the purchase.

The first building to hold the fire truck was concrete block, which was a Kobuta home building in Potter Township. So how do you move a building at that time? Mr. Gaze Yoko got the use of a truck from Kobuta. During the daytime available firemen would scrape and pry the blocks loose from one-another. In the evenings men and women would load blocks on the truck for hauling to Patterson Road. These same men laid the block for the construction of the first fire-hall. It was a proud day when they put their fire truck in it's first home. When they did purchase a siren the way it was blown was by the first man arriving at the fire hall switching it on and it blew until more men arrived at the fire hall, then they would turn it off.

Now the interesting part – when the fire truck left for a fire with a few men on board, how did the men that came later in their cars know where to go? As the fire truck headed down Patterson Road, if the truck turned right at the intersection there was a marker, being a 5# bag of lime, thrown off the truck by a fireman which broke, and showed which way the truck went. This went on with each intersection until they got near the fire.

The wives of the firemen got together and started the Ladies Auxiliary. They helped in the monetary way with strawberry festivals, the traveling basket, and later fish fry dinners. Just to let you know the difference preparing for fish fry week meant Thursdays about six women would sit at a table scraping the SCALES off the fish. Yes, we all had our own layer by the time we were finished, which usually took two hours at least. Then potatoes were boiled, were peeled by hand for the potato salad and French fries, and you know what, we were enjoying ourselves. The

cabbage for coleslaw was chopped Friday. And these dinners were “All you can eat”! Bowls of potato salad and coleslaw were put on the tables for people to help themselves. Even fish was given if asked for with no extra charges.

The first fire department fair was 1950. Today you wouldn't even call it a Fair. There were very few small rides, a few games for adults and children. The men had a Penny Pitch, which in later years they gave to the Boy Scouts to earn money. The Auxiliary ladies solicited the neighbors for material donations of pottery, embroidery work, flowers in planters, whatever they might have to give us to sell. We even canvassed the stores on Franklin Avenue and received very nice items and also used some for door prizes. Most of the ladies worked selling hot dogs, hamburgers, French fries and pop.

After a few years the men put on the “Outside Counter” to the kitchen, it was about 20'x12” and gave us a bigger serving area. The pop coolers, with ice in them, were kept there, and I think we might have even had ice cream sandwiches, and Eskimo pies in a cooler. To shut it up at nights the men had made sheets of plywood that raised and lowered as needed. Though these were not the big money-making fairs of today, they were the friendliest, happiest times and the children could run and play, and ride for the evening with never a fear of something bad happening to them.

Another event that helped keep the fire department going was the making of apple butter. This was a “couples” event that went on for days, and evenings. After the apples were ready for cooking in the copper kettles, in fires outside, it was stirring for hours and hours. Not just one day! After the cooking we had the bottling of jar after jar of delicious apple butter which sold without any problem.

When the fire department had a call that meant they would be at it for some time, beverages were taken to the fire by a few of the women. There was a brush fire that lasted a couple of days so food was brought in, some taken from the freezer and cooked at the fire hall for the firemen to be able to have a meal.

Maybe because we started from scratch to build a fire department we were a closer group of friends. We had our families, and husbands worked as you do today, but TV didn't rule the house, and much less pressure on our lives because of a difference in the way the world was spinning. I know “You can't go back again”, but I just want you to know a little more about the fun time we spent together.

We rented a bus to attend a few Pirates games in Pittsburgh at Forbes Field in Oakland. Then there were summer musicals, or plays, put on outside in the summer, again at football fields in Pittsburgh. Of course that always meant stopping for something to eat coming home.

We had a Fall party at the little, old fire house. It was a covered dish dinner and then we got into fun stuff, which included the husbands sewing a patch on their wife's dress or slacks at the lower hip. Just seeing the husbands trying to sew was a belly laugh.

There was a period of time when the firemen that wanted, stayed after a meeting on Monday nights and played cards. Don't know if there was any money on the table, but they seemed to enjoy those games.

When it came to Installation Dinners, we really lived it up. We dressed in our best clothes and went out to dinner at different restaurants in the County.

I'm pleased to see how your group of men is continuing fish fry dinners, and doing a good job of it, and keeping the Fair going each year. The people seem to look forward to it possibly beside helping the firemen, visiting with people they may have not seen in awhile.

These are a fraction of the memories I remember through the years that helped form the fire department as good as it is today. I'm sure there are many other interesting facts that I have forgotten, but probably hard to find someone else from the beginning.

I'm honored to be a relative to Four Generations of Raccoon Firefighters. Andrew Vinisky, my father-in-law, Robert A, my husband, two sons Robert Drew. (until Diabetes became a problem), David Edward., and now our Grandson Mathew Vinisky.

I enjoyed working 2 ½ hours in the kitchen Friday night of the Fair. Stop laughing, at 81 2 ½ hours is a Marathon for me. It brought back many memories and I only hope you younger members care as much for your fire department as all us Old-Timers did. You seem to be doing a pretty good job to me and I'm still proud of our fire department.

So, now when you see an "Older" lady wandering around you're kitchen, you'll know who it is. Not checking up on you, just reliving her life a little.

Wishing you Years of Success

Beverly Vinisky