

Rockwood Fire Department History

The fire department was officially founded in 1896, after two devastating fires in 1894. The first was in July 1894 which burned most of the south side of downtown between Wilder Ave. & Chamberlain Ave. The second fire happened several months later and burned the north side of downtown, with the exception of one building. It was decided soon after that the town needed an organized fire department. It is unclear how many men volunteered for the fire department when it started, but it is known that William E. McElwee was the first fire chief. We also have no knowledge of what fire equipment was used during these early years before the establishment of a true fire station or motorized vehicles.

In the early years, all members of the fire department were volunteer, including the fire chief, who was appointed by the mayor. It's not clear what year the fire department hired the first paid firefighter, but that man was Arther 'Pop' Lawson. We do know that he was working as early as the 1920's. He stayed at the fire hall, which was in the old Molyneux building located behind the First American Bank building on Chamberlain Ave. He worked 24/7 only leaving the fire hall on Sundays for a couple hours to go home for dinner. Even though, the fire department had a chief during this time it is basically understood that Pop was the defacto leader of the fire department.

Pop Lawson remained the only paid firefighter on the fire department until his retirement sometime in the 1950's, at which time the first paid firefighters were hired. To the best of our knowledge from passed on information, the fire department started with three paid firefighters, but quickly grew to six paid positions. It stayed that way until the late 1970's, when the department increased to ten positions. In 1976, the first paid fire chief was hired.

After Pop retired, the fire department was still staffed for 24 hours, but worked several different shift cycles before settling on the traditional 24/24 in the late 1960's. In the early 1980's, the staff was increased to 12 paid positions and the department went to the current 24/48 shift cycle with four firefighters on each shift.

Today, each shift is made up of a Captain, Lieutenant, and two firefighters. We no longer have volunteer firefighters in the same sense as those who came before us. We still have a combination department, but our reserve firefighters are now 'paid on call' members who not only respond when we have emergencies, but are called on to fill in during vacations, times of illness, and inclement weather. We have a total of 13 career personnel, including the fire chief, 14 paid on call firefighters, one volunteer Assistant Chief, who oversees the paid on call members, and serves as a reserve engineer, and one volunteer Chaplin.

In 1927, the fire department purchased its first motorized fire engine. The American LaFrance arrived on a railcar and was unloaded at the town depot. We know that the department had smaller support vehicles, such as pickups or vans over the years and chief vehicles, but the 27 ALF was the only true fire engine the fire department had until the purchase of a 1954

American LaFrance Type 700 convertible. The next engine purchased was a 1961 American LaFrance 900 series convertible. That year the fire department moved into its new station on S. Front Ave. near the location of where the current city street department garage is today. Soon after, a second station was opened on S. Kingston Ave.

In 1975, the main station ironically burned down. The fire department then moved most of its equipment to the station on S. Kingston Ave. and stationed one fire engine temporarily at the National Guard Armory. In 1976, the city purchased a brand new modern American LaFrance Pioneer series engine, the first closed cab the department ever bought. In 1978, the fire department converted an old 1970 (we think) Chevrolet oil/fuel truck into a 1000 gallon tanker truck. In 1979, the department moved into a new modern fire station, where we still reside today, and continued to operate out of the Kingston Ave. station as well.

Also during that year another engine was added to the fleet, a 1979 American LaFrance/Ford C series. This would be the last ALF truck bought by the city. In 1980, after a several large downtown commercial fire, it was decided that we had a need for an aerial ladder truck/elevated stream device, so the search began. The city picked a used 1965 Seagrave 65ft. ladder truck that had been purchased by and served the Kansas City Missouri Fire Department. The city next purchased a new 1980 FMC/Chevrolet mini pumper rescue.

In 1990, it was decided the 65 Seagrave ladder truck needed to be replaced. As a result, in 1991, the city purchased a new Sutphen 75ft. ladder truck, the first tilt cab chassis that Sutphen manufactured, by the way. We added two new KME/International fire engines in 1995 & 2000 updating our worn out fleet of engines at the time. In 2013, the city purchased our newest addition to the fleet, a 2013 Sutphen fire engine.

In 2003, we started providing a new service to our citizens known as First Responder medical response. We started out with an early 1990's Jeep Cherokee; then we moved into a 1990 Ford F-350 with a utility bed. After that, we purchased a 1999 Chevy Suburban 2500 and used it until we bought a new 2010 Ford F-350 light rescue, which we are currently using for our medical calls & vehicle accidents.

Today we operate both Sutphens, both KME's, the F-350 rescue & the 1976 ALF as a reserve and public education truck. In 2012, Station #2, located on S. Kingston Ave, was closed due to its age and flooding issues making it uninhabitable by personnel. The building still houses our reserve vehicles and our 1927 ALF which has been restored.

We are unsure how firefighters were notified when they were needed on a call in the beginning. However, sometime in the early years, a large siren was acquired and installed on the roof of the fire station located on Chamberlain Ave. When a call came in, whomever was at the station at the time would blow the siren a certain amount of times to designate what part of town the fire was located. For example, one blast for the north side or two blasts for the southwest side, sort of like a Morris Code System. In the 1960's, a reverse call system was put into place. If you were a member of the fire department, your phone number was

put into this system. When a fire was called in at the station, one of the firefighters would pick up another phone, push a button that would in turn ring everyone's phones at home. At the same time, that firefighter would tell everyone what the call was and where, he would continue to repeat the call and location a few times before leaving the station in route to the call. In the early 1980's, the fire department started using modern radio pagers and were dispatched from the station, before the firefighters left on the call. In the mid 1990's, firemen started being dispatched by a modern E911 system that serves not only Rockwood but the entire county.

Some of our more notable incidents over the years:

South & North side of downtown which led to the creation of the fire department, July 1894

Iron Ore Mine explosion, 14 fatalities, 1926

First Baptist Church corner of Strang St. & N. Chamberlain Ave., 1948

Bowman's Lumber Yard on N. Front Ave., 1950's

Hickey's Store corner of Rockwood St. & Front. Ave., 1960's

JC Penney store corner of Rockwood St. & Chamberlain Ave., 1960's

First Christian Church on Rockwood St., 1960's

A & P's Market on Rockwood St., 1978

Campbell High School at Brick Yard Springs Ballfield, 1970's

Lay's Grocery on Rockwood St., 1977

Bromine spill on Interstate 40/Rockwood Mountain. Evacuated entire city, 1977

Walker's Real Estate on corner of Rockwood St. & Chamberlain Ave., 1979

Peggy Ann Hotel & Restaurant on S. Gateway Ave., 1985

Rockwood Hotel on Rockwood St., 1986

Rockwood Antique Mall on Rockwood St., 2003

Several floods and train derailments have happened in the town's history.

Past Fire Chiefs

William E. McElwee 1901-1905

I.G. Fleming 1905-1913

W.N. Thompson 1913-1916

John A. East 1916-1925

John H. Booth 1925-1934 1st term

Fred Robbin 1934-1936

John H. Booth 1936-1939 2nd term

Cecil H. Kelley 1939-1952

John Albertson Jr. 1952-1961

Howard Booth 1965-1970

Bill Beckner 1970

Raymond Russell 1971

Hubert Kirby 1972-1974

Rollin Wyrick 1975

Wiley Ray Martin 1976

Edd Williams 1977

Robert M. Wertz 1977-1981 1st term

Fred Eachus 1981-1984 1st term

Charlie Akins (public safety chief) 1985

Fred Eachus 1986-1993 2nd term

David Foland (public safety chief) 1993-1995

J.W. Cisson (public safety chief) 1995-2003

Robert M. Wertz 2003-2015 2nd term

Matthew Crabtree current chief

It would be impossible to name everyone who has served at the Rockwood Fire Department. However, several families have had multiple members who served as firefighters. Some of these families include the Lawson family, Kirby family, Brasal family, Russell family, Henderson family, Pelfrey family, McNeal family, Booth family, Martin family, Redwine family, Albertson family and the Crabtree family.

We would like to thank all of our current and past members for their service to our citizens. Those of us who have served are only temporary stewards of this department, it was here before most of us and will be here after we are gone. Remember your past and share in the pride of every firefighter who has served here, our history is rich and our future bright.