

Tom Purdy

How North Salem got its first Fire Truck

I have been asked by some kind people of the North Salem Historical Society to record for the record how the hamlet of North Salem got its first fire truck. Incidentally, my name is Thomas Purdy.

Well, it was quite a story. Shortly after the second World War, Carlo Paterno and I went to a number of fires here in our community where, if a truck had been there at the time we were there, the fire could have been easily put out and the house saved, and we thought it was a shame that someone wasn't there with at least a garden hose to put out the fire. We thought it would be a wonderful project for the North Salem-Salem Center Improvement Society to sponsor a fund to buy a fire truck which would be kept here in the eastern part of the town, in North Salem, or Salem Center. So we made quite a drive. It took a year or two to actually raise sufficient funds to buy a truck. As I recall it was going to cost somewhere in the neighborhood of \$15,000 to \$20,000. And this was back, I believe, in 1952.

We finally raised the money to buy the truck and the truck was going to be a John Beam, high pressure fog truck. Carlo and I both having been in the service, the Air Force which used trucks such as this at various air force installations, realized their capabilities of putting out all kinds of relatively small fires, and all fires. And so we, in raising the funds through the NSIS, specified that that was the kind of truck we were going to buy. So, with a lot of help from other people in town, of course, we raised the money to buy the truck. But, then they found that to ship the truck back from the factory, which was in Lansing, Michigan, was going to cost another \$700 or \$800. Well, that was the straw that broke the camel's back. We just couldn't raise that money so we decided to go out to the school out there where they, the factory where they made the truck, they trained people to use it, and we'd take a course in using the truck and then drive the truck back here. And with us going out there were a number of firemen and prospective firemen because they were going to have our company here in North Salem which was going to be part of the Croton Falls Fire Department, which had been long established.

So, as I recall, there was Benny Van Scoy, from North Salem, and, of course, Carlo Paterno and myself, Jimmy Elliott and Leo Gallagher. Leo was an old-time fireman from Croton Falls. So, we flew out to Lansing and had a lot of fun going to school out there at Lansing. We had a day or two of paper work where we were told how the truck operated and how it was built and all the specifications of it. Then, what was the most fun was practicing with the truck that we were actually going to own. And, they showed us how to use it and it was quite a dangerous piece of equipment because it had such high pressure. But we had a house out on the proving ground – where we'd set the house on fire, drench it with gasoline, set a match to it and then we would have to go and put it out in a certain length of time and the instructors would explain to us what we had done wrong and how we could do it faster. After we got very proficient they passed us and the truck was ours. Well, Carlo and I were elected to drive the truck back and that was an amusing experience because as we started off down the road with the truck, as soon as we got a little ways away from the factory, people thought that we were going to a fire and we would find long lines of traffic following us. Finally, we would pull off to the side of the road and tell them that we weren't going to a fire, we were just driving the truck from Michigan to New York.

Everything went along just fine until we decided that we were going to spend the night in Akron, Ohio. In Akron, we decided to stay at the Mayflower Hotel. I happened to be driving the truck at the time. We would alternate, he would drive an hour and I would drive an hour, back and forth, but it was my hour when we arrived in Akron. I pulled up at the hotel on Main Street in Akron with the fire truck. Well, the doorman, who was colored, turned ashen white at the sight of the truck stopped right there because he thought the hotel was on fire. He went dashing into the hotel to see what was the matter. Finally we calmed him down and explained we were just stopping for the night and by that time quite a crowd had collected in the street and a policeman came over and got up on the running board beside me and asked me what was the matter. I told him we were just stopping for the night and he told us we had to get the truck out of there because it was causing a terrible traffic jam. I asked him if he could suggest a good place to put it because we didn't want to leave it in the hotel parking lot because of all the equipment and what not that was on the truck and we didn't want it stolen because we had been entrusted with this truck and wanted to get it back to North Salem safe and sound without losing any nozzles or axes or helmets or anything such as that. So, he said, "Well, there's a commercial garage down at the other end of town" and he tried to give me directions to it. And I said, "Well, officer, maybe you could drive down there with us."

So, he got in and sat between Carlo and me and there was a red light up in front of us and I pulled out in the street and waited for the red light and the officer looked at me in a disgusting manner and said, "What are you driving here anyway?" And I said, "Well, officer, I'm just obeying the traffic signals." So, I pointed to a button right in front of him that he could put his foot on and blow the siren, so he put his foot on that and it didn't come off it for the next ten minutes! And down the street we went like mad until we finally came to this garage. Of course, they thought the garage was on fire. Anyhow, we went into the garage and calmed them down and told them we just wanted to put the truck someplace for the night. Well, they didn't want to leave it on the main floor because of the same problem of people fussing with it. It was an attractive thing, but, what they might go out with some souvenirs. So they said we could park it on the second floor. Well, there was a narrow ramp up to the second floor and they thought we could drive it up there without any problems and we could have the whole second floor to ourselves to park it there, which was very nice and we parked it there.

The next morning we wanted to get an early start and get back to North Salem for the big reception that was going to be given that evening. Well, we got down to the garage about 5:30 or 5:45 in the morning to find out that after we put the truck up on the second floor, the second floor had been rented out to a laundry company that had any number of laundry trucks there. So, we couldn't possibly turn the truck around because of all the laundry trucks there and we had to back the thing down the ramp! Well, it took us about an hour because we didn't dare to get one single scratch on it because we know how irate the good citizens of North Salem would be if they saw so much as a scratch on the truck. Well, we finally got the truck down the ramp and headed for home. Well then we drove the thing on and on and on and finally it got dark and (this was a big truck and we couldn't go too fast and we drove over the Pennsylvania Turnpike) and here again people would follow the truck by the mile wondering where the fire was and after they followed the truck for about 20 or 30 miles they would give up. And as we came to toll gates, people would wave up through being sure we were headed for a fire and we would wave back to them as we went gaily through.

And we finally got back and we would see people coming out into the street, and blowing the

siren like mad and waking up the family and my children (they were quite small at the time)they got up in the middle of the night, including my good wife and they all climbed all over the truck and inspected it very carefully and then Carlo drove it on home to his place where he kept it for the night and the next day we had a big reception. The Improvement Society had a party and presented the truck to the fire district.

And that's how the first fire truck arrived here in the hamlet of Salem Center. Since then it has been replaced by other trucks and I think that the old truck that we drove back was white - we wanted to have something a little bit different - so it was a white truck and we were very proud and pleased. And it lasted for about fifteen or eighteen years and put out a great many fires, brush fires and other types of fires. And, that's the story.

End.