

## Pottsville Fire Department

Looking Back

30 Years Ago

March, 1982

Mike Glore

A big “thank you” to Fire Chief Todd March for his detailed review of the fire investigations conducted during the month of March, 1982, and for sharing his records/archives. Also, thanks have to be given to former Pottsville firefighter Michael Braukus of Yorkville Hose for writing an excellent article on the Webb’s Tire fire that appeared in the May, 1983 issue of Fire Engineering magazine.

03/06/1982 – Box 214 – 13:45 – 348 Anderson St; Occupant: Wm. Zimmerman; Cause: Sparks from welder’s torch; Loss: \$4,000. This is the garage at the corner of Mauch Chunk and Anderson Sts. Fire spread to a work bench and a portion of the interior wall.

03/13/1982 – Box 14 – 13:12 – 112 E. Norwegian St; Joyce’s Café; Cause: Neon light transformer shorted-out; Loss: \$3,000. Minor fire damage was done to the roof overhang in the rear entrance.

03/19/1982 – Box 25 – 05:59 – 594 S. Centre St; Loyal Order of Moose; Cause: Arson; Loss: \$500. Arriving firefighters were confronted with smoke in the building. A fire was discovered burning underneath the bar area in the first floor grill room. While the damage was minor, it was discovered that the building had been burglarized and the fire set to cover the burglary. Investigators quickly zeroed-in on a suspect, William C. Talley. In attempting to arrest Mr. Talley, he fled and was captured after he had fallen in the mud. Detective Dave Newton photographed Mr. Talley with his muddy knees after the arrest. Talley was questioned and subsequently released. The photo, however, was going to prove very important a little later in the month.

03/21/1982 – Box – 522 – 17:10 – 3<sup>rd</sup> & Laurel Boulevard; False Alarm; To start the evening off, a 7-year old girl boosted her 5-year old brother up to the corner telegraph fire alarm box so that he could pull the alarm. The children

were quickly identified and the matter turned-over to the Pottsville Police Department to address with the family.

03/21/1982 – Box 54 – 19:34 – 801 W. Race St; Occupant: Elizabeth Mohl; Cause: Arson; Loss: \$2,000. Companies arrived with light smoke showing from the top floor of the 3-story frame stand-alone dwelling on the southwest corner of 8<sup>th</sup> & W. Race Sts. The fire damaged a bed and portions of the floor and walls in a third floor front bedroom and was under control within half an hour. Two of the Mohl children reported the fire after they said they had heard the smoke detector. It was initially believed that the fire may have been caused by careless smoking, until...

03/21/1982 – Box 54 (again) – 22:10 – 801 W. Race St; Occupant: Elizabeth Mohl; Cause: Arson; Loss: \$2,000. This time companies arrived with fire and smoke again visible in the top floor front bedroom of the home. A fire on the opposite side of the bedroom involving a dresser and wall was quickly knocked-down. Fire Chief Todd March, Pottsville Police Detectives, and State Police Fire Marshal Lawrence Postupak determined both fires to have been arson. This would not be the end of the fire saga at the Mohl house at 801 W. Race that year...



West End firefighters Len "Bunky" Ryan (left) and Harry Reed (right) remove a mattress over the aerial ladder at the Mohl house after the first fire on the evening of March 21, 1982.

03/27/1982 – Box 523 – 05:27 – 800-802-804-806 Mt. Hope Ave; Cause: Arson; Loss: \$56,000; Still alarm: 10:55 – Humane returned for rekindle; Occupants and losses:

800-802 – Webb’s Tire Service \$50,000

804 – Frank Pekarskis 6,000

806 – Vacant 0

The Webb’s Tire Service building was located on the northwest corner of North 8<sup>th</sup> St. & Mt. Hope Ave. The building measured approximately 30 x 60 feet, was two stories in height, and was of ordinary construction. A 50 x 100 foot one-story garage adjoined the rear of the building and served as the company’s warehouse. This was also of ordinary construction and fronted N. 8<sup>th</sup> St. To the west (B exposure) was an adjacent 2 ½ story frame duplex. Frank Pekarskis occupied the home at 804 Mt. Hope Ave. The other half of the duplex at 806 was vacant at the time of the fire.

Shortly before 05:30 that Saturday morning, Perkarskis began to smell smoke in his home. As the odor became overpowering, he discovered that Webb’s Tire Service next door was on fire. He quickly turned-in the alarm. Box 523 began to bang-in at City firehouses and house sirens were sounded.

Humane Engine 33 – a 1980 Seagrave WB Model 1250 gpm pumper – arrived on scene first. They were immediately aware that they were heading into a working fire as heavy smoke blanketed the area down through N. 7<sup>th</sup> St. on the approach. Proceeding cautiously, firefighters found heavy fire showing from both floors of the Webb’s building. Humane turned onto N. 8<sup>th</sup> St. and dropped a 3” supply line from the hydrant at 8<sup>th</sup> & Mt. Hope Ave. They immediately began an exterior attack to knock-down the heavy fire.

American Hose Engine 71 arrived and positioned their 1975 American LaFrance Century Series 1000 gpm pumper at 8<sup>th</sup> & Mt. Hope Ave. They immediately stretched a line to knock-down the heavy fire showing from the front (A side) of the building. Using a soft suction, Engine 71 steamed the hydrant at 8<sup>th</sup> & Mt. Hope from which Humane had laid their supply line. An additional 3” supply line was laid to Engine 33. The smoke condition was banked in the street so severely that Engine 71 pump operator Charlie Sibbett had to crack a 2 ½” discharge on the pump panel to obtain fresh air to breathe

(this is also the reason that American Hose pumpers since have featured a breathing air system for the driver/operator).

Assistant Chief Bill Cerullo (American Hose) arrived and assumed command. Assistant Chiefs George Moyer (Greenwood Hill) and Gary Witmier (Good Intent) also arrived on scene and were assigned to the fireground. Cerullo ordered 2 ½" lines stretched due to the volume of fire and also ordered the exposed homes on the B side vented as they were now beginning to show heavy smoke from the attic area.

Phoenix Ladder 21 positioned their 1978 Century Series American LaFrance tractor-drawn 100' aerial ladder on the front (A side) of the fire. Aerial operations were prohibited, however, due to the overhead power lines and a completely obstructed view due to the smoke condition. Phoenix firefighters laddered the exposed frame homes. As heavy fire conditions now existed in the attic area of the homes, the roof was too compromised to operate on. Numerous ground ladders were thrown to both the exposed homes as well as the Webb building.

Fire Chief Todd March arrived and, after conferring with Cerullo, determined that a greater volume of water would be needed. March assumed the role of water supply officer. He directed Greenwood Hill Engine 81 – a 1967 IH/Hahn 750 gpm pumper - to lay a 3" supply line from the hydrant at 7<sup>th</sup> & Mt. Hope Ave. Engine 81 then fed West End Ladder 51's 1977 Seagrave 1000 gpm/100' quint, which was positioned nose-to-nose with Phoenix on Mt. Hope Ave, generally on the A/B corner of the fire. Yorkville Rescue 63 – a 1981 IH/Swab heavy rescue truck arrived behind Ladder 51 on Mt. Hope Ave.

Humane Engine 31 arrived with the company's 1953 Seagrave 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Series 1000 gpm pumper on Harrison St. to the rear of the fire building after dropping a 3" supply line from the hydrant at 7<sup>th</sup> & Harrison Sts. Good Will Engine 41 – a 1963 GMC/American 750 gpm high pressure pumper – also arrived via Harrison St. and took the same hydrant from which Engine 31 had laid-in. Engine 41 then supplied both Engine 31 and Engine 33.

Chief March then ordered Good Intent Engine 11 – a 1975 Hahn 1000 gpm pumper - to reverse lay a 3" supply line from Engine 81 on Mt. Hope Ave. to the hydrant at 7<sup>th</sup> & Laurel Boulevard, which is fed from a 12" main. As adequate water was now available, master streams were operated from deck guns and Ladder 51's ladder pipe to knock-down the heavy fire that was now showing from the roof of the original fire building as well as the roofs of the adjoining frame homes.

As most of the heavy fire was blackened-down, firefighters advanced 1 ½” handlines via the rear one-story warehouse portion of the building as well as the second floor of the office portion of the building via ground ladders. With the fire prevented from spreading northward into the warehouse portion and the main body of fire knocked down in the original fire building and the exposures, the fire was placed under control. Extensive overhaul was necessary as the fire had gutted the Webb’s building and heavily damaged the adjoining frame homes. By 07:30, companies were beginning to be released from the scene.



Heavy fire is showing from the front (A side) of the Webb’s Tire building as firefighters from the American Hose (Engine 71) put a handline in service.



Truckies from the Phoenix (Ladder 21) attempt to make the roof of the frame homes adjoining the Webb's Tire building (B exposure).



Firefighter Mike Braukus of Yorkville Hose (Rescue 63) takes the glass on the second floor of the exposed frame homes at the Webb's Tire fire. Braukus authored the Fire Engineering article on the fire.



Fire breaks-through the attic area of the frame homes next to Webb's Tires. Phoenix L21 – 1978 American LaFrance 100' tractor-drawn aerial ladder – is handicapped by the tangle of overhead utility wires and limited visibility in the block.



This view shows the D side of the Webb's Tire building along N. 8<sup>th</sup> St. American Hose Engine 71 – 1975 American LaFrance 1000 gpm pumper – is visible on Mt. Hope Ave.



Overhauling continues on the Webb's Tire building as well as the frames homes to the left (B side) in the photo.

03/28/1982 – Box 114 – 05:01 – 208 W. Market St; Gordon Reed Insurance Agency and apartments; Cause: Arson; Loss: \$12,000.

The 3-story middle-of-the-group building of ordinary construction housed the Gordon Reed Insurance Agency as well as apartments on the upper floors. Smelling smoke early that morning, resident Albert Meyers alerted the other tenants who escaped the building and reported the fire. Companies arrived with smoke showing and immediately found evidence of multiple fires burning in the first floor middle offices. A pretty good room and contents job was also going in the rear first floor storage area. Lines were advanced via the front door and the spot fires were quickly controlled. A line into the rear quickly knocked-down the main body of fire in the storage area. The fire was placed under control in 15 minutes, with heavy smoke throughout the building. Fires were found to be burning along the baseboard, in a desk drawer, on a desk, in a storage cabinet, in a filing cabinet, and on the floor in the storage area, which was gutted. In addition, investigators found a lock that had been forced in a first-floor door.





West End L51 has the aerial ladder to the third floor of the Reed Agency building on W. Market St. Also visible are (left) American Hose E71 – 1975 American LaFrance – and Good Intent – 1975 Hahn – pumpers.

While investigating the Webb's Tire fire, it was determined that a stereo and tape deck were missing from the building. It was also quickly determined that there were multiple points of origin. Investigators now had three similar fires – the Moose Lodge, Webb's Tires, and the Reed Insurance Agency – in a very short period of time. While digging-out the Webb's fire, the investigators – Fire Chief March, City Police Detectives, and State Police Fire Marshal Larry Postupak - found a man's wristwatch in the debris. City Police Detective Dave Newton said that the watch looked very much like the one that William Talley had on when he was questioned following the Moose fire. They checked the photos of Talley taken after the Moose fire and confirmed that it was the same watch. On April 2, City Police Detective John Muschock obtained a search warrant and he and Chief March went to Talley's residence. The missing items identified in the Webb's Fire – the stereo and tape deck – were found in Talley's apartment and were verified by the serial numbers. Talley was arrested. During the course of the interview – when presented with the evidence from the fires – Talley admitted to Chief March that he did, in fact, set the three fires. He was charged with arson, burglary, and theft.

...so ended a very busy and very intriguing month for the Pottsville Fire Department.