

Salt Lake firefighters have battled blazes since 1853

By Marc Haddock

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Since 1853, organized units of firefighters have been protecting lives and property from the destructive forces of fire in Salt Lake City. That was the year Mayor Jedediah M. Grant signed an ordinance creating Utah's first citywide volunteer fire brigade.

"We aim to aid and work to save" was the motto of the volunteers, who were responsible for fighting the city's fires until June 21, 1883, when a midnight fire at H. B. Clawson's Wagon Depot the block south of Temple Square convinced city leaders that a professional fire department was needed.

An account in Jeffrey D. Nichols' history of the department detailed the extent of the disaster:

"At about 12:30 a.m., an enormous explosion rocked the scene. ... Windows were shattered for blocks; only two panes remained intact at the ZCMI building. The fire had reached a cache of powder that Clawson had stored (illegally) on his premises.

"The fire spread to Savage's Art Gallery next to Clawson's, as well as to the old Council House, which housed the offices of the Woman's Exponent. A few burning embers blew across South Temple Street and ignited the roofs of the Tabernacle and the Tithing Office but were quickly extinguished. When the fire was finally doused, the damage was extensive: Clawson's and Savage's properties were almost total losses, along with the Council House, Scrace's Bakery, Elias Morris's headstone shop, Sorenson and Carlquist's furniture store, Joseph Hyrum Parry's print shop, and Joseph Rawlins's and Ben Judson's shoe shops."

Throughout the years, Salt Lake firefighters have responded to countless fires, and often the clanging of the fire bell and clamor of the siren attracted photographers from the Deseret News. Photo researcher Ron Fox has culled the newspaper archives looking for many of these images, which can be seen at the newspaper Web site, deseretnews.com.

There were no photographers on the scene at the 1883 downtown fire, but one photo in the collection shows a horse-drawn fire wagon racing east down 100 South, steam billowing from the boiler. That first professional force consisted of four wagons, one aerial truck, two steam engines, 1,400 feet of hose, 30 horses and 64 firemen.

Two steam engines and several firemen are on display in another photo, taken in 1890 in front of Salt Lake Fires Station No. 2 at 19 N. 200 West.

A later photo shows a group gathered in front of Ottinger Hall, erected in 1904 at 233 Canyon Road in Memory Grove as a social hall for the Veteran Volunteer Firemen's Association and named after George M. Ottinger.

Ottinger was the fourth and last chief of the volunteer fire department in 1876, and when the Salt Lake City Fire Department was established on Oct. 1, 1883, he stayed on as the chief for seven more years. After he was unceremoniously dismissed in 1890, Ottinger organized the association, made up of the old volunteers in the photo.

In many of the photos, firefighters are captured "aiming to aid and working to save" at blazes such as the Sept. 16, 1981, fire that destroyed storage tanks at EkoTek Inc., the blaze that damaged the historic Oquirrh Place office building on July 17, 1985, and the Aug. 6, 1989, fire that ignited a

lumber yard and razed a half block between 500 and 600 East at 2200 South and required the efforts of firefighters from all over the county to quench.

A story about that last fire by Deseret News staff writer Brian T. West demonstrates the danger that is an accepted part of the firefighter's job:

"The already-searing temperatures made the battle extra difficult for firefighters. Two were sent to Holy Cross hospital. One South Salt Lake firefighter suffered an ankle injury, and a Salt Lake firefighter was hospitalized after breathing an unknown toxic chemical that was stored in one of the buildings."

No lives were lost that day.

e-mail: mhaddock@desnews.com