

# GRANVILLE FIREFIGHTERS

*The Story of a  
Community Institution*

B. KEVIN BENNETT



GRANVILLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
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**Granville Firefighters: The Story of a Community Institution**

*Granville Historical Society Pocket History No. 7*

By B. Kevin Bennett

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## Preface

THE HISTORY OF THE GRANVILLE COMMUNITY, now well past its two-hundredth birthday, has many rich and interesting strands. One of the most vibrant is the story of the Granville Fire Department through its numerous incarnations. Growing up in Granville, one became quickly aware of the special place the local firefighters held in the hearts of the community. Manned by citizen-volunteers from the village, Denison University, and the township, the fire department was a continuing source of local pride. In our close-knit community it often seemed that every family either had a member who had served or had themselves been assisted by the unit. This civic pride was—and is still—matched by the various members who have made sacrifices both big and small over the years.

Recently, while serving as a Granville Township trustee tasked with oversight of the now-designated Granville Township Fire Department, I became involved with the decision to end the “volunteer” manning of the department. While this change was in a sentimental sense regrettable, the reality of modern firefighting and emergency medical services dictated this decision. The hundreds of hours of training and certifications required of our firefighter/paramedics are such that it proved unrealistic to expect that adequate staffing could be obtained

from volunteers.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, after 183 years, the era of citizen-volunteers serving as our firefighters has come to an end. This significant milestone did, however, spur interest in capturing the long history of this Granville institution. Aided by longtime firefighter and former township official Norman Kennedy, I have collected in this book the recollections of numerous individuals whose lives were touched in some manner by the unit. This then, is the story of the Granville Fire Department.

—*B. Kevin Bennett*

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## The Early Years

GRANVILLE, OHIO, WAS FOUNDED IN 1805. By 1834, it was a thriving community with ambitions of becoming the commercial and industrial hub of Licking County.<sup>2</sup> Almost three decades since being first settled, the village had grown to 362 residents and the township was home to 1,421 souls, according to the 1830 federal census. The community was in transition: The original New England settlers were growing fewer and being replaced by their descendants and other newcomers lured by economic opportunity. While there were traces of the rough and simple pioneer past, the community was marked by numerous brick and frame residences, a thriving commercial center, three chartered schools, four churches, and a number of industrial ventures.

Fortunately, the village had been spared many fires; the most notable that did occur was the 1815 fire in the frame portion of the Grove Case house (located near the site of the modern-day Granville Inn). According to reports, the chimney caught fire, and the blaze quickly spread, aided by a large amount of tallow grease stored near the

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<sup>1</sup>Although the firefighters on duty are mostly full-time or part-time career personnel, one long-serving firefighter, David Kishler, is still technically carried as a “volunteer” on the department roster.

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<sup>2</sup>For more on early industry in Granville, see another Granville Historical Society publication, *Granville's Industrial Past* by Theresa Overholser.



chimney. Neighbors quickly gathered and, using buckets filled from a nearby cistern, were able to save the brick portion of the home.

By 1834, however, a sense of community pride and necessity resulted in the formation of the first organized “fire department.” Headed by John R. Griffiths, the energetic nephew of local businessman Anthony P. Prichard, the effort raised contributions to purchase a small, hand-pulled tank bound by metal bands; the tank was filled utilizing a hose that could be placed in local wells or in several cisterns that were dug in the central part of the village for the purpose. The acquisition of the tank was accompanied by the purchase of a dozen leather water buckets for dousing fires. Uniforms were obtained, and the fire company volunteers were drilled by young Griffiths. The history of these initial firefighters remains sketchy, and they appeared to have disbanded shortly after Fire Warden Griffiths moved to Philadelphia. An early historian of Granville attributed the demise of the company to the fact that “fires were scarce, the machinery got out of order and the enthusiasm of drill died away.” The leather water buckets continued to see use through the years as locals formed impromptu “bucket brigades” to combat fires in the village. Residents out in the township were left largely to their own devices in the event of a house or barn fire, a situation that was to remain largely unchanged for the next hundred years.

Fires continued as a fact of life, most notably one that consumed the Loar firearms workshop behind the Methodist Church in 1857, the 1860 fire that consumed a two-story frame building used by Denison University for music recitals, and the 1872 conflagration at the County Infirmary south of Granville on the Lancaster Road. The latter fire resulted in a number of fatalities among the patients. In 1877 alone there were ten separate fires within the village that untrained local volunteers responded to. Public concern with this makeshift approach heightened, fueling a renewed interest in establishing an organized fire-protection response along with acquiring modern equipment. Especially alarming was a fire that broke out on the roof of the Tresize Photo Gallery late one afternoon in October 1884. Although the fire was quickly discovered and put out by a

hastily assembled group of locals with buckets, it could have been much worse. The *Granville Times* surmised that, had the fire occurred during the night, the core of the village would have been in ashes by the following morning, since there was no effective means available to extinguish a major fire. Several weeks later, Fred Welsh’s home on Welsh Hills Road was completely consumed by fire, the now fifty-year-old fire tank and local bucket brigade having proved overwhelmed by the task. Stirred by the real threat of a major civic disaster, the community decided to act.

In conjunction with establishing a more formal fire department, Granville first constructed a new municipal water system to provide a more reliable water supply. After funds were authorized in a local referendum, work commenced in spring 1885. Three deep wells were dug along Raccoon Creek. A steam-driven pump sent the water from the wells to a 93,000-gallon tank on the “college hill.” Three miles of water pipe served 36 hydrants throughout the village, providing a more modern delivery system of water for household use. In addition, the pressure was sufficient through the hydrants to combat most fires within the village. Denison heartily cooperated, as these measures resolved a longstanding issue of water supply. No longer would drinking water have to be physically hauled up in buckets from the town spring or used from the several rainwater cisterns, which were open to the elements and often stagnant.

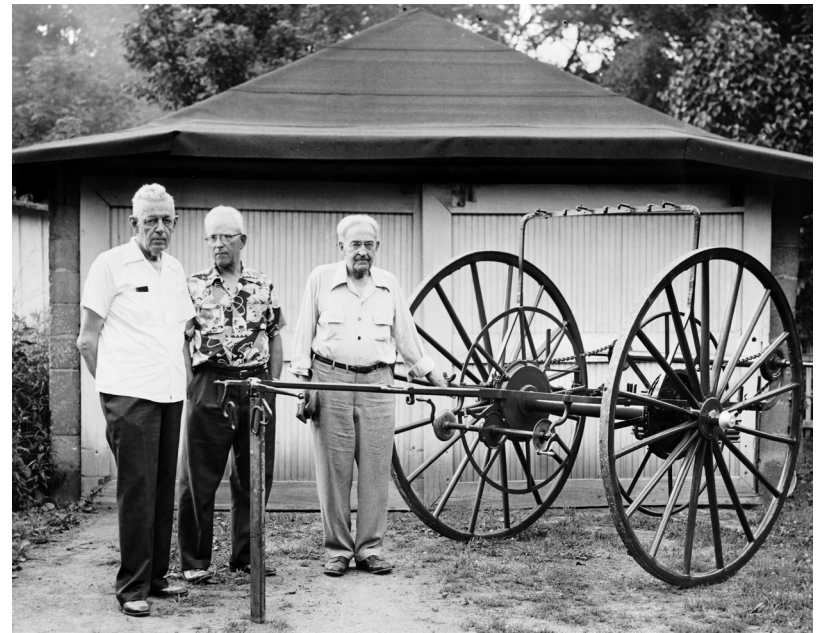
On November 6, 1885, a large crowd gathered at Prospect and Broadway for a demonstration of the new water system. A fire hose was attached to a hydrant, and the nozzle was handed over to two prominent citizens, Charles W. Bryant and Isaac DeBow. Unfortunately, the force of the water was so great (85 P.S.I.) that the gentlemen quickly lost control of the hose, subjecting a number of the assembled crowd to an unwelcome dousing. Observing that the team of Bryant and DeBow had had “an elephant on their hands,” the *Granville Times* noted that a well-disciplined fire team would be needed to handle the hoses attached to this new system. The paper anticipated that such an outfit would soon be organized.

## Granville Hose Company No. 1

This expectation was not long in being met. On December 10, 1885, the Granville Hose Company No. 1 was organized as a volunteer fire department. Established with an initial membership of sixteen firefighters, the organization roster was replete with prominent citizens, including Francis W. Shepardson as its first president. To obtain funds for necessary equipment, a strawberry and ice cream fundraising social was held in the Village Hall, with the faculty and students of the female academies staffing the function. These funds paid for basic equipment such as a two-wheeled, hand-pulled fire cart and five hundred feet of fire hose, to be stored in a rudimentary shed behind the Village Hall.<sup>3</sup> The bell atop the Opera House, pulled by hand, served as the community fire bell.

Underscoring the level of their civic commitment, firefighters had to obtain personal equipment and uniforms at their own expense. The initial uniform consisted of a blue shirt, leather belt, and oilcloth helmet. The seriousness of their civic mission was reflected in the constitution and bylaws of the fire company, which were detailed enough to fill a sixteen-page pamphlet. In addition to setting out the mission and operational rules, this document divided the village into five fire districts, each with its own distinctive bell signal.

The newly formed unit saw its first action within two months in response to a fire inside a building in the business district. Apparently they were successful in their undertaking, as evidenced by a note of thanks from the building owner (R.W. Graham) posted in the *Granville Times*: “A card of thanks is due the Granville Hose Co.



*The primary firefighting equipment for many years in Granville was this hand-drawn fire cart. After a motorized truck was purchased in 1927, the cart was restored and is still maintained by the department. This image from the early 1950s shows longtime volunteers Harold “Happy” Lamson, Roe Morrow, and Jacob “Doc” Rohrer.*

for their prompt and efficient work in extinguishing the fire in my building.”

The Hose Company routinely performed another important service by sprinkling down the main thoroughfares within the village during the warm-weather months. Kind-hearted firemen would also fill watering troughs by the horse-hitching rails that stood along Broadway until 1927.

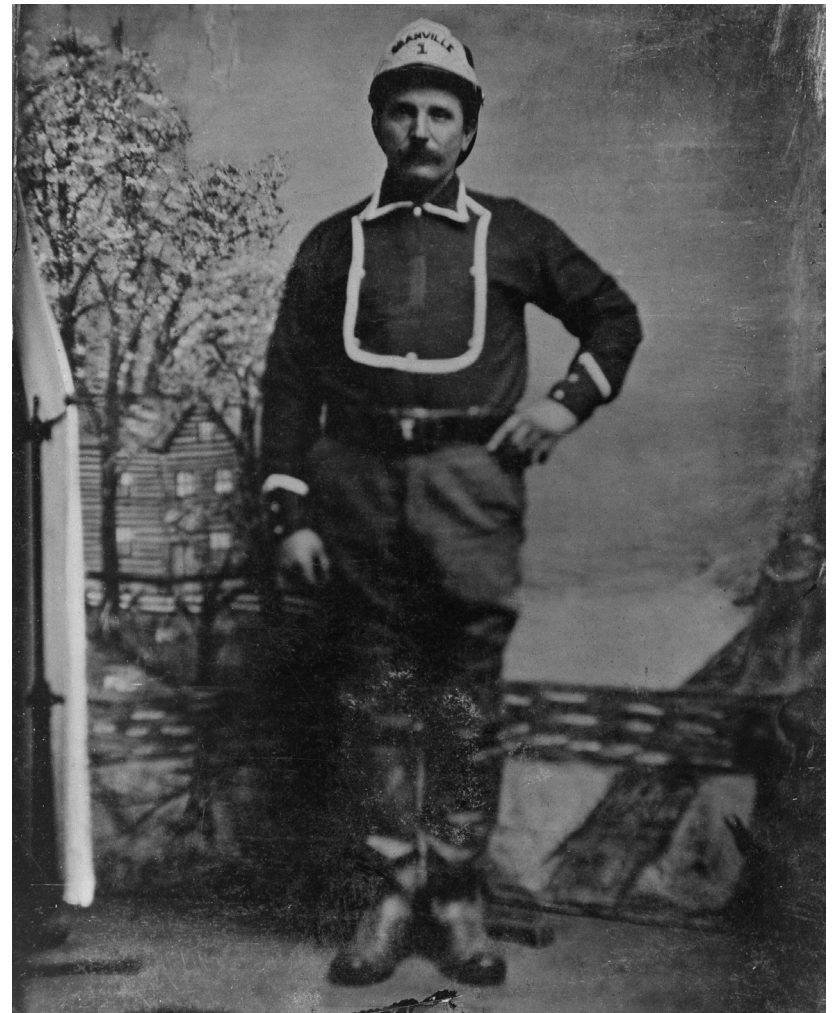
As the years passed into the twentieth century, the local fire company responded to a variety of calls within the village. August 1892 proved to be a memorably active one for the Hose Company. On August 10, the firefighters responded to a barn fire located to the rear of the main business district (modern-day Petunia Park). Despite

<sup>3</sup>This fire cart and reel were carefully restored for the Fire Department’s centennial in 1985, largely through the efforts of former Fire Chief Jim Dumbauld. Fully equipped with accessories of the day, it is currently in storage awaiting permanent placement in the new station to be constructed. Often showcased during significant community events, it forms a proud link to the early days of community firefighting. The old Village Hall is now occupied by the administrative offices of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church.

fears that the fire might spread to the Broadway establishments, the fire was contained to the loss of the barn and two nearby sheds. The following week, a fire broke out in one of the upper-floor rooms of the landmark Hotel Granville (where the CVS drugstore currently stands). Significant smoke damage was sustained and, although the origin of the fire was not confirmed, there was strong suspicion that a “firebug” was on the loose. This concern was only heightened when several days later the proprietor of Hooley’s Grocery Store opened his store in the morning to find a small pile of combustibles near the front window, along with a number of spent matches that fortunately had not ignited the materials. Alarmed, the village hired a night watchman to prevent any further recurrences. Although no individual was ever formally charged in the case, it appears that the culprit was identified and presumably dealt with. Jacob Bolen, one of the earliest firefighters, later spoke of another member of the Company, who, funding his drinking habit with the dollar stipend provided by the village for battling each fire, was believed to have set the fires. In any event, the frequency of fires seems to have declined precipitously shortly thereafter.

After the initial years, community interest in Hose Company No. 1 appears to have tapered off, especially in terms of financial support from the community to purchase necessary clothing and equipment. By May 1903, the organization’s membership voted itself out of existence. Prior to this move, the village council passed an ordinance establishing a successor unit to be called the Granville Fire Department (GFD). In addition to creating and defining the position of fire chief, appointed by the mayor, it set the force size at twenty firemen whose age was required to be at least twenty and no more than 55 years. It also created a rate of compensation of one dollar per fire. Edward Smoots continued as the fire chief.

Two significant firefighting incidents occurred in the early 1900s, the first in 1906 when a freight warehouse located near the Toledo & Ohio Central Railroad was consumed by flames. Firefighters enjoyed more success in combating an early morning fire in 1916 at the W.P. Ullman drugstore on Prospect Street. With the peals of the fire-alarm bells ringing continuously, hundreds of village residents watched as



*Jacob Bolen, one of the original members of Hose Company No.1, is shown here in the prescribed fireman’s uniform. The author’s educated guess is that this photo was taken in the late 1880s.*



the GFD, aided by an impromptu bucket brigade of Denison students, contained and then put out the fire, avoiding total loss. A news article mentioned that the Ullman fire was the second one within 24 hours: Some pejoratively named “hunky shacks,” which housed foreign workers near the rail line, had gone up in flames the previous evening.

Fires were not limited to the village during this period; Denison University and Shepardson College witnessed several occasions on which local volunteers strained to pull the hand-drawn fire cart up the hill to respond. One of the most serious conflagrations occurred in March 1905 at Barney Science Hall. Termed Granville’s most disastrous fire to date, it was initially discovered during the early morning hours by several students returning from a social function. Someone had carelessly left a Bunsen burner on in one of the lab rooms. Quickly racing down the hill, the students began ringing the fire bell. What ensued was a comedy of errors. Not surprisingly, the response of the volunteer firefighters was slow due to the early morning hour, and considerable time was lost before enough firefighters arrived to man the fire cart. By the time they got to the scene and hooked into the nearest hydrant, the entire upper floor of Barney was in flames. It was then discovered that the level of water pressure was so low that the water stream would not extend to the upper floors. Several volunteers were dispatched to the pumping station adjacent to Raccoon Creek, but by the time sufficient pressure had been obtained, the fire was out of control and the interior of the building was completely gutted. The sturdy exterior of brick and Amherst stone withstood the effects, and the building was restored the following year, utilizing a steel-framed interior and fire-resistant floors and walls. It still stands today, fully functional and in excellent condition.

Due to the limited resources and the restrictions posed by the hand-drawn fire cart, runs out into the township and surrounding areas were, as one might suspect, negligible. There were exceptions, however. In November 1916, a phone call to the Village Hall from Alexandria requested help with an ongoing fire at their two-story town hall. The fire was feared to be raging out of control of the Alexandria bucket volunteers and was threatening to consume the

center of town. The Granville fire bell was sounded. As the firefighters and other concerned citizens responded, they were met by Fire Chief John Thomas and Mayor Clarence J. Coons, who informed them of the call for help from Alexandria. Volunteers then grabbed water buckets and axes and lined up to be transported to Alexandria in private automobiles that were being summoned. Within a half-hour, twenty vehicles had transported more than one hundred Granville men, who played a major part in containing the Alexandria fire. This might well have been the first “mutual aid” run in Granville firefighting history.

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### **The Great Fire of 1927**

Although the community was generally well served by its volunteer firefighting unit, the march of time and progress, as always, dictates the need to acquire newer, improved means to properly discharge a mission. To address the problems with water supply and pressure that were evidenced in the Barney Hall fire, a new water tower was constructed up on College Hill as well as a new brick pumping station by Raccoon Creek. Still, despite concerns over the ability of the fire department to meet the needs of the community with its hand-cart and 1,000 feet of fire hose, local officials were loath to make the necessary assessments and expenditures to modernize the force and its equipment. When neighboring Newark obtained a motorized pumper and ladder truck after World War I, it only served to emphasize the outmoded nature of Granville’s fire protection.

Part of the problem lay with the stretched fiscal condition of both the village and township governments. The village had already reached its bonding limit to fund new streets and a sewer system. The cost of a special election for a levy would have also proved difficult. Further, local officials were hoping that Denison University would follow through on discussions to create a new fire department, manned by student and faculty volunteers, with new motorized equipment that would be shared, but these hopes proved unfounded. As other

needs arose, the focus on funding for improved fire protection lagged in the absence of any immediate emergency.

This serious situation did not go unnoticed. In what proved to be an unusually prescient editorial in early January 1927, the *Granville Times* pointed out:

Technically, Granville has no fire department due to the laissez-faire attitude of officials who have the duty of officially appointing the chief and his assistants named. The volunteers should meet occasionally to preserve their sense of organization and to be taught the best method of firefighting so that confusion and the bawling of orders in the excitement of a fire will be unnecessary. If we cannot purchase a truck and other new paraphernalia, let us strive for the highest efficiency with the material in hand. The time for putting the fire company on a firm basis is not next month or next year, but now.

Stung by these charges, Granville's Mayor John Graham responded in the next issue, stating that his hands were tied by the financial situation facing local government. He noted that Fire Chief John Thomas had recently been appointed to a two-year term and that the small fees paid to firefighters were no longer in arrears. He went on to state that the community had the same fire protection that it had had for years. Events were soon to prove that this level of "protection" was woefully inadequate.

Early on the morning of Tuesday, February 1, 1927, the village night watchman discovered smoke coming from the rear of a local restaurant in the main block on the south side of Broadway. He quickly rang the fire alarm bell, and a number of firefighters and local citizens responded by putting water on the fire in hopes that the blaze could be contained to the wooden extension at the rear of the main building. These hopes were dashed when two hot water tanks exploded, blowing out the front of the restaurant and spreading the flames through its interior and into two adjacent buildings. Until the arrival of the Newark Fire Department, there was little that the underequipped local firefighters could do. The fire was not contained until around

noon, by which time two major buildings containing seven businesses had been completely destroyed. It was the most devastating fire in community history.

Stunned by the magnitude of the disaster, the community rapidly responded. Mayor Graham called for a mass meeting the following Monday to address Granville's fire protection needs. In a unanimous vote, it was decided to acquire modern equipment and to reorganize the fire department. To that end, local dentist "Doc" Rohrer was appointed by the Mayor to replace John Thomas as the fire chief. Thus began his tenure of over 25 years as fire chief, the longest serving in the department's history. He immediately began tightening the organization, instituting enhanced training, and setting clear expectations for members of the force. Over the following decades "Doc"



*This faded picture from the Granville Times depicts the extent of the destruction of the 1927 fire that obliterated most of the shops on the south side of the 100 block of East Broadway. Although it's hard to make out, you can see the remnants of buildings lost in the conflagration.*

Rohrer effectively molded the Granville Fire Department. To the extent that there is a “father” of the Granville Fire Department, Jacob “Doc” Rohrer is that man.

At a second community meeting several weeks later, a committee of local leaders and businessmen reported back with a number of recommendations to the community. Largely adopting the ideas of Chief Rohrer, they argued that the highest priority was to obtain a motorized pumper fire truck with 1,500 feet of hose as well as ladders. Further, chemical apparatus along with additional axes, lanterns, hats, coats, and boots were needed to aid the volunteer firemen. With these proposals endorsed by the gathering, a fundraising committee was organized. As earlier noted, Granville’s fiscal situation effectively prevented a tax levy or the sale of further public debt.

A door-to-door campaign was organized to raise the needed funds, estimated at \$4,500.00. Solicitors for each residential block as well as every local business actively pursued this mission over the next six weeks. Churches as well as fraternal and civic organizations contributed; even out-of-town property owners were approached. Public pressure to contribute was significant. In addition to the repeated door-to-door visits from appointed solicitors to obtain and collect on pledges, numerous civic reminders and notices were published. Statements from citizens in support of the drive continuously ran in the paper. One elderly local, Albert Norris, was the rare exception when he was quoted as not inclined to contribute. Social pressure seems to have taken hold, for in the next week’s edition, he “clarified” his position and indicated that he too, would pay his “fair share.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Albert Norris was Granville’s last surviving Civil War veteran, passing in January 1931. He also had the distinction of being the last surviving person from the tragic sinking of the ship *Sultana* in May 1865. It is estimated that around 2,000 weakened and emaciated Union POWs drowned in the Mississippi River when the boilers exploded and the vessel quickly sank. Norris was able to survive by claspings onto an empty barrel. For more on the role of Granville in the Civil War, please see another Granville Historical Society Pocket History: *The Civil War and Granville: An Ohio Community’s Outsized Contribution*, also by B. Kevin Bennett.

THE GRANVILLE TIMES, THURSDAY, MARCH 10, 1927

## WE CAN'T IGNORE THE CHALLENGE OF FIRE

The property loss in Granville's recent fire would have purchased eight or ten fire fighting outfits such as we need. But after the loss had gone up in smoke there was nothing to show for it.

Insurance rates have been high because of the fire hazard. They will be higher when the returns from the recent loss begin to sift through the offices of the underwriters.

Of course the apparatus should be bought by taxation.

But taxation is impossible because:

1. The town is already bonded to limit with new streets and sewers.
2. Taxation would necessitate a special election which would require much time and expense.

The system worked out by the committee will act in the same way as taxation without the red tape. But it depends upon the co-operation of EVERYONE, are the opinions of your neighbors, gathered by journalism students acting as



And practically EVERYONE is con- vinced of the wisdom of the action. Here reporters:

C. B. SLACK: Am in favor of the movement. Will gladly give my share. JOHN D. EVANS: The proposed plan is good. Will gladly give my share. HARRY L. PIERCE: I will give my support and glad to do it. J. E. MABERY: Am for it. We

GEORGE STUART: I will subscribe if selected. While I favor taxation, it seems to be out of the question. H. L. PATTEN: I believe that the campaign is a good thing. MRS. ESMAN ORCUTT: I am in favor of fire protection.

MRS. E. S. BROOKS: Property must be protected at any cost. I am in favor of the fire, and I will contribute my share as soon as I am asked. PROF. K. H. ESCHMAN: I favor

MRS. SUSAN T. BAWDEN: Although a fire department would not be a great thing, because the water cannot be raised to my roof, I am in favor of it. I think that the money could be raised in a short time.

*The inadequacy of Granville’s fire protection was disastrously demonstrated by the 1927 fire. In response, a community campaign was organized to raise money for modern, motorized firefighting equipment. Thanks to widespread public support—and no small amount of public pressure—the necessary funds were raised very quickly.*

Direct solicitation was supplemented by other community-based fundraising. This included a special showing of the Hollywood hit *The Fire Brigade* at the Opera House, with proceeds benefitting the fire equipment fund. Contributions were also prompted by the threat of outrageously high insurance rates for property owners that an insurance inspector insinuated during a visit in March.

Granville came through. With over \$5,000 raised by the end of March, a committee evaluating equipment began reviewing various vehicles and other fire equipment. An order was placed in early May for a Peter Pirsch pumper from Kenosha, Wisconsin, costing \$6,000. Denison University had initially intended to purchase its own fire equipment and maintain a separate department on campus, but the administration reversed this decision in June and provided \$1,800 toward the new truck as well as other forms of assistance, including



five hundred feet of fire hose to be stored on campus. Denison's contribution allowed for a larger truck and reinforced relations between the school and the community. It also provided for volunteer firefighters to be solicited from among the students and faculty of the school.

In addition to the new truck, an electric fire siren was purchased for use as a fire alarm, replacing the Opera House bell. Placed upon a steel framework on the roof of the village building, it could be activated by controls from several locations when a fire was reported. Once the alarm was sounded, the individual taking the call would take down the information on the location and specifics of the fire. That person would then proceed to the fire station to pass the information on to the assembling firefighters. When the station was later moved, the siren was relocated to the roof of the Gregory Hardware building. When that structure was demolished, a pole platform at the rear of the station in Petunia Park became the new home. This village siren proved to be the bane of many a local dog's existence as its daily noontime "test" usually resulted in many episodes of canine howling!

By mid-July a new truck with accessories had arrived and was on display in the village. A practice run to the extreme west end of College Street demonstrated that the new pumper truck could deliver a good stream of water regardless of line pressure, throwing water higher than the trees and houses to the hill to the north. Then a demonstration in drawing water from private cisterns was conducted out at Bryn Du Farm. Each test went smoothly, and the increased training and organization were showing. Fondly named "Old Betsy," this truck would have a long and storied history with the department. After 93 years, the era of the hand-drawn fire cart was over.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>The old hand-drawn fire cart was moved to a garage on the Denison campus for a number of years, assisting for a short period in fire protection at the school. As noted earlier, it was eventually retrieved and restored with care by a group of local firefighters dedicated to preserving this link to the past.

The first opportunity to test the equipment in a real fire occurred in late August 1927 when the department responded to a fire at the Showman residence, two miles southeast of the village on River Road. Noting the increased mobility and response times, news accounts reported that firemen were battling the blaze within five minutes of receiving the alarm. Unfortunately, the water supply drawn from the family cistern ran out, and the house was consumed. That autumn the new equipment proved its worth in several fires that broke out in the business district at Perry's Grocery and a local eatery, the Hut Restaurant. These latter two fires were put out in very quick order, to the satisfaction of the local public.

Denison students returning that fall were equally intrigued by the new fire engine and almost too keen to volunteer as firefighters—so much so that they were advised in a *Granville Times* article not to crowd into the small, Main Street department garage when a fire alarm sounded, as they were impeding operations. The paper went on to notify these overeager students that only those who were properly trained and equipped would be allowed to ride on the fire truck. The well-meaning but untrained bystanders clamoring to ride along on the new truck were referred to as an "unmanageable mob."

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## A Granville Institution

While the next several decades did not witness any incidents of the magnitude of the 1927 conflagration on the south side of Broadway, the local department stayed busy with the occasional building and grass fires. With the increased mobility of the firefighters, the issue of adequate fire protection out in the township became a topic of public discussion. A number of articles and letters debated the relative merits of the Granville Township trustees purchasing an additional truck and constructing a garage for it in the rural northern area of the township. Still, with the reliance on volunteers and no full-time personnel, the response times for this type of operation were still seen as being too long to justify the expense, while the remote location of