

OUR HISTORY Sierra County Fire Protection District #1

FORMATIVE YEARS

“A Brief Accounting of the Organizational History of the Sierra County Fire Protection District #1 (SCFPD #1)” was extracted from an article written by Virginia Lutes titled “Sierra County Fire Protection District #1, A Brief History.” The author referenced sourced official documents, James Sinnott’s book titled ”Sierra Valley”, and interviews with Jerry McCaffery and Joe Maddalena. That accounting is presented in italics below.

The Sierra Co. Fire Protection District #1 was established in July 30, 1930 following a vote of the registered voters within Supervisor District #5. (At the time, the 5th District covered all of the eastern portion of Sierra County from and including Bassett’s Station and the Lakes Basin except the City of Loyalton). The vote followed a published announcement in “The Sierra Valley News” on June 13 and June 27, 1930. The vote tally was 93 in favor and 17 opposed. The new District was organized under Chapter 191, of the California Statutes of 1923 which allowed the formation of fire districts.

With financial assistance from the sawmill owners, the new District ordered its first fire pumper from an American LaFrance factory in Elmira, New York in August of 1930 for \$7,550. After successful performance testing, Volunteers accepted delivery of the apparatus in mid-January of 1931 and drove it to Sierra Valley via the Feather River Canyon. Hwy 40 over Donner Summit was considered unsafe for winter travel in the open cab, 2wd Model G-454 truck. The truck remains in the District’s fleet graciously stored on the Sierra Valley Ranch.

The District constructed its first fire house in Sattley in the fall of 1930. Sattley was considered the most central location for this first structure.

The District organized “Volunteer fire departments” in Sattley, Calpine, and Sierraville in 1949. Each “department” had at least one fire truck and a fire house by that time. The intent of this organizational structure was to encourage local participation and to train and mobilize Volunteers working and living in the respective communities. A large pool of Volunteers were available in those days from sawmills, logging crews, and hay crews.

The State of California required all Fire Districts to reorganize in 1961. The SCFPD #1 completed this reorganization on May 18, 1964. New boundaries were drawn at that time. The western boundary was moved to Yuba Pass. A number of ranches in Sierra Valley and other properties in the eastern part of the County were deleted at the request of the individual property owners. Part of Verdi CA remained in the District while other parts were deleted in response to property owner’s expression of concern about property taxes.

MOVING BEYOND THE 80's

The District was re-organized under the provisions of the Fire Protection District Act of 1987, Section 13800 et. Seq. of the California Health and Safety Code.

The District contracted with the “Verdi Volunteer Fire Department”, located in Verdi, Nevada to provide fire protection for the developed properties in “Old Verdi” through 2016.

As properties located south and west of Loyalton were subdivided, a number of attempts were made in the 1970's through early 1990's to create a new fire district to serve the Loyalton Mill site and nearby developing properties. A notable effort aimed at creating a new district that included the City of Loyalton came to a halt in 1991. Sierra County signed agreements with the City to serve specific areas, including the Mill property and the Sierra Brooks residential subdivision in 1991.

Property owners in portions of Verdi requested that Sierra County take responsibility for fire protection. The County negotiated a protection agreement with Sierra Fire, a local Nevada Fire District.

2019 ANNEXATION

The District embarked on a multi-year effort to annex and provide fire and emergency services for the area of Verdi located in Sierra County. Following multiple public meetings, a proposal surfaced to annex all of eastern Sierra County within the District's service boundary, excluding the City of Loyalton. The Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) of Sierra County approved the annexation, completed in December 2019.

An agreement for service was negotiated to provide fire suppression and emergency medical services to the newly annexed area with Truckee Meadows Fire Protection District, including Verdi and Long Valley.

The District also contracted with City of Loyalton to serve the Sierra Brooks and Loyalton Pines communities, as well as the Loyalton Senior Center, the Mill site, and neighboring ranch properties, located outside of its City Limits.

ONE DISTRICT, THREE FIRE DEPARTMENTS

The model of “One District, Three Fire Departments” continued into the early 2000s. Volunteers were previously summoned by community sirens located in each of the three communities. One blast meant “the fire was in town”, two blasts meant “the fire was out of town.” Some Volunteers would respond directly to “their fire station”, while others would search for signs of smoke or fire, and drive their personal vehicles to the scene of an incident.

Volunteers from Sattley, Calpine, and Sierraville were given substantial latitude to recruit, retain, and mobilize Volunteers, however some friction occasionally arose between communities. The District has endeavored to level perceived funding discrepancies between the communities by assuring that all Volunteers have proper protective equipment, apparatus and tools, as well as district wide training to assure an ethic of excellence, camaraderie and cooperation.

STANDARDS CHANGE, DEPARTMENTS FADE

As National and State standards have evolved, the days of “everybody in town can be a volunteer” have vanished. Minimum standards for training, personal protective equipment, and physical capabilities have changed. Minimum standards were not only mandated by government agencies, but were also influenced by insurance industry standards for worker’s compensation and liability concerns. Annual training requirements for rostered volunteers are required for Insurance Services Office (ISO) ratings, which score the efficacy of fire departments, and influence homeowner insurance rates.

In 1980, the State of California and the Federal Land Management Agencies in California adopted the Incident Command System (ICS) statewide. A tool in this system (MAC 410) addressed all agencies in the state that had fire and emergency responsibilities. Fire districts and agencies were given an identity as required by this statewide system. Each separate district or agency was given a three letter designator. Sierra County Fire Protection District #1 became “SER.” The three District “departments” could no longer qualify as “fire departments” or entities under the MAC 410 classification system.

Through the transition to the ICS System, the District continued to use the three “department” model well into the 2010’s. The need to mobilize by means of a town siren faded away as pagers, radios and cell phone capabilities replaced the sirens. In some ways, the three department model worked, recognizing that communities supported their department. However, old perceptions and differences plagued departments from time to time. Distinctions between departments caused confusion with cooperating fire districts and agencies, as well.

ONE DISTRICT, THREE STATIONS

The District now operates under the model: “ONE DISTRICT, THREE STATIONS.” Volunteers are identified as District Volunteers, wearing Sierra County Fire Protection District #1 apparel. Volunteers participate in districtwide training and are provided tools, equipment, radios, personal protective equipment, and utilize District vehicles and apparatus. Our Volunteers of today have found a bond, brotherhood and a sense of pride in being part of a team.

GOING FORWARD

The District supports the concept that in addition to providing active, trained Volunteers, there is a need for reserve support, which may include community members with skills that can be used in an emergency. Some may have the capacity to operate specialized equipment, such as drivers of water tenders. Some can serve as traffic control protecting an accident scene. Others might be former trained firefighters who can provide logistical support to those that are on the current roster. Others may choose to help by keeping fire station properties and fire hydrants painted and clear of brush or snow in winter. An auxiliary organization may promote fundraising events. The District hopes to see the formulation of a not-for-profit organization that can take the fundraising and facility cleaning task off the shoulders of the active Volunteers. Perhaps that is in the future.