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# Early Days of the Cumberland Fire Department

Kenneth W. Chase

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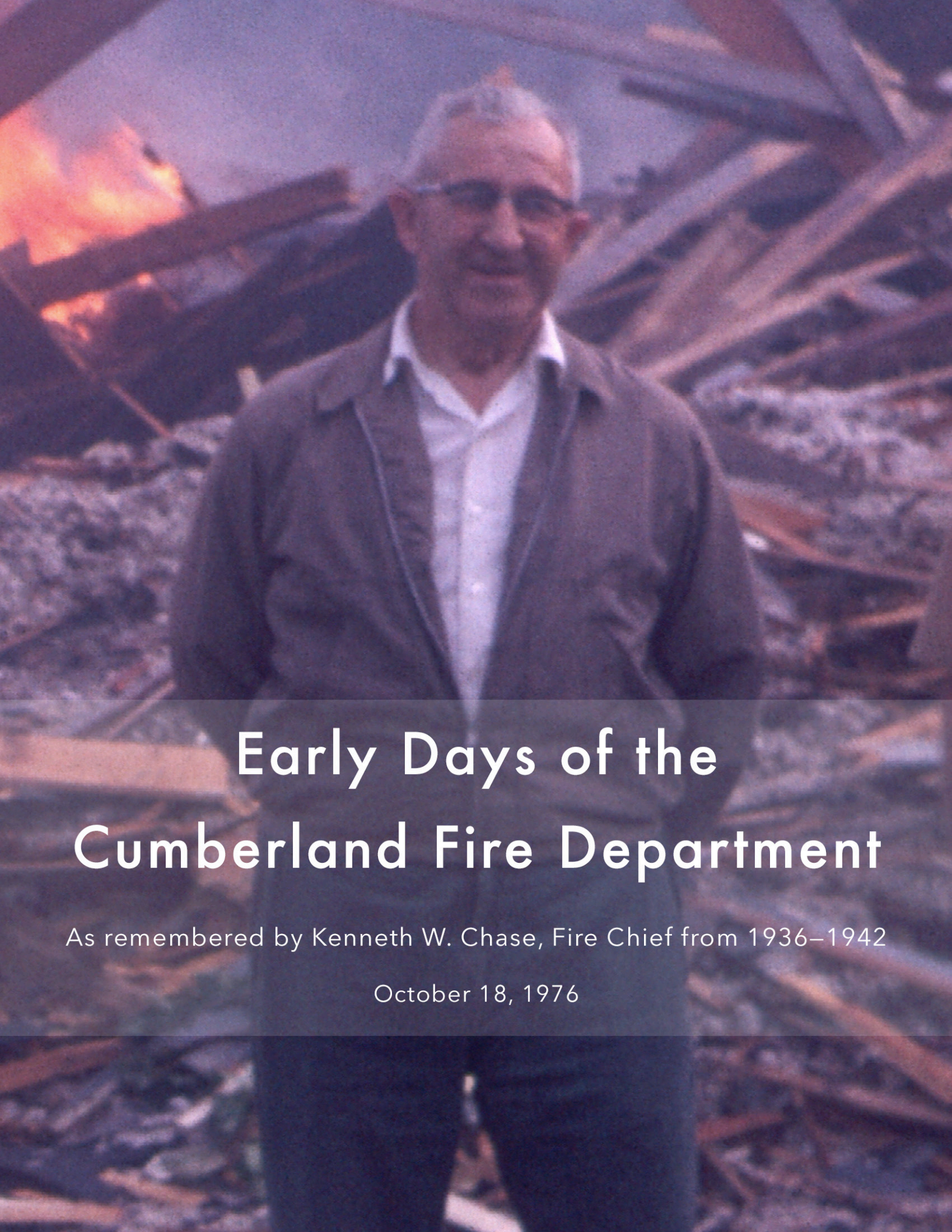
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# Early Days of the Cumberland Fire Department

As remembered by Kenneth W. Chase, Fire Chief from 1936–1942

October 18, 1976



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Compiled by Yolande E. Bennett

## Early Days of the Cumberland Fire Department

The first fire that I remember was when I was about five years old, about 1907. I woke up in the night with the church bell ringing and it was as light as day. It was the building where the library now stands (Prince Memorial, 264 Main Street). The fire started by putting hot ashes in wooden barrels. I've never forgotten that.

The next fire that I remember was the sawmill which was located in back of what is now Chandler's house at 40 Blanchard Road. I remember seeing the black smoke rolling up, my father grabbing the 2 ½ gallon soda and acid fire extinguisher, always kept in the front hall, and starting for the fire. A few extinguishers and water pails were all they had for fighting fire then, and those were only any good for putting out fires started on roofs of other buildings. All that could be done then was wet down other roofs by putting wet blankets on them and keeping them wet with pails of water from wells or any nearby source of water. All shingles in those days were made of wood, and BOY, would they fly around all afire and set other fires.

The first attempt at fire equipment was a fifty-gallon soda and acid tank mounted on two wheels, bought by some of the citizens of the town—J.L. Dunn, Fred Sweetser, E.B. Osgood, A.S. Chase, Geo. Blanchard, Harvey Blanchard, and Lester Bragg, to mention a few. This piece of equipment was kept in my father's, A.S. Chase's, barn (285 Mary Street), as he was a florist and his barn was kept warm. I can remember of only once that this piece of equipment was of much use, and as I think of it now, it may have saved the whole center community. J.L. Dunn had a gasoline engine in a back room of his store (277 Main Street) to hoist grain to the upper floor, from where it came down thru ducts to fill grain bags. At that time gasoline engines were not too reliable, and on this particular day it didn't start. After many attempts, it backfired and set the gasoline and oil afire that was around the engine. They ran to my father's barn only a short distance away, hauled out the fifty-gallon extinguisher, and through a window in the room put out the fire, otherwise the whole building would no doubt have burned, and with no other fire



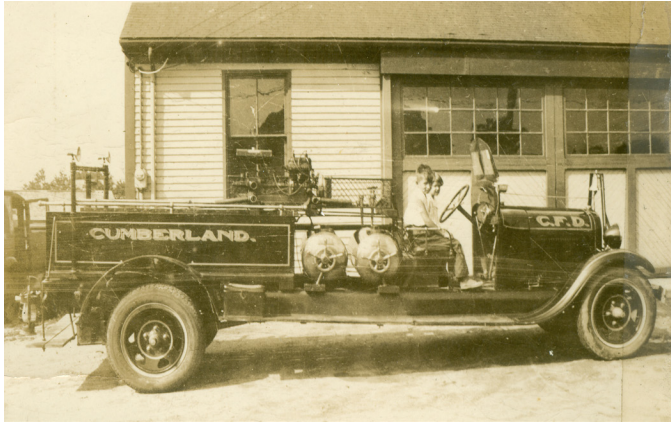
*Ken Chase at home on Main Street, with library in background.*



*Burning of old fire station on Tuttle Road.*

equipment the whole community could have burned. The only other place I remember of that extinguisher being used was at the early home of Phyllis Sweetser (154 Tuttle Road). It was towed to the fire by a telephone truck which happened to be at the telephone office at the time, one of the few automobiles around at that time. The wheels on the fire equipment were mounted narrow to go thru house doors, and being towed fairly fast, it rolled over from side to side. About all it did after getting to the fire was wet down the roof of a nearby shed and barn. After that, the wheels were widened

## Early Days of the Cumberland Fire Department



*Phil and Pip Chase on Cumberland's old Model A Ford fire engine.*

out by Fred Adams, the blacksmith. I think the end of that first piece of fire equipment came in the fire of my father's greenhouse.

The next piece of fire equipment was bought by the town, a Model T Ford, with two chemical tanks, hose, short ladders, axes, crowbar, etc. Lester Bragg, who had been a member of the Portland Fire Department, was Chief and the equipment was kept in his barn (now Wayne Merrill's, 279 Main Street). One tank could be recharged while the other one was being used. Don't remember any fires where it was used except chimney fires, other than at Marston Sweetser's build-

ings, where the Wilson School now stands. I believe they had that fire mostly out and ran out of chemicals. I used to mow the lawn at this house when Clara Sweetser owned it. One day I saw a big fire at the railway station, and rather than leave the lawn and go to the fire, I ran all the way finishing the lawn, then went to the fire on my bicycle. It was the store and grain mill where Humphrey's grain storage now stands on the east side of the tracks. Needless to say, it burned flat.



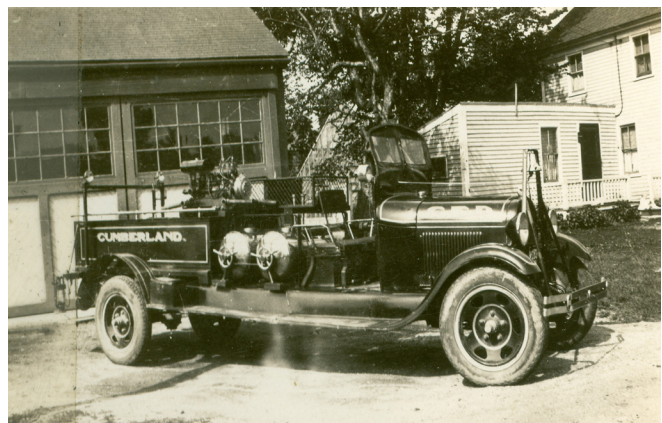
*Burgess Property burn, September 17, 1966.*

After Mr. Bragg's death, the fire equipment was kept in a metal garage at the end of the horse sheds at the Congregational Church. During the winter it was frozen up most of the time.

About 1929, a group of the townsmen met and decided to form a Volunteer Fire Department. Ned Bragg was Chief, I was assistant chief. Some of the others were Capp Bragg, Howard Blanchard, Herm Sweetser, Walter Barter, George Burgess, Guy Burnell, Pat Ross, Gerald Dackard, Gus Doane, Dud

Merrill, Ed Merrill, Ernest Rand, Sam Porter, Lee White, and several others. The first piece of fire equipment that we had as a Volunteer Fire Department was a Model A Ford on which we had mounted by the Portland Co. some equipment bought from the city of Portland when they abandoned a piece of equipment at Munjoy Hill.

The ladders were too long and too heavy to use, but we did use the two chemical tanks (on which we always skinned our knuckles when used), some chemical hose, hose basket, axes, etc. We also purchased a



*Cumberland's old Model A Ford fire engine.*



## Early Days of the Cumberland Fire Department



*Fire at Arno Chase's greenhouse on Main St., March 1933.*

snowing hard. Near the fire, the road was blocked with cows that had been turned out of the barn. We took the portable pump across the field where they said we could find a brook. Snow waist-deep and dark, after tumbling down a snow bank and getting a pump, hose, gas tank and us all tangled up, we finally got sorted out and got things going, saving the house.

Fire at the Chebeague old coal storage on the stone wharf. We were called to put out a fire in the coal shed that had been burning for some time. We took the portable pump and some hose, and arranged for the Nellie G. steam boat to take us over from Falmouth. We sat up on the float near the coal shed and pumped around four hours, lowering the ocean about five feet!, but put out the fire. After that we were hungry, so they took us over to the store about midnight, got the keeper up and we had some crackers and cheese, but forgot the boat Captain.

When we got back he had let the fire go out in his boiler and had gone to bed. He wasn't too pleased about the deal but got up and started a fire in the boiler, got up steam and we headed for Falmouth with fire coming about five feet out the top of the smoke stack.

Up to this time, our only Fire Alarm was for the telephone operator to give us a series of short rings on the telephone to attract our attention then tell us where the fire was. One night, we got a call for a fire at the Nutting House. No one knew where it was as the operator, Hattie Merrill, knew where it was by the name she had known it by as a girl. It turned out to be the last house on the right

two-cylinder, two-cycle portable pump made by Evenrude, which really has several dwellings to its credit. It was very hard to get started at times being of the two-cycle type with oil in the gas and with rope pull. Nothing more nerve-wracking than to have all equipment set up with man at nozzle and flames going higher and higher in the air and the damned pump won't start, and it always seemed that it never would get going.

I remember the fire at Harvey Lovell's farm in North Yarmouth. We were having a Men's Club meeting at the Church vestry when the alarm came in, it was in the winter and

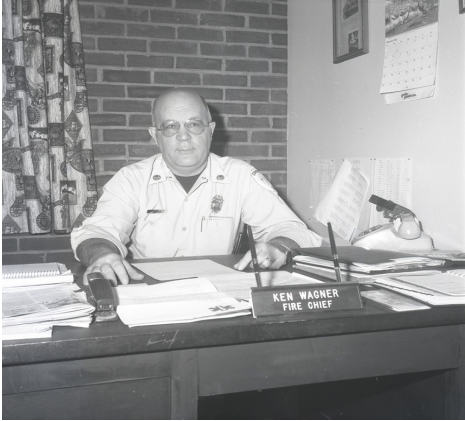


*Controlled burn at Burgess Property.*



*Fire at Arno Chase's greenhouse on Main Street, March 1933.*

## Early Days of the Cumberland Fire Department



*Ken Wagner, Fire Chief.*

before getting to the Railroad Station.

At one time, Capp Bragg lived at 283 Main Street. Lee White lived up stairs in the store at 277 Main Street, and I was at 258 Main Street. Lee had no telephone, but Cap would get up and dress, then run up stairs at the store and wake Lee up and they would run thru the alley (from store to fire house) and we'd all get there about the same time. I could never figure out how Lee did it, unless he slept with his clothes on.

About this time, we added the siren to our system (around 1932). It was wired over to the telephone office (now Wayne Merrill's) and a push button mounted on the wall near the operator, and operated by her. Janet Bragg was also an operator at that time, and has put in faithful service since.

About 1936, we had our first real fire truck, a Ford V-8 with built-in pump, booster tank, ladders, etc., also a new four cylinder Pacific portable pump that started by crank and no oil in the gas to foul up the plugs. It did start much better than the old rope-pull Even-

rude. With this pump we saved several buildings. This truck was assembled by McCann of Scarborough, an old fire equipment concern. The old truck went to Chebeague Island for their Fire Department.

The miniature water system in town with a four-inch main and 2 ½ hydrants was really the means of saving many buildings. The source of supply was an artesian well, and springs on a hill near the Memorial Highway in North Yarmouth.

During the big fire in Auburn, we went up and were the only stand-by truck in Central Fire Station. Fortunately, we were not called out. An alarm did come in, but it was for Lewiston.



*Controlled burn at George Burgess Property.*

At the Albert Sweetser house, 270 Tuttle Road, we saved the house by pumping

from a water hole, now on Maurice Small's property. It was in the winter and we had to cut a hole thru the ice. We got more mud than water, but did save the house but lost the barn.

On one Christmas, Fen Blanchard's barn burned (now Bill Garsoe's, 70 Blanchard Road) and on New Years, Sam Porter's barn burned (now Guy Burnell's, 190 Main Steet). We saved the house at both places. We found later that they both had been set by two boys.

We could always depend on a chimney fire at Fred Robinson's on Thanksgiving day.

We went to a house fire one night on the Gray Road in North Yarmouth. It was twenty-two below zero and some



*Ken Wagner, Fire Chief.*



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cold riding on that open fire engine. In fact it was so cold we couldn't even turn the portable pump over, to say nothing of starting it.

At the Humphrey fire on the Harris Road, I knew we didn't have hose enough to go up from the brook by the road, so cut up across the field. It was dark and I soon found out that we were in the middle of a field of oats. We didn't save the house, and I guess the man that owned the oats wasn't too pleased with us. It took two weeks to get all the oats out of the radiator on the fire truck.

In the winter we carried a toboggan on the truck to carry the portable pump to brooks.

We used to get gas at Gus Doane's garage, and one time, just before getting back to the fire station, I heard a click and looked around just in time to see the last coupling of 2,500 feet of hose go out the back of the truck. That half-mile of 1 1/2 inch-hose back there in the middle of the road was a sorry sight. I don't remember who was with me, but about everyone we knew came along while we were putting it back on and thought it a great joke.

We were called to a fire at the Pownal Railway station, and one of the structures on fire was the water tower. We ran water out of the tower into a tub, then pumped it back onto the tank with the portable pump extinguishing the fire.

A house at Dunn's Depot was saved by pumping out of Royal River.

The one fire that the old timers will remember was at the shop and greenhouse of Arno S. Chase. The shop sat where Phil Chase's garage is now and the greenhouse filled the space between his garage and the present fire station. On March 11, 1933, about seven o'clock in the evening, the shop was discovered in flames - we had always planned that in case of a bad fire at the center, we would pump from a



*Firemen's trip, Jewell Island.*



*Freemen and wives at Jewell Island.*

large cistern at the greenhouse, and here was our first big fire right on top of the cistern. We connected the portable pump to the miniature hydrant in front of where the Merrill Memorial monument stands and went to work on the fire. Yarmouth, Falmouth, and I think Gray were called in. The water from the hydrant kept his house from burning, also the apartment house now owned by Phil Chase, although the curtains inside the windows were brown from the heat and the glass cracked, the paint was blistered and the building badly charred. The telephone office (where Wayne Merrill now lives, 270 Main Street) caught fire

several times, as well as other buildings including the store and Post Office, but were put out by neighboring firemen. The telephone operators remained on duty through it all. It was a close call for the Center



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Community that night. But for the miniature water system I think it would have gone.

One day, going over the middle road, I saw Mr. Storey's roof on fire. I went in the house and found him asleep right under the fire. After waking him, we hooked us the garden hose and kept the fire under control until the Fire Department got there.

In those days, we had no radio communication; each man knew what he was supposed to do and had to be in his place at the right time. Pump man, hose man, nozzle man- and it's surprising how well it usually worked. Capp Bragg was



*Controlled burn at Burgess Property.*

usually on the nozzle, and it's surprising how many doors he burned up using them for a shield from the fire while playing the water, into it. I have seen fire coming around one side of his door while he played water around the other side.

We had a fire one night on Morrison's Hill, a truck loaded with explosive gas. We didn't know whether we would be blown sky high or not before we got the fire out, but nothing happened.

On the east side of the fire house, there was an alley that ran from there to the store. One day, the Road Department was heating tar there and it exploded all over the end of the fire house, setting it on fire. Without even moving the fire truck, we ran hose out of the door and put out the fire.

I used to lay my clothes on the bath tub at night so as to get them on quick in case of a fire. One night of a fire, I tried to get my union suit on and it didn't want to go; I pushed one leg right out, then I discovered that Phil (about 10 years old) had left his on the tub too, and I'd gotten his. He was quite surprised when he tried to dress to only have one leg.

One of the older fires, before we had any fire equipment, was the Thomes house at what is now 43 Blanchard Road. A very large set of buildings; with a long ell, a real mansion. A fire started in the ell around the chimney. A pail of water right then would have put it out, but with no fire department and no fire equipment, the fire spread thru the ell and the main house, burning it flat. It took so long for the fire to get to the main house that they had time to take out the doors, banisters, some windows, and other thing, as well as all the furniture. The present house that sits there has those doors and other parts built into it. The present Fire Department could have saved the whole thing with only little [burn     ].

We were having Mens Club Ladies Night at the Church



*Cumberland Fire Department Central Station, Tuttle Road.*

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*Fire Department assisting with overturned concrete truck.*

## Early Days of the Cumberland Fire Department



*Central Station, Tuttle Road.*

We came up so fast that we left the road going over the top of one hill. Phil never let me forget that ride, but he got it back on me when, at Jimmie Wilson's fire, word came that the Town House was on fire. He gave me a ride that made his ride look tame, only to find that the smoke was coming from an incinerator.

The siren had a way of freezing up in a sleet storm. One day, I took a brand new teakettle of boiling water from home to thaw it out, only to drop the teakettle down the hose tower and ruin it on the cement floor.

Another fire I remember before we had much fire equipment was Frank Chase's house, on the land where Maurice Small now lives. His son Dana, when small, lighted a fire in the hay to keep the horse warm- he did! When Frank tried to pitch the burning bunch of hay out of the barn it flamed up and caught the haymow afire, burning both barn and house.

Other than having all smoky, dirty fires, we had some good times. For several years, I'd take a dozen or so of the firemen out in my boat to Jewell Island over a weekend. We sure had fun. Gerald Packard never took a pillow to sleep on but once! and why the Coast Guard didn't come to see what was wrong when we flew Dud Merrill's bright red bathing suit from a pole, I'll never know.

I was Fire Chief from 1936 to 1942. When the war came, I went with the Signal Corps as a Radio Engineer in the First Service Command. I have many memories of the Fire Department, a wonderful bunch of fellows. The town is very fortunate to have such a wonderful Department now, and has made such good progress since the old days.

vestry one night when an alarm came in for a fire at E.B. Osgood's (317 Main Street). The barn was all afire but we saved the house. This was another place where the miniature hydrants paid off. Back at the supper, the caterer came out with fried clams to put on the table, only to find a few women waiting. At various times we saved four houses in Osgoods vicinity (217 and 221 Main Street), two of his, Gilbert Strout's (310 Main Street) across from Greely, and the house next to Ralph Brown's (323 Main Street).

I remember some years ago when the house across from Guy Burnell's burned. It was a hot dry summers day. The flying shingles set fires in the field clear up to Morse's Hill.

One time, Phil and I were working on my boat at Falmouth Foreside when we got word that the Cumberland Fair Grounds were afire.



*Controlled burn at Burgess Property.*



*Cumberland Fire Department, Engine Two.*



## Early Days of the Cumberland Fire Department



*Former Fire Department Chiefs, from left to right: Maurice Small, Phil Chase, Harold "Capp" Bragg, Kenneth Chase, Edward Bragg*

These are a FEW of the incidents that I remember and I hope they will be interesting to you, as well as to record some of the early days when there wasn't much to fight fire with.

### Cumberland Fire Chiefs

1915— 1921	Lester B. Bragg
1921— 1929	Gilbert L. Strout
1929— 1930	Carroll B. Lewis
	New Volunteer Fire Company formed.
1930— 1936	Edward E. Bragg
1936— 1942	Kenneth W. Chase
1942— 1966	Harold M. Bragg
1966— 1969	Philip A. Chase
1969— 1971	Maurice W. Small
1971— present	Ralph J. Brown

After the Volunteer Fire Department was formed we had to have a place to put the new fire truck, so part of the old Town House was fixed up with cement floor and hot air furnace. Doors were put in the side and room made for one fire truck, one school bus (which was a new venture at that time) and space for a tractor snow plow for the Road Department. The Town Office was still in the east end of the building. Later on, the Town Office was removed to make room for another fire truck (a tank, truck). The Fire Department then built a room up over where the office was, the office having been moved to the old Red Mens Hall. In this new room we held our meetings and had our suppers.

It might be of interest to note that I drove that first School Bus, a 1929 Model A Ford with seats lengthwise on the sides, forty pupil capacity. I covered the whole town and all schools, including a school at each end of town and one on Bruce Hill Road. The bus had a four-foot extension. The only hard surface road I travelled was up Morrison's Hill, the rest all dirt roads. Progress has been made in that Department also.

## Early Days of the Cumberland Fire Department