

A Fire Chief's Log Book

Records of the Port Credit Volunteer Fire Brigade by Dorothy Kew

The present Mississauga Fire Department consists of various small fire departments, most of which were amalgamated into one department in 1968 when Toronto Township became the Town of Mississauga. These included the fire departments of Cooksville, Lakeview, Clarkson and Malton. In 1974 when the City of Mississauga was formed, the Streetsville and Port Credit fire departments also became part of the present Mississauga Fire Department. In 1999, through the generosity of the late Mr. Boyd McKee, retired Deputy Chief, the Canadiana Collection of the Mississauga Library System acquired the record and minute books of the Port Credit Fire Department (formerly the Port Credit Volunteer Fire Brigade). From 1941 to 1969 the record book was kept by Mr. McKee's father, Chief Robert McKee. The Chief's comments, along with his reports on the activities of the Port Credit Fire Department, make for interesting reading and give one a picture of the Brigade's activities during that time. I wish to acknowledge Mr. Boyd McKee's generous gift to the library ... a piece of Port Credit history that not many people are aware of.

In the 1920s a garage owner, Fred Selman, took the initiative of providing the community of Port Credit with fire protection. The first fire truck was a Ford Model T chemical truck outfitted with soda acid tanks and a water tank. It probably looked like this.



Credit Town of Chelmsford, MA Fire Dept.

At a special meeting of the Port Credit Municipal Council on January 20, 1928, the council considered obtaining better fire protection for the village. The council deliberated between purchasing a hose and chemical truck or one equipped with a pump. It was decided to purchase the latter "which could be used in case there was no city water supply". And so the Port Credit Weekly reported on February 10, 1928, that the council had purchased, at a cost of \$5,500, a new fire engine from the Bickle Fire Engine

Company in Woodstock. The photo below shows a Bickle Fire Truck, as used by the Cooksville Fire Department.



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William Newman was appointed as the first Fire Chief, a position he held until 1940. After the death of Chief Newman, Robert McKee was appointed Chief, and continued in that position till his retirement in 1968, at which time Art Warner took over as chief. Chief McKee began his record book on January 1, 1941. The entries are handwritten and at the front of the book is a photograph of the Port Credit Fire Department standing by the fire engine. The Chief's son, Boyd, then a youngster, sits in the front.



x Gone to meet the Real Fire Chief.

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Chief McKee wrote the names of each member of the department above their heads ... a couple who had passed on at the time he did this are identified as "gone to meet the Big

Fire Chief”.

Chief McKee not only reported on each fire or incident the Brigade attended but also made pungent comments on events. His very first entry gives one a taste of his opinions where fire safety was concerned:

“Fire on Cumberland Dr., Port Credit, 12:45 a.m. Fire in wall in sitting room. Faulty construction of fireplace. Wanted a cheap job and got one. Damage \$50.”

And on January 5, 1942:

“Orchard Drive, Port Credit, 5:25 a.m. Fire in dining room wall caused by faulty chimney inside wall. We have some wonderful builders here when they build a chimney on a wooden base with no clean out. Used a little discretion and the garden hose. Damage \$30 material and \$50 smoke.”

The Department made several calls to the refinery in town. This was originally the Good Rich Oil Company, then Trinidad Leaseholds, later to become Texaco.



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On June 18, 1943, at 5:00 a.m., the brigade attended a fire in tanks of gasoline and kerosene. The Chief noted that the brigade would only enter the plant on invitation. He showed his concern at the lack of firefighting equipment at the refinery.

“I wonder if the government inspector is lax in his duties at this plant, for although I know little about fighting such fires, I do know that this plant has no equipment for use in a serious fire, but perhaps it is more businesslike to grease the inspectors and let the fire equipment go to blazes”.

This concern came up again when the brigade was called to the refinery on April 15, 1944 at 2:30 p.m., to fight a fire in the cracking plant. The Chief wrote in the record book:

“I still maintain that there is an absolute lack of fire protection in this plant and have said so in the Fire Marshall’s Office. No action has been taken as yet, and if the plant ever has a real fire we will have lots of fun”.

It was not until February 6, 1947, that the Chief reported, after yet another brigade call to Good Rich that the company intended to install a full firefighting unit in the plant “which this record shows has been long overdue”.

The brigade made a couple calls to the Long Branch Military Camp in December 1943. The first one was to a fire in a hut caused by an overheated stove. According to Chief McKee, “they could do with a few lessons on fire prevention.” The brigade was called again a few days later when fire erupted in the dentist’s hut, again from an overheated stove, but was under control when the brigade arrived. The Chief recorded acerbically, “They will burn that camp if they are not careful”.

Scattered throughout the record book are notations and comments on grass fires, which Chief McKee loathed. On April 17, 1944, he wrote:

“Joseph Street and Highway, west side, Port Credit. Grass fire - I did not go to this fire and I will not go to any I can avoid. It seems to be a standard practice for anyone to set fire to the grass on his or her property and walk away and leave the fire in the lap of the Gods or the hands of the Fire Department. Well, before I am fixed the public shall look after their own grass fires. No damage as usual”.

At the end of 1949 the Chief wrote his summary for the year:

“We had twelve fire calls. Total fire damage \$730. Brigade strength 2 men. Meet every Thursday evening. Average attendance 16 men. Engine, age 20 long years, falling in wee pieces, but we carry on and maybe Santa Claus may bring us a new fire hall and a big shiny engine for Xmas 1949.”

It was the village council, not Santa Claus, who delivered a new fire engine to the Port Credit Volunteer Fire Brigade. However, the deliberations over the purchase of a new fire truck led to a dispute between the brigade and council. Newspaper and radio stories reported that the entire brigade would resign in a body because instead of purchasing an 800-gallon engine, as recommended by the brigade, the council was considering a 600-gallon truck. This story, however, was discounted in the Port Credit Weekly of June 2, 1949 which claimed that no decision had been made. Nonetheless, Chief McKee resigned his post on June 24, 1949 in protest. By July 1, however, he was back on the job and made the following entry in his record book on September 22, 1950:

“On this day, Friday Sept. 22nd 1950 the village received a La France 800 gallon pumper at a cost of \$20,400. In comparison with the Bickle which was bought in 1928, this new machine is a fairyland of dials and gadgets, but to get down to the detail of pumping water through a hose or hoses there is comparatively little difference between the idea of 1928 and 1950. This new machine is fully equipped for the comfort of the firemen. Nine men can be very comfortable in the closed in heated cab ... a far cry from the old one. Twenty years from now you who are younger may look at this engine and say what of heap of antiquated junk, to you I say you may be correct, but at this moment this machine is the most modern piece of fire equipment in Canada.”

On April 17, 1952 Chief McKee recorded that on that Thursday evening at 8:45 p.m., the chief caretaker of the Port Credit High School had refused to take the Brigade on a familiarization tour of the school. “Result: no future inspections there and no member of this brigade is to enter the building in case of fire”. However, when the high school went up in flames on the early morning of October 18, 1956, the fire brigade was there in force. Chief McKee wrote:

“Major fire covering three floors when we arrived, and as my son Boyd remarked as we drew up to the hydrant, we’ve had it. We had it, it took us with the help of Cooksville, Lakeview and New Toronto seven hours to bring the fire under control. There had been prowlers in the school that night and arson is suspected. Damage \$430,000. Insured”.

Chief McKee could be very serious where severe damage or loss of life was concerned but he never lost his acerbic wit over what he saw as carelessness with regard to fire safety . On May 15, 1959 he reported a fire at Fisher’s 5-10 Store on Lakeshore East at 8:30 p.m.

“Some kids set fire to loose papers lying against wooden building at back of store. Two minutes more and whole building would have gone. In fact it might have been a good thing for the appearance of the main street.”.

And again, on September 15, 1962:

“Port Credit, 183 Lakeshore East, Apt. 1, 3:20 a.m. Decided to fry something I know not what. Had a drink then another. Forgot frying and went somewhere I know not where. Lots of smoke but no fire. No damage.”

On January 1, 1964 Chief McKee began another record book with this comment:

“My last log book lasted for 23 years. I am afraid that before this book is completed I will be shaking the hand of the big Fire Chief.”

On July 1, 1969, Chief Robert McKee retired and A. F. Warner took over as Chief. Bob McKee’s son, Boyd, became Deputy Chief. Chief McKee died on May 22, 1975. His death was reported briefly in the Mississauga News of May 28, 1975. The News referred to him as Port Credit’s first professional fire chief and one of the original members of the area’s volunteer fire department. Perhaps by then not many knew much about Chief McKee’s career, which is a pity, for as his log book shows, he was committed to fire safety and fire prevention and for twenty-eight years served the area of Port Credit well in his capacity as Fire Chief.

Sources

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