

ROCKDALE FIRE DEPARTMENT
(Researched by John Weed, Jr. and Ward Roddam)

Early records are not available to determine the actual time of the organization of the Rockdale Fire Department but it is believed to be in the mid or late 1880's. Since that time Rockdale has been protected from loss by fire by a totally volunteer department. Apparatus used by the early firemen was hand-drawn hose carts pulled to the scene of a fire. One of these carts is still stored in our fire station. In the early 1900's a horse-drawn hook and ladder wagon became the pride of the department.

Firemen were notified of a fire by the sounding of the town bell located atop a tower on the City Hall. They would then, as the old constitution stated, "Repair to the fire station and help convey the apparatus to the fire." It took a lot of pure strength and stamina to be a fireman in those days.

In 1915 the city council decided to modernize the department and negotiated the purchase of a motorized pumper. This was an American La France 350 gallons per minute combination pumper and hose wagon. Fireman took great pride in their new pumper and affectionately named it "Nancy Hanks". The pumper could not be stored in the City Hall so it was parked in the Gaither Motor Co. shop.

This pumper served Rockdale well until 1930 when the council found it necessary to augment it. They purchased a Seagrave 600 GPM pumper. This was the latest in modern pumpers capable of road speeds of up to 60 mph, and could handle three 2 1/2 hose lines at one time.

In the mid 1930's the City Hall was remodeled and a fire station was provided in the rear to house the apparatus and equipment. The Seagraves and "Nancy Hanks" served the town until 1950 when once again the council purchased a new 500 GPM pumper to replace the old one and "Nancy Hanks" was sold to an antique car buyer for \$1.50. The Rockdale Fire Department was incorporated by a charter issued on June 13, 1936.

In the mid 1950's the fire station was remodeled and enlarged to its present size. As ALCOA caused the town to grow, it was decided in 1960 to add a new pumper to the department so another Seagraves pumper was purchased. This gave Rockdale a well- equipped department and created considerable pride among members.

The members of the department recognized the need of a rural pumper and in 1969, began fund raising campaign to purchase one. This drive was successful and a pumper was purchased in 1970. At the same time the council saw the need to replace the old Seagraves pumper and purchased a new 750 GPM American La France diesel pumper. The departments rural pumper replaced the 1950 pumper and it was sold to Minerva where it is in use today. Rockdale currently has one of

the best equipped departments in the state for a town its size. In addition to the pumpers, the department also has a rescue truck and a boat used to search for drowning victims.



Rockdale has had its share of disastrous fires. In the early 1900's the Mundine Hotel located on the corner of Main and Milam burned and the entire Brooks family, five in number, lost their lives. This family is buried in a mass grave in the I. O. O. F. Cemetery in north Rockdale. The ground floor of the hotel was rebuilt and now houses the McVoy Grocery Co. The old Mundine Hotel sill plate is on the Main Street entrance to the store. The firemen had their most tragic fire on September 3rd, 1935 while fighting the Scarbrough & Hicks fire at the corner of Cameron and Ackerman Streets. Two firemen were manning a hose line when the front wall collapsed, burying them. They were quickly rescued, but both men lost their lives. They were W. J. Hooper and J W. Williams. A granite stone marks the occasion on the south lawn of the library grounds, site of the fire.

In the early 1940's the firemen fought a losing battle for 13 hours trying to save the Bredt & Haley Produce complex, a large group of buildings located on Milam Street. A small but tragic fire occurred in the mid 50's when four small children were burned to death in a frame house on the corner of White and Hickory Streets.

As time moved on, there were several more historic fires in the City of Rockdale. The Brookshire Brothers Grocery Store in July of 1998. This fire began in the early hours of the morning and kept RVFD volunteers on scene for 2-3 days. In the early hours of the morning on December 11, 2002, RVFD was dispatched to a fire in the Arledge Antiques Building downtown Rockdale. This devastating fire destroyed both Arledge Antiques and the adjoining building/business of Ballard Furniture Etc. The All Service Propane Business fire on March 3, 2017 consumed one large home, multiple old vehicles, and damaged an adjacent home near the property. This fire was even more dangerous due to the adjacent location of a very large propane tank on the property of the business. Two firefighters were injured during this long battle to contain the fire and protect residents.

Firefighting is not the only role that RVFD Volunteers perform as a part of their duties. RVFD personnel perform search and rescue duties, patient extrication and packaging at motor vehicle accidents, high angle/low angle rope rescue, confined space rescue, water rescue, and assist EMS on many medical related calls.

There have been many Rockdale Firemen over the years, too many to name. Each one has contributed in his/her own way and to mention any particular individual would unjustly affect the rest. The Rockdale Fire Department is one of the oldest continuing organizations in town yet it must be one of the newest always looking ahead.