



# Murrieta Valley Historical Society Newsletter

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*It is our mission to identify, preserve and promote the historic legacy of the Murrieta Valley and to educate the public about its historical significance.*

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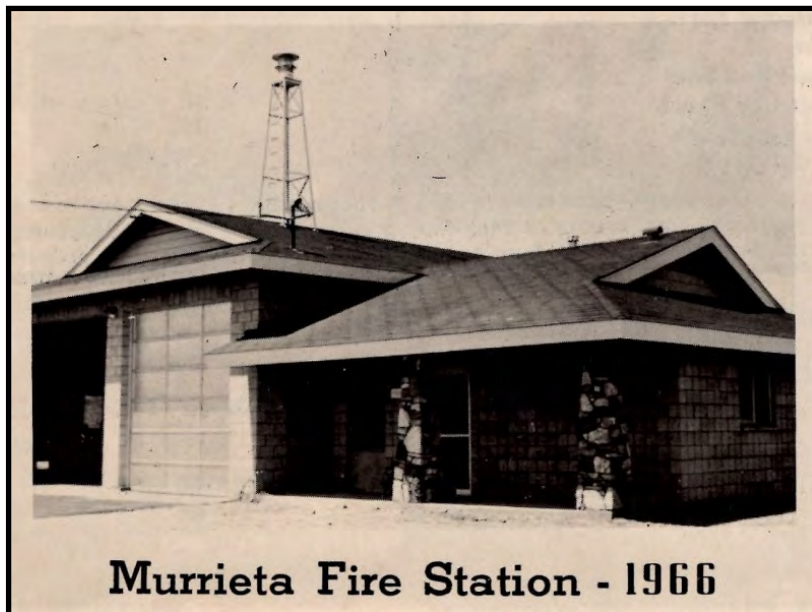
## SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY EDITION

# The Murrieta Fire Department 75 Years of Service

By: Pat Jennings, Deputy Fire Chief (Ret)  
Murrieta Fire Department



The first crew, 1948, From left to right, (front row): Marvin Curran, Lawrence Dunham, Coy Burnett, and Ted Sheld, (second row), assistant chief Victor Garrison, Clayton Erdel, Willis Thompson, Jr. Oscar Matteson, Floyd Rail, and chief Raymond Thompson.  
Source; E. Hale Curran Collection



**Murrieta Fire Station - 1966**

Fire Station #1 on Juniper Street

Photo Source: Pat Jennings

I had the honor of serving on the Murrieta Fire Department for 28 years, two as a volunteer and twenty-six as a paid employee. Having grown up in Murrieta, my father also served as a volunteer during the 1960s. In 1996, as the Department approached its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, my wife, Annette, who also grew up in Murrieta and whose father also served on the Department in the late 1950s, and our daughter, Ashley, began collecting the history of the Murrieta Fire Department with a goal of presenting a pictorial history of the Department at its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We accomplished that goal and since then we have continued to collect and preserve the history of the department for the future. In this special edition of the Murrieta Historical Society's newsletter we will present some of the Department's highlights and some trivia from the last 75 years. As a side note, I will use rounded numbers for much of this based on information we have on hand and from interviews from many current and former Department members. We are always looking for any input that helps firm up these dates or adds to our collection.

The Murrieta Fire Department has been known under a few different names over the past 75 years. First as the Murrieta Volunteer Fire Department,

then the Murrieta Fire Protection District; after 1993, the Murrieta Fire Department, and after 2017 as the Murrieta Fire and Rescue. I will use Department to generically cover all these eras.

In March of 1947, yet another home was lost in Murrieta due to the lack of fire protection. The loss of the home of Max and Mattie Thompson set in motion the formation of the Murrieta Fire Department.

Shortly after the Thompson house fire, E. C. Harbor, who was the Director of the Murrieta Farm Bureau Center, proposed to his members the formation of a volunteer fire department. In true Murrieta fashion, committees were soon formed and a volunteer fire department was founded on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 1947. The first Fire Chief was Raymond I. Thompson. Chief Thompson was the only professional firefighter on the Department at this time and he worked at the Marine Corps Base (MCB) Camp Pendleton. Victor Garrison, owner of the Murrieta Machine Shop, became the Assistant Chief with Oscar Matteson as Secretary/Treasurer, seven other members were recruited from the local community.

During that first year, a fire engine was purchased with \$1400 donated from the community. Also during the first year, the fire engine was quartered at the Murrieta Machine Shop and the volunteers were notified of a call by the ringing of the bell at the Murrieta Methodist Church.

Construction of a fire station was also started that year on property donated by the Garrison family on C Street behind the Murrieta Machine Shop. In September of 1947, the County of Riverside was petitioned for the formation of a fire protection district, the County approved of the petition, a vote was held and passed by the district voters, and a Board of Commissioners was appointed. By April of 1948, the fire station on C Street was completed. As part of the new fire station, a tower mounted siren was installed to alert the volunteers of a call, this replaced the Methodist Church bell. The original siren was moved to the new Fire Station 1 on Juniper Street in 1966 and was later replaced by a larger Civil Defense siren in the early 1980s. This siren was used until about 1987 when pagers and home alerts made the siren obsolete. Also starting in 1948, as a celebration of the opening of the new fire station, the first iconic Fireman's BBQ was held.

The first BBQ featured pit BBQ beef. The firemen were taught the pit BBQ by a local rancher/horseman named Gib Miller. This first BBQ was such a success that it continues to this day and has been quoted (depending on who you talk to) as the second or third longest running event in Riverside County. During the early years, supplies of eggs and potatoes were parceled out to the community prior to the BBQ for the local women to cook. They were picked up on the morning of the BBQ by Department members and taken to the school cafeteria for the potato salad. One of my jobs when I was a kid was to ride around with volunteer firefighter, Ira Rail, and pick all the stuff up. The coleslaw was made at home by other volunteers and the Dunham Family made the beans. The meal was served with loafs of bread on the table and all the coffee and water you could drink with sodas and deserts available from one of the civic groups like Scouts, 4-H or PTC. The BBQ continued with minor changes being made and later all the sides were purchased instead of being made locally. In 2014, the BBQ ran into an issue with the ability to do an in-ground BBQ for public consumption. In true Murrieta Fire Department tradition a

large smoker was constructed and has been used since. Funds from the BBQ were used to purchase needed equipment and supplies, as well as giving funds to the Town Hall Association, and support to the local Boy and Cub Scout Packs and established an emergency fund for people who had lost a home to fire starting in 1957. The BBQ also became a reunion for Murrieta residents and families that had moved away, at the last BBQ, held just before the Pandemic, there were 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> generation Murrieta residents in attendance.

As mentioned earlier, when the Department formed in April of 1947, the first ten members were all from the community of Murrieta and



Fire Chief Raymond I. Thompson

Circa: Late 1960's

Photo Source: E. Hale Curran



The Last BBQ Pit, April 2013

Photo Source: Pat Jennings

represented a cross section of many different talents. The only member that had any fire experience was Chief Raymond Thompson. Assistant Chief Vic Garrison owned the Murrieta Machine shop, and other members were farmers, ranchers, equipment operators, and general contractors. Later the Department did have a few other professional firefighters. Most all of these members worked at MCB Camp Pendleton. The volunteers met every other Tuesday for training. Volunteers were approved for their membership by vote of the Department membership, but the Department had a one "black ball vote" to disqualify someone from membership. These policies continued well into the late 1990s for the volunteer side of the Department even after the Department started

hiring paid suppression crews in 1987. When the Department began hiring full time suppression personnel starting in 1987 thru 1992, at least five members came from MCB Camp Pendleton and two from Cal Fire. During this time, all the personnel hired came from the ranks of the Volunteer Department. The first outside hire was Al LeCou who was hired as the Operations Battalion Chief around 1990. The Department continued to hire from the Volunteer ranks until 1999 when outside firefighter/paramedics were hired in preparation of starting the Paramedic Assessment Engine Company Program early in 2000. The Department continued to operate its volunteer program into the 2000s. The last suppression volunteer was Gerry Grandi, his last shift on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 2016 marked the end of 69 years of community volunteer firefighters.

In early 1992, the Department had just opened Fire Station 2 and work was underway on Station 3. The crew for Station 3 had been hired and were training with the other crews. The Department at this time had 46 employees, 33 on suppression, 6 in administration, 4 in prevention, 2 in maintenance and 1 in disaster prevention. There were also 50 volunteer firefighters on the Department rolls. The Department had also recently taken delivery of two Type I engines and a 95- aerial platform. By the middle of 1992, due to a little known economic recession, the Department took a major hit on its funding based on property tax devaluation and a Certificate of Participation Bond taken out to fund stations and apparatus. By the early part of 1993, the Department had taken a major hit. Half the Department personnel were let go. Personnel were let go based on the last hired, first to be let go procedure resulting in about half the Department, thru all areas, had been downsized. The new apparatus was returned and the recently opened Fire Station 3 was closed. As the Department continued to lose money and personnel, the local citizenry turned to the then new City of Murrieta for help. During a heated meeting at City Hall, the City of Murrieta agreed to

take on the Fire Department as a subsidiary district with the condition that the Fire Department must survive on their own funding. On a side note, up until the passage of Measure T a few years ago, the Fire Department did survive on its own funding. The Measure T money is now being used to increase the Fire Department's capabilities. After that meeting, Station 3 was reopened and all three of Murrieta's fire stations now had a staffing level of two people per engine. As it appeared that the Department would not be hiring for a while, the volunteer participation dropped off, but enough remained to provide additional staffing. This reduction continued until around 1997 or so and in 1999 the hiring of personnel for the Paramedic Program brought staffing back to reasonable levels.

After the first BBQ, work continued on improving the new station. Money earned at the next BBQs was used to buy equipment and supplies for the Department. The next major purchase was in 1952 when the Department purchased an E&J Resuscitator, this purchase was helped by a \$400 donation from the community. In 1958, Assistant Chief Victor Garrison left the Department and Marvin D. Curran was elected to replace him.

During these early years, the Department had very little in the way of uniforms or equipment. Badges were purchased and there were no uniforms or safety equipment, only surplus Civil Defense helmets. These helmets were all painted white and had the members seniority number painted in red on the front. The Fire Chief had the number 1 helmet, Assistant Chief number 2, and down the line. The Department members responded with whatever they were wearing at the time and their helmets. In the late 1950s, the Department purchased white coveralls for all the members. These had Murrieta Fire Department embroidered across the back with the member's name on the front.



Photo Source: Murrieta Fire & Rescue

They were worn to meetings, and at the BBQ, or on responses if they had time to put them on. The Department finally got their first real turn-out equipment in April of 1964 which included new structure helmets. The white coveralls were used until the early 1970s when they were replaced by a more traditional style of uniform.

The Department's first fire engine was a unique choice made specific for the community of Murrieta at that time by Chief Raymond Thompson. This engine was a surplus Navy crash truck made by International Harvester with a fire body and pump made by the Bean Manufacturing Company. It was unique in a couple ways, first it featured a high pressure low volume pump, meaning it could pump in excess of 1,000 pounds per square inch at 55 gallons a minute and could also be driven while pumping at the same time, called mobile pumping, which most fire engines of the time could not do. The attraction of this, according to Chief Thompson during an interview in 1996, who was also a pioneer of the mobile pumping doctrine,

was that a field of standing crops could represent the total yearly income for a farming family and was therefore a priority for the Department to protect. He also noted that the Department had no interior firefighting capabilities at that time nor any type of public water system to utilize a traditional type fire engine.

The Department purchased a second Navy crash truck from the Soil Conservation District around 1957, in poor repair it was made serviceable and painted by Assistant Chief Marvin Curran at his gas station on the corner of Juniper St and Washington Ave. In the early 1960s, the Department began construction on its third engine. A 1957 GMC cab and chassis was supplied by Lyle Gerdes, a fire body from the Soil Conservation District and a separate pump and motor from another source were put together in time for the 1966 BBQ. This Department built truck was also capable for pump and roll operations. These three engines were used by the Department until the mid-1970s.

In February of 1976, the Department



The Department's First Fire Engine

Photo Source: Pat Jennings

purchased for one dollar a 1953 GMC/Van Pelt, 1,000 gpm Type 1 structural engine from the California Department of Emergency Services. This was the Department's first Type 1 engine and was the Department's first roll engine until the purchase of a 1984 E-One engine in 1985.

The Department's first squad was built in 1970, on a Chevy 1 ton chassis with a service body, this squad was in fact a small quick attack with a pump and water tank. This squad also carried medical supplies, a compliment of rescue equipment, and at that time, the Department's only Hurst Tool, an extrication system for rescuing people from car accidents.

During the early 1980s, the Department purchased three military 6X6 trucks. These trucks were rebuilt and repowered with new Caterpillar motors by Fire Captain/Mechanic Jim Kean. These trucks replaced the aging crash trucks for vegetation responses. These trucks were replaced in the late 1990s by three ex CalFire Model 9 Type 3s. The Model 9s were replaced in the mid-2000s by new E-One Model 34s.

After the purchase of the 1984 E-One engine, the Department stayed with E-One for many years. By 1992, the Department had four additional Type 1 engines, two 95-foot aerial platform trucks and a new rescue squad. Half of this equipment was returned in 1992 and 1993 during the Department's downsizing. Later in the 1990s, a new American LaFrance and a used Clark/Hendricks engine were purchased along with the mentioned Model 9s. The remaining apparatus served until the early/mid 2000s when a complete apparatus replacement began. As before, the new apparatus was made by E-One, this included a 75-foot ladder truck, new engines and new Type 3s.

All apparatuses purchased after this time, up to the present, are made by the Pierce Company.

The Murrieta Fire Department Auxiliary "Bucket Brigade" was formed in late 1984. Membership was made up of the wives, friends, and families of members of the Department. Their mission was to raise money to support the operation of the Department and to purchase needed equipment. There were many fundraisers, pancake breakfasts, rummage sales, craft fairs, spaghetti dinners, Christmas tree sales, and a booth at every BBQ to sell drinks, deserts and to hold a raffle, the Auxiliary also solicited donations from the community. Over the years the Auxiliary donated many needed items to the Department, a VCR/TV for the training division, a coffee pot for the office, backboards, a stokes basket, a CPR mannequin, money toward the Department's first ventilation saw and thermal image camera to name a few of the items donated to the Department. The Auxiliary also sponsored and helped to put on the Department's annual fire prevention programs and open house. In 1988, the Auxiliary started its first Toy and Food Drive. Soliciting donations and then using these donations to support many needy families during a time when they were the only organization doing so in Murrieta. In 1993, the Auxiliary's Toy and Food Drive received a boost in

donations when Councilman Jack VanHaaster linked the Toy and Food Drive to the then new City of Murrieta's Santa Runs. This resulted in donations over the years to tons of food and thousands of toys that were then distributed back into the community, at first by the Auxiliary and later by the local nonprofits that had started up in the area. The last year the Auxiliary did direct donations to the local community, 120 families were served. The Toy and Food Drive was later moved to the City and continues to this day. In the mid-1990s the Auxiliary had a van made up as a vehicle to support fire operations by delivering food and drinks to the incident, prior to this they had used their own vehicles. The Auxiliary also had a Bucket Brigade team that competed against the Department's team and also against other local Auxiliaries that were active at that time. By the late 2000s, the Auxiliary had gradually disbanded.

Another organization that supports and represents the Department is Fire Explorer Post 630. The Post was established in January 1992 by Captains Jim and Steve Kean, a father and son team. The Post was later ran by Captain Richard Curran. The Explorer Post is a program under the Boy Scouts of America and is open to anyone age 14 to 20 years old and who has



Assistant Chief Marvin D. Curran repairs second engine. Photo Source: Marvin D. Curran



L-R: Minnie Norris, Vickie Forkey, Kathie Peery, Dottie Arnold, Michele Thomas, Linda Limkemann and Annette Jennings. Photo Source: Kathie Peery

completed 8<sup>th</sup> grade with a 2.0 or better grade average. Explorers are taught all the basics of the fire service to prepare them for a future career with a fire department. They also are taught community service and support the Department during its many public events such as the BBQ, fire prevention activities, citizen academies, and CERT training to name a few. The Post also fundraises to support their activities and they are very competitive and a successful mustered team. The Department also offers cadet programs for firefighters and fire inspectors also with many other programs. Please check out their web page for details under [murrietafire.org](http://murrietafire.org).

The Department has had nine Fire Chiefs over the last 75 years and is currently recruiting for its 10<sup>th</sup>. In order from the first to the last the Fire Chiefs were Raymond I. Thompson 1947 to 1972, Marvin D. Curran 1972 to 1992, Joe Whisenand 1992 to 1995, Jerry Allen 1995 to 2000, Phil Armentrout 2001 to 2005, Paul Christman 2006 to 2011, Matt Shobert 2011 to 2014, Scott Ferguson 2015 to 2019, and David Lantzer 2019 to 2021.

The Department has operated out of seven fire stations over the last 75 years, not counting the first year where the engine was quartered at the Murrieta Machine shop. The first station was on C Street behind the Machine shop. The new Station, now Station 1, along with the Fire Administration office, training rooms and fire maintenance, was dedicated in 1966 on property donated to the Department by Fire Commissioner Albert Edmund. The Station 1 site has been updated several times. In 1988/89 when the station itself was enlarged and the Admin wing was added and again around 2006 when the current two story Admin Office building was built. The shop was built during the 1980s, in two phases, by Department personnel as were the training rooms around 1990. Fire Station 2, located on Cal Oaks Road, was opened in 1990. Fire Station 3, located on Whitewood Road was opened in 1992. There was a temporary Station 4, located where Loma Linda Medical Center is now located. Opening in late 2005, Department personnel did all the site work, grading, concrete and utility trenching to expedite the



opening of the station. Permanent Station 4 was dedicated on February 23 2009. Station 5, located off of Vineyard Parkway was dedicated on May 7 2010. The station and apparatus buildings came from temporary Station 4.

A few more pieces of history:

Captain Larry Reeves is credited with starting the Fire Department's first hose down at the City Birthday Bash. While doing standby at one of the first Birthday Bashes Larry and his crew from Station 2 would hose down the kids on the hot afternoons. It was such a hit that it later became part of the day's program with elevated and ground master streams for a lot more water and fun for all.

On March 5, 2001 at 0844 hours, then Firefighter Paramedic Phong Dang ran the Department's first call at the start of the Department's First Responder Advanced Life Support (ALS) Non- Transport Provider, on a 75- year old woman with a complaint of dizziness and low blood pressure.

When Citizens for Cityhood began the incorporation drive for Murrieta Cityhood they depended on the Department for the needed demographic information required for the Cityhood application. What was needed was an accurate tax roll accounting, cur-

rent commercial property values and because the Department issued conditions and permits in the fire district the department knew what types of development were being built and the forecasted revenues. When the election for City Council Members was held, Department members won the top two spots. Administrative Battalion Chief Jerry Allen was elected Mayor and Fire Captain Joe Peery was elected Vice Mayor based on the votes they received.

When the new fire station was built on Juniper Street it was designed with the BBQ in mind. During the BBQ, people entered through the front door on Juniper Street, paid for their meals at the counter, then they then turned right in the hallway that had a divider down the middle, then along the restroom side, turned back to the left, they were then served from a large counter opening into the kitchen, this opening was closed up during the station upgrade in 1988/1989. They then went straight through the door to the apparatus bay where tables were set up. The BBQ pit in those days was located to the rear of the station about where the crew quarters are now.

In 1963, the new Murrieta County Water District started installing new water lines through Murrieta. When the Department found out the Water District had no plans or money to install fire hydrants, the Department purchased four hydrants and Department members in-



Department personnel graded pad for temporary Station #4.

Photo Source: Murrieta Fire & Rescue



Top: Craig Gottlieb

Middle Row L-R: Steve Kean, JoAnn Tiss,  
and Gary Whisenand

Bottom Row L-R: Evan Tiss, Willie Stewart  
and Chris Swift.

Photo Source: Pat Jennings

stalled them themselves.

The Department was looking at a self-contained breathing apparatus as early as 1955 when the Department requested the local Scott Air Pac Dealer for a demonstration of their product.

Howard Sykes served on the Board of Fire Commissioner for a few months short of 40 years. Clydene Boots was the first female volunteer firefighter; she joined the Department in

1980.

Starting in the early 1980s, the Department began taking on high school age volunteers. Most of these younger volunteers were eventually hired starting in the late 1980s as the Department went to paid crews. Chris Swift, Evan Tiss and Gary Whisenand have since retired from their careers with the Department. Steve Kean, now a Battalion Chief, continues his career with the Department. Steve has been on the Department as a volunteer and career member for over 40 years. Joann Tiss Serven served as a volunteer firefighter until she was hired to work in the Department's Admin Office; she later transferred to the Murrieta Police Department and works there today. She too has over 40 years of public service. Two other young volunteers, Craig Gottlieb and Willie Stewart chose other careers.

In August of 2017, the Department reached another major milestone. Under the leadership of Fire Chief Scott Ferguson and Deputy Fire Chief David Lantzer the Center for Public Safety Excellence awarded the Department its completion of its nationally recognized Accreditation Certificate. This certificate, at the time it was issued, was 1 out of 258 departments nationwide, 1 of 20 in California and the first in Riverside County. Today the Department, re-branded Murrieta Fire and Rescue, to better identify their current mission, serves the City of Murrieta out of five fire stations.

The Department has suffered three lines of duty deaths over the last 75 years. Fire Chief Phil Armentrout, Last Alarm December 27, 2005, Fire Captain Matt Moore, Last Alarm March 10, 2008, and Firefighter/ Paramedic Dean Hale, Last Alarm November 22, 2019.



Photo Source: Murrieta Fire & Rescue

I hope you have enjoyed this special edition of the Murrieta Historical Society's newsletter and we all hope to see you in April to help us celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Murrieta Fire Department.



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### Next General Board Meeting TBA

General Board Meetings are virtual in a Zoom meeting format. Anyone interested in joining us, please send an email to info@murrietahistoricalsociety.org and we will email you the Zoom link before the meeting



The Murrieta Museum,  
41810 Juniper Street  
at Hunt Memorial Park.

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