

History of Scranton Fire Co.

The company, like so many of its brethren, was born of disaster. But its brand-new home had been forged in the furnace of civic pride.

The Scranton Fire Company No. 1 was formed on the night of Oct. 22, 1883, by the light of a raging fire - the way so many volunteer fire companies are begun. The company and its firefighters served the community in many ways over the years, culminating in the construction during the early 1920s of one of the region's most modern fire stations. That station now houses Scranton's Restaurant, continuing a tradition of dedication to excellence.

The Scranton Company's fire halls had always been important meeting places for politicians and preachers, for Sunday afternoon socials and Billy Sunday revivals. The early fire station served as a voting place and banquet hall, and as a symbol of civilization in a sometimes rough and ready seacoast town.

The men of the Scranton Company watched over the communities in their area for many years, fighting fires and building civic pride in many ways. Its members could be counted on to battle blazes in any coast city, from Gulfport to Mobile, and were often called on to assist the volunteer firefighters of such Jackson County towns as Moss Point, Kreole, Laine, Eastside and all the Pascagoulas - North, East, West, Big and Little.

But the Scranton Company and all its fellow firefighting troops were no match for the two fires that leveled its downtown area in 1921. The first came in the night, at 1a.m. on Feb. 25, sweeping down Delmas Avenue and swirling along Magnolia and Pascagoula Streets. More than half the town's businesses were destroyed or damaged.

Within four months, on the quiet Sunday afternoon of July 19, a second blaze would raze what remained, gutting more than 50 homes and businesses, and leaving the town and its people in shock.

In his columns for The Mississippi Press, local historian Arthur Smith describes both fires as "devastating, out of control." Writing in his book, *Pascagoula: Singing River City*, Jay Higginbotham speaks of the blazes as "dragons" making a meal of the city.

The fires served only to temper the steel of the town. Reorganizing itself, consolidating its boundaries, settling finally on an official name, the villages of North Pascagoula, Little Pascagoula, Scranton and East Pascagoula came together after the infernos as the town of Pascagoula, stronger than ever before, with a sense of community that would burn brighter through the years than any fire could hope to.

It was to this community that the Scranton Fire Company dedicated itself with renewed vigor, reforming with the town and vowing to build in place of its "rickety old fire hall" a new and commanding structure.

Work began on the new fire hall on Monday, June 9, 1924, and from the beginning it was expected to be something special. Built with money raised by the Scranton Company, the hall was to serve not only as a fire engine station but as the new city hall for its town - a gift from the firefighters to their fellow citizens.

Though builders had hoped to have the hall completed in time for an anniversary celebration on Oct. 22, 1924, it was not until early the following year that the hall was ready for use.

The formal dedication of the new fire hall, on Thursday, Feb. 12, 1925, was an occasion of great celebration. It included a grand parade through the town, special tributes to veteran firefighters and their equipment, speeches by just about every politician in the state, and a special appearance by the U.S. Naval Band of the Pensacola Naval Air Station.

Hermes Gautier led the procession as Grand Marshal followed by open touring cars holding some of the firefighting veterans of the community. Troops of Boy Scouts carried banners honoring the hand and horse drawn firefighting machines of earlier eras, including an old hand pumper that was the first piece of equipment ever owned by the Scranton Company. There were plenty of other bands and marching groups, including Platoon Infantry Company L of the Mississippi National Guard under the command of Capt. O.E. Rolls, but the stars of the day were the firemen.

Marching in the parade to honor their neighbors were the men of the Moss Point Fire Company, the Ocean Springs Fire Company No. 1, the Ocean Springs Volunteer Hook and Ladder Company, and the Southern Paper Company Fire Department. And bringing up the rear of the parade were the men of Pascagoula Central Fire Company No. 1 - the newly renamed Scranton Company, which had voted to adopt the name of the community as its own.

Tours of the building were all the rage that day and in the weeks to follow. Everyone wanted to see everything they could of the inside and outside of the new Fire and City Hall. Built along classic mission adobe lines at its front, the hall was spacious and appointed with all the latest modern conveniences, according to The Chronicle Star, the city's weekly newspaper:

"The eastern half of the lower floor will be used to house the fire apparatus, and in the rear will be a lounging room for firemen, shower baths, dressing rooms and lockers.

"The city will use the western half as a city hall. In the front will be the main hall and clerk's department, where citizens may pay taxes and light and water accounts and transact other business with City Clerk DeJean, who will be ensconced behind a railing. A built-in vault will be provided for city records. Nearby will be a ladies cloak room, and behind the clerk's office will be the Mayor's private office adjoining the city court room. Further back will be two cells for keeping prisoners, lavatory, janitor's closet, etc.

The second floor will be used for a municipal hall and meetings of the Fire Company. This hall represents the Fire Company's latest contribution to the public welfare and is dedicated to public use. This room will be comfortably fitted with ladies dressing and cloak rooms, and chairs."

All the ceremonies and speeches and tours ended as suppertime came on, and folks made for home to get ready for the celebration's climax - a Grand Ball to be held that evening in the city's brand-new Fire and City Hall.

The men of the Scranton and Pascagoula Fire Companies who worked so long and hard in the service of their fellow citizens have been honored many times through the years, and the community has said many thanks for their efforts and dedication. Those thanks have also been expressed to their families, especially the mothers and wives, who shared these men with the town, and who never flinched when that sharing meant the possibility of irreplaceable loss of their loved ones.

Once again the legacy of these citizens serves their town, as Scranton's Restaurant maintains the heritage of Scranton Fire Company No. 1 and its last, best home.