

History of the Elizabethtown Fire Department's First Aerial Ladder Truck

On Thursday, 16 July 1964, shortly after noon a fire started in the Leed-Pak paper manufacturing building in Elizabethtown, PA.¹ The building was used to produce paper and plastic products, and employees noticed the fire after returning from lunch.² The cause was undetermined but the fire spread rapidly, and firefighters from Elizabethtown were soon joined by the Mount Joy, Rheems, Bainbridge, Florin, Lawn, Maytown, Middletown, Hershey, and Manheim fire departments.³ Plastics such as polyvinyl, polystyrene, polyethylene, and cellophane produced highly toxic smoke that combined with the intense heat of the fire to incapacitate over thirty firefighters from the ten different departments fighting the fire.⁴ Ambulances from Elizabethtown, Mount Joy, and Lawn-Colebrook brought these firemen to various Lancaster County Hospitals. One of the causes of the high casualty rate was the inability to penetrate the roof to let the toxic smoke out of the building until Manheim, the last department on scene, could bring in their eighty-five-foot aerial ladder truck.⁵ Leed-Pak initially estimated a loss of one half million dollars, although this would shrink to a mere three hundred thousand after salvage operations.⁶

Fourteen days later, on 30 July 1964, a special meeting was held at the Elizabethtown Fire Department.⁷ President Martin Boozer presided over the meeting, in which James Risser presented a proposal by Claude Disney to buy a ladder truck for the fire department.⁸ Claude Disney was a real estate agent in Elizabethtown of French descent, and owned considerable amounts of land in the borough.⁹ In his proposal Disney stated the ladder truck he had found was in "A-1 condition."¹⁰ He also stated the truck was "needed in this Borough" could serve the department for five to ten years.¹¹ The truck Disney proposed to give to the Elizabethtown Fire Department was a used 1937 Pirsch Fire Apparatus Aerial tractor-trailer truck with a seventy-five-foot ladder.¹² Disney also offered to pay any fees involved with the title and license of the truck, but hoped the department would dedicate the truck in memory of Walter Shaffer, who had passed away earlier that year of natural causes.¹³ Harold Eberly made the motion to accept Disney's offer, and Charles Kipp swiftly seconded the motion.¹⁴ The company carried the motion unanimously, and the Elizabethtown Fire Department got their first ladder truck.¹⁵ At the 3 August 1964 company meeting just three days later, Chief Engineer Marvin Shaud reported the new ladder truck to be "in working order and ready for service."¹⁶

Before serving with the Elizabethtown Fire Department, the Pirsch ladder truck had served as the "Calvin J. Frank" for the Reily Hose Company Number Ten of Harrisburg from April 1937 to 1961.¹⁷ The rig was purchased for the Reily Company by the Harrisburg City Council in 1936 for 15,500 dollars and named after the Harrisburg Fire Commissioner.¹⁸ The apparatus was built around a seventy-five-foot wooden aerial ladder which was hydraulically operated, but it also carried a large number of ground ladders, including a fifty-five-foot Bangor

¹ "Fumes, Smoke Hinder Efforts of Firemen in Leedpak Blaze," *Elizabethtown Chronicle*, (July 25, 1964): 17.

² *Ibid*, 17.

³ *Ibid*, 17.

⁴ *Ibid*, 17.

⁵ *Ibid*, 17.

⁶ *Ibid*, 17.

⁷ Minutes of the Company Meetings and Special Meetings, Elizabethtown Fire Department, 1964, Past Company Meeting Minutes of the Elizabethtown Fire Department, (Elizabethtown Fireman's Historical Society, Elizabethtown, PA), 21.

⁸ *Ibid*, 21.

⁹ Jean-Paul Benowitz, *Elizabethtown* (Charleston, S.C., Arcadia Publishing, 2015), 8.

¹⁰ Minutes of the Company Meetings and Special Meetings, 1964, 21.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 21.

¹² "1937 Pirsch Aerial: Elizabethtown's First Ladder Truck", Elizabethtown Firemen's Historical Society, n.p.

¹³ Minutes of the Company Meetings and Special Meetings, 1964, 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁷ "1937 Pirsch Aerial", n.p.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, n.p.

ladder.¹⁹ A life net, rescue basket, and assortment of hooks and forcible entry equipment was also carried.²⁰ Pompeire safety belts were added by the Elizabethtown Fire Department in August of 1964, when the rig was also painted in EFD colors.²¹ In September 1964 Chief Bailey added one section of three-inch hose, a 500 gallon fog nozzle, and a face mask for the aerial operator.²² The rig was an early tiller-style apparatus, which meant that the rear wheels of the trailer could be steered from a tilt-away seat on top of the aerial.²³ This gave the truck tremendous maneuverability in the streets of Harrisburg, and would help it negotiate the small roads of Elizabethtown. While in service with Elizabethtown the truck frequently used the radio call signs “7-4-L” or “Ladder 7-4”.²⁴

After acquiring the aerial ladder truck, the Elizabethtown Fire Department was then confronted with the difficulty of storing the apparatus. The rig was too long for the current station of the time, which was located on Market Street.²⁵ In August 1964 President Boozer appointed a ladder truck storage committee consisting of Charles Bailey, Marvin Shaud, and Walter Espenshade to find a suitable location to store the ladder truck.²⁶ At first the committee met with little success, reporting in September that they had found no suitable building at the and in October that they had asked the Borough Council for help but the request was refused.²⁷ At the October meeting Espenshade offered to erect a temporary building on land he owned at 113 E. College Avenue, with the condition that Espenshade would be allowed to purchase the building when the fire department eventually built a new station which could house the truck.²⁸ This motion was passed, but appears to have made little progress by December 1964, when President Boozer presented a surprising proposal.²⁹ President Boozer informed the department that President McCauley of Elizabethtown College had contacted him and offered that if the college purchased the Kiwanis Building the fire company was welcome to store their ladder truck there.³⁰ However, it would require a larger overhead door be installed on the building, which would be the responsibility of the fire department.³¹ A motion was made and passed which allowed the trustees to make the necessary purchase if the opportunity arose.³² On 11 January 1965 a special meeting was held at the fire department after another communication from McCauley confirmed the college had purchased the Kiwanis Building and was still willing to store the ladder truck for the fire department.³³ The college also proposed to keep the truck separate from the college maintenance equipment by way of a macadamed access paid for by the college.³⁴ Furthermore, in the event the fire department found other housing for the truck the college would reimburse the department for the cost of the new overhead door that would need to be installed.³⁵ The motion passed unanimously, and the ladder truck was kept in the old Kiwanis Building at Elizabethtown College from 1965 until the new, current fire station was built on South Mount Joy Street in 1976.³⁶

In December of 1965 the tractor suffered the complete loss of its clutch, most likely from age and hard driving.³⁷ On 13 December a special meeting was held to discuss the problem, with repairs estimated to cost just under \$550.³⁸ The company agreed to proceed with the repairs, while sending an itemized bill to the borough

¹⁹ Ibid, n.p.

²⁰ Ibid, n.p.

²¹ Minutes of the Company Meetings and Special Meetings, 1964, 25.

²² Ibid, 27.

²³ “1937 Pirsch Aerial,” n.p.

²⁴ “1937 Pirsch Aerial,” n.p.

²⁵ Jean-Paul Benowitz, *Elizabethtown* (Charleston, S.C., Arcadia Publishing, 2015), 36.

²⁶ Minutes of the Company Meetings and Special Meetings, 1964, 23-25.

²⁷ Ibid, 27, 31.

²⁸ Ibid, 31.

²⁹ Ibid, 39.

³⁰ Ibid, 39.

³¹ Ibid, 39.

³² Ibid, 39.

³³ Minutes of the Company Meetings and Special Meetings, Elizabethtown Fire Department, 1965, Past Company Meeting Minutes of the Elizabethtown Fire Department, (Elizabethtown Fireman’s Historical Society, Elizabethtown, PA), 6.

³⁴ Ibid, 6.

³⁵ Ibid, 6.

³⁶ Jean-Paul Benowitz, 36.

³⁷ Minutes of the Company Meetings and Special Meetings, 1965, 47.

³⁸ Ibid, 47.

council in the hopes they would help to pay for the repairs.³⁹ On 24 January 1966 another meeting was held due to difficulties in acquiring the necessary parts to fix the tractor.⁴⁰ At this meeting the company also agreed to increase the budget for repairs to \$1000.⁴¹ On 14 February yet another meeting was held, but at this one things took a distinct turn. Harold Brinser and James Grim presented three new, available tractors to the department which could be purchased instead of fixing the Pirsch, as well as one used tractor.⁴² In a twenty-four to seven vote a motion was passed to purchase a new tractor at the lowest cost possible.⁴³ This was a 1966 Ford closed-cab tractor which was purchased from Garbers for \$5,211.⁴⁴ This tractor would remain in service with the Elizabethtown Fire Department until the entire apparatus was replaced in 1981.⁴⁵

At the 14 September 1981 company meeting it was noted that a failure of the hydraulic system operating the ladder had occurred the previous month, and a new policy was enacted that would not allow more than two firefighters on the ladder at any time with at least fifteen feet between them.⁴⁶ Several members were appointed to look over the truck and determine how much money would be needed for repairs, however their names are not given.⁴⁷ In October Chief Engineer Bob Zeager reported on the findings, which clearly signaled the end of the ladder truck.⁴⁸ The hydraulic system would have to be entirely replaced, and because the National Fire Protection Association no longer acknowledged wooden ladders the ladder itself would have to be replaced.⁴⁹ The cost of this was estimated to be \$60 to \$70,000, if the chassis of the truck could even support the weight of a steel ladder.⁵⁰ Zeager concluded that there was no point in refurbishing the old ladder truck, and recommended a new one be purchased instead.⁵¹ President Gary Landvater, who had appointed a committee for the issues with the truck in September, confirmed this decision and asked the committee to shift their focus to purchasing a new or used apparatus to fulfill the department's aerial need.⁵²

Until the 1960s, there is no documentation proving the Elizabethtown Fire Department operated a ladder apparatus. A photograph exists which shows a horse-drawn ladder wagon behind the Rogers team engine in a parade, suggesting there may have been a horse-drawn ladder wagon in the 1800s.⁵³ However, no evidence of such a wagon exists in the Elizabethtown Firemen's Historical Society, and it is possible another fire department provided the ladder wagon for the parade.

³⁹ Ibid, 47.

⁴⁰ Minutes of the Company Meetings and Special Meetings, Elizabethtown Fire Department, 1966, Past Company Meeting Minutes of the Elizabethtown Fire Department, (Elizabethtown Fireman's Historical Society, Elizabethtown, PA), 5.

⁴¹ Ibid, 5.

⁴² Ibid, 9.

⁴³ Ibid, 9.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 9.

⁴⁵ Minutes of the Company Meetings and Special Meetings, Elizabethtown Fire Department, 1981, Past Company Meeting Minutes of the Elizabethtown Fire Department, (Elizabethtown Fireman's Historical Society, Elizabethtown, PA), 30.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 27.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 27.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 30.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 30.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 30.

⁵¹ Ibid, 30.

⁵² Ibid, 27, 30.

⁵³ Unknown, Untitled, ca. 1800s, Elizabethtown Firemen's Historical Society, Elizabethtown, PA.