

Marking

90 years

for fire crews

Open house: Ben Lomond honors its volunteers.

BY TERRI MORGAN
Special to the Mercury News

The Ben Lomond Volunteer Fire Department is celebrating its 90th birthday Sunday by hosting an open house and community luncheon.

Firefighters will take visitors on a tour of the Ben Lomond fire station to acquaint them with the wide range of emergency services the department provides. The open house will end in the kitchen, where volunteers will serve a free spaghetti lunch.

The first station

The department was founded in 1903 to protect homes and businesses within a seven-square-mile district in the San Lorenzo Valley. The original department was located in a tiny garage on Mill Street in downtown Ben Lomond, and run by about a dozen volunteers. That facility, which is attached to today's Park Hall community theater, was too small to house much more than the department's hose cart. After volunteers got tired of trying to squeeze their first fire truck — a 1926 Reo — inside the building they decided to construct a roomier station across the street.

Builder Roland "Bingo" Hill — the first of three generations of Hills to serve as volunteer firefighters in Ben Lomond — headed the construction crew. After the department moved to its current location at the corner of Highway 9 and Love Creek Road in 1941, the old station was remodeled into a community center and renamed Wilder Hall.

Bingo Hill was the assistant fire chief during the 1940s, said his son, Ed Hill, who recently retired from the department after 30 years.

Frequent sirens

"In the old days, every time the phone rang the siren would go off and the (station) doors would go up," Hill recalled. "Everyone would drop what they were doing and leave their jobs to respond, even if it turned out to be a wrong number or a false alarm."

Today, Bingo's grandson Jeff and the 31 other volunteer firefighters are summoned with pagers, and the siren is blown only on the rare occasions when too few volunteers respond. While their predecessors primarily doused blazes, those on today's crew are more likely to be called

Ben Lomond marks 90th birthday of all-volunteer fire department

FIRE STATION from Page 1B

to medical emergencies or automobile accidents. Of the 300 to 400 calls the department receives each year for emergency assistance, only about 10 percent involve a fire.

In the last 20 years, the volunteers have also been pressed into service during a variety of natural disasters including snow storms, floods, mudslides and earthquakes.

While the community and its needs have changed, the level of dedication the volunteers bring to the department has remained the same.

"I don't think the public realizes the benefits they get from their all-volunteer department," said Ed Hill. "The men and women who serve the community give generously of their time, dropping everything to respond to fires, rescues, and often risky medical calls. The level of commitment is fantastic."

To polish their skills, the firefighters drill at the station every Tuesday night. Because firefighters throughout the San Lorenzo Valley routinely assist other departments, the Ben Lomond volunteers also practice several times a year with neighboring crews. In emergencies, the different departments work together. The rest of the time, especially during the annual muster competitions, they engage in a fierce-but-friendly rivalry.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The fire department is located at 9430 Highway 9 in downtown Ben Lomond. Sunday's open house will run from 11 a.m. until 3 p.m.