

# Fire Engines Make The News — Again

By MARK BERGSTROM

Sentinel Staff Writer

Back in the 1940s when fire districts were forming, residents were asked to chip in a few dollars to help buy a new fire truck.

Times have changed. So have fire trucks. They're bigger, carry more equipment. And, they and no longer just come in red.

But the need for handouts to buy the apparatus is returning to fashion.

Once the fire districts were formed, they gained taxing powers on property and were able to grow to meet the needs of their expanding communities.

Then came Proposition 13 in 1978, which rolled back the property tax — the sole means of support for fire districts — by about two-thirds.

In order to maintain service, the districts have had to just about wipe out any reserves they may have amassed — for such purposes as replacing old apparatus or building new stations.

That's enabled the districts to get by, but their chiefs and directors have become increasingly concerned about how to replace their aging fire engines.

There's been a concerted effort to keep what's already in the barn running by rebuilding engines and pumps rather than shopping around for a brand new pumper.

But, as Aptos Fire Chief Nick Baumgartner points out, there comes a time when the nickle-and-dime repairs start matching what it would cost to buy a new rig.

With the future holding no promise for financial improvement, Aptos Fire directors decided more than a year ago they'd better do something to replace at least one of the department's 15-year-old front line pumpers.

What they did would give any car salesman fits (of jealousy).

The first thought was to find a trade-in. District directors found two — twin four-wheel-drive pumpers which no longer suited the district's needs so they advertised them for sale.

Representatives from the Salsipuedes Fire District came to look and liked what they saw. The four-wheel-drive unit would meet their needs and would be cheaper to buy than a new engine. The second went to Cambria By The Sea near San Luis Obispo.

Aptos put the two checks — totalling \$54,500 — in the bank.

It was a good deal for the district, says Baumgartner, since Aptos recovered just what it had invested in the two units and was well on its way to the purchase price of a new front line pumper.

Baumgartner, a former task force

commander with the Los Angeles City Fire Department, then learned from former associates that LA City was about to place an order for 10 Seagrave pumpers.

They agreed to let Aptos tag along on that order since fire engines are cheaper by the dozen. The fleet-type purchase discount, Baumgartner says, saved the Aptos Fire District some \$20,000.

Because of frugality, Aptos had been able to squirrel away some budget money which, along with the sale of the surplus trucks and the discount, allowed the district not only to afford a new pumper, but to pay for it in cash and save thousands of taxpayers' dollars in interest charges.

Baumgartner last month picked up the new lime-yellow rig at the Seagrave factory in Wisconsin and drove it back to Aptos, where "Aptos Fire District" markings are being applied and specialized equipment added to make it ready for the street.

Branciforte had a real problem keeping its front-line, 1954 pumper in service because of frequent breakdowns and few replacement parts around.

With absolutely no money in the budget for a new engine, directors of that district decided to take advantage of a financing avenue granted fire districts by the state

Legislature by seeking voter approval of a special, fire protection fee.

They went into the proposition knowing that similar attempts up and down the state had generally failed to gain the two-thirds' voter approval necessary.

But, Chief Dale Thomas and his volunteers went door to door to explain the fire district's plight, and not only did they convince the voters, but they started seeing donations in the morning mail at the station.

The fee proposal passed on last November's ballot by a margin of nearly 80 per cent, enabling the district to order a new \$90,000 rig.

And, even though the fees will enable the district to meet the monthly payments of about \$15,000 per year, donations are still coming in. Thomas says he received another check just last week for \$100, bringing the donation total to about \$6,000.

Had the fee proposal failed, directors had worried they might have to turn to bake sales to finance the new piece of apparatus.

Now that might seem far out, but consider that the Boulder Creek Fire volunteers have been holding fund-raising events since 1957 to buy and replace that

department's rescue vehicles.

This year, the volunteers took delivery of their fourth rescue unit after raising more than half the purchase price through social events.

The only other district in the area to order a major new piece of equipment since Proposition 13 is Capitola, which, in March, awarded a bid for a new Mack pumper to replace its 20-year-old Mack.

Acting Chief Jerry Bowles explained that the district did so good at penny pinching the last three years it was able to come up with the down payment.

The district, he said, will pay the remainder under a lease-purchase plan which will cost \$25,000 a year for several years.

"When we get that one paid off it will be time to begin saving for a new replacement," he says.

Hard times may have made buying a new fire engine difficult, but they have served to once again make the delivery of a shiny new rig a big event and the source of community pride.

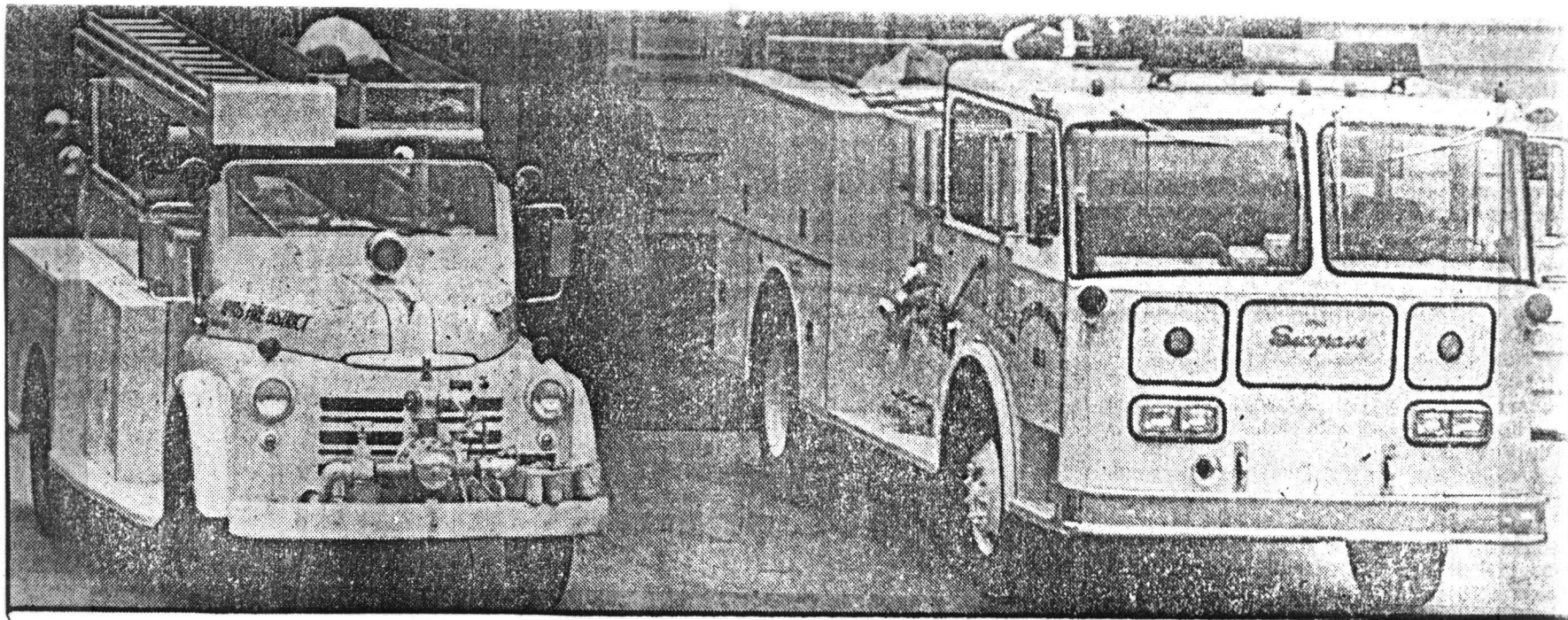
Aptos residents surely can look to see their new engine proudly rolling through the Village come the Fourth of July parade.

APTOS FIRE DISTRICT  
LIBRARY  
7045 SOQUEL DRIVE  
APTOS, CALIFORNIA 95020

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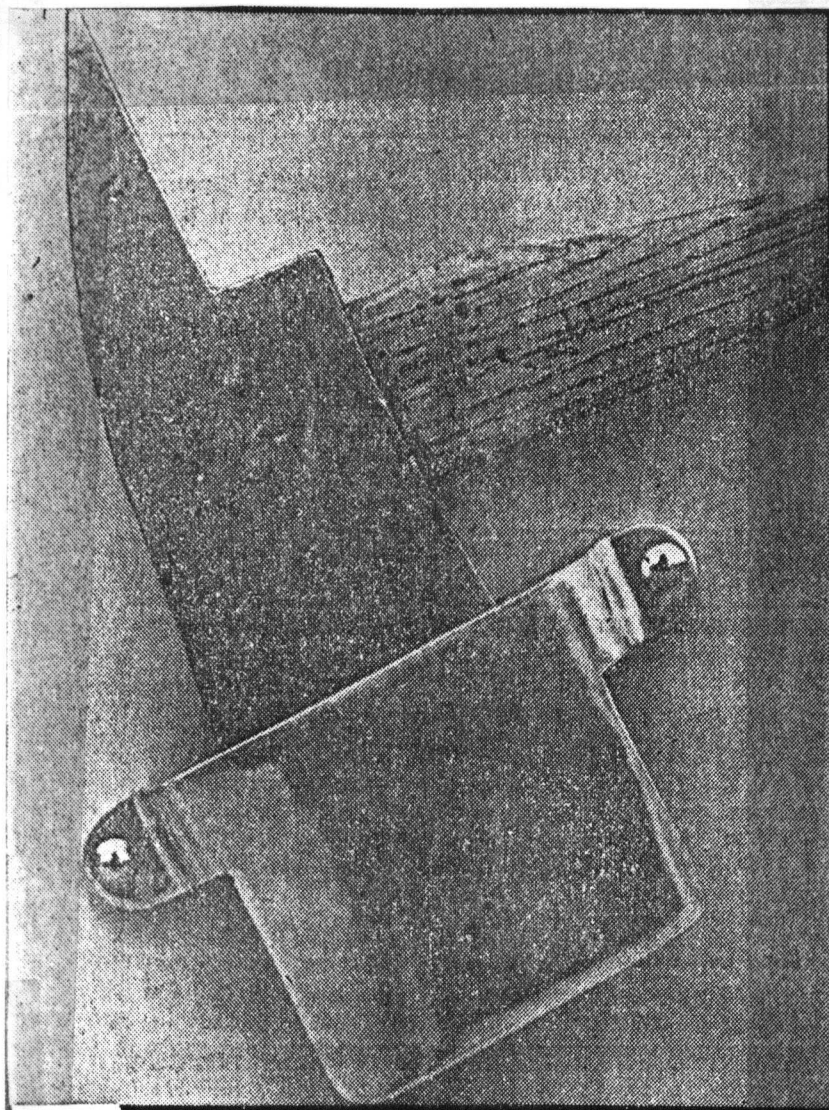
Aptos Fire Director Dick Duchscher, left, and Chief Nick Baumgartner



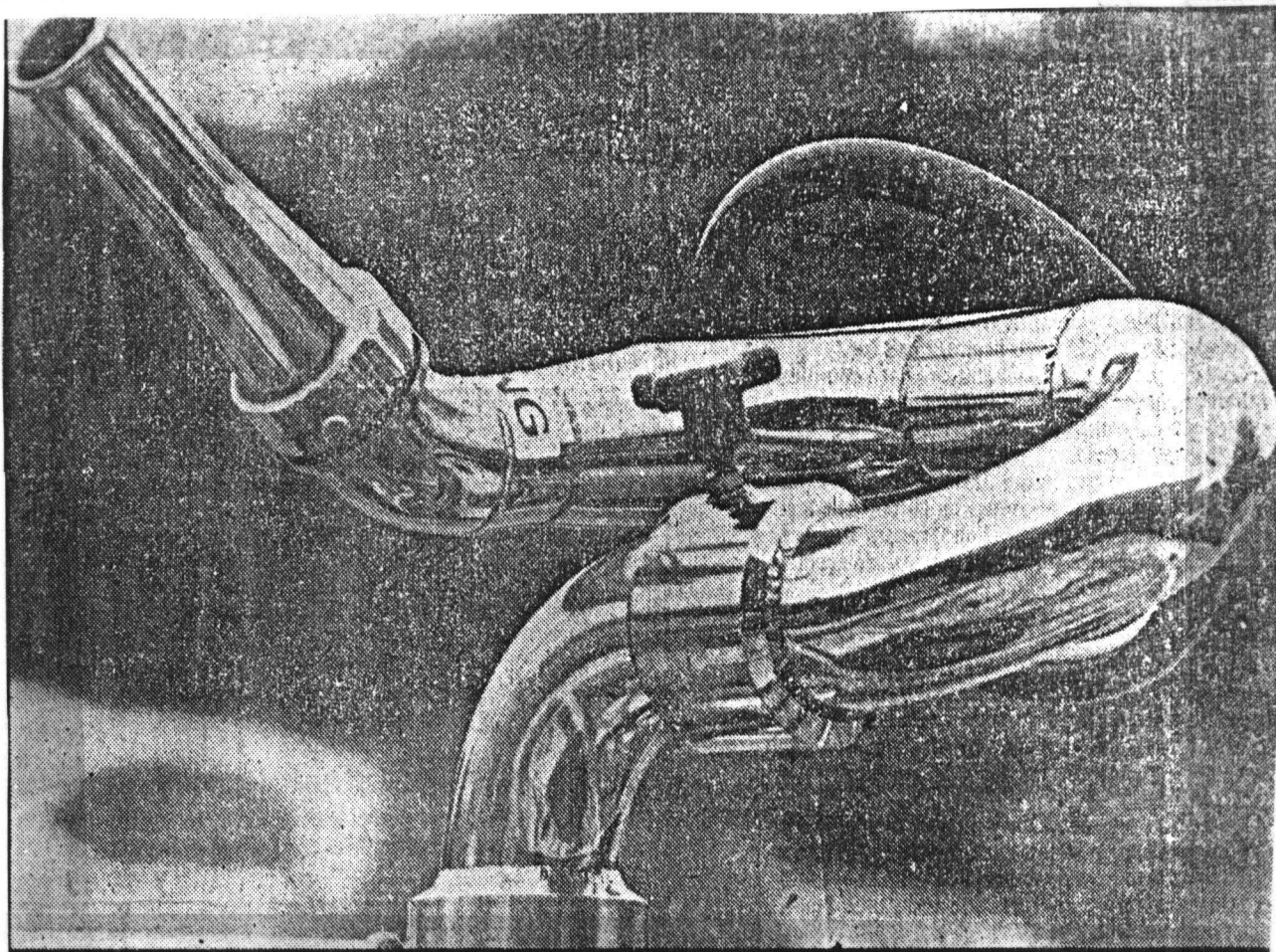
Aptos Fire District's newest pumper stands beside its first, a 1948 Dodge



Sentinel Photos  
By Bill Lovejoy



Some firefighting tools never change



'Deck gun' on new pumper can deliver 1,000 gallons of water per minute