

ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTH PARK

HOT OFF THE PRESS

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April 14, 1949, probably started off like any other Thursday for the San Diego Fire Department. Shortly before 8:00AM, firemen throughout the city donned their dress uniforms, including coats and ties, and assembled on the apparatus floors for the 8 o'clock roll call and transfer of the shifts. After the five bells on the primary alarm circuit sounded, followed by 5 bells on the secondary circuit, the captain called the roll of the off-going and on-coming shifts and the shift change was complete. The start of another 24 hour work day for the city's firemen.

And then it happened. At 8:04 AM, the bells sounded the alert in every city fire station followed shortly by the numerical sequence for the "box" location. The crews at stations 14 (at 32nd and Lincoln), 18 (at Felton and Adams), and 5 (at 9th and University) knew that they were going for a ride in their dress pants and shoes based on the box number even before the captains had a chance to verify the location on the "run cards". Had the alarm been sounded a few minutes later, the on-coming crews would have already have changed into their daytime work uniforms. In those days, you did not wear your turnout pants and boots during the day (unless you got caught in the shower) and simply wore the black Frisco jeans and blue T-shirt that constituted the work uniform. In the three above stations, the engineers started the engines and turned on the red lights as the hosemen put on their helmets and turnout coats and climbed onto the tailboards of the engines. When the captain (or lieutenant) climbed into his seat and rang the bell and blew the siren, the engine left the station. Crews were allowed 45 seconds during the day and 90 seconds at night from the time the first bell sounded until the engine left the station.

And then the reality hit. As the engines pulled out into the streets and the crews scanned the horizon, they knew that their dress pants were in for a hard day because there was a large black cloud of smoke rising over North Park. The first engine to arrive at 30th and Meade found the Franklin Press print shop on the first floor of a two story building at 2929 Meade Avenue, home to the North Park Independent, in flames. The shop contained equipment and lots of paper. To make matters worse, the second floor housed a furniture warehouse. The only choice was to call for help.

Today, help would be summoned via the radio or an MDT (mobile data terminal) in the engine. Without radios, the officer of the first engine had to go to the nearest alarm box and unlock it so that he could access a telegraph key on the inside. Indicating that he wanted a second alarm required that he send in two telegraph pulses three times followed by pulling the lever on the alarm box (pulling the hook) to transmit the location to the central alarm office, located in Balboa Park, which would in turn transmit the second alarm and location to all of the city's fire stations. The second alarm was transmitted at 8:11 AM.



The second alarm summoned three more fire engines and an aerial ladder truck. The city only had 23 engine companies and two truck companies at the time. With over a quarter of the city's

fire protection committed, the battle was on. Through it all, the fire was finally controlled by mid-morning and damage was listed between \$60,000 and \$75,000 even though it was a total loss. The cause of the fire was attributed to a gas fired paper dryer left on by an employee when he went to use the phone.

The North Park Independent was a weekly neighborhood paper that had been in business for a scant two months. The presses were half way through a run of 10,000 papers that were to be distributed that day. In addition, the building also housed a subscription and advertising office for the Los Angeles Times; 15,000 copies of the Sunday supplement were destroyed in their office. The second floor was occupied by the A & B Transfer Company and was full of furniture. It was totally destroyed.



A section in the 1956 publication, "San Diego Fire Fighters – Fifty Years of Progress" shows a picture of Fire Marshal Sydney Roppe in his dress pants and drenched firefighters standing in puddles. The building was surely not the only total loss that day. The dress pants and shoes were fine for parades, but did not fare well at fires. The firemen not only had to look sharp in their uniforms, they had to pay for them as well.

April 14, 1949, brought a whole new meaning to the edition referred to as the "Hot Sheet."



Fire Station 20, circa 1956. The 1930 right-hand drive fire engine on the left was at the 30th & Meade fire.

All photos from San Diego Fire Department Almanac, 1956, courtesy of Larry Hall.