

Millbrae Fire Department

by Tom Dawdy

Millbrae Historical Society Historian

Everyone that has some knowledge of Millbrae History knows Millbrae was incorporated in 1948 but the “Village of Millbrae” formed a Millbrae Fire Department several years before Millbrae became a city. Around the turn of the century in Millbrae when structures caught fire it was likely they would just burn to the ground. One example was the infamous “Millbrae Hotel” open to the public in December 1882 and sold to “World Heavyweight Boxer Champion” James Corbett in 1889. It was destroyed by fire without a single fire fighter in site. In 1895 William Dunphy residence burned to the ground on Linden Avenue. After this the “Dunphy Mansion” was built on this site. The Millbrae Train Depot burned down twice before the third one was built which houses the Millbrae Train Museum today. After researching articles saved at the museum I learned about the old Spanish homes in Millbrae that did not burn because they were made of adobe with little wood. In the later “village years” the new buildings were framed like the 16 Mile House, it was told if they caught fire you got out as fast as you could and then they would just watch them burn.

Fast forward to 1931, the Millbrae community organized the “**Millbrae Volunteer Fire Department**”. In the beginning you could join the department and become a volunteer fire fighter, the dues for the members were 25 cents per month. 39 community members soon signed up to be volunteer firefighters. This helped finance operations and training, the by-laws from San Bruno FD were used for a guide to form the

group and the fire districts .The fire fighters were paid one cold beer after fighting one hot fire. So things were off and running for the “**MVFD**” The first three members were Les Pallas, Art Snider and Harold Terrill. Art Snider was elected the 1st Fire Captain in Millbrae (1932-1938). In August of 1931 a siren was installed at a local business that sounded the alarm to summon the volunteers for a fire. In 1934 “Millbrae Fire District” was formed. Niels Schultz, developer of the Millbrae Highlands donated the first piece of equipment to the MVFD, it was a two-wheel hand cart carrying 400 feet of hose.



Shortly after a 1931 Chevy truck was donated by the Redwood City Fire Dept. and converted to a “hose wagon” with the same 400 feet of hose. This became Millbrae’s first Fire Truck. This truck was nick-named **Junior**. Niels also provided the beer after fires.



Another big event happened in 1937, a new Fire house was built at 225 Broadway. The lot was purchased for \$600. and Community Volunteers with the help of WPA workers constructed Mill-



brae's new fire house for \$2,500. The Ogden Mill's Family donated \$3,000 so the Fire Department could buy their first real Fire Engine for \$6,500. The sparkling new engine was a 500 gallon per minute



American La France Pumper. This beautiful fire engine is currently housed at the Millbrae Museum Carriage House! In 1938 Les Pallas became Millbrae's first paid firefighter, his salary was

\$80. per month. Four years later in March of 1942 a second piece of equipment was added, a 750GPM Challenger Triple Pumper. The purchase price for the challenger was \$9,450. This new Fire Engine replaced "Junior" the original Millbrae fire truck. During this time period MFD Chief Les Pallas had a annual salary of \$2,400. Most of the fire department were still volunteers, Mel and Sil Massolo along with Billie Wallace

and Jerry Schu-
maker headed up
the volunteer staff.

Millbrae's popu-
lation was growing
fast after World
War II and the
25x55 foot fire
house building on
Broadway was get-
ting obsolete. The

MFD rented the
empty lot next door to have room to store and park fire
equipment. After 2 failed bond elections in 1955 Millbrae vot-
ers passed a

\$70,000 bond to
purchase an acre
of land on Mag-
nolia from the
San Francisco
Water Depart-
ment to build a
new Fire Station.

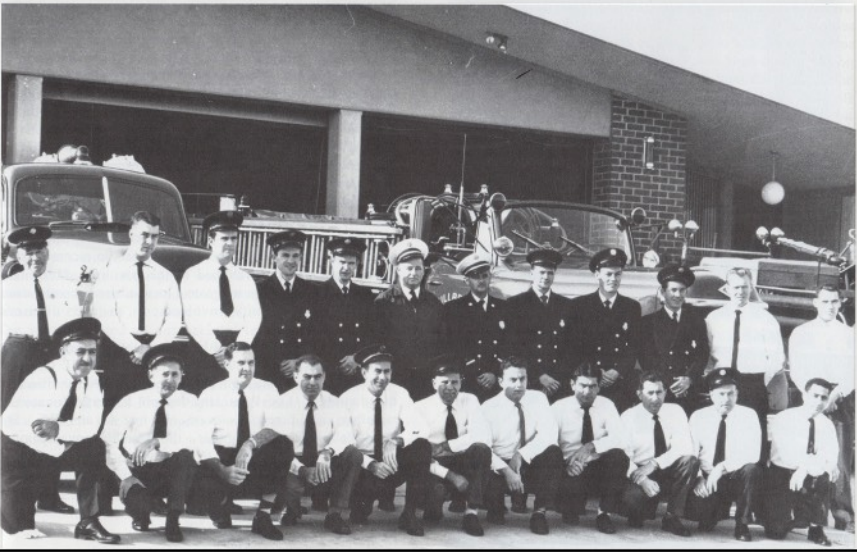
Now the City had
to come up with
\$130,885 to build

the new station, Millbrae did come up with the needed funds
by dissolving the city's two fire districts and selling the old
fire station building on Broadway. Some of the bond issued
funds also supplemented the construction. Millbrae's new
fire station was open in time to celebrate the City's ten year



The Millbrae Fire Department at the new firehouse in the mid-1950s.
Front row (l to r): Lou Gianni, Lee Silva, Harry Fiske, Don Dambrosio, Mel Massolo, Harry Rickson, Ernest Ferrari, Bruno Matteucci, Sil Massolo, Bill Mitchell, Ray Cappa.

Top row (l to r): Fred Ritter, Don Herschel, Ray Bianconi, Norman Brown, James Crawford, Fire Chief Les Pallas, Capt. Bob Kohler, Jerry Stern, Jeff Schackelford, Jim Friday, Harold Clark, Les Cotter. Photo courtesy Millbrae Fire Department.



New Millbrae Fire House

anniversary in 1958, along with a 5th vehicle, a combination tanker-pumper fire truck. Les Pallas had brought the Millbrae Fire Department a long way, his accomplishments are often overlooked but he

was one of the true “Millbrae Pioneers” I knew Les and his family very well as a friend and neighbor. I want to mention another Millbrae Pioneer Don Dambrosio. Don Led the Millbrae Rec. Center from the old Adobe to Millbrae’s Community Center and was there to break ground for our new center, and yes Don was also a long time volunteer fire fighter! One thing I do miss in Millbrae is what we called “the fog horn” going off when there was a fire and quite a number of my friends dads would scramble over to the fire station to serve Millbrae.

In the early 1970’s there was a tragic fire in the upper Millbrae Meadows neighborhood. Millbrae citizens were concerned about the response time by the fire Department & in March of 1974 a second Millbrae fire house was approved, open and dedicated December 1975.

In 1966 Chief Pallas retired after 35 years of service to Millbrae, he was replaced by Robert Kohler. In 1979 Mike Golder became Millbrae’s third Fire Chief followed by William Moke. William retired in 1987 and Brian Kelly became chief.

Millbrae's final Fire Chief was Dennis Haag. Dennis was born and raised in Millbrae and served his hometown fire department for 33 years before his retirement in 2012. Dennis was a very unique Chief serving as both police and fire chief for some time under the title of "Director of Public Safety". Dennis not only wore 2 hats in Millbrae but he also served as Millbrae-San Bruno Fire Chief and led the response to the Sept. 9, 2010 fatal San Bruno Pipeline explosion.

After Haag's retirement in 2012, Don Dornell (who also grew up in Millbrae) became Fire Chief of Central County Fire Department and took over as temporary fire chief of Millbrae and San Bruno until a new chief could be appointed, but after a couple years Millbrae decided to join Central County Fire and San Bruno opted to stay independent.

Today Millbrae is still part of Central County Fire Department that includes Burlingame and Hillsborough, the coverage area is approx. 15 square miles with a population of 70,000. There are seven fire stations including the headquarters on Rollins Road in Burlingame. We still enjoy shared services from all cities in San Mateo County and even though in the beginning the merger was to save money, today we have a first rate department with very highly trained personnel. Millbrae has come a long



way from “Junior” their first fire truck to a high-tech modern fire department staffed with highly trained firefighters and paramedics.