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The Pflugerville Volunteer Fire Department

by [Blake Rasmussen](#)

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The men who built Pflugerville also fought its fires

At the front of the office buildings for the Pflugerville Fire Department hangs an old black-and-white photo with the names of 27 men with familiar names. Names like Pfluger and Pfennig, Priem and Bohls, and Timmerman and Kuempel.

They're the names of the men who built up much of Pflugerville in the 1900s, and they're the names of the men who first founded Pflugerville's volunteer fire department more than 50 years ago. Many of them are even the men who were there the night a fire nearly destroyed downtown Pflugerville in 1971—but that's jumping ahead in the story of Pflugerville's Volunteer Fire Department.

Now professionally safeguarded by Emergency Services District No. 2, Pflugerville's fires were long fought by men who had no more reason to rush toward smoke than a stake in the city.

"It was a community function," said current Fire Chief Ron Moellenberg, who started with the volunteer department in 1971 and was also its first paid chief. "All good citizens saw the need."



Courtesy Emergency Services Dist

Front row: I.B. Krienke, Theodore Timmerman Jr., Otto Pfeil Jr., Arnold Arend, Alfred Mogonye, W.E. Pfluger; Second row: John Oscar Malmquist, Leon Pfluger, Albert Priem, Burwell Knebel, Clarence Bohls, Emil Bohls; Third row: Robert Fuchs, H.L. Kuempel, A.G. Saegert, Charles Kuempel, Armin Pfennig, Clarence Wieland, Willie Randig Jr., Kenneth Bohls; Fourth row: Walter Priem, Willard Pfluger, Otto Pfluger, J.B. Marshall Sr., Max Kuempel Jr., Albert Remmert.

Establishment

The first meeting to establish the volunteer fire department was May 31, 1955, and the department was officially established July 6 of that same year. There were 27 charter members and a number more associate members who helped raise the \$4,000 to buy the department's first fire truck, a Chevrolet that arrived Oct. 5, 1955.

"Most of it was farm boys," said Clarence Bohls, one of the last living founders of the department.

They didn't have to wait long to put the new truck to use. In a newsletter put out by the fire department on its 50th anniversary, Willard Pfluger said that a fire broke out at a building owned by Henry Bohls the day the truck was delivered.

The volunteers also secured a fire station with a donation from the Pflugerville Schuetzen and Kegel Vereen—a social hall that was no longer in use—on the same land ESD No. 2 offices sit today. Building the fire hall cost about \$6,000, according to an article printed at the time in the Austin American-Statesman.

Bohls said the impetus for the creation of the department was the drought of the 1950s, Texas' worst sustained drought on record. The number of grass fires that needed to be extinguished led the largely rural farming community to organize. Prior to that, firefighting was a matter of who happened to be passing a fire at a certain time.

"If you saw smoke, you'd go to see what's happening and grabbed some water and a gunny sack," said Max Kuempel Jr., who was among the original volunteers.

Firefighters were notified by either a siren or one of 10 phones throughout the city. One of the central phones was located at Marshall's Tavern in downtown Pflugerville on Pecan Street. The owner, J.B. Marshall Sr., was among the original firefighters and was the first assistant fire chief. Otto Pfeil Jr. was the first fire chief.

The department's yearly highlight and major fundraiser was a barbecue that Kuempel and Bohls said was attended by more than 1,000 residents in its first year. Some grainy footage of residents lining tables, eating barbecue and glancing curiously at the camera still exists on the department's 50-year anniversary video.

The fire of 1971

But as the city grew, so did the need for more resources.

A tipping point came in 1971 when a fire at the original location of Princess Craft threatened to burn down every building on Main Street. Bohls recalled the fire was so bad people started clearing money out of the bank near Railroad Avenue for fear it would burn down.

The bank was, ultimately, saved, but not before the Pflugerville fire department ran out of water and had to send tanks to Austin to fill up and return to the blaze.

Witnesses recall somewhere around 17 and 20 fire trucks lining the streets to put out the massive fire. Bohls said five buildings were lost, one of which collapsed mere moments after several volunteers had just been ordered off its roof.

"Seventy-one was kind of like, 'Wow, wake up,'" Moellenberg said.

A new department

Just as telling was the last barbecue cookout in the early 1980s, which netted just \$89 after weeks of work, Moellenberg said. It was then that the department knew it needed another source of funding, he said.

From there, the department received its first major funding in 1985 when it became a rural fire prevention district, a precursor to modern ESDs that allowed the district to levy a tax of 3 cents, Moellenberg said.

The district remained almost entirely volunteers until 1992, when voters approved the creation of ESD No. 2. It wasn't until 1996 that the department began hiring full-time firefighters and phasing out volunteers, Moellenberg said. The department still uses volunteers today, but none of them fight fires or ride on the truck.

Today, the fire department is run entirely by paid firefighters and staff.

Still, none of that might have been possible were it not for an old unused building, barbecue fundraisers and 27 farm boys without an ounce of formal fire training.

"I think we done a real good job getting the fire department started," Bohls said. "I'm just really proud it turned out the way it did."