

Tucson Fire Department

Through Two World Wars: 1915-1950



Al Ring

Bob Ring

Through Two World Wars: 1915-1950

Tucson grew slowly but steadily through two World Wars and the Great Depression. The TFD kept up with city growth, more than doubling its coverage area, expanding to four fire stations, and employing a series of increasingly capable gasoline-powered firetrucks. The TFD also paid more attention to training and expanded its mission to include fire prevention and first aid services, while fighting several large fires with damage above a quarter of a million dollars, including the famous Hotel Congress fire in 1934, that led to the capture of desperado John Dillinger and his gang.

Let's talk about what was happening in Tucson before talking about developments with the Tucson Fire Department (TFD).

Tucson Perspective

Summary.¹ During World War I in 1917 and 1918, Tucsonans weathered vigorous efforts to increase production of vital war materials like copper and supported conservation activities like food-savings programs. Adding to the stress, there was concern about the possibility of Germany invading Arizona through Mexico, severe labor-relations confrontations with the pacifist union, Industrial Workers of the World (affecting mining of copper), and the onset towards the end of the war of the great influenza epidemic.

Foreshadowing Tucson's long aviation history, in 1919 the first municipally owned airport in the United States opened on land that is now the site of the Tucson Rodeo Grounds. Also in 1919, the three-story Hotel Congress was opened.

In 1927 the airport was moved to the current site of Davis-Monthan Air Force Base and dedicated by famed aviator Charles Lindbergh.

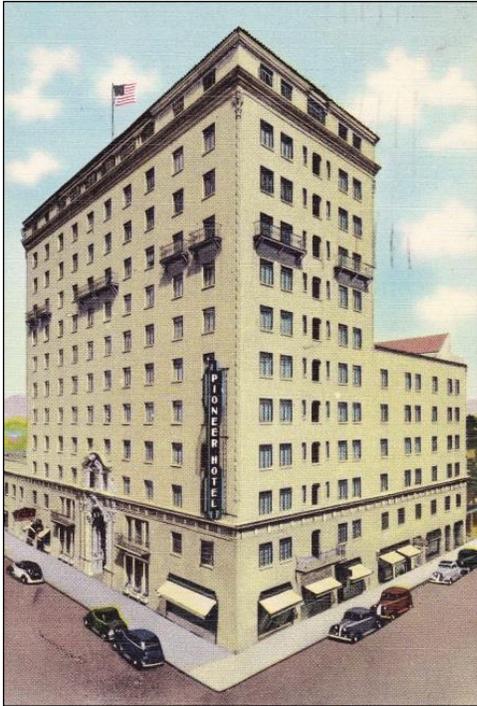
The 1920s were mostly prosperous for Tucson. Civic leaders continued to improve the city's social, educational, cultural, and economic institutions. The Tucson Museum of Art and the Tucson Symphony were founded.

The Tucson Sunshine Climate Club promoted tourism, selling Tucson's spectacular climate, weather, and Old West attributes. In doing so, the club coined the "Old Pueblo" moniker for Tucson and repeated it so often in advertising that the name "stuck."



Famed pilot Charles Lindbergh came to Tucson to dedicate the new municipal airport on September 23, 1927. (Courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society, B94401)

¹ This summary is excerpted from the book, *Tucson Reflections - Living History from the Old Pueblo*, by Bob Ring.



The Pioneer Hotel on the northeast corner of Stone Avenue and Pennington Street opened in 1929. (Postcard courtesy of Al Ring)

Dude ranches, fine hotels, and medical clinics proliferated. Tucson's first two skyscrapers, the Pioneer Hotel and the Consolidated Bank Building, were completed in 1929.

But then the stock market crashed; the Great Depression of the 1930s affected Tucson dramatically. Construction, farming, and mining jobs disappeared. Businesses and banks failed. Generally, it was hard for Tucsonans to support their families. The Federal government provided much-needed jobs, building a dam in Sabino Canyon and the Mount Lemmon Highway.

Towards the end of the 1930s business began to recover and new jobs were created. Tucsonans experienced gasoline powered buses, air conditioning, and the first shopping center at Broadway Village.

World War II (1941-1945) had a direct effect on Tucson. As described by Tucson historian David Devine in his book *Tucson - A History of the Old Pueblo from the 1854 Gadsden Purchase*, "Estimates were that more than 60 percent of the men from the community eligible to serve, along with many women, did so. Almost 400 of these people gave their lives for their country while another 15 were listed as missing in action." (Three TFD Chiefs from this period served extensive tours during WW II; see later discussion.)



Towards the end of the 1930s, Tucson business began to recover from the Great Depression. Congress Street looking west. (Postcard courtesy of Al Ring)

Tucson had a major role in military training during WW II. Davis-Monthan field became a U.S. Army Air Base. Thousands of pilots were trained there; at Ryan Field, west of town; and at Marana Air Base, to the north. Marana Air Base, activated in 1942, trained 10,000 pilots by the end of the war, becoming the largest pilot-training center in the world. Besides pilots, infantry and cavalry detachments were stationed in or near Tucson for training for desert warfare in Africa and testing military equipment.

In 1943 Consolidated Vultee Aircraft (later Convair division of General Dynamics) built three huge wooden hangars for B-24 Liberator modifications on the future site of Tucson International Airport.

In the late 1940s, Tucson's municipal airport was moved from Davis-Monthan field to its current location, eventually becoming Tucson International Airport. The initial airline terminal was at one end of the old Consolidated Vultee hangars. (These gigantic hangars are still present today and can be leased for storage space.)



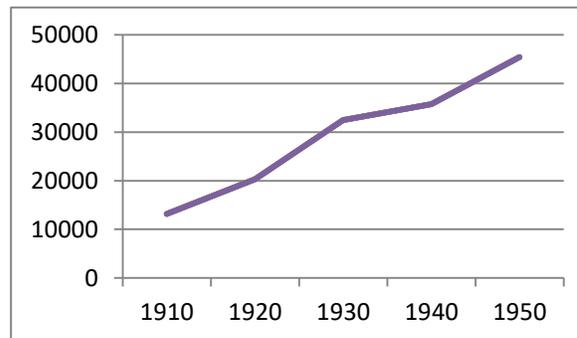
During and after WW II, U.S. bomber aircraft, including B-24's and B-29's, were modified in these three huge hangars at Tucson's municipal airport. Aerial view, looking south, around 1950. (Courtesy of the Tucson Airport Authority)

The Army Air Base became Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, and as its military role expanded, emerged as one of Tucson's largest employers. One of the base's missions - extended storage of military aircraft - is unique to Tucson, because of our dry climate and alkali soil. Starting in 1945, out-of-service aircraft have been lined up in the desert "boneyard," awaiting possible return to operational status or providing spare parts - until disposal of spent airframes. Approximately 4,200 aircraft are stored there today.

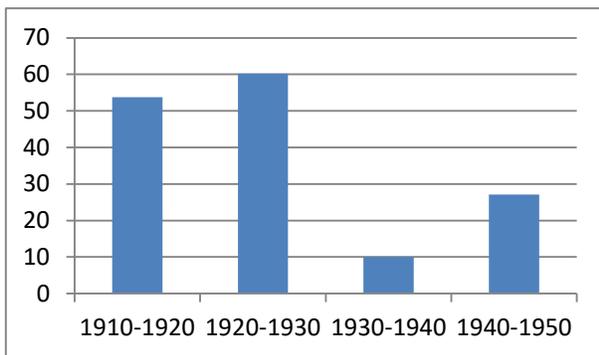


4,200 aircraft are stored in the Davis-Monthan Air Force Base "boneyard" today. (Postcard courtesy of Al Ring)

Population. According to U.S. Census records, the population of Tucson grew steadily from 13,193 in 1910 to 45,454 in 1950, shown in the accompanying population chart. There was a slowdown in the difficult years during and following the Great Depression that can be seen in the second chart where population increase in each decade is plotted. Population growth picked up after WWII, but there was little indication of the enormous growth to come after 1950.



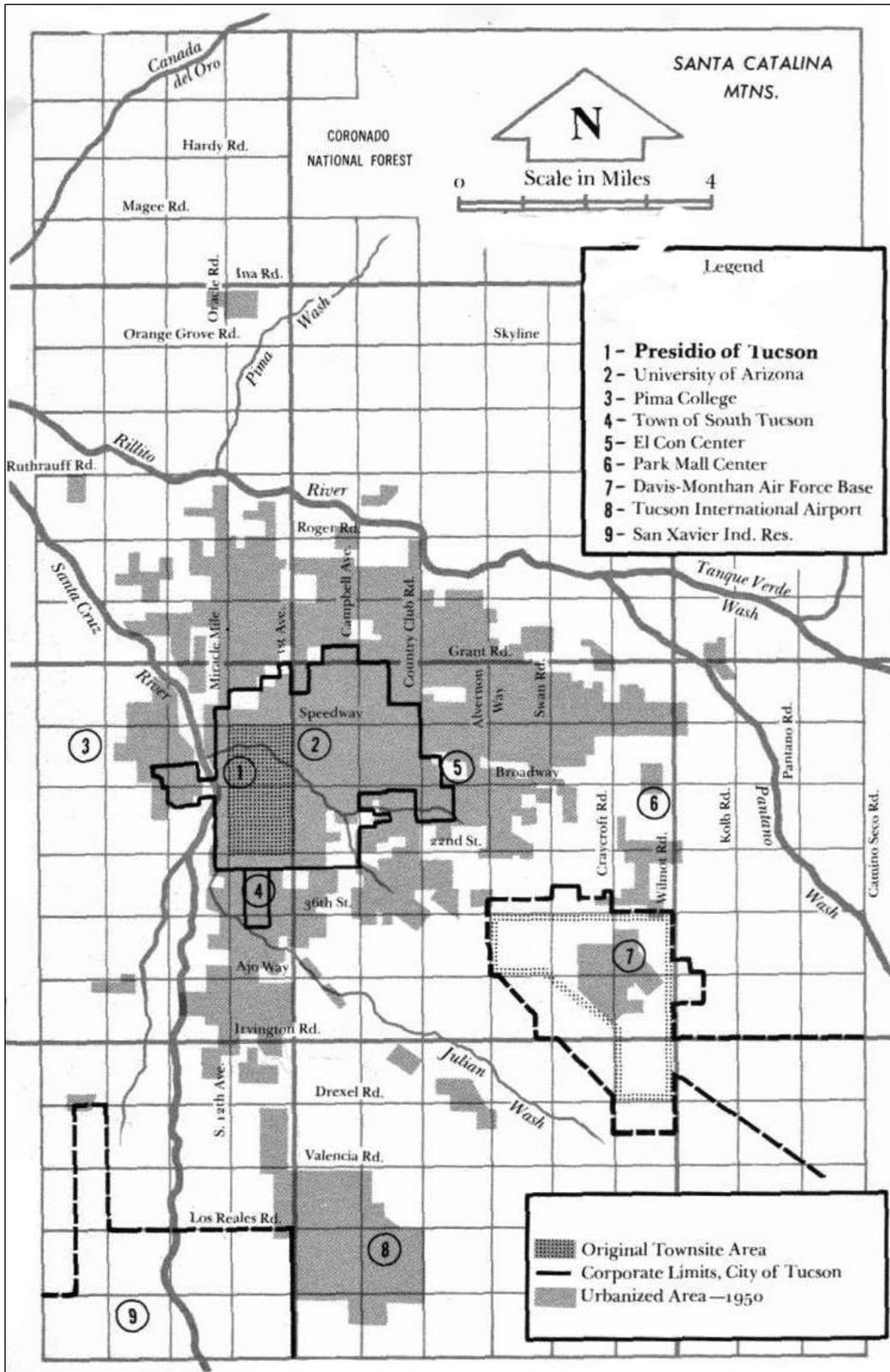
Population Growth in Tucson.



Percentage Population Growth by Decade in Tucson.

Municipal Growth. In 1915 the city of Tucson encompassed 3.75 square miles. Through a series of 34 relatively small annexations (typically residential neighborhoods), Tucson grew by a factor of 2.5 to 9.55 square miles by 1950. Corporate limits extended east to Country Club Road, north to Grant Road, south to 23rd Avenue and west along Congress Avenue across the Santa Cruz River. The larger urbanized area grew to Wilmot Road in the east, close to the Rillito River in the north, to Irvington Road in the south (along

with Tucson International Airport), and a mile west of the Santa Cruz River in the west. The accompanying map shows the city landscape in 1950.



This 1950 map of Tucson and vicinity shows how much the corporate limits and urbanized area had expanded. (Courtesy of the Journal of Arizona History)

In 1940, at the southern edge of the city limits, South Tucson was incorporated as a separate city to celebrate and preserve Mexican culture. In future years, due to additional annexations, this one-square-mile enclave straddling 36th Street would be surrounded by the city of Tucson. In 1950 South Tucson had a population of 2,364 people.

The percentage of Anglos compared to Hispanics in Tucson's population continued to grow steadily between 1915 and 1950 - reaching 68% from 55%, while the Hispanic population portion dropped from 40% to 25%.

Water. The availability of water for irrigation farming, mining, personal use by Tucsonans, and fighting fires had been an issue for years. By 1915 Tucson was right in the middle of transitioning from getting water from the Santa Cruz and Rillito Rivers to total dependence on ground wells. After centuries of perennial flow, increased water usage and pumping ground water since the 1890s were drying up both the above ground and underground river flows.

The Tucson Water Company tried everything. More and deeper wells were dug near the water plants south of town and around new plants developed north of town. New technology turbine pumps were developed to pump water from greater depths. Additional water reservoirs and water storage tanks were constructed. They even tried a few elevated tanks to increase water pressure. They increased the diameter of water mains.

As Tucson kept expanding, both in land area and population, the Tucson Water Company began purchasing ground water supplies from private water companies on the fringe of town. The first such purchase in 1929 was 100 acres of farmland, complete with two wells, on the south side of town.

The 1930s saw the end of irrigation farming along the Santa Cruz and Rillito Rivers. Tucson agriculture in the 1940s relied almost exclusively on water pumped from wells, resulting in further groundwater depletion. Increased water requirements for agriculture, mining, new industry, and people during and after World War II spurred the use of groundwater. By 1945 Tucson was almost entirely dependent on groundwater.

The Tucson Water Company grappled with increased water use and lower water tables. Between 1938 and 1950, the Water Company purchased over a dozen private water companies. According to Douglas E. Kupel, in his book *Fuel for Growth - Water and Arizona's Urban Environment*,



This elevated tank on Elm Street was constructed in 1938 to provide greater water pressure for Tucson residents. (Courtesy of Douglas E. Kupel)

“At the end of the war [World War II] Tucson had nineteen wells in active service, including the wells at its two pumping plants [south of town] and the north side well field. In 1950, the number of wells in active service had increased to thirty three. ... In a very real sense the city was not anticipating growth but reacting to it.”

Tucson Fire Department

In 1915, as the U.S. drew closer to entering World War I, the TFD had just completed the transition to a fully paid fire department and had just started the era of gasoline-powered firefighting trucks. For the next 35 years, as Tucson slowly expanded, the TFD grew and changed along with the city.

Growth and Change. As Tucson’s city limits moved outward, additional fire stations were required to adequately cover the expanding area. Additional personnel were required to man the stations and drive the fire trucks garaged there. So the TFD grew along with the city of Tucson.

There were also changes in day-to-day operation, management, mission, and technology applications.

In 1917 firefighters worked 24 hours on and 24 hours off. That changed in 1920 when the TFD instituted a two-shift system of day-night operation. However, firefighters who were off shift were required to answer all alarms.

Also in 1920, the TFD began to keep statistics of operations - yearly totals of Tucson’s population, area of city limits covered, number of fire runs, dollar value of fire losses, and per capita fire loss.

Beginning in 1910, TFD Chiefs were appointed by the Mayor, subject to the confirmation of the City Council. By 1930 Tucson had added a City Manager to the governing mix; this individual’s responsibilities included supervision of the TFD and appointment of the TFD Chief - a change from the TFD being guided by a three-person Fire Committee of the City Council. From 1930 on, all TFD positions were subject to Civil Service guidelines.

In 1936 a firefighter’s labor union was established - Local 479 of the International Association of Firefighters. (The union maintains a 99% membership.)

The mission of the TFD began to expand in the mid-1940s. In July 1946 the TFD started its first firefighter training program. Later that year in December, a Fire Prevention Bureau was created. First aid services, which would culminate in the TFD’s first ambulance vans in the early 1950s, began in this period.

A telephone strike in 1946 prompted the first use of radios. The TFD borrowed police two-way radios to enable police-central-to-single-truck communication. By 1949 all fire vehicles had their own three-way radios for communication between fire central and mobile units.

There is some very interesting available data that gives us real insight into the operations of the TFD during this time period. The National Board of Fire Underwriters continually assessed Tucson’s overall firefighting capability to determine fire insurance rates for businesses and commercial enterprises.

Starting in 1922 and every few years thereafter (10 times in this period), the Underwriters wrote a very detailed report² documenting their evaluation of such areas as the water supply, the fire department, the fire alarm system, firefighting facilities, building codes, explosives and flammables, electricity, and the conflagration hazard. We have included here the summary page of their report for 1934.³

There is quite a bit of consistency in these evaluations. The water supply is generally labeled as marginally adequate. The TFD Chiefs are highly regarded, but the fire department is repeatedly considered to be seriously undermanned and undertrained. There are many references to the need to better maintain and test the alarm system. There are itemized notations of facilities and equipment that needed to be upgraded or replaced, including requirements for reserve equipment. Each report ends with a sobering assessment of conflagration vulnerability in downtown Tucson, due to a lack of fire retardant features in construction. Many of these assessments turned into recommendations and many of these led to such TFD positive changes as water system and alarm system improvements, additional fire stations, additional firefighting apparatus, better training, and additional personnel.

As we saw earlier, Tucson's urbanized areas were expanding outside the city limits. In 1937 the City Council ordered the TFD not to respond to fires outside the city limits, except in cases of orphanages, hospitals, or schools. This position was based on not wanting to leave the city unprotected during suburban runs and lack of liability insurance outside corporate limits. This issue would come up again and again in future years, leading in the mid-1940s in some outlying districts to the formation of private fire departments - such as the Pima Fire Department, the Catalina Fire Department, and the South Side Fire Department - and in 1962 to the expansion of Rural/Metro from Phoenix to Tucson to protect unincorporated communities.

Fire Stations. The TFD started this period in 1915 with one fire station, Station 1, a two-story brick building opened in 1909 at 142 South 6th Avenue. Station 1, known as Central Station, was the home of downtown fire units for 63 years until a new Fire Headquarters was completed in 1972 at 265 South Church Avenue. In 2009 Station 1 moved into its present quarters within the new Fire Central Building located on the west side of downtown at 300 South Fire Central Place. The oldest station has since been demolished and the former Station 1 at 265 Church Avenue now houses the Tucson Museum of Contemporary Art.

Station 2, the TFD's first satellite facility, was built in 1917 at 1030 North 4th Avenue, about a mile north of downtown. Known in its early years as the "northside" station, Station 2 was originally constructed as a one-story building, but a second floor was added in 1930. As the city expanded beyond it, the station became increasingly obsolete for response purposes and was eventually decommissioned in 1963. The Department continued to use the building for fire prevention, recruiting, and quartermaster activities until 1972 when these disciplines were combined at the new Station 1 at 265 South Church Avenue. The old Station 2 is now a privately owned residence.

² These reports are posted on this web site, under Articles, History & More, TFD Histories, "1922-1956 TFD-ISO1."

³ This happens to be the year of the infamous Hotel Congress fire. See the discussion later in this article on this fire.

GENERAL SUMMARY

City in General.—Population about 37,000. Railroad, distributing and health center. Surface slopes slightly toward the west. Few paved streets. Long periods of hot dry weather; mild winters. Loss per fire and number of fires moderate; loss per capita low.

Water Supply.—Municipal works; good supervision. Source of supply sufficient for present needs. Low-lift and high-lift pumping capacity adequate. No elevated storage; only moderate suction storage. Main supply through single conduit; normal power supply to main well field over single overhead line. Consumption moderately high. Pressures moderate to low. Distribution in one service; arterial system incomplete; gridiron fairly good; much small pipe. Valves and hydrants well maintained but widely spaced.

Fire Department.—Full paid; on two-platoon basis. Chief officers experienced. All members under civil service. State pension act; members mainly young. Companies well located for protection of important districts; seriously undermanned. Small stream service good. Apparatus mainly in good condition. Reserve engine provided. Supply of 2½-inch hose deficient; no 3-inch hose provided. Considerable deficiencies in minor equipment and heavy stream appliances. Repair facilities unsatisfactory. Discipline good. Drilling facilities incomplete. Fire methods limited in effectiveness by lack of men. Response to alarms well arranged. Building inspections fair. Records mainly satisfactory.

Fire Alarm System.—Gamewell automatic system; maintenance fair. Headquarters in separate non-fire-proof building; apparatus in good condition; no operator on duty. Box distribution good in principal mercantile district; elsewhere fair to lacking. Boxes mainly of good type but not well tested. Separate alarm circuit to 3 stations. About 40 per cent. of circuits underground. Circuit protection good. Telephone alarms not properly handled. Tests fairly good; records deficient.

Summary of Fire Fighting Facilities.—Water supply adequate and fairly reliable; quantities available for engine supply fair to good. Fire department fairly well equipped but seriously undermanned and not well trained. Fire alarm service fairly good in important districts; additional boxes needed.

Fire Department Auxiliaries.—No State fire marshal. Police and public service corporation assist fire department at fires. Telephone service fairly well distributed and used considerably for sending alarms. Substantial outside aid remote.

Building Department.—Building Laws comprehensive but somewhat inadequate on several construction features tending to restrict spread of fire. Good enforcement secured. Fire limits cover principal mercantile district but are slightly insufficient for its protection. Predominating construction is ordinary masonry, of low height but with few fire resistive features; small amounts of fireproof and frame construction.

Explosives and Inflammables.—Ordinances regulate adequately a few common fire hazards but many others are not covered. Fire department inspections produce some results but cannot be made fully effective without the support of adequate laws and without men specially trained for fire prevention work. Local conditions in general are fair.

Electricity.—New interior wiring properly supervised by municipality; National Electrical Code used as standard. No reinspections of old wiring. Overhead wires offer considerable obstruction to fire department operations in business district.

Conflagration Hazard.—In the principal mercantile district severe group fires are probable because of the large number of unprotected exposures. Owing chiefly to the low heights of buildings the conflagration hazard of the district as a whole is moderate. In industrial districts fires should be only local. Older residence districts present the normal hazard of flying brand fires.

April 6, 1934.

Inspection by Assistant Chief Engineer Robert E. Andrews and Engineers Herbert Raines and R. C. Stange.

This is the summary page of the National Board of Fire Underwriters 1934 assessment of TFD Operations.



*Station 1 opened in 1909.
(Shown in 1928, courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society, B#205198)*



*Station 2 opened in 1917.
(Shown in 1929, courtesy of the Arizona Fireman's Association)*



*Station 3 opened in 1923.
(Shown in 1929, courtesy of the Arizona Fireman's Association)*



*Station 4 opened in 1930.
(Unknown date, courtesy of the TFD)*

Four fire stations served Tucson until the 1950s.

Station 3 was originally located on the southwest corner of East 9th Street at Park Avenue when it was built in 1923 to service the University of Arizona and surrounding area. The “bungalow, mission style” building, known as the “eastside” station when it opened, it was relocated about 3/4-mile eastward to 24 Norris Avenue in 1953, where it serves today as the oldest city fire station in operation. The original Station 3 is now a locally owned sandwich shop.

Station 4 was built in 1930 on land just west of the Santa Cruz River, right in the heart of the Menlo Park neighborhood on the northeast corner of Grande and Alameda. It remained there until 1974 when a new multi-bay station was constructed on North Contzen Avenue in the Barrio Anita neighborhood. The

need for coverage west of the Santa Cruz River dictated that Station 4 be relocated in 1997 to its current location west of Interstate 10 and south of Grant Road at 2102 North Dragoon Avenue. The original Menlo Park building is now home to the city's Ward 1 Council Office.

Firefighting Apparatus. In 1914 the TFD began its transition from horse-drawn firefighting equipment to gasoline-powered fire trucks with the acquisition of a Velie chemical engine and hose truck. In 1917 the arrival of two Seagrave pumpers, completed that transition.

As the City steadily expanded through 1950, the TFD acquired a series of increasingly capable fire engines - pumpers and aerial ladder trucks - that were assigned appropriately to the central station or one of the three satellite stations. With thoughtful balancing, as new equipment came into service, the TFD assigned some of the older equipment to reserve roles.

The accompanying table lists the motorized firefighting apparatus that was put into service over this period. (If we didn't find supported data to enter in a particular box, we left it blank.) Note the long period during the Great Depression (1931-1939) when the TFD did not purchase a single firefighting apparatus.

At least three of these fire engines were premier apparatus of their day, and in recent years the TFD Restoration Committee has spent considerable time, money, and effort in restoring them. One of the 1923 American LaFrance pumpers and the 1928 Ahrens-Fox pumper have been restored to mint condition. You can see both of these fabulous machines today at Fire Central. The restoration of the 1923 American LaFrance Aerial Ladder Truck is presently underway - first the "cab" and perhaps later the ladder section.⁴



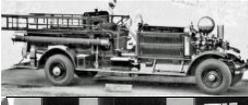
The restoration of this 1923 American LaFrance pumper was completed in 2014. (Courtesy of the TFD)

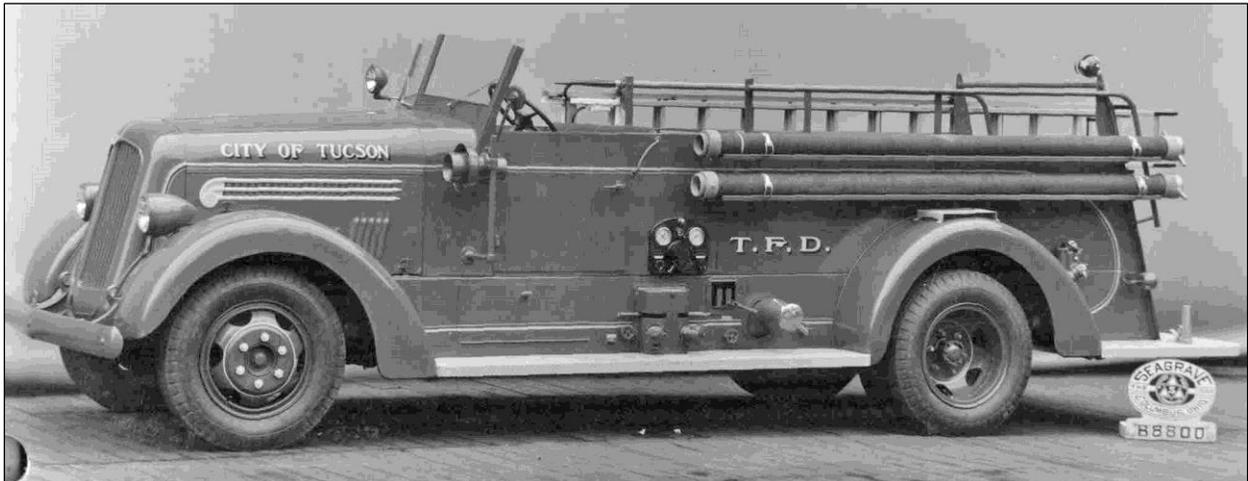
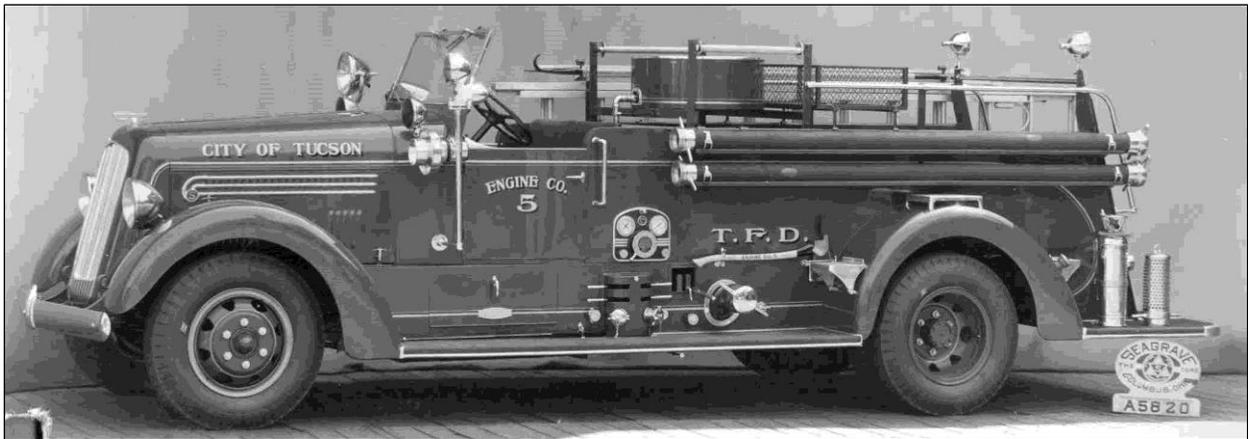


The restoration of this 1928 Ahrens-Fox pumper was completed in 2008. (Courtesy of the TFD)

⁴ See the separate sections devoted to these three fire engines under Apparatus, "TFD Apparatus Information."

TFD motorized firefighting apparatus put in service through 1950.

	Year	No.	Make	Type	Motor	GPM	Comments
	1914	1	Velie	Chem. Engine & Hose Truck	4 cyl.		First motorized fire truck in TFD. Converted to city garbage truck in 1925.
	1917	2	Seagrave	Pumper	6 cyl.	900	Horse teams disbanded. Both pumpers sold to private buyer in 1953.
	1923	2	American LaFrance	Pumper	6 cyl.	750	Unit 1 - private owner in California. Unit 2 - To storage in 1949. Restored by the TFD.
	1923	1	American LaFrance	Aerial Ladder Truck			75-foot ladder/tiller. To storage in 1949. Sold to Tucson Airport in 1959. Being restored by the TFD.
	1928	1	Ahrens-Fox	Pumper	6 cyl.	750	To reserve in 1949. Restored by the TFD.
	1930	1	American LaFrance	Pumper		750	Retired in 1954; sold to private owner.
	1940	1	Seagrave	Pumper	12 cyl.	750	To reserve in 1962.
	1943	1	Seagrave	Pumper	8 cyl.	500	In reserve by 1948.
	1948	2	Seagrave	Pumper	12 cyl.	1000	Unit 1 converted to water tender.
	1949	1	Seagrave	Pumper		1000	To reserve in 1962.
	1950	1	Seagrave	Aerial Ladder Truck			85-foot ladder/tiller.



Here's a closer look at three of this period's historic fire engines in Seagrave factory photos - from top to bottom: 1917 Seagrave Pumper, 1940 Seagrave Pumper, 1943 Seagrave Pumper. (Courtesy of Gary Courtney)

Alarm Boxes and Fire Hydrants. The number of fire alarm boxes and fire hydrants grew accordingly with the steady growth of Tucson.

In 1924 the City added 60 Gamewell alarm boxes to the 24 boxes installed in 1908, giving the city (with a few other occasional additions over the years) an average of about 85 alarm boxes during this period. The alarm system was connected directly to the new fire stations as they were opened in 1917, 1923, and 1930. In 1928 the TFD built an isolated fire alarm headquarters to receive alarms and pass them along to the stations.

The number of fire hydrants to service new neighborhoods grew to 566 in 1930 and 1091 by 1950. The total length of water mains connecting the hydrants to water sources grew from 105 miles in 1930 to 302 miles by 1950.

TFD Chiefs. The paid-Chief era of the TFD started in 1910 with the TFD’s 15th Chief, Tom Conlon. Harry Parker succeeded Conlon, and was followed by Chiefs Roberts, Hilles, and Sievert during this period. The table below lists these men and summarizes their service. The question marks “?” in the table represent birth and death information that we have been unable to find so far. Beginning with Chief Parker, note the long service period of each Chief, with Chief Roberts serving longer than any other Chief in the history of the TFD.

The first five paid Chiefs of the Tucson Fire Department.

No.	Term as Chief	Name	Born	Died	Time as Chief	Comments
15	4/1910-12/1910	Tom Conlon	1862 Ireland	? ?	9 mo	First paid Chief
16	1911-1920	Harry Parker	Abt. 1883 Illinois	1942? Chicago?	10 yrs.	Horse-gasoline power transition Chief
17	1921-6/1938	Joseph Roberts	1889 Texas	1966 Tucson	17 yrs. 6 mo	Longest serving Chief
18	6/1938-6/1946	Henry Hilles	1881 Ohio	1950 Tucson	7 yrs.	First Civil Service Chief
19	7/1946-10/1953	John Sievert	1893 Minnesota	1959 Tucson	7 yrs. 3 mo	Several non-responses outside city limits

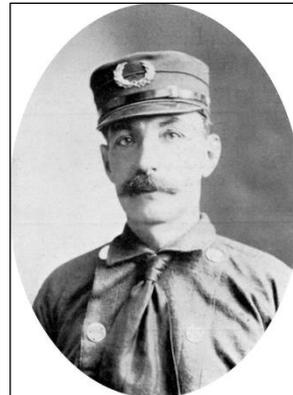
Here is some additional information on these five Chiefs:

15 Tom Conlon (4/1910-12/1910) - Ireland-born Tom Conlon left Ireland in 1884 to come to Saint Louis, Missouri before arriving in Tucson in 1889 to try his hand at prospecting and mining. By 1903 Conlon was Tucson’s first superintendent of the City Water Works, and a most respected Tucsonan. He had joined the TFD as a firefighter in 1892, and in early 1910, during the transition of the TFD from an all-volunteer department to a fully-paid organization, the Mayor appointed him to the newly created paid position of Fire Marshal, with “complete charge of the Fire Department.” This position quickly evolved

into a paid Fire Chief position; thus Conlon became the first paid Chief of the TFD, a position he held for only nine months.

During Conlon's term as Chief in 1910, the TFD fought two major fires: the disastrous fire at the Southern Pacific Railroad Shops and the fire at Goldring's Furniture Store at which former TFD Chief Jack Boleyn was fatally injured.⁵

Forced by the Mayor to resign his position as Water Works Superintendent during his term as TFD Chief, after serving as Chief, Conlon rejoined the Water Works as a station engineer at one of the pumping plants, while continuing to serve the TFD as a volunteer firefighter until 1914. Tom Conlon tried to get into city politics in 1916 by running unsuccessfully for Sheriff, and also was reported to have been "in charge of construction work for the Santa Cruz Reservoir Company" and "at present employed by Albert Steinfeld & Co." In 1918 Conlon was active in a political action group. The final reference to Tom Conlon is from 1931, a brief note in the *Arizona Daily Star* that he had returned to Tucson from a visit to the west coast.



16 Harry Parker (1911-1920) - Harry Parker was born about 1883 in Illinois and came to Tucson in 1908. In February 1909 Parker became the fourth paid member of the TFD, hired to be the driver of Tucson's new horse-drawn fire engine, the Nott Steamer. He progressed rapidly in TFD management, promoted to Steward in June 1909, and then appointed Chief of the TFD by the Mayor in January 1911.

As Chief, Harry Parker oversaw the end of the horse-drawn apparatus era and managed the acquisition of the TFD's first three gasoline-powered fire trucks, the Velie pumper in 1914 and two Seagrave pumpers in 1917. Also, the opening of Fire Station 2 in 1917 occurred while Parker was Chief.



Under Chief Parker's leadership, the TFD fought major fires at Kitt's Sons Department Store on East Congress in 1911, the Tucson Citizen Plant on Belknap in 1912, the complex of Stationary, Meat, and Candy Stores on East Congress in 1912, Litt's Drug Store and Adjacent Buildings at Stone and Congress in 1913, the Kress Building on East Congress in 1914, the Tucson Furniture Company on East Congress in 1915, and the Wheeler & Perry and Brannen Stores on East Congress in 1918. (The Wheeler & Perry and Brannen Stores fire will be discussed later in this article.) In 1914 Chief Parker saved a firefighter from serious injury at a fire at the Yellow Front store on West Congress when he threw himself over the firefighter's back to protect him from falling glass from a skylight, cutting his hands in the effort.

In a *Tucson Daily Citizen* article of September 30, 1915 Chief Roberts is extolled as having "worked indefatigably for the good and improvement [of the TFD], and through the efforts of Mr. Parker this force has reached a stage of efficiency that places it in the foremost ranks of the fire departments of the

⁵ These fires are discussed in a previous "Reflections" article, "Tucson Fire Department - Early 20th Century: 1900-1915."

state. Its record is not excelled anywhere in Arizona either in morale or efficiency. At no time in the history of the city has there been so small a fire loss. This is attested by the constant and steady reduction of the insurance rate.”

Following his duty as Chief of the TFD, Harry Parker worked many years in management positions for the Pima County Highway Department. The last certain reference to him that we have is from the 1940 United States Federal Census that lists him as a Tucson resident. We also have an unsubstantiated article from a Chicago newspaper that indicates that Harry Parker may have died there while visiting on March 2, 1942.

17 Joseph Roberts (1921-6/1938) - Joseph Roberts was born in El Paso, Texas in 1889 and at age 14 moved to Tucson with his family in 1903. In 1907 he joined the Navy for four years, including a two-year cruise around the world with Teddy Roosevelt’s “Great White Fleet.”



Returning to Tucson, Roberts joined the TFD in 1913 as a firefighter. In 1917, while testing a new hose coupling, he was severely injured when the coupling let go and a high-pressure water steam hit Roberts in the abdomen. After his recovery, Roberts joined the Army and served with the Artillery in World War I. When he returned home to Tucson and the TFD in 1919, he was soon promoted to Lieutenant and in January 1921, the Mayor appointed him as Chief of the TFD, succeeding Harry Parker.

During Robert’s long(est) term as Chief, the TFD continued to expand its coverage by building Fire Station 3 in 1923 and Station 4 in 1930. Chief Roberts also oversaw the acquisition of five new fire apparatus - two 1923 American LaFrance pumpers, the 1923 American LaFrance aerial ladder truck, the 1928 Ahrens Fox pumper, and the 1930 American LaFrance pumper.

Chief Roberts was very interested in improving the quality of the TFD and its firefighters. He enthusiastically received the first visit to Tucson of fire inspectors from the National Board of Fire Underwriters to evaluate the TFD and recommend improvements that might reduce insurance rates. He was a “strong booster” of civil service guidelines and training in the Department. In 1930 Roberts started a vocational training program for firefighters that included first-aid and life-saving training, and instruction about fire hazards, fire detection, building vulnerabilities, and how to use complex firefighting equipment.

There were relatively few major fires during the 17 1/2 years that Roberts served as Chief, only three with damage estimates greater than \$100,000: the Hotel Congress fire on East Congress Street in 1934, the Pima Print Company on North Scott Street in 1934, and the Arizona Flour Mills on Toole Avenue in 1937. (The Hotel Congress fire will be discussed later in this article.)

At age 49, in mid-1938 Chief Roberts submitted a request for retirement, along with a Certificate of Disability, based on his injury 24 years earlier in 1914.

Following his retirement from the TFD, Joseph Roberts had many more years of service to the Tucson community left. He served as Chiefs of the Fire Departments at Marana Airfield and Consolidated Aircraft. A long-time South Tucson booster, he helped the small city organize their fire units. In Tucson Roberts helped organize and later headed local units of the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign War. (More on Joseph Roberts to come)

18 Henry Hilles (6/1938-6/1946) - Henry Hilles was born in Barnesville, Ohio in 1881. From 1900 to 1903 he served with the Fifth Cavalry in the Philippine Insurrection and from 1904 to 1910 he was stationed with the cavalry at Ft. Huachuca. Hilles was discharged in 1911 and lived a short time in Bisbee before coming to Tucson in 1913.



Henry Hilles joined the TFD in December 1913 as a hoseman, was promoted to Captain in 1915 and then Assistant Chief in 1922. When Chief Roberts retired in June 1938, Tucson's City Manager appointed Hilles to be Chief of the TFD, "with the consent and approval of the Mayor and Council" and subject to "the Civil Service Commission holding an examination for Chief of the Fire Department" - both of which occurred soon thereafter.⁶

In addition to his post as TFD Chief, Hilles was also appointed acting Police Chief from October 1938 to July 1940, filling a vacancy until a trained police chief could be hired.

Chief Hilles' term spanned the entirety of WWII - a busy time of pilot training and the beginning of the aviation industry in Tucson. During Hilles' term as Chief, the TFD purchased the 1940 and 1943 Seagrave pumpers. In this wartime period, the TFD fought over ten major fires, including three fires with estimated damage exceeding \$175,000: the F. W. Woolworth fire on East Congress Street in 1941, the Levy's Department Store fire at Scott & Congress Streets in 1943, and the huge Brunswig Drug Company Warehouse fire on South Tyndall Avenue in 1946. (These fires will be discussed later in this article.)

Just before Chief Hilles retired, in April 1946, an incident occurred that dramatized a serious issue in the steadily growing greater Tucson community. Three little girls burned to death in a residential fire just two blocks outside Tucson city limits. The TFD did not respond to this fire, based on the 1937 order from the City Council.⁷

Hilles retired from the TFD in June 1946 at age 64. Four years later in 1950, Henry Hilles died at a local hospital.

⁶ Quotes are from the City Council minutes of June 6, 1938.

⁷ According to an article in the April 11, 1946 *Tucson Daily Citizen*, Tucson officials argued that outlying areas should "set up their own assessment districts and provide their own protection."

19 John Sievert (7/1946-10/1953) - John Sievert was born in Janesville, Minnesota in 1893. When he was five years old, he moved with his family to Oklahoma where his father homesteaded. He came to Phoenix in 1914 to visit a sister, decided to stay in Arizona, worked briefly for a mining company in Kingman, before overseas service during WWI with the 158th Infantry. He came to Tucson after the war and helped to build Cochise Hall at the University of Arizona.



Sievert joined the TFD in 1922 as a hoseman, became a fire engine driver in 1923, was promoted to Lieutenant in 1926, to Assistant Chief in 1938, before being selected from a group of Civil Service candidates for Chief of the TFD in July 1946. During Sievert's term as Chief, through the end of 1950, the TFD purchased the two 1948 Seagrave pumpers, the 1949 Seagrave pumper, and the 1950 Seagrave aerial ladder truck.⁸ Under Chief Sievert's leadership the TFD significantly increased in strength through the purchase of new equipment, the hiring of additional firefighters to use the equipment, equipping all apparatus with radios, starting a training program, and instituting a Fire Prevention Bureau.

The TFD fought ten major fires during Sievert's seven-year, three-month term as Chief (most of them in 1946-1948); three of the fires reached \$200,000 in damage: the Southwest Wholesale Grocery Co. on East Toole Avenue in 1946, the James A. Dick Grocery Warehouse on South Tyndall Avenue in 1947, and St. Joseph's Academy on Wilmot Road in 1948. (The James A. Dick Grocery Warehouse fire will be discussed later in this article.) There were also seven major fires during this period that were outside Tucson's city limits and to which the TFD did not respond.

At age 60, having been plagued by ulcers for several months, John Sievert applied for, and was granted, a disability retirement in October 1953.

Firefighters. The fully paid TFD started out in 1915 with only 15-20 firefighters. With new fire stations in 1917, 1923, and 1930 and a steady stream of new fire engines, TFD membership grew accordingly. By 1930 membership was 34, by 1940 there were 38 firefighters, and by 1950 a total of 65.

By 1947 Civil Service requirements to be a fireman were well established. The following was set forth by the Director of Tucson Civil Service and published in the April 5, 1947 *Tucson Daily Citizen*,

"The local requirements include an adaptability test for firemen, an IQ test, a mechanical aptitude test, and a general knowledge test. The written examination takes four hours after which the applicants are given an oral interview by a board of examiners who evaluate the man's personality as well as other factors."

⁸ Before Chief Sievert retired, as Tucson started an enormous growth period, the TFD would purchase its first Rescue Unit in 1951 and another American LaFrance 1,000-GPM pumper in 1953, and build Fire Station 5 at Grant Road and Vine Avenue in 1953.

The third active-duty death of a Tucson firefighter occurred in 1946 when Fred Van Camp was fatally injured while extinguishing a fire under the bed of a city garbage truck. The bed was unexpectedly lowered on Van Camp when his head was underneath trying to confirm that the fire was out.⁹

Bernard J. Oliver, who started with the TFD in 1947, after service as a pilot in WW II, and who retired as a Battalion Chief in 1974, wrote a fascinating biography¹⁰ in which he recalls his years with the TFD. Among his recollections from this time period are of Central Station, “with the living quarters upstairs and three poles to slide down to the apparatus floor (the poles were kept shiny by daily sandpapering),” the need for off-duty jobs to supplement his TFD pay, being one of the first radio dispatchers, and being one of the first to make first aid calls (using the Assistant Chief’s red car before the TFD had a specialized truck).

Major Fires. From 1915 through 1950, there were over thirty major fires in Tucson. As during the previous 15 years, a lot of these fires occurred in the more crowded, commercial, downtown area - many on East Congress Street. Here are summaries of seven of the larger fires across the time period, compiled from TFD records and newspaper accounts of the day. Comments in “quotes” are from newspapers.

August 8, 1918 Wheeler & Perry, Brannen Stores on East Congress Street

“Early morning fire does heavy damage [Estimated at \$60,000] to the Wheeler & Perry grocery and Brannen haberdashery. ... United States court rooms on second floor also gutted. ... Rats or mice in combination with matches blamed. ... The fire started in the rear of Wheeler & Perry’s, broke through the ceiling, spread to the court room, and burned through the roof. ... The fire burned stubbornly for two and a half hours and the firemen were handicapped in reaching it with lines of hose because of the fact that steel doors at the rear of the grocery were locked. ... This is probably the largest loss in a single fire that Tucson has ever had, said Fire Chief Harry Parker.”

January 23, 1934 Hotel Congress on East Congress Street

“The Congress Hotel was almost completely ruined by fire and water ... Three general alarms brought every piece of firefighting equipment and Chief Roberts full complement of men. ... The fire apparently ... started at or near the furnace and oil supply, the flames roared up the elevator shaft and to the roof. ... All [guests] were removed from the flaming building without injury. ... every available hose line was put to use shooting

⁹ The first active-duty death occurred in 1902 when Assistant Chief William Katzenstein was assassinated in a revenge killing; the second was when retired Chief Jack Boleyn died from injuries suffered in fighting a fire in 1910.

¹⁰ Available on this web site at Honor Roll & Membership (1), Chief Officers, “BC-B-J-Oliver-Auto.”

**LOSS OF \$60,000 IN
FIRE ON CONGRESS ST.**

**Fire Rages In
Levy's Store
During Night**

Heavy Loss Suffered As Fire
Ravages Department Store
Early Last Night

**TELEPHONE GIRL
HOLDS POST AS
CONGRESS BURNS**

Tucson Hotel Swept by Fire
With Resultant Loss of
Near \$100,000

GUESTS ARE UNINJURED

Fire Department Uses Full
Equipment to Battle
Record City Blaze

**Largest Blaze
In Years Hits
Business Area**

Entire Building Goes
Up In Flames; Loss
Reaches \$175,000.

**10,000 PERSONS
DRAWN TO SITE
OF HUGE BLAZE**

Loss Fully Covered by
Insurance; No Food
Shortage Seen

**Half Million Dollar Blaze
Destroys Brunswick Drug Co.**

Over-Strength Crews Battle Blaze 16 Hours as
Wholesaler's Stock and Warehouse
Called Total Loss

**\$300,000 Fire Loss
Hits S.W. Wholesale**

\$180,000 In Hard-to-Get Food Destroyed in
Spectacular Blaze; Flames Soar 200 Feet
As Firemen Battle Conflagration

Here are some representative newspaper headlines about the fires we're talking about.
(Courtesy of the Arizona Daily Star, Tucson Daily Citizen)



Firefighters to the right of the 1923 American LaFrance pumper pour water into the third floor of the Hotel Congress during the fire on January 23, 1934. (Courtesy of Tommy Stefanski)

streams of high pressure water into the flaming building. The roof fell in ... followed by the cupola over the front entrance.” Estimated damage \$250,000.

By coincidence, members of fugitive John Dillinger’s gang were staying at the Hotel, were recognized during egress, and captured with Dillinger a couple of days after the fire. (More to come on Hotel Congress fire)

November 13, 1941 F. W. Woolworth Co. on East Congress Street

“Largest blaze in years hits business area ... entire building goes up in flames ... loss reaches \$175,000 ... originating in stacks of merchandize stored in the basement ... apparently been smoldering for several hours before the discovery ... Firemen hampered by dense clouds of smoke ... Almost 1,000,000 gallons of water from 13 hose lines had been poured into the building when [Fire Chief] Hilles announced that the fire was under control [six hours after first alarm] and firemen still had many hours of work before them to extinguish it completely.”

December 10, 1943 Levy’s Department Store at Scott and Congress Streets

“Flames sweep clothing store ... in the space of a half-hour damaged or destroyed the entire stock of the store, scorching and burning the mezzanine floor and most of the



TFD aerial ladder and pumper trucks battle the Woolworth Building fire on East Congress Street. (Courtesy of the Arizona Daily Star, November 14, 1941)

ground floor. ... According to Fire Chief Henry Hilles ... the stock of the store was destroyed by flames, billowing clouds of smoke and water which seeped into basement rooms. ... firemen found it difficult to chop vents in the roof to let flames out. ... Smoke was so thick that firemen were forced to don masks to enter the building. Glass in show cases was shattered by the intense heat and littered the floor." Estimated damage was \$213,400.

June 30, 1946 Brunswig Drug Co. Warehouse on North 4th Avenue

"Two-alarm fire - the most disastrous in Tucson's history [estimated damage \$375,000] - burned from slightly after midnight until 4 pm yesterday, destroying the warehouse and offices of the Brunswig Drug Company. A full crew of 30 city firemen, assisted by eight off-shift fire fighters from the Davis-Monthan Army Airfield department ... battled the blaze. Clouds of dense black smoke rose ... after the roof caved in flames climbed 75 to 100 feet into the air. ... Three trucks responded to the first alarm, and a fourth truck to the second. During the height of the fire - for four and a half hours - nine streams of

water played constantly on the flames. ... Five firemen ... suffered eye injuries due to smoke and gas. ... Only the walls and cement floors, cracked and blackened by the heat and smoke, were left standing.”

August 21, 1946 Southwest Wholesale Grocery Co. on East Toole Avenue

“Largest food wholesale firm in southern Arizona was destroyed in a spectacular fire. ... Loss of food and supplies was estimated at \$180,000 and loss of the building, gutted from the basement to the roof, at \$120,000. ... Three trucks, manned by a crew of twelve men were immediately dispatched. ... the fire burst through the roof as it collapsed. They [flames] mounted 200 feet into the sky ... Out of control for slightly more than an hour ... an extra crew of firefighters was called from nearby Davis-Monthan airbase to help city firemen. ... an entire second [TFD] crew volunteered and was sent to the scene. Fire Chief ... Sievert directed the men.”

September 16, 1947 James A. Dick Grocery Warehouse on South Tyndall Avenue

“A half-million dollar fire, largest in Tucson’s history ... completely destroyed ... warehouse ... second largest wholesale grocery company in the state. Estimated loss includes a \$400,000 stock of dry groceries and building and fixtures valued at \$150,000. ... witnesses heard a muffled explosion and then saw flames break out over the whole building. ... intense heat of the inferno ... exploding canned goods rocketed skyward, some of them to fall up to 200 feet from the building. The corrugated steel sides of the building turned white-hot and literally melted. ... Four city fire trucks, one from Davis-Monthan airbase, one the Southern Pacific shops answered the call. ... building was ablaze from end to end when first truck arrived ... completely out of control ... Firemen played 10 streams of water in an effort to subdue the flames.”



Flames leap 200 feet high in James A. Dick Grocery Warehouse blaze. (Courtesy of the Arizona Daily Star, September 17, 1947)

Through two world wars and the Great Depression, from 1915 to 1950, the TFD continued to protect Tucson from a widespread conflagration. The city, and the TFD along with it, was about to begin an enormous growth period.

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Greater Tucson Fire Foundation

Thank you for taking an interest in Tucson Fire Department history —

This is one of many sections that contain information, documents, letters, newspaper articles, pictures, etc. They have been collected and arranged in chronological order or by a subject. These items were collected, organized and entered into a computerized database by Dave Ridings Retired Assistant Chief Tucson Fire Department, Al Ring friend of the department, Greater Tucson Fire Foundation and with the help of many friends and fellow firefighters.

All graphics have been improved to make the resolution as good as possible, but the reader should remember that many came from copies of old newspaper articles. This also applies to other items such as documents, letters, etc.

Credit to the source of the documents, photos, etc. is provided whenever it was available. We realize that many items are not identified and regret that we weren't able to provide this information. As far as the newspaper articles that are not identified, 99% of them would have to be from one of three possible sources. The *Arizona Daily Star*, The *Tucson Citizen* and the *Tucson Daily Citizen*, for which we want to give a special thanks.

Please use this information as a reference tool only. If the reader uses any of the information for any purpose other than a reference tool, they should get permission from the source.

Should the reader have additional information on the above subject we would appreciate you sharing it with us. Please see the names and contact information on the 1st. TFD Archives page right below this paragraph.

