

# **Tucson Fire Department**

## **Unprecedented Tucson Growth 1950-1970**



Davis-Monthan jet loaded with fuel crashed into southside Food Giant on December 18, 1967

**Al Ring**

**Bob Ring**

## **Unprecedented Tucson Growth: 1950-1970**

**Tucson experienced tremendous growth, with the metropolitan area expanding more than eight-fold and the population mushrooming almost six-fold to a total of 263,000. The TFD grew along with the city, by 1970 operating 12 fire stations, up from 4, increasing the firefighting force from 65 to 279, and adding Rescue and Fire Prevention missions. Three Chiefs guided the TFD in fighting 35 major fires, culminating with the disastrous Pioneer Hotel fire that caused 29 deaths.**

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

### **Tucson Perspective**

**Summary.** In the 1950s, along with gigantic expansion of the metropolitan area and huge population growth, Tucson experienced a dramatic transformation, changing from a small town to, in Tucson historian C. L. Sonnichsen's words, a "metropolis" and, because of a "tidal wave of immigration ... began to be a multilingual, multinational city." Reasons for the huge growth rate included increased manufacturing with new industries relocating to Tucson, an enormous increase in tourism leading to a construction boom, the permanent return of servicemen who were trained in Tucson during World War II, the wide use of air conditioning that made desert life so much more pleasant year round, and of course, the people already living in the newly incorporated areas.

One of the keystone industry manufacturing startups during this period was Hughes Aircraft Company which in 1951 built a new manufacturing plant aside the Tucson Municipal Airport. Initially manufacturing radar units, the company gradually transitioned to producing military missiles, becoming the premier missile builder in the U.S., and today as Raytheon Missile Systems, is Tucson's second largest employer.

Other large companies that came to Tucson during the 1950s include the Arizona Portland Cement Company, the Chapman-Dyer Steel Manufacturing Company, and the Krieger Air Conditioning Company.

Here are a few other milestones that helped define the 1950s in the Tucson area:

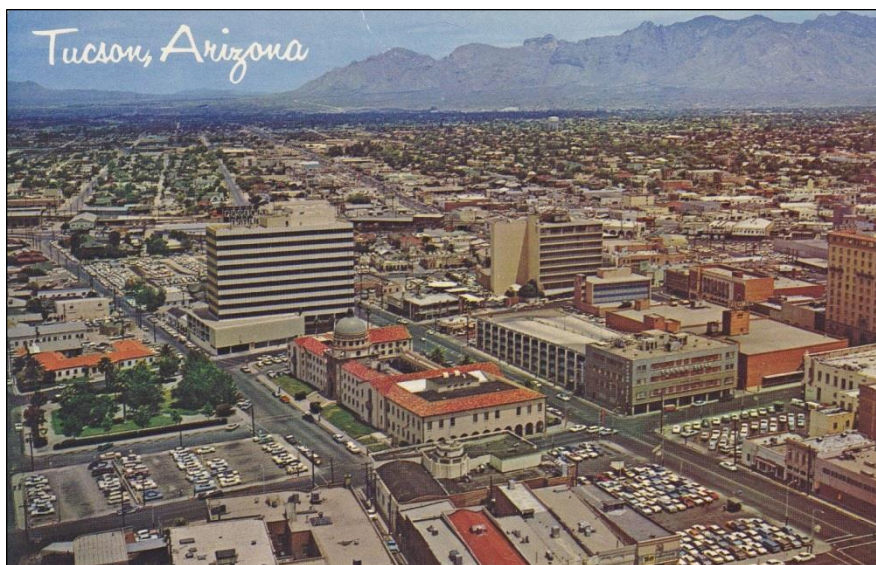
- a. 1950 - The Catalina Highway to Mt. Lemmon was completed.
- b. 1952 - The Arizona Sonoran Desert Museum opened.
- c. 1953 - The community of Green Valley was founded.
- d. 1953 - First local Television, KOPO Channel 13.
- e. 1955 - First Gem and Mineral Show
- f. 1958 - Kitt Peak Observatory founded.

The 1960s in Tucson started with a business slow-down but the population still expanded rapidly because of the steady flow of immigration from all over the world. Business began to pick up by the mid-1960s. The big copper mines that ringed the town expanded and stepped up production. Nearby

enterprises like the 18 Titan missile sites and the astronomical observatory at Kitt Peak added to Tucson's economy. Construction of the I-10 freeway and supporting road infrastructure started in the 1960s and was completed in the 1970s.

Other milestones that helped characterize the 1960s include:

- a. 1960 - El Con Center opens as Tucson first shopping mall.
- b. 1961 - Municipal Airport becomes international.
- c. 1963 - UA College of Medicine founded.
- d. 1966 - First Tucson urban renewal project approved: Pueblo Center.
- e. 1967 - Reid Park Zoo founded.
- f. 1969 - Pima Community College opens.



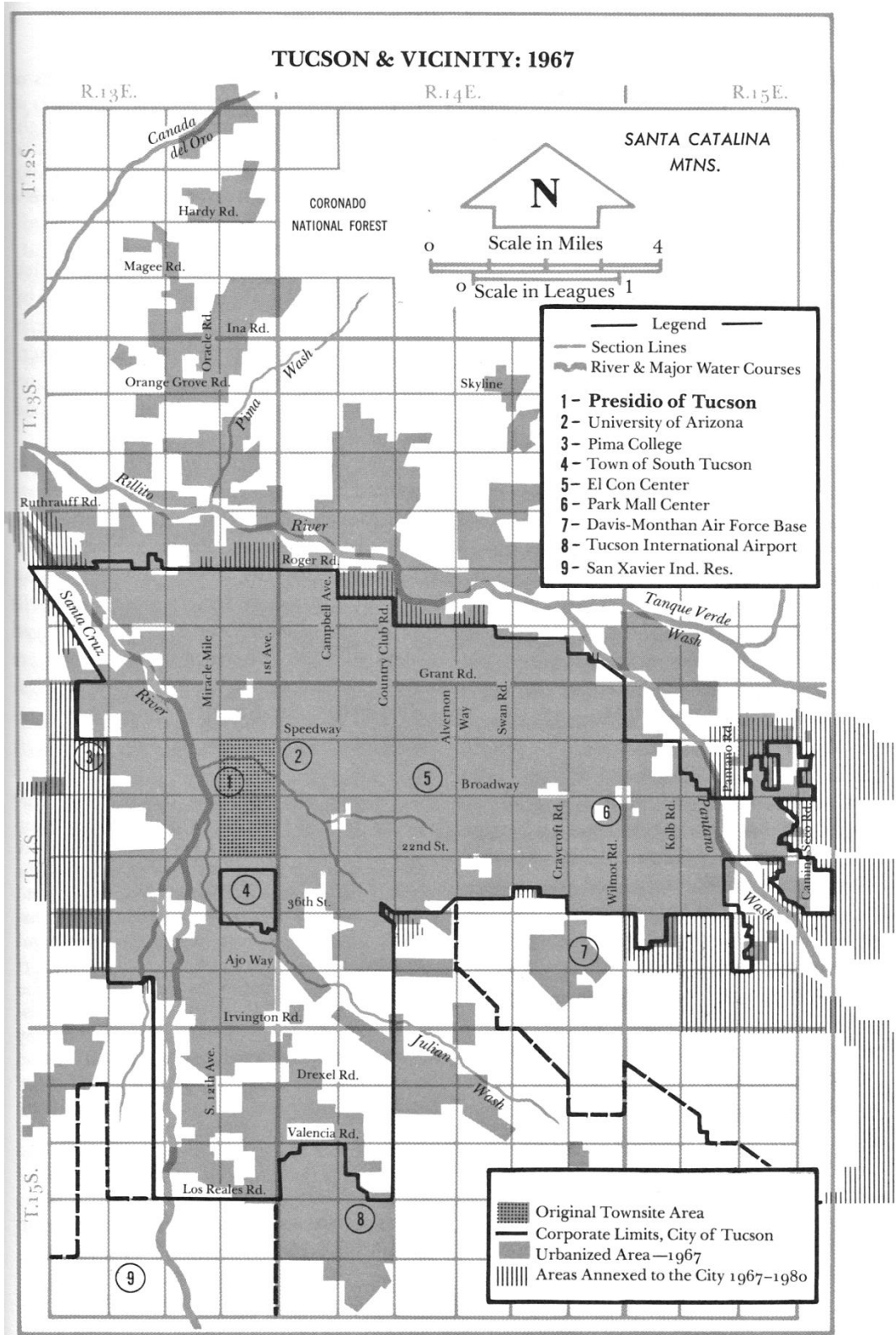
*Tucson in 1966, looking north. Our small town had turned into a sizeable city. The original Pima County Courthouse is at the center; the Pioneer Hotel is visible at right-center. (Postcard courtesy of Al Ring)*

**Municipal Growth.** In 1950 the city of Tucson encompassed only 9.6 square miles. Tucson's leaders thought that the city needed to grow rapidly in order to capitalize on the prosperity of the times. Accordingly, between 1950 and 1970, through a steady series of 61 separate annexations, Tucson's metropolitan area grew over eightfold to 80.7 square miles, expanding in all directions.

Three of the annexations contributed almost 75% of the growth:

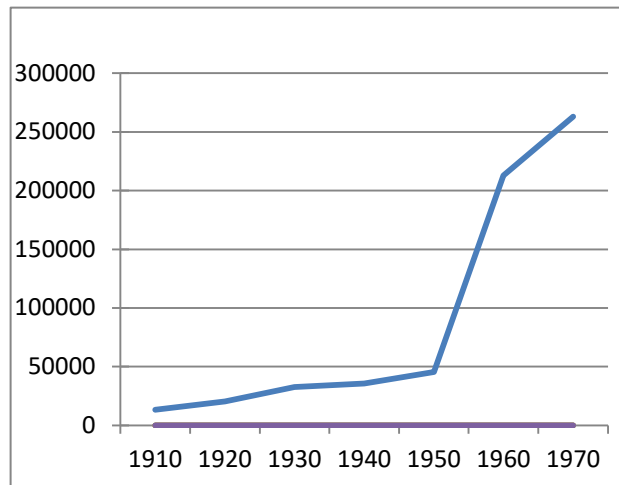
|            |              |   |
|------------|--------------|---|
| 12/05/1955 | 6.1 sq. mi.  | East side: Pima Street south to 22 <sup>nd</sup> Street, east to Craycroft Road |
| 03/26/1959 | 21.3 sq. mi. | North to Roger Road, east to Kolb Road  |
| 03/18/1960 | 25.0 sq. mi. | West to Silverbell Road, south to the San Xavier Indian Reservation             |

The accompanying map shows the results of all annexations through 1967 and subsequent annexations through 1980.

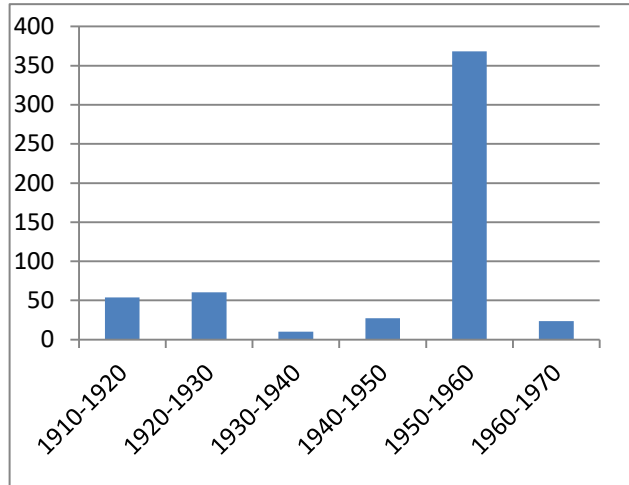


*This 1967 map of Tucson and vicinity shows how much the corporate limits and urbanized area had expanded since 1950. (Courtesy of Tucson - The Life and Times of an American City)*

**Population.** Tucson's population growth in this period was equally dramatic. According to U.S. Census records, the 1950 population of 45,454 grew to a whopping 262,933 by 1970, most of that increase occurring by 1960, as the accompanying population growth chart shows. Tucson's incredible population growth in the 1950s is even more visible in the second chart of percentage population growth by decade.



*Population Growth in Tucson.*



*Percentage Population Growth by Decade in Tucson.*

Also during this period, the percentage of Anglos in the Tucson population, which had been increasing for years, peaked near 80% in 1960 and began to decline as the percentage of Hispanics increased - a trend continuing to this day.

**Water.** Population growth, mining, and agriculture increased Tucson's requirements for water in the 1950s. The city was almost completely dependent on pumping ground water to satisfy these needs. In 1952 Tucson began to acquire well sites in the Avra Valley to the northwest of town. Having started in 1938, the City continued to purchase private water companies, most to provide water service to new subdivisions that the town's rapid expansion had encompassed. By 1965 the City had added 200 private water companies. To provide water storage against severe seasonal requirements, Tucson built a 20-million gallon reservoir in 1954 near Craycroft Road and 22<sup>nd</sup> Street and another in 1964 at the southeast corner of Old Nogales Highway and Valencia Road. According to Douglas E. Kupel, in his book *Fuel for Growth - Water and Arizona's Urban Environment*, "Between 1947 and 1965, groundwater levels dropped twenty to forty feet." Tucson would face a water crisis by the mid-1970s.

## Tucson Fire Department

The TFD was severely challenged to provide fire protection to the fast growing city of Tucson. Additional fire stations, firefighting apparatus, manpower, and support infrastructure were urgently needed.

**Growth and Change.** From 1950-1970, in order to cover the more than eight-fold increased fire coverage area, the TFD added 10 fire stations. Accounting for one closed station and one temporary decommissioning, there were 12 operational stations in 1970. The rapid expansion of service area included “envelopment and dissolution” of two small private fire agencies, the Catalina Fire Department, absorbed with the March 1959 city annexation, and the Pima Merchant Patrol, taken over with the March 1960 annexation.

During this period the TFD put in service 18 additional pumper apparatus, including a few used pumpers from the two private fire departments, and four aerial ladder trucks. The first diesel pumper was purchased in 1967.

Expanding its mission to include “Rescue,” the TFD employed its first dedicated first aid van in 1951, a natural follow-up to providing limited first-aid services in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. By 1970 the TFD had a “fleet” of five rescue vehicles, based at five fire stations distributed over the TFD coverage area.

To man the additional stations and operate the new firefighting apparatus and rescue vans, the number of TFD personnel increased dramatically from 65 to 279 during this period.

Adoption of Fire Prevention Ordinance No. 1524 by Tucson in 1954 assisted the TFD’s Fire Prevention Division. The TFD shared radio frequencies with the police department until November, 1955, when the TFD was assigned its own frequency band. In mid-1956 firefighters began routine daily testing and inspection of fire alarm systems, including 86 fire alarm boxes. In that same period, the TFD began inspecting family dwellings for fire risks.



*“Rescue No. 1” was introduced into service in 1951 at Central Station. (Courtesy of the TFD)*

In 1961 Tucson opened a new Communications Center in Randolph Park for use by the city’s Public Works Department, Police Department, and Fire Department. All fire alerts - from alarm boxes, telephone calls, and automatic devices - were now routed to the Communications Center which had two-way radio connection, as well as direct telephone connection, with each of the fire stations. All mobile fire equipment was equipped with radios and could be controlled from the Center.



*The TFD Training Center at Ajo and Park was completed in 1970. (Courtesy of the TFD)*

In 1970 the TFD completed construction of an extensive Training Center at Ajo Way and Park Avenue, right next to Fire Station 10 (see section on fire stations below).<sup>1</sup>

New technology continued to be applied to improve TFD operations. Self-contained breathing apparatus for use in dense smoke situations were introduced in the 1950s and generally accepted by firefighters in the 1960s. Trials with traffic signal preemption devices (to allow priority fire apparatus passage) began in 1967.

By 1970 Tucson's water supply infrastructure had greatly expanded with the metropolitan area, providing 1594 miles of water mains and 5382 fire hydrants.

The TFD was becoming a major business. In mid-1955 the TFD began issuing annual reports covering the previous year's operations, including changes in facilities, apparatus, and personnel; and activities with respect to alarms, major fires, fire prevention, rescue and first aid, training, and organizational departments. Typically, the TFD organization (charts) in this time period reflected all of these items, although the reports showed quite a variation in "wiring" diagrams. Interestingly, the heart of the Department, the "putting out the fires" part, was variously labeled "Firefighting," "Combat," and "Fire Suppression" over the period. TFD budget information appeared for the first time in the 1966-67 Annual Report. The TFD budget was \$2.37M, compared to the Tucson City budget of \$27.4M. By 1969-70, the TFD budget had grown to \$3.30M and Tucson budget to \$37.0M. In these years, the TFD budget was almost 9% of the Tucson budget.

**Fire Stations.** At the start of 1950 the TFD had four fire stations: Station 1 (Central Station) at 142 South 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Station 2 at 1030 North 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Station 3 on East 9<sup>th</sup> Street at Park Avenue, and Station 4 at the northeast corner of Grande and Alameda. Station 3 was relocated to 24 Norris Avenue in 1953 and Station 2 was decommissioned in 1963 when "it became increasingly obsolete for response purposes."

During the 1950s other stations were added almost as fast as annexations occurred. Some of them were temporary quarters for several years before permanent stations could be built. These included residential houses, an airport hangar, and commercial buildings. Two other stations originally belonged to private fire departments before being absorbed by the TFD via annexation. The accompanying figure shows all of the fire stations that started service from 1950-1970.

<sup>1</sup> This TFD Training Center was used until 1997, then converted to the Fire Prevention Division office, purchased by Golden Eagle Distributor around 2000, and demolished a couple of years later. The Training Center was replaced in 1997 by the Public Safety Academy, operated jointly by Tucson's Fire and Police Departments, at 10001 South Wilmot Road.



Station 3  
24 Norris Avenue  
1953-



Station 5  
1510 East Grant Rd.  
1953-1983



Station 6  
Fifth and Swan  
1956-1959



Station 6  
Bellevue and Venice  
1959-1983



Station 7  
3202 East 1st St.  
1959-1983



Station 8  
3325 North Stone Ave.  
late 1950s-1968



Station 8  
250 West King Road  
1968-



Station 9  
5941 East 22<sup>nd</sup> St.  
1959-1966



Station 9  
6275 East Eastland  
1966-



Station 10  
Southwest of Kino and 36<sup>th</sup> Street  
1956-1965



Station 10  
801 East Ajo Way  
1965-

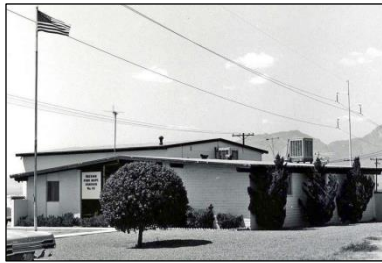


Station 11  
4075 East Timrod  
1961-

*These are the fire stations that started in service from 1950-1970. (Courtesy of the TFD)*

(no photo available)

Station 12  
Blacklidge and Country Club  
1959-1965



Station 12  
7901 East Scarlett  
1965-1976



Station 13  
341 West Ajo Way  
1960-1965



Station 14  
5832 South 6<sup>th</sup> St.  
1960-1968



Station 14  
5757 South Liberty  
1968-

*These are the fire stations that started in service from 1950-1970, continued. (Courtesy of the TFD)*

A short summary of the history of each station follows:

**Station 5** was built in 1953 at Grant Road and Vine Avenue as a result of anticipated population growth. In 1983, looking to expand the building, the station was moved to its current site two miles farther east to 2835 East Grant Road. The original Station 5 is now the City's northside Ward 3 office.

**Station 6** was originally housed near 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Swan in 1956 and relocated to the corner of Bellevue and Venice in 1959. This busy midtown station was closed in 1983 when it was merged with the original Station 7 near Speedway and Country Club. Station 6 was briefly recommissioned in 1994 in a temporary building, closed again until 1997 when it was brought into service on the grounds of the Regional Public Safety Academy at 10001 South Wilmot Road, where today it is the city's southernmost firehouse. The original Station 6 was demolished in the 1960s/1970s and replaced by a small office building. The station at Bellevue and Venice is owned by a behavioral health services agency.

**Station 7** originally was constructed at 3202 East 1<sup>st</sup> Street in 1959. It was converted to a Tucson Police Department substation in 1983 and is currently home to the City's Ward 6 Council office. Station 7 was relocated to 4902 Pima Street and today is one of the busiest stations in the City, encompassing a large

service area that includes a mixture of residential neighborhoods, commercial businesses, and numerous adult care facilities.

**Station 8** was originally placed at a single family residence at 3325 North Stone Avenue. A permanent station was completed in 1968 at 250 West King Road. Station 8 serves a diverse area that includes apartment complexes, commercial and industrial businesses, and low-income residential housing. The original station was demolished in 2010.

**Station 9** was originally located in 1959 at a small house at 5941 East 22<sup>nd</sup> Street. A new station was completed in 1966 further east at 6275 East Eastland, near Wilmot. Today the station covers Park Place Mall, Davis Monthan AFB, residential neighborhoods, and St. Joseph's Hospital. The original Station 9 was demolished in the 1960s/1970s and replaced by a small strip mall.

**Station 10** was originally posted in 1956 at a hangar at the Tucson Downtown Airport, southwest of Kino and 36<sup>th</sup> Street. It was repositioned to a new building in 1965 at 801 East Ajo Way. The old airport site is currently under construction as a master planned facility by UA research, residential, and commercial interests. Today the station covers commercial and business locations, and much of City's freeway system.

**Station 11** was built in 1961 at 4075 Timrod, just east of Randolph Municipal Golf Course. Today the station, the second oldest<sup>2</sup> in the City, covers Reid Park, Hi Corbett Field, El Conn Mall, as well as high rise hotels and office buildings.

**Station 12** was originally located in 1959 on the southwest corner of Blacklidge and Country Club, taking over from the private Catalina Fire Department with the annexation of March 1959. In 1965 the station was relocated eastward to a residential style station at 7901 East Scarlett, near Broadway and Pantano. The Blacklidge station is no longer standing and the Scarlett facility is now owned by the City, but has been vacant for several years. Station 12 moved to its current location at 250 South Harrison Road in 1976.

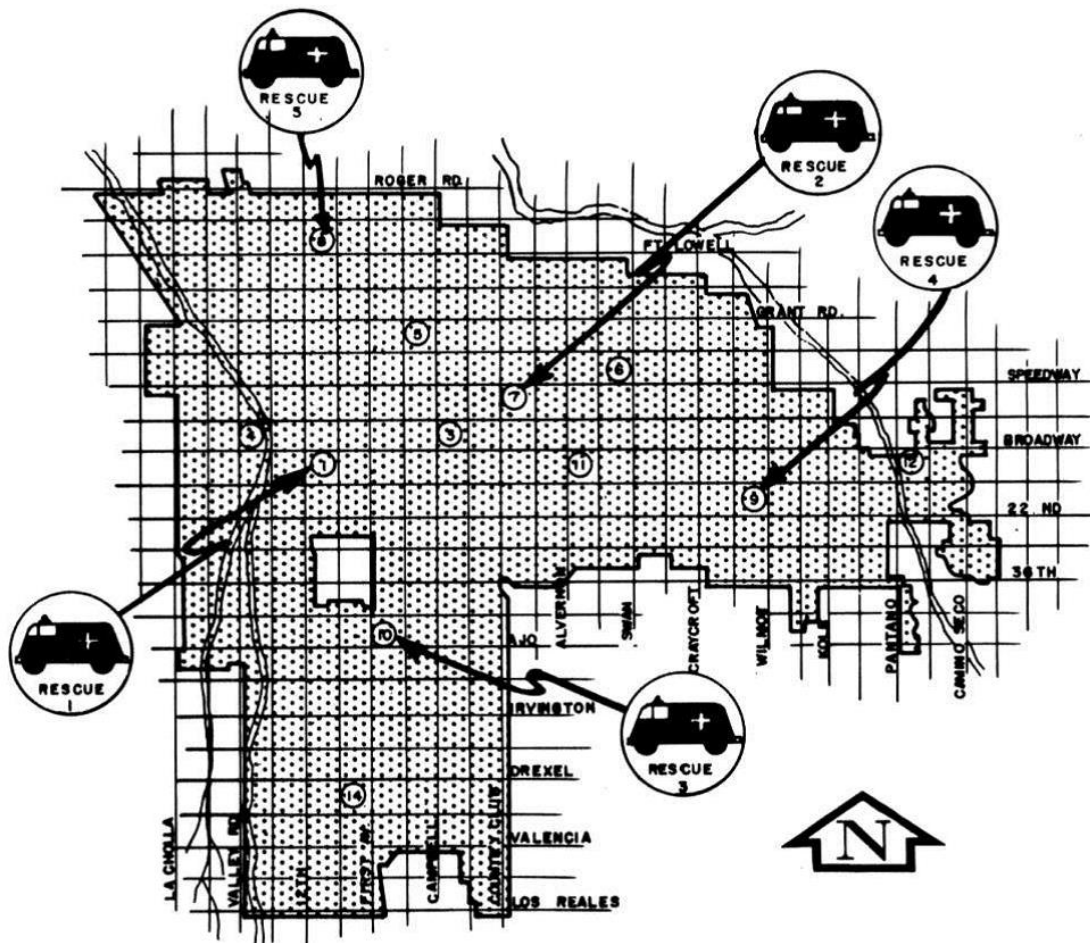
**Station 13** was originally commissioned in 1960 at 341 West Ajo Way. The station was decommissioned in 1965 as a result of the opening of Station 10 at Park and Ajo, but was brought back into service and relocated to its current location in 1973 at Stella and Pantano. The original building on Ajo remains standing as a privately owned business called the Corner Market.

**Station 14** was commissioned in 1960 when the TFD took over the private Pima Merchant Patrol fire house at 5832 South 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue, following the City annexation of March 1960. Station 14 moved to a newly constructed building in 1968 at 5757 South Liberty, near Drexel, where today the station covers apartment complexes, residential and low-income housing, as well as commercial and retail businesses.

In 1970 the five rescue vans were assigned at Station 1 (Central Station), Station 3, Station 7, Station 8, and Station 9.

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<sup>2</sup> The oldest City fire station still in operation is Station 3, built in 1953, located in the Sam Hughes neighborhood, serving the UA and surrounding area.



*On this 1968 map, the TFD is shown operating 12 fire stations and five rescue units, distributed across metropolitan Tucson. Station 13 was temporarily decommissioned from 1965-1973. (Courtesy of the TFD)*

**Firefighting Apparatus.** The table that follows identifies the firefighting apparatus that was put in service in the 1950s and 1960s. The gasoline powered age ended in 1967 when the first diesel fire engine, an American LaFrance pumper, was placed in service.<sup>3</sup> According to retired Assistant Chief Dave Ridings, "The Department eventually converted or replaced the entire fleet to diesel-power, with that type of motor remaining in use today."









In addition to the listed firefighting apparatus and rescue ambulance vans, there were a handful of utility trucks, water tenders, and even a canteen truck in operation during this period. There were also a small number of additional used pumpers secured and held on reserve.

<sup>3</sup> Diesel engines are more efficient, more reliable, and last longer than gasoline engines.

*TFD firefighting apparatus put in service from 1950-1970.*

|   | <b>In-Service Year</b> | <b>No.</b> | <b>Make</b>       | <b>Type</b>         | <b>GPM/GAL</b>       | <b>Comments</b>  |
|---|------------------------|------------|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--|
|    | 1950                   | 1          | Seagrave          | Aerial Ladder Truck |                      | 85-foot ladder/tiller.   |
|    | 1953                   | 1          | American LaFrance | Pumper              | 1000/200             | Sold to Pierce, Arizona Fire Department.   |
|    | 1954                   | 1          | American LaFrance | Pumper              | 1000/200             | Sold to Pierce, Arizona Fire Department.   |
| (No photo available)  | 1954 (used 1951)       | 1          | Chevy             | Pumper              | 500/200              | Converted to hose wagon in 1964.   |
|   | 1957                   | 1          | Ford              | Pumper              | 500/300              |  |
|  | 1959                   | 2          | Ford              | Pumper              | 1000/750<br>500/1000 | Both converted to water tenders in 1964. One wrecked in 1964 with one civilian fatality. |
|  | 1959 (used 1956)       | 1          | Ford              | Pumper              | 500/200              | Converted to 1000 GPM water tender in 1969.  |
|  | 1959                   | 2          | Seagrave          | Pumper              | 1000/400             | Both converted to diesel in 1972/1973.   |
|  | 1959                   | 2          | Seagrave          | Aerial Ladder Truck |                      | 100-foot ladder/tiller. Both trucks sold to Hermosillo, Mexico Fire Department in 1979.  |

*TFD firefighting apparatus put in service from 1950-1970, continued.*

|   | In-Service Year     | No. | Make              | Type                | GPM/GAL  | Comments  |
|---|---------------------|-----|-------------------|---------------------|----------|---|
|    | 1960<br>(used 1954) | 1   | GMC               | Pumper              | 600      |   |
|    | 1962                | 2   | Crown             | Pumper              | 1250/400 |   |
|    | 1962                | 1   | Seagrave          | Pumper              | 750/750  |   |
|   | 1963                | 2   | Hahn              | Pumper              | 1250/500 |   |
|  | 1964                | 1   | Crown             | Pumper              | 1250/500 |   |
|  | 1965                | 1   | Seagrave          | Aerial Ladder Truck |          | 85-foot ladder/tiller. Sold at city auction in 1992.                          |
|  | 1967                | 1   | Ford              | Pumper              | 750/1000 |   |
|  | 1967                | 1   | American LaFrance | Pumper              | 1000/500 | <b>First diesel fire engine.</b><br>Gifted to Tohono Fire Department in 1995. |

**Fire Alarms.** The rapid expansion of metropolitan Tucson accelerated a transition in fire alarm systems. With no additional alarm boxes provided, that system increasingly covered only the “center section” of the City. By the mid-1960s, almost 75% of fire alarms were received by telephone, and less than 4% received from alarm boxes, with three-quarters of those turning out to be false alarms. So the old system of telegraph alarm boxes, last updated in the 1920s, was on the way out and would be totally gone by the 1970s, replaced by a wireless radio system to supplement telephone alerts and special automatic systems.

**TFD Chiefs.** Only three men served as TFD Chief from 1950-1970. John Sievert actually started his term as Chief in July 1946 and served three years in this period. Robert Freeman served his full term during these years, while Leonel Peterson’s term as Chief extended several years beyond the period.

*The Chiefs of the Tucson Fire Department during the 1950-1970 Period.*

| No. | Term as Chief  | Name            | Born              | Died           | Time as Chief   | Comments                                  |
|-----|----------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------|-----------------|---|
| 19  | 7/1946-10/1953 | John Sievert    | 1893<br>Minnesota | 1959<br>Tucson | 7 yrs.<br>3 mo  | Several non-responses outside city limits |
| 20  | 11/1953-4/1966 | Robert Freeman  | 1901<br>Texas     | 1976<br>Tucson | 12 yrs.<br>5 mo | Managed largest TFD growth period.        |
| 21  | 4/1966-7/1976  | Leonel Peterson | 1916<br>Arizona   | 2007<br>Tucson | 10 yrs.<br>3 mo | Chief during Pioneer Hotel fire.          |

Here is some additional information on these Chiefs:

**19 John Sievert (7/1946-10/1953)** - 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.<sup>4</sup>

During Sievert’s term as Chief, the TFD purchased two 1948 Seagrave pumpers, a 1949 Seagrave pumper, the 1950 Seagrave aerial ladder truck, and the 1953 American LaFrance pumper. Under Chief Sievert’s leadership the TFD 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.

Sievert was Chief when Station 5 was built and opened in 1953. He also presided over the beginning of the “Rescue” program and the use of ambulance vans.



<sup>4</sup> A more complete biography of John Sievert, and the major fires he led the TFD in fighting in the late 1940s, appears in a previous “Reflections” article, “Through Two World Wars: 1915-1950.”

There were no fires with damage exceeding \$100,000 covered by the TFD during the latter part of Sievert's term from 1950-1953. However, there was a major fire in 1951 at a Safeway store outside Tucson's city limits to the east at the time, and to which the TFD did not respond.<sup>5</sup>

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

**20 Robert Freeman (11/1953-4/1966)** - Robert Freeman was born in 1901 in Athen, Texas, grew up in Ardmore, Oklahoma, joined the Navy in 1918 for four years, went back to Oklahoma to work as an oil field roustabout, before being alerted by his Tucson firefighter brother that there was a job open with the TFD. Freeman came to Tucson and joined the TFD as a hoseman in January 1925. He got homesick after 18 months, resigned from the TFD, and returned to Oklahoma in May 1925, but returned to Tucson a year later and was reappointed a TFD hoseman in September 1927.



Robert Freeman spent the next 39 ½ years with the TFD, where "he had a personal role in fighting nearly every major fire in Tucson." Freeman made Captain in June 1940, 2<sup>nd</sup> Assistant Chief in September 1958, 1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Chief in March 1951 (under Chief John Sievert), and was appointed TFD Chief by Tucson City Manager, J. Luther Davis, in November 1953 - a post he held for 12 years and five months, until his retirement in April 1966.

Freeman led the TFD during the decade of its greatest growth. Under Freeman's leadership, while the city grew from 14 to 76 square miles, nine additional fire stations were commissioned and/or built. He presided over the acquisition of 15 fire engine pumpers and three aerial ladder trucks. While Freeman was Chief the Department's complement of firefighters increased from 72 to 272. While Chief, Freeman also instituted a permanent training program for firefighters and beefed up the fire safety inspection program.

During Freeman's term as Chief, the TFD fought five major fires that exceeded \$250,000 in damage: a Safeway store on Stone Avenue in 1954, Paulos Café on West Congress also in 1954, Cele Peterson's Fashions on Pennington Street in 1956, the Grant Road Lumber Yard in 1960, and the Supreme Cleaners at Stone Avenue and East Grant Street, where seven deaths occurred. We will discuss these fires later in this article.

Also, during his year with the TFD, he served as part time manager of the Municipal Employees' Credit Union which he helped found in 1935. He left the post when he became Chief, but was re-hired full time in 1966, after his retirement.

John Freeman was a member of the Arizona State Firemen's Association, the International Association of Fire Chiefs, the Mason, Eagles, Moose, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Veterans of World War I.

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<sup>5</sup> This location at East Speedway Boulevard and Richey Boulevard came into the Tucson metropolitan area with the December 1955 annexation.

Retired Chief Freeman died of a heart attack on August 13, 1976 and was buried at Evergreen Cemetery.

**21 Leonel Peterson (4/1966-7/1976)** - Leonel Peterson was born in 1916 in Claypool, Arizona (between Globe and Miami), grew up in St. David, Arizona, moved to Tucson after graduation from high school, and joined the TFD in June 1940 as a hoseman. For fun he joined a flying club and obtained his pilot's license. In June 1942 during WWII, he took military leave to join the US Navy as an aviator and became a flight instructor. Peterson returned to Tucson in November 1945, rejoined the TFD and was promoted to Captain in May 1947. He was recalled to duty with the US Navy in April 1951 during the Korean Conflict, serving at the Naval Research Lab in Washington, D.C. He was back in Tucson for good in 1952, where in November 1952, he was appointed Battalion Chief, Supervisor of Firefighting Instruction. In April 1964 he was appointed to the new position of Deputy Chief and two years later in April 1966 was appointed Chief of the TFD, when Robert Freeman retired.



Leonel Peterson was Chief of the TFD for over ten years, retiring in July 1976. Tucson and the TFD continued to grow during Peterson's term as Chief. He oversaw the building of three additional fire stations: Station 14's permanent home on South Liberty in 1968 and later, Station 15 on Mission Road in 1974 and Station 16 on Speedway just west of Pantano in 1976. He managed the acquisition of the 1967 Ford pumper and the 1967 American LaFrance Pumper, the first diesel powered fire engine for the TFD. In the 1970s Chief Peterson oversaw an enormous buildup of firefighting apparatus and personnel - Tucson's reaction to the devastating Pioneer Hotel fire in December 1970.

Between April 1966 and the end of 1970 the TFD battled three major fires where damage exceeded \$270,000: the Food Giant Market at Alvernon and 29<sup>th</sup> Street in 1967, the Copper State Chemical Company on 16<sup>th</sup> Street in 1970, and the Pioneer Hotel Fire on Stone Avenue in 1970. We will discuss these fires later in this article.

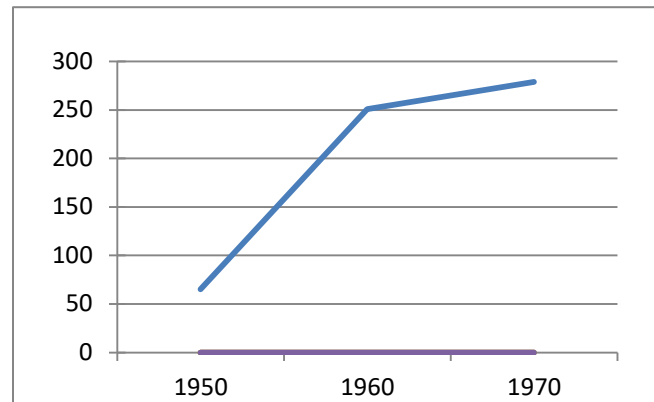
In June 1976 Peterson received a Fire Science Degree from Pima Community College to cap off years of education and training in his professional life. Chief Peterson "constantly strived for improvement of the Tucson Fire Department firefighting and rescue capabilities in the continued in-service training for all Fire Department personnel, an extremely comprehensive Fire Prevention program, and selection of only the best and most qualified to wear the uniform of the Tucson Fire Department."

By mid-1976 Peterson "commanded a budget of nearly \$9.5 million and 400 men at 15 fire stations." While he was Chief, the TFD was recognized for its fire protection efforts and as a top department in fire safety.

Peterson spent a long retirement traveling in the U.S. and Mexico, enjoying his family, his church, and friends and pets. Chief Peterson died in Tucson on January 18, 2007. (More to come on 1970s TFD operations)

**Firefighters.** The number of TFD firefighters ballooned during this period along with the TFD coverage area, the number of stations, and the additional apparatus. Starting in 1950 with 65 personnel, the TFD complement increased to 251 by 1960 and 279 by 1970.

In the late 1960s two long-standing operational practices affecting firefighters changed. Beginning on Memorial Day 1967, firefighters were paid for holidays worked rather than being granted equal time off, as was previously done. During fiscal year 1968-69, the two-platoon system of day-night operations instituted in 1920 was changed to the current three-platoon system.



*Increase in TFD members, 1950-1970.*

In reviewing TFD firefighter records for this period, a number of humorous episodes caught our eye: In 1963 an announcer at a local radio station told his listeners to call the fire department, his studio was ablaze. Also in 1963 a guy thought he was throwing a match out an open car window; it was closed and started a fire in back seat. In 1964 a fire engine's rear wheels sank into an old cesspool behind a house; firefighters had to put out a shed fire from that position. In 1967 a firefighter rescued a four year old French Poodle from under a bed and gave her mouth-to-mouth for eight minutes to save her.

**Major Fires.** From 1950 through 1970, the TFD fought over 35 major fires in Tucson. There were also at least 10 major fires outside the rapidly growing Tucson metropolitan area to which the TFD did not respond, including a \$868,000 fire at Tanque Verde Bowling Lanes in 1963, a \$400,000 fire at Skyline Country Club in 1964 and two F-100 airplane crashes at the Tucson International Airport<sup>6</sup> in 1970.

During 1966 (with a population of about 240,000) Tucson achieved its all-time lowest per capita fire loss of \$1.14. In FY 68-69 the TFD made 6945 runs of which 52% (3610) were rescue or first aid runs.

Following is a summary of newspaper headlines concerning eight of the larger (damage exceeding \$250,000) Tucson fires across the time period. Following the headlines, we present a summary of each of these eight major incidents, compiled from TFD records and newspaper accounts of the day. Comments in "quotes" are directly from these sources.

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<sup>6</sup> Tucson International Airport was not annexed into the Tucson metropolitan area until 2014.

Burst of Flames Spurt 90 Feet up Into Air  
**\$300,000 Fire Razes  
Big Safeway Market**

**EXPLOSION, FIRE  
DEMOLISH PAULOS'**

***Cele Peterson's  
Shop Is Ruined  
In Sudden Fire***

***Explosive Fire  
Guts Grant Rd.  
Lumber Yard***

**\$250,000  
Damage  
Estimated  
Origin Of Blaze  
Not Determined**

**SIFT BLAST SITE RUBBLE  
FOR CATASTROPHE CAUSE**

**Death Toll  
Climbs To 6;  
36 Injured**

*Four Dead, None Reported Missing*  
**TOLL CALLED 'MIRACLE'**  
**Jet Lands  
On Store  
and Homes**

**CHEMICAL PLANT EXPLODES**

**Tucson Memories Buried  
In Charred Hotel's Ashes**  
***Memorial Mass Commemorates Deaths Of 28***

*These representative newspaper headlines bannered major Tucson fires in 1950-1970. (Courtesy of the Arizona Daily Star and Tucson Daily Citizen)*

**June 6, 1954**

**Safeway Store at 1346 North Stone Avenue**

"Largest volume Safeway store in state was completely gutted by fire last night as firemen battled three hours against flames that at one time surged 90 feet into the air. ... 7,000 watch blaze ... Fire escaped an incinerator ... shortly before 7:00 pm ... touched off pile of empty cartons, leaped to the roof and seared its way across. ... Five fire engines and 32 men responded ... put down eight lines and began pumping 2,500 gallons of water a minute into the raging flames. ... chopped holes in the roof to ventilate the building and allow smoke and gas to escape. ... After firemen whipped the blaze, the steel-buttressed roof collapsed over the charred groceries." Damage to the single story brick building (11 feet by 175 feet) was later estimated to be \$300,000 (building, stock and equipment). No automatic sprinkling or detection devices.



*After a three-hour battle at the Safeway store, against flames that rose to heights of 90 feet, roof segments burned out and crashed into the building. (Courtesy of the Arizona Daily Star, June 7, 1954)*

**December 26, 1954      Paulos' Restaurant at 55 West Congress**

"A spectacular midnight fire - touched off by a thunderous gas explosion - razed Paulos' restaurant and gutted the entire northeast corner of Congress Street and Church Avenue ... Fire Chief John Freeman blamed ignition on an accumulation of gas [from a leak]. ... Widespread breaks in gas lines resulted during early stages of fire. ... Quick and efficient action by the city fire department was credited with stemming the flames and saving adjoining buildings ... Every available fire unit in the city rushed to the downtown area as thousands of Tucsonans poured into the area [to watch]. ... 35 men threw all the power of five fire engines, a hook and ladder, and eight lines at a torrent of flames [in 43-degree Weather] ... Operating in the basement, one engine company barely escaped when the first floor collapsed. Two firefighters were injured when they fell into a hole and landed in the basement. Under control in an hour and twenty minutes." Damage estimated at \$500,000.



*Firemen stream water into the smoldering Paulos' Restaurant. (Courtesy of Fred Bair)*

**November 29, 1956      Cele Peterson's Fashions at 48 East Pennington Street**

"Thirteen persons were injured, none of them critically, when fire swept ... one of the Southwest's finest specialty shops ... caused damage estimated at more than \$500,000. ... Fire equipment racing to the scene as smoke poured from the building and clouded nearby rooftops, included four pumping engines and hook and ladder equipment. Fire rescue squads braved flames to enter the building in search of fitting room employees who were reported trapped upstairs by smoke and flames. ... Some of the women were screaming and about to panic. [Firefighters] were able to get them down okay but they would have been forced to jump if the ladder hadn't been there handy. ... [those rescued] were suffering from shock, burns, and asphyxiation ... automatic sprinkling system was credited for keeping [trapped people] alive until firemen could reach them. ... A spark from welding apparently touched off the fire, which spread to drapery and set the interior ablaze instantly."



*Firefighters rescue a woman from the second floor of Cele Peterson's store during the November 29, 1956 fire. (Courtesy of the Arizona Daily Star)*

**June 4, 1960**

**Grant Road Lumber Yard at 2543 East Grant Road**

"Flames fed by dry lumber and paint swept through the Grant Road Lumber Co. last night in a ... fire that leveled the half-block-long building. ... The lumber yard was completely ablaze when five fire trucks answered the 9:35 p.m. alarm. ... Forty firemen fought last night's blaze ... until early this morning. ... hundreds of Tucsonans watched. ... half the firemen fought to control the main blaze, the others soaked [nearby businesses] to prevent flames from spreading. ... Above the steady roar of the fire ... could be heard the occasional muffled 'thump' of an exploding paint can. Sections of the roof splintered away and fell into the flames below and plate glass shattered in the intense heat. ... Firemen had the blaze under control 30 minutes after arriving, but the yard continued to burn for three hours. ... At least a million and a half feet of lumber was destroyed, in addition to the concrete offices and showroom and 200 feet of frame lumber storage racks. ... There were no serious injuries although one fireman was overcome by smoke. \$250,000 damage estimated ... Origin of the blaze could not be determined."<sup>7</sup>



*Firefighters move in close to pour water on the 1960 Grant Road Lumber Yard fire. One fireman lifts his arms to protect himself from the heat. (Courtesy of the Tucson Daily Citizen, June 6, 1960)*

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<sup>7</sup> Opened in 1948, the Grant Road Lumber Yard suffered separate fires in 1950, 1960, 1968, 1972, and 1980. The 1960, 1968, and 1980 fires were major incidents producing total destruction; arson was suspected, but never confirmed. All of these fires are discussed on this web site at "Grant Rd Lumber Fires" After 66 years the Grant Road Lumber Yard finally closed in 2015.

**March 29, 1963**

**Supreme Cleaners at SW corner of Stone Avenue and East  
Congress Street**

"Two terrific explosions shattered the main plant of the Supreme Cleaners ... shortly after 11 a.m. today. ... Chunks of concrete and pieces of plate glass were hurled more than a block. ... The blasts broke windows of stores at the Grant-Stone shopping center and caused an interruption in electrical service to the area. ... The fire resulted from a gas leak in fur storage vault ... Fire burst out immediately." Three alarms were given; all off-duty firemen were called. Davis-Monthan AFB also responded. "A total of 4 engine companies, one ladder company and two rescue units ... seven 2 ½" lines were used. ... The fire was brought under control in about 45 minutes. ... Six bodies were recovered from the rubble, and the co-owner was rescued, however, he died two days later. ... All others [30] that were in the building received injuries of varying degrees. ... A crowd of more than 1,000 gathered at the scene, hampering rescue efforts. ... Rescue and mop-up operations continued throughout the afternoon." Damage estimated at \$300,000.



*Firefighters keep pouring water on the smoldering rubble of the Supreme Cleaners after the explosion and fire that resulted in seven deaths and 30 injuries. (Courtesy of the Arizona Daily Star)*

**December 18, 1967      Food Giant Market at South Alvernon Way and East 29th Street**

"A crippled U.S. Air Force F4D jet fighter [immediately following take-off from Davis-Monthan AFB] plunged into a [the Cactus] shopping center and residential homes, seconds after the pilot and navigator had ejected. Its exploding jet fuel creating a holocaust that took four lives and injured many others, including six firefighters being rushed to the hospital. ... Fire from the explosive fuel completely gutted the supermarket and two homes. Three bodies were recovered from the market and a fourth from one of the homes. ... first alarm ... sounded at 5:48 p.m. ... ten of the first line rigs of the Tucson Fire Department responded. ... Davis-Monthan AFB joined. ... brought under control within forty-five minutes. ... Total losses from the fire exceed \$270,000." Ejecting jet crew landed safely without injury. Cause of jet crash not known.

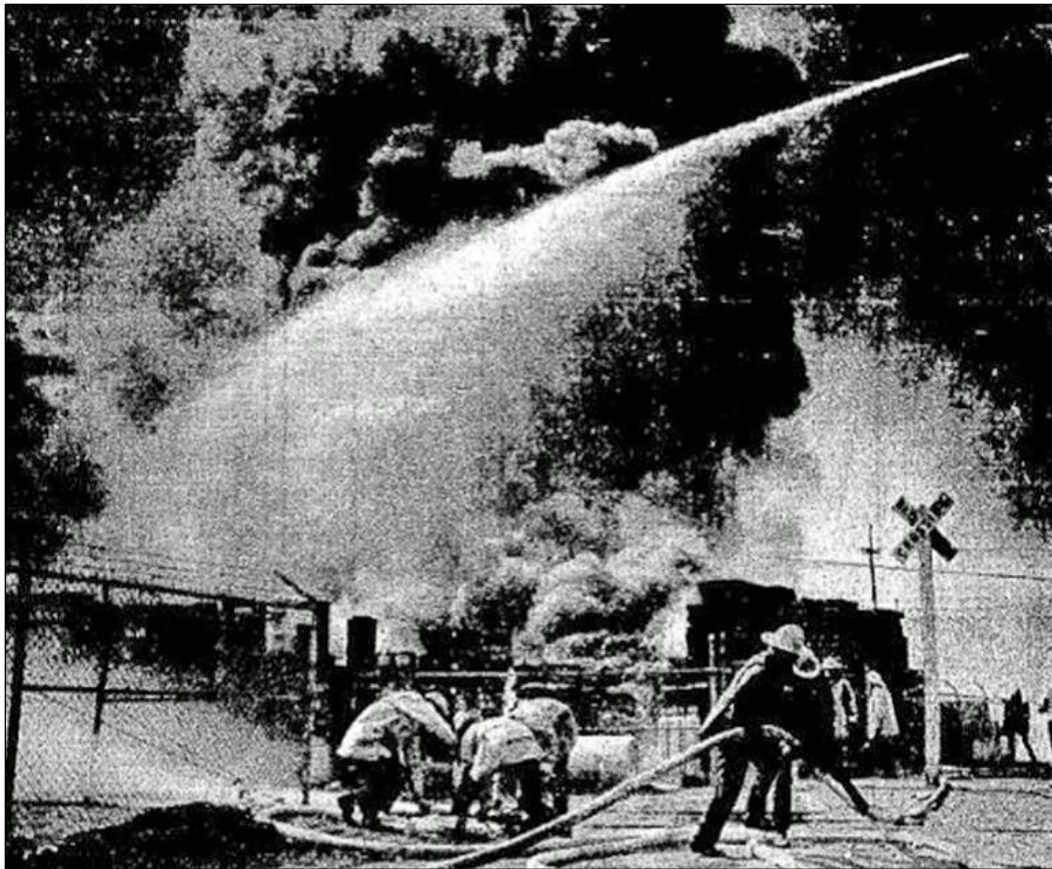


*With curious onlookers hanging around, firemen continue their firefighting and rescue efforts at the Food Giant disaster. (Courtesy of the TFD)*

**July 2, 1970**

**Copper State Chemical Company at 748 East 16<sup>th</sup> Street**

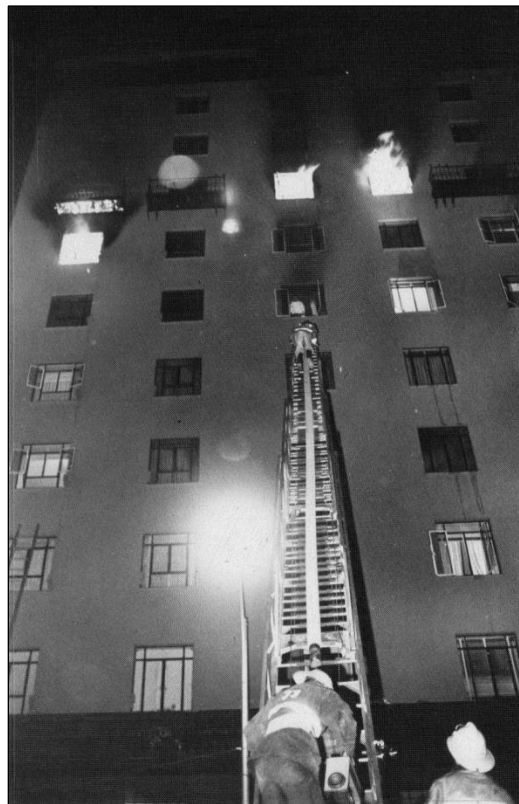
"Fire and a series of explosions raged ... razing two large buildings and sending 74 people to city hospitals. ... estimated \$330,000 damage ... started about 4 p.m. ... explosions ripped off the roof. ... Explosion of chemical bottles - at least three dozen - ranged from muffled pops to loud booms and sent pieces of tin, steel, glass and paper flying for more than a block. ... fed by numerous chemicals the fire had the two-building plant completely involved by the time firemen arrived ... the five alarm blaze brought 10 engines, three ladder trucks and two rescue vehicles to the scene and an estimated 100 firefighters fought for about an hour before bringing the fire under control. ... fire department demonstrated exceptional ability in preventing spread of flames to adjoining businesses. ... At least 19 firemen succumbed to the toxic fumes and were taken to several hospitals, suffering from irritated lungs, eyes and skin. ... Fire commanders ordered the evacuation of people and homes in the area due to the toxic clouds of smoke. ... Two million gallons of water was poured onto the blaze through the night [concern about polluting nearby ground wells] ... most probable cause of fire was flammable vapors coming in contact with open flame of a water heater."



*Water is shot from an aerial ladder and firefighters scramble to lay additional hose at the Copper State Chemical fire. (Courtesy of the Tucson Daily Citizen, July 3, 1970)*

**December 20, 1970      Pioneer Hotel at 80 North Stone Street**

"Fire swept through the 41-year-old Pioneer International Hotel early this morning." First alert at 12:19 a.m. "Fire ignited around midnight by an arsonist in at least two locations on fourth floor. ... combustible [hotel] contents caused the fire to extend up the open stairways and engulf the hallways of the fourth through the 11<sup>th</sup> floors with inconceivable speed. The fire gutted one room on the sixth floor, three rooms on the eighth floor and two rooms on the ninth floor. Searing heat and acrid smoke engulfed the hotel ... causing a large loss of life in the upper floors. ... a total of four alarms ... 11 engine companies, 4 ladder companies, and 5 rescue companies dispatched ... people were in a state of panic and yelling for help ... a woman jumped to her death ... three other persons died from falls during the fire. ... Ladder companies immediately ... extended their ladders for rescue operations [from windows, balconies, and ledges]." Engine companies carried hoses to the fire floors to connect with water lines. "Approximately one hour after initial dispatch fire was under control. ... There were 29 persons who died as a result of the fire [including prominent Tucson businessman Harold Steinfeld and his wife, and one victim who died months later in a hospital]. ... At least 13 persons received medical attention. ... There were 34 reported injuries to firefighters. ... estimated fire damage is 1.5 million dollars." (More to come on Pioneer Hotel Fire)



*Firefighters rescue Pioneer Hotel guests from flames on the upper floors.  
(Courtesy of the TFD)*

Through this period of unprecedented growth, the TFD served Tucson very well. But the terrible Pioneer Hotel fire would cause both the City and the TFD to rethink fire protection policies as the 1970s unfolded.

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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.

