

A few weeks ago I spoke of the memories of the bells and whistles on New Years Eve in Eureka. Also mentioned was the air horn that served as the fire alarm for the City of Eureka. I never saw the horn but heard it many times over the years. Some referred to it as the 'fire siren' or 'whistle'. It served its purpose and was the noisiest horn in town. Situated on the top of the old city hall located at Third and G Streets. Powered by compressed air, it blasted each day at twelve noon and every time a fire alarm was set off. I don't know what year the alarm system was installed but it was back in the time when the telephone was fairly new. Fire alarm boxes were installed at specific locations within the City. A person reporting a fire approached the alarm location, breaking the glass window with a small hammer attached to the door of the box and pulling the handle, sending a signal to fire headquarters. Each alarm box was identified as to location by numbers. For example: the alarm box located just below our house on the South East corner of Albee and Hawthorne Streets had a two digit number, let's say fifty two. I don't remember the original number. The signal went to the station and the fire horn would blow five consecutive short blasts, pause and then two short blasts. The paid firemen were then on their way to the area of Albee and Hawthorne, not knowing where the actual fire was unless some cooperative citizen with a telephone called the main station. The best the paid men could do, while en-route, was to scan the skies for smoke or flame and hope that the person who turned in the alarm had stayed near the alarm box to give directions. Frustratingly sometimes the box was pulled by pranksters and the arriving fire personnel had to investigate the whole area before declaring a recall. A recall was five blasts on the fire horn. One thing I did not mention was each volunteer was equipped with a list of fire alarm boxes, their location and call numbers so you also had up to two hundred volunteer firefighters responding. For a volunteer to wake up to that blasting air horn at three o'clock in the morning, jumping into his clothes and racing to the scene only to find that some drunk pulled the alarm box was frustrating. As the number of telephones increased, responses were a bit more accurate and the volunteers were automatically called by phone. As the years passed it was decided to coat the fire alarm box handle with a powder that reacted to black light. This did lessen the prankster problem. The most humorous part of the alarm system was the sound of the horn after blowing round after round for a multi alarm fire. As the compressed air supply dwindled some pretty sorry sounds were emitted.

Fred Nelson for Community Comment