

Patagonia Regional Times

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COLUMNS

Notes from SEFD: Fire services before SEFD



by Eddie McArthur
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SEESI volunteers gather around a fire truck in the early 1990s. *Contributed photo*

Happy anniversary to us!

SEFD as an actual fire district was formed in 2006. We will celebrate our 20th anniversary this year. However, we owe a big debt to those individuals who began fire services in this area, literally beginning with nothing.

In 1946, Sam Frazier, a Sonoita resident who ran a gas station/car repair shop, recognized that the area needed some sort of fire protection services. He bought a surplus 1941 fire truck from Fort Huachuca and operated it at his own expense. Along with a number of old time volunteers, Sam fought grass fires. He later added two Army surplus trucks that he equipped with water tanks and pumps that ran on muscle.

After 30 years of service to the community, Sam Frazier retired, and in 1979 Alonzo “Jokey” Spencer took over as fire chief. He had volunteered on the fire lines with Frazier and continued on with the old equipment, upgrading when he could. In the mid-’80s the pumps of the big trucks were upgraded and one was plumbed for 1½ inch hoses. Jokey Spencer, at his own expense, took training and became the first EMT in the area. The little volunteer group now had fire control, search and rescue and EMT services.

In 1984 Sonoita Elgin Emergency Services, Inc. (SEESI) incorporated as a nonprofit, tax-exempt entity. Mrs. Bettie Ann Beck donated land to build a fire station. Mrs. Beck, Sam Frazier, and Jokey Spencer turned the first shovels of dirt. The entire community, from contractors to volunteers, helped to build the station along with Border Patrol and even an Air National Guard unit from Chicago.

John Everhart, who owned a construction company, drew up the plans and supervised much of the building. He became the next fire chief and hosted the open house on September 16, 1989 when the building was open and operating. He began to work on replacing the old equipment and upgraded communications. There were discussions around that time about forming a fire district (as opposed to the nonprofit and mainly volunteer group), but it was not considered feasible.

Wes Chambers moved to Sonoita in 1988 and joined the Fire Department in 1989. He began serving on the SEESI Board of Directors in 1989 and was elected president of the Board. He continued to serve as a fireman and began EMT training. When Chief Everhart resigned in August 1989 to tend to his business, Chambers became chief. This was a time of great changes as better equipment and training were added. CPR classes for local residents were given at the station; Red Cross blood drives were held; and SEESI joined the Arizona State Fire District to learn how to establish a fire district in the future. Chambers remained chief through 1998.

As the decade of the 2000s began, it was becoming more apparent that additional changes were going to be needed, first and foremost to become an actual fire district supported by real estate taxes in order to have consistent funding. An upcoming article will take us through that time and the early days of our existence as SEFD.