



THEN AND NOW: A History of the Missoula Rural Fire District

*Based on reports by Lucy Deaton, longtime MRFD Office Manager (1976-2002)
And Chief Curt Belts*

In 1960, a group of civic-minded people* living in the Orchard Homes area west of the City of Missoula [Montana] decided they needed an organized volunteer fire department. They circulated petitions and in the spring of 1961, the Missoula Rural Fire District (MRFD)—as it is called today—opened for business in a rented garage on South Third Street.

To administer the business of the newly formed District, the Missoula County commissioners appointed a five-member Board of Trustees to serve until a public election could be held the following spring. Today, Board Members are elected annually during the April school election. Members serve three-year terms. Two members are elected each year, except for the third year, when only one member's term expires.

To provide operational funding, the County assessed a tax on the properties of each landowner inside the new district's boundaries. This enabled the Board of Trustees to establish a budget and to purchase equipment. It also hired three full-time employees to serve as "on duty" firefighters. Each man worked a 24-hour shift followed by 48 hours off duty. Today, MRFD has nearly 40 career (or paid) firefighters and these employees mostly work the same 24-48 hour shift as their predecessors.

The men who spearheaded the formation of the MRFD also became its first volunteers. Additionally, they recruited their neighbors throughout the coverage area, and in 1962, a Volunteer Association was formed with 42 charter members. Today, MRFD boasts some 54 volunteer firefighters spread out amongst five fire stations, and FYI: most of our paid firefighters started as District volunteers.

* So that we never forget our roots, a list of those charter members of the Missoula Rural Fire District hangs in Station 1 on South Street for all to see. Three of the original 42 members went on to become the District Fire Chief: These men include **Joe Gasvoda, Lorin Stanfield, and Wilber (Bill) Reed**.

WHO YOU GONNA CALL?

In June of 1961, MRFD's first "fire call" was at a grocery store where a small electrical fan motor in the dairy cooler was burning. Since the District's first piece of apparatus had not yet been delivered, the on-duty firefighter responded in his pickup and extinguished the fire using a half-gallon of milk. The first of two engines arrived in Missoula County the following fall: September of 1961.

Of course, the District began to grow just as soon as it was born.

Station #1 was built in 1963 at the corner of South Avenue and Reserve Street. This facility still serves the area and is headquarters for all District activities. Station #1 is manned by career firefighters on a 24-hour per day basis.

Station #2 was originally built and occupied in 1968 on the Missoula County Airport grounds. In 1988, Missoula Rural Fire replaced the building with a new fire station at 6550 Highway 10 West. It is manned by career firefighters on a 24-hour per day basis and has three Resident Firefighters who live there.

Station #3 was in a rented building in the Rattlesnake at the corner of Lolo and Gilbert Streets. Station was closed June 1995 due to annexation of a majority of the Rattlesnake Valley into the City of Missoula. The area that remained in the protection of MRFD is serviced first due by Missoula City Fire from station 1, located at 625 E. Pine, through an automatic aid agreement. MRFD responds from station 4 in the Bonner area.

The Bonner-Milltown-Turah area joined the Fire District in 1971 and **Station #4** was opened in March. The building originally was an old combination store and gas station. Over the years, it has been extensively remodeled to house 24-hour per day career firefighters, two resident firefighters and four pieces of fire apparatus.

The community of Lolo had a volunteer fire company dating back to the mid 1940's. Financial problems and lack of modern equipment encouraged the residents to petition into Missoula Rural Fire District in 1973. **Station #5** was built at its present site near the Lolo Community Center that year. Originally staffed with a career firefighter 8 hours per day since 1976, career staffing increased to 24-hours per day in 1981. There are three resident firefighters living at this Station.

Station #6, the latest addition to Missoula Rural Fire District, was built at 8455 Mullan Road in 1982. The station is manned by career firefighters seven days per week, 24 hours per day, and also has three resident firefighters living at the station.

HOW YOU GONNA PAY?

The operation of the District is financed with property tax dollars. In FY 95-96, the budget totaled \$2.3 million dollars. Of that amount, only \$51,000 or a little over two percent of the budget was derived from non-tax revenues.

In 1986, the voters passed Initiative 105, capping revenue tax dollars at 1986 levels. Each year after that, the Board of Trustees eliminated more programs and budget categories until only personnel costs remained. In November 1991, the Board found it necessary to eliminate four full-time firefighting positions. Faced with the demand for increased services and the inability to increase the mil levy, the Board voted in January 1992 to call for an election of the District residents to release MRFD from the Property Tax Limitation Imposed by I-105. During the School Election in April 1992, the request was passed. In 1997 the legislature reinstated the I-105 cap on all agencies and since that time no additional requests for increases have been made. Currently the Fire District's budget for FY 06-07 is \$4.4 million dollars, of that \$4.4 million \$2.9 million is derived from personal property tax. The balance of the revenue comes from State entitlements, license fees and grant funding.

The staff of Missoula Rural Fire District, which includes all facets of the organization from the career staff to the volunteer staff to the Board of Trustees, shares a strong commitment to make our community a better place in which to live. To this end, the District has adopted its Mission Statement:

Missoula is our community and we strive for excellence in serving our neighbors. We will meet the community's fire, medical and emergency needs in a professional, safe and efficient manner. We will promote fire and life safety through education, code enforcement and planning.

Since the District's inception in 1961, it has changed to reflect the needs of the community. What started as a group of Volunteers to answer fire calls has evolved into a District with full medical capabilities, up to and including EMT-P's (Paramedics) with full cardiac capabilities, a fully trained and equipped Regional Hazardous Materials Response Team, special rescue operations, and a very active Fire Prevention Program that annually provides programs to the local school children and civic groups. Whatever the future holds for Missoula Rural Fire, past history dictates the District will make whatever modifications are necessary to meet the changing demands of the community and to continue to serve those needs.

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