

Water-spewing 'tower' fought early day fires in Los Angeles

(13th in a series)

By Roger Swanson

It is ungainly, lacking modern fixtures, helpless without additional fire apparatus to feed it water and it is becoming more beautiful day by day.

At least believe the firemen of Engine Company 12 on North Figueroa where, unused for more than half a century and long ignored, the fire department's first "water tower" is undergoing massive restoration.

Built in 1905, the tower was essentially an aiming device, a monster nozzle. It lacked ladders, a water supply and hoses. But hooked to a pumper, the 65 foot tower was able to hurl water at a rate of 1000 gallons per minute.

NEGLECTED STORAGE

Rescued from neglected storage about a month ago, the tower was taken to Engine Company 12 where today it will be on display for Fire Service Day activities. Also shown will be a 1911 Ford Fire Chief's car.

While full restoration will not be completed until the end of the year, it will participate in a "muster," a fire department Olympics May 23 and 24 at Dodger Stadium where firemen from throughout the state will compete in such contests as ladder raising and hose laying.

Firemen, none of whom remember the old water towers — there were only two in the history of the department — are restoring the "dinosaur" in their spare time. The United Firefighters Union of Los Angeles has donated \$500, a chrome shop has donated \$1000 worth of rechroming and Tommy's Brake Shop next door to Engine Co. 12 repaired the braking system at no charge.

Even today, firemen are impressed with its features.

"It could put 1000 gallons of water a minute on fires and that compares very favorably with our equipment today," says Capt. Al de la Pena of Engine Co. 12. "It had a 66 foot tower and new equipment has a reach of about 65 feet.

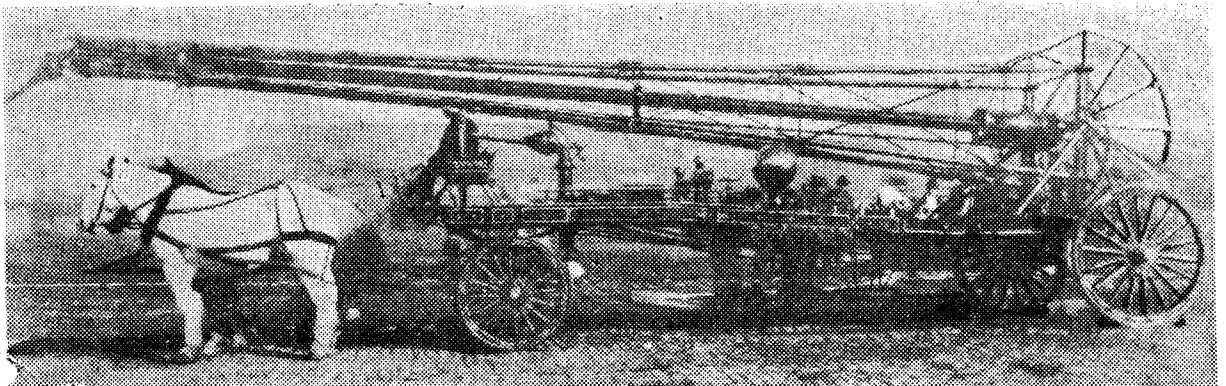
WATER MOTORS

The thrust of water also operated special water motors, elevating and rotating the tower, freeing firemen from

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PROGRESS — Fire captains Fred Folta (left) and Al de la Pena inspect progress of the 1905 water tower, now undergoing restoration at Engine Company 12. The tower will be on display today, Fire Service Day, at the station on North Figueroa St. at Avenue 61.



EARLY DAYS FIRE FIGHTER — During its early years of service, the fire department's first water tower was pulled by a team of three horses. It was motorized by American-La France in 1925 but still depended on a pumper engine for a supply of water.

Northeast Tintypes . . .

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mechanically raising the mechanism to reach a high fire.

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The century was only three years old when the San Francisco Fire Department placed in service a machine which could extend 76 feet and aim a powerful stream of water on all but the tallest of buildings — it was the first water tower.

The tower proved to be such an exceptional engineering success that it was described in detail in the March 14, 1903 issue of *The Scientific American* magazine.

Impressed with the monster apparatus, Los Angeles decided it must also possess a water tower and contracted to have one built by Henry Gorter who had designed the San Francisco machine. A mechanical engineer employed by the San Francisco Fire Department, Gorter was given \$7000 to duplicate his efforts for Los Angeles.

The tower was completed in 1905 and was identical in design to the San Francisco machine but 10 feet shorter. Gorter was then named superintendent of fire engines and machinery for the Los Angeles Fire Department, bringing with him his helpers — a blacksmith, carriage maker and three

machinists — who had assisted him in building the tower.

STRONG FORCE

First mention of the tower in action was on Nov. 25, 1905 at a fire at the Harris and Frank Clothing Store on North Spring Street. Frequent use of the tower was made during the early years of the century in the downtown area. The force of the water stream generated by the team of a pumper and the 65 foot tower prompted one newspaper to remark, "there is not a brick in the city which could long stand against such a stream as that." An insurance adjuster complained after one downtown fire that "the force of the water was so strong that it distributed the goods all over the first floor."

In 1919 the American LaFrance company, respected manufacturers of fire engines, motorized the tower, installing a six cylinder engine and huge chrome headlights and spotlights. Lacking an engine, it had been pulled by three horses.

But still the machine was slow and cumbersome and could not operate on its own; it needed a companion pumper to supply the water and as the years passed it was used less and less, moving finally in 1925 to Fire Station 5 at Fifth and Maple.

The fire department's

second water tower was a combination city service ladder truck and water tower. It was the only one of its kind ever built and was the last water tower ever built in the United States. It was built by American-La France, was powered by a V-12, 250 horsepower engine and was delivered in 1938.

STORED

By 1925 the original water tower was placed on reserve status and shortly thereafter was taken out of service entirely. It was stored at various fire stations, most recently at a closed fire station at 14th Street and Union and then in the San Fernando Valley, outdoors but under cover.

About a month ago, the machine was remembered and brought to Engine Company 12 on North Figueroa for restoration.

The second tower was purchased in 1960 by former fire commissioner Fred Kline who donated the machine to Travel Town, a semi-museum of old trains, airplanes, streetcars, trucks and fire engines in Griffith Park. The tower was allowed to sit outside, unprotected and unattended. It was soon discovered by vandals who stole anything that could be removed. It is now in a fenced area but there are no plans to restore the water tower.