

Brief History of the Division of Fire Prevention

By Deputy Fire Marshal II - Retired Walter Winston and Public Education Coordinator Jodie Hettrick

An arson fire in a building next door to the Territorial Police offices in Anchorage sparked the creation of the Office of the Fire Marshal. The Legislature of the Territory of Alaska Twenty-Second Session established the Office of Fire Marshal within the Department of Territorial Police with Senate Bill 24. The bill was signed into law by Territorial Governor B. Frank Heintzleman on March 23, 1955.

The first fire marshal was C.V. Daily, a retired Detective from the Seattle Police Department. He served from July to December, 1955. The position remained vacant until April 15, 1956 when Fredrick C. Roberts, a retired Fire Officer from Los Angeles, and former Fire Chief from Eielson Air Force Base was appointed. The primary function of the first Fire Marshal was to develop a Territorial Fire Safety Code and investigate suspected arson fires.

Fire Marshal Roberts drafted the first Territorial Fire Safety Code which was adopted December 5, 1956. He resigned in June of 1957 and the position was vacant for nearly a year until it was filled by Hilton A. Dearing in May, 1958.

Alaska officially became the forty-ninth State January 3, 1959 while Dearing was the Fire Marshal. He resigned in April 1959 to become a special agent for the American Insurance Association and Robert F. Crouse was appointed the Alaska State Fire Marshal on September 15, 1959. The State Fire Marshal's Office remained a one person operation, responsible for life safety code enforcement and fire investigations as well as training of State Police and volunteer firefighters throughout the State until the mid 1960's. State Fire Marshal Crouse accepted an award from the National Association of Fire Investigators for National Fire Marshal of the Year in 1965. The award was presented to Alaska for their great strides in fighting arson fires.

In 1965, due to the devastating and alarming number of fire related fatalities (averaging 35 per year), the State Firefighters Association convinced the legislature to authorize a statewide fire training position within the Department of Vocational Education.

William A. Hagevig, from the Ketchikan Fire Department, was appointed and given the task of organizing a statewide fire training program aimed primarily toward the smaller volunteer departments throughout the state. Even though Fire Service Training was not a part of Public Safety directly under the Supervision of the State Fire Marshal at this time, a strong co-operative effort was developed and maintained between the two organizations.

In 1967 State Fire Marshal Robert F. Crouse began publication of the Fire Marshal's Newsletter. The newsletter began as a service to communicate with the fire service and the rest of Public Safety about the workings of the State Fire Marshal's Office.

By 1967 the Division of Fire Prevention had seven full-time employees. The Division was organized into three program areas; fire and arson investigation, fire prevention and training and code enforcement.

In October 1967, after serving as the State Fire Marshal for eight years, Robert Crouse resigned. Wallace Dawson was appointed the State Fire Marshal and continued to expand the Divisions responsibilities.

By 1969 Legislation was adopted that allowed local Fire Chiefs and/or heads of local governments authority to function as Deputy Fire Marshals for the State of Alaska. This "Deputy Fire Marshal" designation was repealed sometime in the early 1970's (it was felt that there were too many unqualified individuals in elected or appointed positions to properly enforce the life safety code requirements); however, AS 18.70.090 still allows the local Fire Chief the power to enforce the regulations adopted by the Department of Public Safety for the prevention of fire or for the protection of life and property against fire, panic and explosion.

Also in '69, Gary R. Crouse was selected as the new Chief Inspector. This position was added due to the increasing responsibilities of plan reviews, more in-depth inspections, investigations and training.

In the early 1970's, an inspector was added to the Northern and Southcentral regions and the Chief Inspector became the Deputy Director. Regional Fire Marshal Ronald Hendrie was appointed State Fire Marshal in 1972.

The Division reorganized in the mid 1970's. A Fire Protection Engineer's position was created and retired State Fire Marshal Robert Crouse was selected to fill the position. The Assistant Fire Marshals were reclassified as Deputy Fire Marshal III's and the Inspectors became Deputy Fire Marshal I's. A Data Control Clerk was also authorized at this time.

The mid to late 1970's brought about the construction of five regional fire training centers to centralized locations in Anchorage, Juneau, Fairbanks, Kotzebue and Bethel. The training centers were built to provide more "hands-on" training to volunteer firefighters around the State.

Commissioner Richard Burton mandated that all Deputy Fire Marshals become commissioned officers and on March 31, 1977 Deputy Fire Marshals Lee Davis and Roy "Ike" Isenberg graduated from the 28th State Trooper recruit academy becoming the first commissioned peace officers within the Division.

By 1981-82 the State Fire Marshal had an Assistant State Fire Marshal, three Deputy Fire Marshal III/Supervisors, a Fire Protection Engineer, a Public Education Specialist I to oversee federal grants and provide public fire education programs such as "Learn Not To Burn" to the public schools. In addition to the regional supervisors, Southeast region had a Deputy Fire Marshal I, Southcentral had three Deputy Fire Marshal I's and the Northern Region had two Deputy Fire Marshal I's.

In 1983 the Assistant Fire Marshal position was abolished and an additional Deputy Fire Marshal I was added to the Northern Region. The Deputy Fire Marshal III position was reclassified as a supervisor. Gary Crouse and Gordon Brunton filled the Director's position until October 1983 when Sylvester "Sam" Neal was appointed.

The Fire Marshal's Office recognized the growing need for more aggressive arson fire investigations and was very instrumental in providing instructors and funding seminars leading to the formation of the Alaska Association of Fire and Arson Investigators.

September 1984 brought the first female Deputy Fire Marshal into the Division when Edith Curry joined the Northern Region Office.

In September 1985, Fire Service Training was transferred from the Department of Education to the Division of Fire Prevention under the direct supervision of the State Fire Marshal. By this time, Fire Service Training had grown to a supervisor and two Fire Training Specialists, with one stationed in Juneau with the supervisor and one in Anchorage.

By the end of 1986, budget considerations started to take their toll on the Division. The Public Education Specialist, a Fire Training Specialist and two Deputy Fire Marshal positions were eliminated. State Fire Marshal Neal, however, negotiated a grant from the federal government to promote residential sprinkler systems that gave a real boost to the Public Education Program and provided a mobile trailer equipped with a built in residential sprinkler that could be hooked up with a domestic water hose. The demonstration trailer toured the state from late 1986 through 1987.

In 1987 the Deputy Fire Marshal II (supervisor) position was eliminated from the Northern Region. The economic climate began to improve in 1988, bringing back two Deputy Fire Marshals, and two Fire Training Specialist positions. A plea for additional help in the Director's Office late in 1988 resulted in the temporary assignment of Lt. Jay Yakopatz, from the Alaska State Troopers, as Assistant State Fire Marshal.

Lt. Yakopatz also served as acting State Fire Marshal from November, 1990 until Jack McGary's appointment in August, 1991. The re-allocation of priorities

throughout the early 1990's drastically reduced the Division's overall ability to participate in fire investigations and public fire education programs leaving our focus solely on targeted building inspections and plan reviews. A single Anchorage Deputy Fire Marshal was assigned the investigation of all fatal fires and all suspected arson fires along with various other special assignments such as public fire education/prevention.

In 1992 the Assistant State Fire Marshal's position was re-instated to focus on inspecting all hospitals in the state.

1994 saw the conversion of the Data Control Clerk's position to an Administrative Assistant on the Director's staff. The Fire Protection Engineer was reclassified as the Plans Examiner, concentrating on larger projects.

Craig Goodrich was appointed the State Fire Marshal in 1995. 1996 saw a renewed effort to get the Division back into public fire education by resurrecting the "Learn Not To Burn" school curriculum. Additional time was allotted to school inspection trips to allow fire prevention presentations. Fire investigations once again became the responsibility of all Deputy Fire Marshals, working in a cooperative effort with local fire departments and the Alaska State Troopers.

The current Alaska State Fire Marshal, Gary Powell was appointed in June of 1999. He successfully lobbied to bring back the Public Education Specialist position and the Northern Fire Training Specialist position by 2002. In 2003 the Division began a complete reorganization into three Bureaus; Life Safety and Inspection Bureau, Plan Review Bureau and the Training and Education Bureau.

Alaska has grown tremendously since 1955 and the Division of Fire Prevention has grown to provide more services to Alaskan citizens.

In 1955 the fire death rate in Alaska was 10 deaths for every 100,000 people. It has improved to 1 death per 100,000 persons in 2003. We are saving at least 67 people from dying from fire each year.

The Division of Fire Prevention is working toward the elimination of fire deaths and in Alaska.

Excerpts from the Fire Marshal's Newsletter

- January 1968 – Fire Marshal's Newsletter
 - o Uniform Fire and Police Reporting Numbers – We read in the weekly newsletter from the Office of Senator Ernest Gruening that he had introduced a concurrent resolution which would make it possible for a citizen to dial one uniform nationwide fire reporting telephone number and one uniform nationwide police reporting telephone number. He

said on the floor of the Senate, "Uniform nationwide fire reporting and police reporting telephone numbers will not end riots, eradicate criminals, nor prevent fires, but they would provide two sensible tools which could make it possible for stranger passing through town to save a burning home or apartment house or let local police authorities know that a store front has been broken."

- March 1968 – Fire Marshal’s Newsletter
 - o The news this morning, on this first day of Spring, carried the announcement of the signing by Governor Hickel of the Workmen’s Compensation Bill for volunteer firemen.
 - o On February 11, Pamela Onnolee Macy, age 16, noticed smoke coming from a house just outside of Valdez proper. She went in and found a young man, Earl Bangle, asleep and partly overcome by smoke. The girl attempted to awaken Bangle without success and was forced to go outside again for air due to the extremely smokey conditions. She went back inside again and found Bangle’s clothing and hair on fire. This time she was able to wake him and help him out. She attempted to put the fire out, but it was too far advanced.
- September 1968 – Fire Marshal’s Newsletter
 - o Chief Boddy answered a call for help from the State Fire Marshal’s Office in 1966 in order to assist in training volunteer firefighters at the Pribilofs. Following tragic fire earlier that year, in which eight children and one adult lost their lives, the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries requested training for the two existing volunteer companies at the Pribilofs. Besides Chief Boddy, Lieutenant William Hagevig of the Ketchikan Volunteer Fire Department and Assistant Fire Marshal Andre Schalk went on this expedition. As a result, to date, there are two very active and well trained departments in the St. Paul and St. George. At least, during a large warehouse fire, shortly after the team of instructors left, part of the building and all of the cases of beer were saved...