



## **If Somebody Yelled Fire!**

There were no fire brigades when the Swan River Colony was formed in 1829. For almost sixty years the growing settlements around Western Australia had little means of controlling or extinguishing a fire. Response to public outcry would see the formation of a volunteer fire brigade. However, without training, a reliable water source or equipment little could be done to stop an “unplanned” fire.

Devastating fires continued to destroy life and property. In 1866 the premises of Solomon Cook, a well-known Perth engineer, was burnt to the ground. The local newspaper at the time reported:

*“The fire raged for more than half an hour before the fire engine arrived: and when brought to ply, it fell far short of the efficient service expected. The result of this has been a very spirited movement for the organisation of a volunteer brigade”.*

In 1887, a man, who later became the first Chief Officer, stood amongst a crowd of onlookers as the Military Pensioners Barracks in Perth was severely damaged by fire. After witnessing its devastation and the poor response by the fire brigade and its engine, James Lapsely joined the fire service and made it his life’s work to continually improve and expand its capabilities.

Part-time brigades were set up by some businesses in Perth, Fremantle and the Goldfields to protect their own property. However, these brigades often relied on public support to establish bucket-lines from nearby wells. The lack of water, especially in the Goldfields, continued to be a problem in the effectiveness of fire brigades until piped water and street hydrants were introduced in the early 1900’s.

By the height of the gold rush in the late 1890’s, the population of Western Australia had grown from 48,500 to over 180,000. This created a huge demand for services such as a public water supply, and, finally, the formation of organised fire brigades in Perth, Fremantle, Geraldton and the Goldfields.

A formal Western Australian fire service commenced with the first Fire Brigades Act of 1898 and the establishment of a fire brigades Board. The Act required funding from insurance companies, local governments and the Colonial Treasurer. These funds were distributed amongst all metropolitan fire brigades to supply training and equipment.

The Western Australian Volunteer Fire Brigades Association was formed not long after and promoted the recognition and support for all volunteer fire-fighters around the State. The Association adopted a formal constitution in 1904 (revised in 1911).

It was still the desire of the State Government to formally control and support all fire brigades in Western Australia both career and volunteer. In 1909 the District Fire Brigades Act was passed through Parliament. The Western Australian Fire Brigades

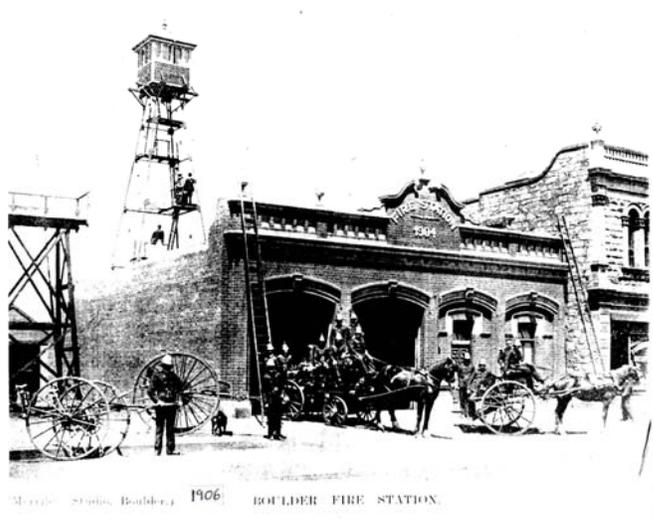
Board was formed as the authority to carry out this union and was led by the newly created Chief Officer's position.

In 1916 the Fire Brigades Employees Union was formed and lobbied for improved working conditions for fire-fighters. One of their biggest achievements was the introduction of a second platoon in 1925. This saw an increase in career fire-fighter numbers, increased pay and reduced working hours.

The year of 1945 saw a third platoon introduced decreasing working hours even further from 84 hours to 56 hours per week. In 1966 the fourth and final platoon was introduced creating an A, B, C, and D platoon or shift structure, which is still used today.

To improve emergency response the "000" service was introduced in 1961. Street alarms were phased out and by 1969 most calls were received via the "000" number. Today all emergency "000" calls are received through the FESA Communications Centre.

In 1999 the Western Australian Government introduced an umbrella organisation known as the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of WA (FESA). It brought together the WA Fire and Rescue Service (both career and volunteer), Bushfire Service, State Emergency Service and Volunteer Marine Rescue Service. This authority remains in control of one of the largest fire districts in the world and coordinates over 800 career fire-fighters and around 30,000 emergency service volunteers.



*Boulder City Fire Station, 1906*



*Perseverance mine fire, Goldfields 1909*



*Superintendent and First Chief Officer of the WA Fire Brigades Board, James Lapsely*



*Perth Fire Brigade parade along Murray Street in front of Perth Station, c1914*



*Career fire-fighters march in the Labor Day Parade, campaigning for the second platoon and an 84 hour week.*



*Fire-fighter school no. 40 1994*