

LAFD Historical Society
Los Angeles Firemen's Grapevine Article – May 2016
Submitted by Frank Borden
Director of Operations, LAFDHS

LAFD HISTORY – Major Oil Fire in Downtown LA 1896 – Chief Engineer Walter Moore in Charge

In the year 1896, a major fire in downtown Los Angeles nearly destroyed the city except for the heroic efforts of the fire fighters. Los Angeles was in the midst of an oil boom after Edward J. Doheny found oil while drilling in 1892. He discovered natural gas only seven feet below the ground and a vast pool of oil at the 162 foot level. Within 4 years there were more than 600 wooden derricks, storage tanks and oil sumps in citizen's backyards west of Bunker Hill. The smell was awesome and the profits were too. Oil was selling for a whopping \$1.15 a barrel on Saturday June 6, 1896. Early that evening, two boys built a bonfire near their father's yard on Metcalf St. (Bixel) between First and Second. The fire ignited the dry grass and made a run for Mr. Miller's yard and his oil sump. He and his neighbor Ralph Tucker tried to beat it out but it spread from the sump to a 500 gallon storage tank and then engulfed Mr. Miller's house. Mr. Tucker ran to the nearby Engine 7 station on Temple St. near the Cable Car power house (now Edgeware Rd.) and turned in the alarm at 9 p.m. By then the wind had scattered the fire in all directions. Engine 7 merely pulled out of quarters, took suction at the corner hydrant and began pumping as more apparatus answered the alarm. It was slow going for the horses as they strained at their harnesses while hauling the steamers up the hill. Chief Engineer Moore, realizing the entire oil field was endangered called for a general alarm. As engines took up battle positions more derricks, storage tanks and houses ignited. More than 10,000 gallons of blazing oil spilling from the tanks ran down hills and Temple St. toward the downtown district.

Chief Moore's strategy was to surround the fire and he directed the firefighters to set up a perimeter bounded by Temple, Court, Figueroa Streets and the Cable Car powerhouse. Seeing the glow of the fire, hundreds of spectators came by horse, buggy, streetcar, bicycle and on foot to watch the awesome sight. The Los Angeles Times described the firefighter's efforts as follows: "It was a time of reckless heroism and heart breadth escapes. A shout of admiration went up at the splendid daring of Assistant Chief Edward R. Smith who, rushing close up to one of the blazing tanks, stood in oil to his knees as he sent the stream of water into the flaming mass from the hose he held. One spark would have ignited the oil about the brave fireman and burned him to a crisp before help could arrive. But the spark did not fall and the gallant officer will rush to the rescue of many another blazing building." The Times further lauded Chief Moore and the firefighters: "But for the skill and heroism of the brave men whose lives are spent in fighting the fire fiend, last nights wild work might have left only heaps of smoking ruins to show where the City of Los Angeles once stood. It was only by the hardest battling that the fire, which broke out in the heart of the oil region, was confined within the basin which now holds only black ashes instead of tall derricks and well filled tanks." Losses exceeding \$25,000 included 13 derricks, 15 tanks, five houses and 6000 barrels of oil. The fire was the City's worst of the year.

Story from "LAFD A Century of Service", Paul Ditzel .

[PHOTO – Caption “Hard to believe that LA had so many oil wells as the city grew around them. Photo from 1905”]



[PHOTO – Caption “Fire in an oil well with a wooden derrick circa 1930’s.”]



[PHOTO – Caption “Fire Station 7 in 1887 with a steamer and wagon in front of the station at Temple and Edgeware Rd..”].



A SKETCH OF WALTER S. MOORE

By **FRED S. ALLEN**

The newly appointed Fire Commissioners of the City of Los Angeles at their inaugural meeting in January 1886 elected Walter S. Moore, the first Chief of the recently established paid Los Angeles Fire Department. Mr. Moore was well qualified to organize and start the development of the fire department that was one day to become recognized as the greatest fire fighting force in the world. He not only possessed a natural ability to lead and organize but had a good background of fire fighting and knowledge of methods and equipment of his day.

Walter S. Moore was born of old revolutionary stock in the district of Kensington, city of Philadelphia in 1851 and was educated in the public schools of that city. During the latter part of the Civil War he attended the Northwest Grammar School and was afterwards a runner with Philadelphia Fire Company No. 18.

He became identified with the volunteer Los Angeles Fire Department in the year of 1875 being elected to active membership of Confidence Engine Company No. 2. During his service in this company he held the office of secretary for two terms and subsequently filled the presidency of that company for five consecutive years.

In 1883 he was elected chief engineer of the Volunteer Fire Department of Los Angeles. At the time the paid department came into existence in 1886, Mr. Moore, as secretary of the first Board of Fire Commissioners and chief engineer, of the department arranged and carried into successful operation the work of the new department.

Mr. Moore's tenures as chief is somewhat mindful of a scenic railway, however, his various appointments graphically illustrate his abilities and bears out the truth of the old adage "you can't keep a good man down". His first appointment became effective February 1, 1886. He resigned September 1, 1887, and was reappointed in 1891. He resigned again February 1, 1893 and was reappointed a third time February 1, 1895 and retained the position until 1899 to be succeeded by Thomas Strohm.

Chief Moore was well known and appreciated for his thoroughness and attention to detail. He also had a strong desire to see his department keep pace with the rapid growth of the city as his Annual Reports to the Commissioners and City Council will indicate.

Walter S. Moore was 35 years of age at the time of his first appointment as chief engineer. At the time of his retirement the chief engineer's salary was \$2400 per year. Available records show this figure to represent a steady increase from a modest beginning. The last increase prior to 1899 being in 1896 when the chief engineer was paid a salary of \$175 per month.

The chief was provided with a buggy and two horses--one held in reserve--His home was also equipped with a tapper so that he would be informed on all alarms, day and night.

The abilities of Chief Moore as a proficient fireman and administrator were not confined to the city of Los Angeles. In 1898 he was president of the Pacific Coast Association of Fire Chiefs. He also was active in the International Association of Fire Engineers and held one of the vice-presidencies during the same year.

That Walter S. Moore was a forward looking and aggressive fire chief is well attested. In January of 1889 the then ex-chief Moore was selected by city authorities and the Pacific Coast Board of Underwriters to conduct a survey of the fire department and report such improvements and additions that would put the department in tip-top condition. His report was adopted with the result that three steam fire engines and three horse drawn hose carts were purchased and put into service. One of each of these served the Boyle Heights area, the east Los Angeles district and the other in the "western hills" of Temple Street. Chief Moore can be credited with starting the movement which resulted in the placing in service a water tower, for in his 1896 report he states; "the best equipped fire department with the most powerful and effective appliances at times seem unable to cope with a conflagration. As we have many large, high and costly buildings in which, if a fire should gain headway, it would drive the firemen out and endanger that portion of the city in which they are located, under such conditions a water tower would prove invaluable and enable us to successfully fight the fire." In this same report he recommended that the men of the department *should be furnished* with leather fire helmets, to be used while on duty at fires, and thus affording them some protector against injuries from falling bricks, blocks of wood, plaster and other dangers." These excerpts from his Annual Reports illustrate the concern that he felt for the property of the citizens of his community and the interest he held in the safety and welfare of the firemen who worked for him.

The citizens of the city of Los Angeles as well as the officers and men of the present day fire department can be justly proud of the first chief of the Los Angeles Fire Department. It was a wise selection that placed as the first chief engineer a man of the integrity, devotion and ability such as was possessed by Walter S. Moore.

This article appeared in the March, 1961 issue of THE FIREMEN'S GRAPEVINE.

[PHOTO – Caption “LAFD’s first Fire Chief Walter Moore in his Chief’s Buggie with his driver parked somewhere in downtown LA in 1884.”]

