

Mr. Bill's Fire Engine

The mayor who bought it is gone, but Orangeburg folks still revere their classic first fire truck.

Article by Charles L. McCain

My grandfather, Mr. Bill, became mayor of Orangeburg in 1917 because he was too old to make the Kaiser dance. Others, more suited to be mayor, could not take the job because they were in France shooting at the Germans. That's what Mr. Bill said. Not that he felt bad about staying home during the conflict. He had done his bit in the Spanish-American War with the 4th South Carolina Regiment of Volunteers. "Did you ever see anyone famous?" I once asked him. "Only Teddy Roosevelt," he said. "I told him the food was terrible."

Being the youngest member of the regiment, Mr. Bill was kept behind the lines driving supply wagons, so Spanish bullets never found him and he returned home to establish a business and become a leading citizen. "One of Orangeburg's most interesting people," the newspaper described him.



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While mayor, Mr. Bill reflected on Orangeburg's curious lack of a fire engine. After all, Orangeburg was the county seat. It had a new courthouse to replace the one that had been burned by Sherman, a jail that was painted pink and considered the envy of smaller towns, a railroad station, several cotton gins and, it was said, the biggest Confederate monument in the country. For these reasons alone, Orangeburg merited a fire engine.

Fortunately, Orangeburg, then a town of 3,000 people, had the large and diversified tax base with which to support the purchase of a fire engine. Thus the

townsfolk did not have to resort to the usual round of fish fries, pond drainings, bake sales, chitlin struts, and the like to which neighboring towns had to turn when raising money for their civic improvements.

I don't know whether Mr. Bill asked the town council for the money or whether he just purchased the fire engine with his own check and had the town pay him back. He was not much given to conferring with others and believed that once a decision had been made it should be carried out at once.

To illustrate his decisiveness, Mr. Bill often told the story of a hapless bootlegger named Joshua who had been brought before him in the mayor's court, which handled small offenses in those days. "Are you the Joshua that made the sunrise?" Mr. Bill asked, referring to the Biblical story. "No sir," the man said, "I'm the Joshua that made the moonshine." "Thirty days," Mr. Bill ordered. He brought the same decisiveness to the question of the fire engine. Orangeburg needed one, so he bought it.

One day, so I am told, the fire engine arrived, chained to a flatcar at the Southern Railway depot. Painted bright red, it was built on the elongated body of a Model T Ford and looked for all the world more like a carnival ride than a fire engine. It was escorted through the streets of Orangeburg like a visiting monarch and taken to the firehouse, now cleared of the faithful horses and wagons that once had served the town. There it sat, like an exhibit at the county fair, and folks just naturally slept better knowing it could be summoned at a moment's notice whenever someone ran to the town square and banged on the fire bell with a large, wooden mallet kept there for that purpose. The bell, which occupied a place of honor in the shadow of the Confederate soldier, summoned the volunteer firemen. It was not a fast system but it worked better than a bucket brigade - or hand wringing, which didn't work at all.

Because of my grandfather's purchase, I always took a proprietary interest in the fire department. I waved at the firemen when my mom drove me by the station. I defended them vigorously when they failed to extinguish a blaze and someone's home burned to the ground. I craned my neck to gaze upon them whenever they clanged by on the way to a fire. And I periodically counted all the fire engines, looking especially for Mr. Bill's, to make sure it had not been sold to some upstart town like Elloree or Branchville, which was often the fate of Orangeburg's older fire engines.

"I drove that old engine to my first fire," the fire chief, a man of whom I was much in awe, once told me. He and my mother had been schoolmates, and when he would walk over to say hello to her, I would be struck dumb by being in the presence of such a great man.

Like firemen everywhere, his men believed cleanliness was next to Godliness. So in addition to their other chores, they kept my grandfather's fire engine waxed and shiny, even after it ceased to race through the streets of town.

And so the old engine stood expectantly in the firehouse, and I wished, even though I knew it was a sin, for some catastrophe to strike the town so the old engine once again could race from the firehouse on its wooden, spoked wheels and do the job it was made for.

Unfortunately, that catastrophe never came. But something did happen that properly honored the old engine. That something was the opening of a second fire house. On quiet summer days when the tar on the road melted in the sun and the only sound to be heard was a dog barking, it was hard to believe Orangeburg needed one fire station, let alone two. But the town council said it did, so it was built, and there it sat on US 21, looking as self-important as a policeman.

After puzzling over what to call it, the town fathers decided to name it "Fire Station Number Two." And so it became. Downtown, a small sign was placed over the wooden doors of the old station, reading "Main Station." We were becoming a city at last like Florence and Sumter. I knew one day I would walk by the firehouse and see Dalmatians.



Mr. Bill's Fire Engine - Close-up

A dedication ceremony of great solemnity was held for Fire Station Number Two. Curious townsfolk came and gawked at the shiny engines on display while their sticky-fingered children rang the polished bells that adorned the engines. A speech about Americanism was given. The National Guard fired a cannon.

Final blessing of the venture was given by Mr. Bill when he arrived at the station in his chauffeur-driven Chrysler Imperial. The crowd parted for him, and he surveyed the scene. Finding it to his liking, he gave his stamp of approval by climbing into the driver's seat of his fire engine and having his picture made for the local newspaper. Fire Station Number Two then was made the place of repose for the old engine.

Small southern towns often proclaimed their entry into the Twentieth Century by their purchase and possession of a fire engine. So I reckon you could say my grandfather brought Orangeburg into the Twentieth Century when he bought the fire engine.

Mr. Bill is gone now. The biggest wreath at his funeral came from the Fire Department. But the old engine still remains in its place of honor at Fire Station Number Two.

"You buy quality merchandise," Mr. Bill used to exhort me, "and it lasts."

And so it has.

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