

# NANAIMO'S FIRE DEPARTMENT



Near this site in the 1870's Nanaimo's first fire hall was constructed on land donated by local merchants. The Nanaimo Fire Department originally started out as an informal "bucket brigade." In 1878 the Black Diamond Engine Company was formed, and adopted "We Strive to Save" as their motto.

The original personnel consisted of thirty volunteers, many of them local businessmen.

In 1894, the fire hall was destroyed by a fire that started in a nearby hotel. All equipment and personnel were then moved to a new brick fire station at the foot of Nicol Street.

"In the first years, buildings and equipment for the fire company had been paid for by an annual provincial grant of \$500.00 and the money raised from private donations and entertainments. There was no remuneration for the firemen, and the last government grant was received in 1899. In 1901 there was a movement to get the City to take over the fire company. On November 14, 1901, every member of the Black Diamond Engine Company received notice that the City was taking over and if he wished to continue as a fireman, he must make application to the City. Not surprisingly, practically every member of the Company was accepted. The Black Diamond Engine Company passed into history, replaced by the Nanaimo Fire Department."

Source: *Nanaimo Retrospective*.

By the early 1960s, the fire station at Nicol Street had become too small and in 1967 the #1 Station at Fitzwilliam & Milton Streets was built. During the coal mining years, many small communities sprung up around the original City boundaries. These communities – Harewood, Northfield, Wellington, Chase River, Departure Bay, and Protection Island had their own fire departments. In 1975 the City amalgamated with the surrounding districts and absorbed these departments into the Nanaimo Fire Department.

## John Parkin *Nanaimo's Longest Serving Fire Chief*

John Parkin was born in Nanaimo on February 4, 1867 to Eliza Malpass and William Parkin, proprietors of Nanaimo's first general store. He joined the Black Diamond Fire Company in 1889, becoming its chief in 1897. He was later appointed chief of the Nanaimo Fire Department when it was created by Nanaimo City Council in 1901. He served as chief until his death in 1937, a remarkable 48 years of community service!



Black Diamond Engine Company (organized 1878) ◀▶ Nanaimo Fire Department created by the City of Nanaimo on November 14, 1901.

1850 1860 1870 1880 1890 1900 1910 1920 1930 1940 1950 1960 1970 1980 1990 2000

### Nanaimo Fire Chiefs:



**1874**  
City of Nanaimo incorporated

**1878**  
Black Diamond Engine company formed and first fire hall constructed on Commercial Street

**circa 1885**  
First Fire Hall with distinctive fire hose tower used to hang and dry fire hoses (Wharf & Commercial Streets)



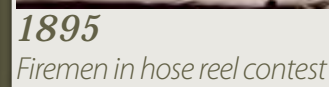
**1886**  
Steam Fire Pumper



**1901**  
City takes over Black Diamond Engine Company and forms Nanaimo Fire Department

**1895**  
Firemen in hose reel contest

*Hose reel contests, designed to test the speed of the participating fire brigades at connecting hose to fire hydrants, were popular events in the late 19th century. Nanaimo's team won the Pacific Coast Championship in 1890.*



**1894**  
Commercial Street fire hall destroyed by fire

**1893**  
Nicol Street fire hall constructed



**1920's**  
Regular and volunteer firemen pose in front of one of Nanaimo's first motor driven fire trucks, ca. 1920s

**1967**  
Fitzwilliam St. fire station construction

**1975**  
City fire department amalgamates with surrounding fire districts



### 1913 Lafrance Chemical Hose Wagon #2 "Shakey"

This beautifully restored fire truck (now located at Fire Station No.1 – 666 Fitzwilliam Street) was one of two motorized rigs purchased by the City of Nanaimo in 1913 to replace their horse-drawn apparatus. It is a Type #10, No. 189, built by the American LaFrance Fire Engine Company of Elmira, New York. The Department's collection includes a number of other heritage artifacts, such as a massive solid brass fire bell, cast in 1874 by the Buckeye Bell Foundry of Van Duzen & Tift, Cincinnati, Ohio, an old hose reel, early fire hydrants, and other fire-fighting paraphernalia.



Early Nanaimo fire hydrant



Hose reel