

The Early History of the Crested Butte Fire Protection District

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The District, as a legal entity, dates from September 1973. In order to understand how the district was formed, I am presenting here some of what I recall from 1971 through July 1979, when my family left Crested Butte.

Please understand that much of what follows is about me. That is in no way meant to be self-centered nor bragging; it simply represents the reality of the creation of the district and the early years of its operation. Please also take notice that I am working strictly from memory, as there is no printed record of this; I do not remember precisely each step of the process; thus, there may be, for example, lapses in the presentation of when things happened, and names are often not recalled at all. Any and all errors are mine and mine alone.

To comprehend how matters transpired as they did, you need to realize that, in 1971, when my wife and I moved there, Crested Butte was a very small community. I believe that the U.S. Census Bureau showed a population of three hundred thirty people. There were a number of residents not covered by the census, such as people living in the very small cabins and shacks in the town's alleys.

Not long after arriving in Crested Butte, I saw that there was no functional fire department. The Town of Crested Butte had a fire department, but that was in name only. In the original town hall, there were two hand-drawn hose carts and a hand-drawn ladder cart, equipment that probably dated from the incorporation of the town, in 1880, to serve a source of coke for Colorado Fuel and Iron in Pueblo, Colorado. The actual date of the purchase of this equipment is not known: At my request, a local man who could read the early town records, written in Croatian, did research them and did not find any specific reference. The town had never owned a motorized fire engine; the only such device that it had was also in the old town hall, an old Jeep pickup truck with a very small fire pump and an equally small tank of water, which belonged to the Gunnison County sheriff and was on loan to the town.

How did I determine that the department existed only in name? Not long after arriving, I asked about the fire department and was told that anyone was welcome to respond when the siren on the town hall was turned on to notify the residents of a fire. It was a fire in a shed one night that led me to start investigating what might be done to improve fire protection: No one was in charge that night, and instead of following the old firefighter's "Put the Wet Stuff on the Red Stuff," very little water was actually aimed at the fire.

Please take note again, of the date: In 1971, there was no Internet, there were no cell phones, there was no cable TV in Crested Butte; in short, there were very few sources of information about the legalities of fire departments in Colorado, nor was I even aware of any professional journals or associations devoted to the fire service. About the only thing

I had a desire to improve fire protection, without knowing how to go about doing that. I began by asking questions, only to find out that I was not the only person who knew nothing about this process; no one else did either. The only local fire department was the Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department, but I knew no one involved with it, and if I had, I would not have known what questions to ask.

Given that the fire department, the one which once had had a fire chief who lived outside of Gunnison, was legally part of the town government, the logical next step was for me to discuss the situation with the town council, so I asked to be placed on the council's agenda. I did appear before the council, and told them that I felt that something needed to be done about fire protection, making it clear that I had no specific ideas as to what was to be done, nor how to approach the problem. What I did want to determine at that stage was whether the town council would be willing to discuss change, and I found out that, although the council members obviously did not know what such changes might entail, they were at least willing to listen if I could come up with some proposals. This was the first formal step in what led to the creation of the Crested Butte Fire Protection District, an outcome that no one could have imagined nor predicted at the time.

With the town council having expressed an interest, the next step was to start investigating what changes might be instituted. The first thing that I considered was to figure out how to extend fire protection to the Crested Butte Ski Area. (The Town of Mt. Crested Butte was not created until 1974.) Hauling ancient hand-drawn hose and ladder carts behind pickup trucks from Crested Butte to the ski area, although it had been done, did not seem to provide actual protection; thus, it looked as though the boundaries of the town's fire department needed to be extended.

This idea was broached to the council, but a legal problem soon arose: The boundaries of a town fire department could not extend outside of the limits of the town in question. One exception to this was turned up in the course of research about fire department boundaries: Outside of the Town of Crested Butte, there was one building which was connected to the town public water system; because of that, attorneys said that the town was obligated to provide formal fire protection to that building, a structure that will reappear later in this history.

Due to this impediment, my research turned to other possible ways of legally providing fire protection to the ski area; that led me to the concept of a fire protection district under Colorado statutes. There being no such districts in Gunnison County, not only was the concept unknown there, but there was no one involved in such an organization to whom I could turn for advice and assistance. I don't recall how I located the Colorado Department of Local Government, but I did find out that among other services it provided was assistance to Special Districts, which are defined in law as "local governments, i.e., political subdivisions of the state, which make up a third level of government in the United States." Among the multiple such special districts, fire protection is one such, so I contacted the Department to request information, which was forthcoming.

Under Colorado law, a special district such as a fire protection district is a self-standing,

self-regulating, quasi-governmental entity. A fire protection district can obviously provide fire protection, as well as emergency medical services, as well as some related services such as water supply, but is otherwise limited, which is why it is considered to be “quasi-municipal” by providing some services that might otherwise be provided by a municipality. Given the circumstances, such as that water supplies were already provided in both the town and at the ski area, I limited my investigation to fire and medical services.

Having gathered what I hoped would be sufficient information to start the process, the next step would be to approach both the town council and the county commission. I started by making a presentation at a council meeting, telling the council and the residents in attendance what I had found and what I was proposing. I told them about Colorado Special Districts and Fire Protection Districts in particular. I explained that I felt it rather clear that fire protection needed to be extended to the ski area and why the town could not do that. I further explained that setting up a fire district would take control of the fire department away from the town and give it to board of directors and that one of the benefits would be that, as a quasi-municipal corporation, that board could, within limits set by the state, tax all property owners inside the boundaries of the proposed district to build a fire station, to buy a fire engine and related equipment, and to provide protective gear to the volunteer fire fighters. The council was not opposed to this but, understandably, needed some time to further discuss the ramifications, to consult with the town attorney about the legal aspects, and to allow the town’s residents to ask further questions.

The next step was a request to be placed on the agenda for a Gunnison County Commission meeting. I duly appeared before the commission and answered their questions as best I could. One question did get a laugh out of everyone present: When asked how many other people were involved, I said none; I then explained that, if and when both the Town of Crested Butte and the County Commission gave me the requisite legal permission to proceed, I would then start the process of setting up the fire district, including involving other people. As this was something new to the Commission, they, like the town, needed some time to consider the matter, but it did not take long for both government entities to decide that I should proceed.

With that permission granted, I again turned to the Department of Local Government for instructions on how to start creating a fire district. The first step was to determine the legal boundaries. As the Town of Crested Butte was already platted, that part of the district (including the one building outside of the town limits) was easy to determine. The ski area, however, was a somewhat different matter, as it did not seem to have any specific boundaries. In a meeting with the Gunnison County Assessor’s office, however, I was able to find a plat showing the limits of what the owners of the ski area had purchased, and the attorneys found that those limits could also be those for part of the district. Having found what appeared to be sufficient information to set up the district’s coverage area, a snag arose: It was found that state statutes required that land included in any special district had to be contiguous, and there was a gap between the town and the ski area.

The attorneys for Local Government found that all we needed was to include a narrow strip of land along one side of the road between the two parts of the proposed district. I

returned to the assessor's office, to find out who owned the property in question. With that information, and using a topographic map, I was able to make a good estimate as to how many acres would be involved; knowing the maximum tax rate that the fire district would be able to levy on this land, I contacted the ranchers who owned the property, explaining why we needed to make them part of the district, and showing them that their new taxes would be only a few dollars per year. In one of the first instances of tremendous cooperation of both people and agencies in setting up the district, I soon received written acceptance of including the land in question as part of the district.

Once it had been determined that the creation of the Crested Butte Fire Protection District would be legal, it was time to start working on a myriad of tasks that needed to be accomplished in order that, on the day that the district went into operation, various matters were at least under consideration, if not yet accomplished. Many of these tasks needed to be undertaken more or less simultaneously; as I stated above, I am uncertain as to which things were done when, so what follows is not necessarily in proper historic order.

For example, the district would need to build a new fire station, as the old town hall was unacceptable given its size. I went to the town council to see what they could do for us; in another example of tremendous cooperation, they determined to lease the town's property at 306 Maroon Avenue to the district on the common terms of a ninety-nine year lease at one dollar per year. I don't know if that fee was ever paid! The only conditions that the town imposed were that the building reflect the historic architecture of Crested Butte, and that it have a second floor open for public use.

Of course, with a location for a fire station assured, it would be of no use if we did not have funding to build it. With the help of the county assessor's office and Local Government, it was found that the district would be able to float a tax-free bond for \$95,000; this was the upper limit of our bonding capacity, as determined by attorneys for bonding firms, given the statutory limit on our mill levy and the relatively low value to assessed property inside the district's boundaries. I asked that Local Government please proceed to carry out the various tasks that needed to be done to set up a bond election, so that we (the Board of Directors of the District) could authorize the election as soon as possible after the District began operations. Part of the bond issue would have to be used to pay for a fire station.

There was a young architect living in Crested Butte, so I approached him for advice. He offered to take on this part of the project at no cost. (This is one of the many times that I do not recall the names of people involved.) Given the location of the land provided by the town, and with the cost limitations, he determined that it would be best for us to use a steel building, with wood interior joists, and a wood siding overlain on the steel structure. (Years later, I found that the Western History Collection at the Denver Public Library photo of the station stated that it was wooden framed; I notified them of the error, which they acknowledged, but never changed the caption.) He was even able to locate a planing mill in Denver which could manufacture siding of exactly the proper shape to meet the town's request that the station appear historically correct architecturally.

In connection with building a new fire station, the question was how the fire department would be notified of emergencies and dispatch its members. While radio dispatching, using pagers for the volunteers, would have been desirable, it turned out that there was, at that time, no way to provide such dispatch service. The old fire station had a two and one-half horsepower electric siren, which was turned on through a "ring-down telephone system." This system had several phones which would all ring when anyone called the emergency number; on each of those phones was a small switch which whoever answered the call could push and which would set off the siren on a timer. Even if the caller were to hang up, the line stayed open, and the first person who arrived at the fire station would pick up the phone and ask where the fire was.

This appeared to be the only way that we could dispatch the new fire department, but we needed a more powerful siren. By then, I had obtained a fire equipment catalog from W.S. Darley Company in Chicago, one of the largest suppliers of such equipment. The largest siren they listed was a ten horsepower one, in both single-phase and three-phase electricity; the cost of the single-phase was much higher than that of the one with a three-phase motor. To find out if there was three-phase two-hundred-twenty-volt power in the alley behind 306 Maroon, I sought out the manager of the Gunnison County Electric Association. He said that such was not in the alley, but that he needed to clean up the distribution system there and would install three-phase power. Having no idea where to purchase the requisite cable to bury between the meter which would be a pole in the alley and the service entry to the station, I asked him how I could obtain this, to which he replied, when the trench was open, to let him know. I did so, and one day I found that the cable had been dropped in trench. This was just another example of the amazing cooperation the entire community provided.

Fire Protection Districts in Colorado have elected five-person boards of directors. Of course, as our new district could not hold an election until after it started, I was empowered by the county commission to appoint the members of the first board. Other than Russ Reycraft, the Crested Butte Postmaster, and myself, I don't recall who else agreed to serve, although I do know that one of them had been a flight engineer for United Airlines and involved with Ski Apache in southern New Mexico. Having found a group willing to be involved, we started holding periodic meetings, at which I kept the others informed as to what I was doing and asked for their guidance about many matters, as what this informal group would do would set the pattern for the district once it started. For example, we quickly established one tradition, which was that one of the five board positions would be reserved for someone living at the Crested Butte Ski Area once the electoral process began.

We had a need of funds before the district started; for one thing, having a real fire engine seemed to be a good idea. The committee decided to have a fund drive; this started by my approaching Ralph Clark. Ralph and Billie had moved to Crested Butte from Cincinnati, Ohio, where he had been a corporate attorney, and at one time, Ralph had been a volunteer firefighter. I had dinner with them, and asked Ralph if he would be willing to lead the fund drive; instead, Billie and he each gave me a check for five thousand dollars. That turned out to be the largest amount of money raised, which we did put to good use.

Finding a used fire engine was not easy at the time. I had already subscribed to *Fire Engineering* and *Fire Chief*, the two major fire service monthly journals, which did carry advertisements for used apparatus. Most of the equipment was located in the eastern United States, and I did not think that flying east to inspect a possible purchase, only to find that it was unacceptable, was a good idea. Eventually, we located an engine in Tucumcari, New Mexico, so Larry Adams, later to be the first assistant fire chief, and I flew down there from the Crested Butte Airport on the Helio Courier belonging to the ski area. There was a severe fuel shortage at the time, so our pilot landed the STOL plane right in the intersection of the runway and taxiway, as he was getting low on fuel and needed enough to continue to Santa Rosa, New Mexico, if I remember correctly, where aviation fuel was available. The Flight Service Station at the Tucumcari airport saw our landing, and called us on the radio to ask what type of airplane we were using. Using some of the fund drive money, we paid for the engine, and Larry and I drove it back to Crested Butte; we had to spend a fair amount of time repairing the engine, but at least we had something to start with. I parked it at my house as it would not fit in the old town hall. I plugged in a battery charger to keep it ready to use, even though there was not yet a legal fire department. By now, I had become known as “the fire department,” and I got a call for a small fire near the town hall. I got into the fire engine, started it and began to drive off; before I got very far, I stopped, got out, unplugged the battery charger, and went to take care of the fire. The fire was in a box of ashes from a stove belonging to a very embarrassed older couple: They had lived in Crested Butte for many years and knew better than to put hot ashes in a cardboard box.

Another way we put our limited funds to use was for Jerry Chiles, to be a lieutenant once we started operations, and I to go to Kansas City, Missouri, to attend a firefighting seminar put on by *Fire Chief Magazine*; this trip was intended to enhance our training program. I don't remember why our flight from Gunnison to Stapleton Airport in Denver was cancelled, but as Frontier Airlines (the original Frontier, not today's resurrected one) was the only airline serving Gunnison, it seemed as though we would miss our seminar. I knew, however, that the fixed base operator in Gunnison owned a Beech B18, a six to eleven seat, twin radial-engine airplane that he would charter. (I don't know how many seats this particular plane had.) At any rate, I asked around in the terminal and found enough people willing to fly on this somewhat antiquated, but quite safe, airplane, if we could negotiate a reasonable price with the rather testy owner. We did so, and Jerry and I made it to Kansas City in time for the weekend seminar.

Having a fire engine, it looked to me as though we probably should have some volunteers to operate it, so I held a few meetings in the Town Council meeting room to introduce the concept of a fire department in Crested Butte and signed up the first volunteers. We had to take anyone who was willing, drawing from a limited number of residents. One did not do such things as background checks in those days; after all, we all either knew each other, or knew someone who knew the person in question. In general, this worked well: Some of the first volunteers quit fairly early, as they found the training and obligations too much; some stayed in the department for many years. At one of these meetings, I asked for a volunteer to be the secretary for the department-to-be, and a young woman offered. The next day, as I was going to the post office, a Crested Butte ritual at 12:30, when the

daily mail had been placed in the lock boxes, I was accosted by two or three other women, who accused me of whatever sexism was called in those days. I told them, in no uncertain terms that, as they had not volunteered to be firefighters, and as the secretary appointee had offered to take on the job, they had no standing; that was the end of that little problem.

One of the legal requirements was to gather signatures on petitions in favor of setting up the district; I do not remember how many names we needed. Some people signed as soon as I asked, mainly among the younger in-comers to Crested Butte. I found the reaction of the older, long-time residents about signing interesting when I asked if they would do so. These were mainly people who had seen their town go through some serious changes, first with the closure of the CF&I's Big Mine in 1972, and then with the opening of the ski area. I was a recent in-comer and was asking for people to agree to the establishment of a fire district, which implied new taxes. When I would ask these older people to sign, at first they were quite reluctant, but would then ask again what the petition was about. When I explained that it was to provide an operating fire department for Crested Butte, their signatures were quickly forthcoming.

With petitions signed, boundaries set, written legal opinions obtained as to the legality of setting up the Crested Butte Fire Protection District, at some time in nineteen seventy-three, I asked for a formal hearing before the Gunnison County Commission. This hearing was held, at which time the commission voted to create the district, with the date of its going into operation at a now forgotten date in September. On that date, having legally posted notice of the first actual meeting of the district's board of directors and the start of the associated fire department, using the town's council hearing room (again, an example of wonderful cooperation), the committee of what became the board met and attested to the start of the district. Russ Reycraft was chosen as president of the board, and I was elected as fire chief. (Yes, I abstained from that vote.) The board voted to start the legal proceedings to hold an election for the bond issue, among other matters taken care of that day.

One might assume that this momentous day would have concluded my involvement, other than as fire chief, but that would be far from the mark. For one thing, as fire chief, I was the only member of the fire department with any firefighting experience, which placed a responsibility on me greater than might have been the case. For another, the board of directors expected me to continue to work on developing the district itself, as I expected to do. Thus, going on the hoped-for success of the forthcoming bond election, I needed to start developing specifications for a new fire engine, and to see to it that a temporary fire station for our used engine was built on the site for the new station. In other words, the other board members were quite willing to follow my guidance so long as I continued to keep them well informed, just as I had done when they formed the committee before the district started.

As we had laid the groundwork in advance, it did not take long for a municipal bond company to agree to fund our bond issue, so a date was set for the election. Voter turnout was quite low. As I knew everyone who had voted by that afternoon and was quite certain

that they would all have voted in favor, I decided to try to increase the number of votes, if for no other reason than to make it look to the public as though the election was not somehow rigged. I went out on Elk Avenue and accosted anyone I saw who I knew lived in the area, and did get some more votes. As expected, the bond issue passed with ease, and it did not take long until I found a check for ninety-five thousand dollars in my personal mail box; my box was much larger than the districts, so most district mail was put in my box. I took the check to the First National Bank in Gunnison, where I was well known. I asked if I could change my name to CBFPD; when asked why, I said that I had the bond issue check for CBFPD, and wanted to deposit in my personal account. This request was denied.

With the funds in hand, the board soon signed a contract for the new station. The contractor rushed to install the concrete foundation before winter set in, so that the building could be erected as soon as the weather abated enough, the following year, for the erecting crew to work, and it did not take them long to install the steel once the materials were on-site. The wooden beams and joists were shipped by truck from Boise, Idaho, and I arranged for the only local crane big enough to handle the large beams, to be on-site for the scheduled arrival. When the truck did not appear, we began to be worried, partially as we feared that the crane operator might leave. When the truck did show up, the driver explained why he was late: He had made a delivery in Durango, Colorado, and for unknown reasons, his Colorado over-length permit sent him over U.S. 550, the "Million Dollar Highway", instead of the usual route through Monticello, Utah. He was stopped by a Colorado State patrolman, who did not want to let him proceed; eventually, the officer issued a ticket and let the driver bring us our building materials.

The building itself did not take long to erect, but getting the siding installed took much longer than I had anticipated: The volunteer firefighters were simply not willing to give their time to do the work; we ended up hiring a crew of local residents, who did a very fine job, at a very reasonable price, of finishing the exterior of the station. We moved our used fire engine inside but encountered another problem, and that was getting the flooring for the second floor, which was of course the ceiling for the apparatus bays, and the insulation installed. I'll return to that later. Meanwhile, Larry Adams and I wired the service entrance and the circuit breaker boxes and started to wire the first floor; although we were not licensed electricians, this was legal as the building was government-owned. It took a while to get the only state electrical inspector to show up, but he did issue a permit, so I got Gunnison County Electric to turn on the power.

We went to bid on turnout gear for the fire department, consisting of helmets, coats, pants, gloves, and boots, all of which had to be designed for the cold climate of Crested Butte. Once the winning bid was received, I had to take measurements of every firefighter, so that at least we could start the department with properly-sized gear, knowing that that would likely not continue as members left and new ones came in.

Again with the assistance of Local Government, the specifications for a new pumper had been developed, and with the bond issue passed, I requested that the contract be put out to bid. The specifications called for a Custom Chassis Five Man-Cab Forward Diesel Four-

wheel Drive Pumper, rated at 1000 Gallons Per Minute at 9,000 feet elevation on a suction lift of, I believe, seven feet, with flow gauges instead of pressure gauges on the four rated outlets (flow gauges were quite new,) the entire unit to meet the requirements of National Fire Protection Association Pamphlet 19, the then-current governing document if one wanted Insurance Service Office credit towards the community's insurance classification. This unit was basically state-of-the-art at that time.

When the bids were opened, there were a few surprises, perhaps the most obvious being that Mack Fire Apparatus submitted a "No Bid." I was puzzled by this, given that Mack Trucks built four-wheel-drive chassis as a regular item. It took me a few years to find out why this no-bid: Thanks to a Mack fire apparatus salesman from Minnesota, I was introduced to a Mack factory engineer who was familiar with the bid; he told me that it was not something that Mack could not build, but, rather, that they did not want to as a four-wheel-drive Mack fire engine chassis would have been a one-off design which they felt they could not support.

The winning bid appeared to be from Ward LaFrance Truck Company, in Elmira Heights, New York. Ward LaFrance was relative of Asa LaFrance, the founder of American LaFrance, located in Elmira; Ward had a falling out with Asa, and went off to start his own company. Much smaller than American LaFrance, Ward LaFrance was probably best known for its production of tank retrievers for the U.S. Army in World War II, and the pumpers used by the fictitious Engine Company 51 of the Los Angeles County Fire Department on the 1970's television program *Emergency!* The dealer was Western Fire Equipment in Pueblo, Colorado. I wanted some first-hand information about similar Ward LaFrance apparatus, so I visited the Grand Junction, Colorado, Fire Department, where I spoke with the fire chief, some of the firefighters, and the mechanic.

Based upon that visit, I recommended to the district board that they enter into a lease-purchase agreement for one Ward LaFrance pumper, to be the first motorized fire engine ever for the Crested Butte area. The board so voted, so I asked Local Government to please issue the contract. As the district did not have sufficient funds to pay cash for this unit, a lease-purchase agreement was needed. In many states, including Colorado, government agencies (remember that the fire district was a quasi-municipal corporation) cannot enter into contracts that last for more than one year, as they cannot commit possible future governing boards to debts that they might not have created. Thus, fire apparatus manufacturers and other companies create what is more or less a legal fiction: The lease-purchase agreements stipulate that the purchasing agency is only agreeing to a one-year contract, renewable year-to-year, and if the agency does not renew the contract or cannot pay for it, the manufacturer will repossess the item(s) covered by the contract. The unstated assumption is that it is unlikely that a lease-purchase contract will not be renewed and payments made thereon, until expiration of the document, at which time the agency will take possession of the fire engine or other capital goods.

With those projects underway, it was time to start training the firefighters; remember, none of them had any experience. Having no place of our own to meet, in the continuing mode of cooperation, the town gave us access to the council room. I started the training with a

series of talks about what a fire department is, how it operates, what it does. For example, I discussed the semi-military setup, wherein a firefighter takes orders from an officer. However, I also introduced a vital subject at the same time, safety. On the fireground, if an officer orders you to the roof, and when you step on the roof it feels unsafe, you may disobey the order, by coming down and reporting to the officer why you did what you did. Continuing on that theme, I talked about response to a call in a privately-owned vehicle or a fire engine: If you do not drive safely and get hurt, then the person who called for help from the fire department may not get it. After all, if one firefighter is injured, it is normal for other firefighters to help the injured party, and now, especially in a small department, there may be insufficient firefighters, or even no firefighters going to the scene of the alarm. I stressed that safety is, and must be, an inbred philosophy, must start at the top, and that safety would be one of my mantras.

We then moved on to a discussion of how fires start, how they spread, how they may be extinguished; that led in turn to the start of learning how to put out fires, and that led to our first hands-on training with the limited amount of equipment we had. All we had at first was the old, outmoded, turnout gear that had belonged to the town fire department, consisting of long coats, very high boots, and helmets. As part of the stress on safety, wearing this gear was mandatory for all hands-on training, to help get across the message that firefighting is inherently dangerous, and people can get hurt even during training.

Before the new station was finished, the used fire engine and the old turnout gear were all housed in the temporary fire station, which presented a new snag: There was no fire phone in this structure, so we had to set up a system whereby someone would always respond to the old town hall, answer the phone there to find out where we needed to respond, then meet the rest of us before we departed with the fire engine. As the old and temporary stations were only a few blocks apart, this was manageable—so long as we were not in the midst of a typical Crested Butte major snow storm, greatly impeding driving.

With the new station erected, but nowhere near finished inside, we moved the engine into the building. The temporary station was sold to Gunnison County Electric, which moved it to its house down the road where its linemen lived, finished the outside to fit into the town, and used it to house their line truck. The new station had a fire phone, an office for the chief, a store room for equipment, places to hang up turnout gear, electric hose dryers, etc. The ten horsepower siren on the roof was a great improvement over the one on the old town hall, as it could be heard over a much wider area. There was one totally unexpected and amusing sidelight to the new siren: Our young son, who was three or four years old, could perfectly imitate the sound made as the siren started up, and more than once dad would start to leave for the station before realizing that it was not an actual alarm!

As training continued, I invited the Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department to assist us with basic techniques, such as how one catches a hydrant, handles hose lines, and other things that our newly-fledged firefighters needed to learn. Unfortunately, the volunteers from Gunnison apparently wanted to show off their skills, and instead of doing what I had

asked them to do, started showing us skills far advanced from anything that would help us. That was the only time that they got invited to help us train. I, on the other hand, started to look outside the area for much-needed assistance, and started traveling to state fire school and meetings of major fire-related organizations. Sadly, I found very little of what I was seeking, and was about to give up when I noticed a small classified advertisement in one of the two journals to which I was subscribing. This was for a conference of an organization I had not heard of, but its name, The International Society of Fire Service Instructors, intrigued me, so I flew to Boston and attended the meeting. It did not take me long to realize that I had found exactly what I needed, as this group was comprised of an amazing number of truly progressive volunteer and career fire trainers, who knew what they were doing, were changing the old and no longer valid methods, and were more than willing to share everything they knew. Much of what I did as fire chief thereafter was based on this cornucopia of information and techniques, and eventually I became a board member of ISFSI. I feel strongly to this day that much of what I accomplished in Crested Butte rests on the shoulders of those who were out in front of the American fire service.

I wrote earlier that I would return to the subject of the one building that was outside the Crested Butte town limits, but on the town water system. The building had been constructed for use as a hydro-electric plant, so it had a substantial concrete foundation, and thick concrete walls. Due to war-time exigencies, the structure was never used for its intended purpose, and eventually it became a restaurant. I can only guess at the date at which it was totally destroyed, most likely sometime in 1974. At any rate, I was at the supermarket in Gunnison one morning when someone who recognized me told me that there had been an explosion in Crested Butte. Even if I could have found a telephone to use, there would likely have been no one to call (not even the fire phone system,) so all I could do was drive to Crested Butte, wondering what I would find.

When I got to town, I found someone who knew that whatever had happened had taken place at the restaurant, so I drove out there to be confronted with terrible devastation. The force of the explosion was so great that the building was nearly entirely destroyed; when it started to snow heavily late in the day, I ordered that it be torn down so that no one could get inside and be injured or killed. As the restaurant was only open for dinner, there was only one fatality, a town resident who was working to get ready for opening time. Had the restaurant been opened when the blast occurred, I am certain that there would have been multiple fatalities, and so many injured people that the very limited medical system at the time would have been completely overwhelmed. This incident was certainly one that impressed our volunteer firefighters, who knew nothing about the force of explosions, and I took advantage of it to start our policy of having the entire department review every single emergency call as a learning and training tool.

Once the weather cleared up, I went back to see if I could find out what had happened. The rumor in town was that it was a sewer gas explosion, as it was known that the two unlicensed plumbers in town, who had done much of the work around for a number of years had been working on the drain system from the septic tanks. While I was certainly not an expert about sewer gas explosions, I had serious doubts about this having been

the cause. Looking around, I found that there were two large propane tanks used for heat and cooking, an installation that looked poorly done to me, but there was nothing there that was an obvious explosion source. I found the telephone number for the state agency that governed and inspected propane systems, called and told them that I needed help as soon as possible. Shortly thereafter, a state propane inspector came to Crested Butte, and we went to the site. I showed him the tanks and why I was suspicious. He concurred, so we started tracing the copper tubing from the tanks to the building, and shortly found the culprit: The pressure regulator, which had a relief port, was buried in the snow, and the port was totally iced up. The inspector, who of course knew much about than I did, stated that he would, if need be, testify in court that it was the over-pressurization of the propane system that had caused the leak, with its concomitant odor, the smell that was thought to be sewer gas, and that the leak had eventually filled the building with propane, and that a single spark, likely from refrigerator motor or even a light switch, had ignited the vapors and caused the explosion. (A law suit was eventually filed; I don't know the resolution.)

At some time, I asked for a state inspection of the propane tanks in town, as we had been having quite a few calls for propane leaks. It did not take the inspector long to issue an order to the propane supplier to remove all tanks that had tank end-mounted regulators, as those regulators were constantly being covered with snow and having their relief valve ports frozen. He also mandated that all top-mounted regulators be inspected and, if needed, that their covers be replaced, to keep snow out of them. Furthermore, he ordered that all propane piping be brought up to code. The number of emergency calls went down sharply, but this did not eliminate those calls that turned out not to be propane-related, but were for skunks under buildings, as skunks smell just like the safety odorant added to propane.

In the spring of 1975, I got an exciting call from Ward LaFrance, telling me that they were ready for me to go to the factory and do a delivery inspection; the cost of the trip was in the contract. I'll spare you some of the details the of trip, and only say that I did request a few changes, mainly that one pipe in the pump compartment be rerouted to improve maintenance access. The next call was not really exciting: While the apparatus was complete, the factory was about to go on strike. (This strike eventually led to bankruptcy and closure of a company started in 1916.) The first problem was that Ward LaFrance was worried about possible sabotage, and had taken the engine to their nearest dealer, which I believe was in Syracuse, New York. The other problem was that the contract called for a factory delivery engineer to deliver the rig and train the department, but due to the strike, the only person available was on his way to Santa Rosa, California.

A series of rather frantic phone calls ensued. For one thing, the phone lines at the factory were shut down, so at first I could not even contact anyone. It was eventually decided that I would deliver the rig to Crested Butte, with Ward LaFrance reimbursing us, and that the delivery engineer would fly to Gunnison from Santa Rosa. My trip was an adventure. I gathered as much of the paperwork that I could that might prove to anyone challenging me that the truck actually belonged to the district and that I was the district's fire chief. I flew to Syracuse, where I was met by the not-sober founder of the dealership; I knew both him and his son, who was by then running the company. It was raining quite hard when

we got to the dealership; at least our new fire engine was there. I put my suitcase, document collection, etc., into the cab, then went into the office, looking for the transit plate, as there was none on the engine. My host had no idea where it might be and was rather anxious for me to get the apparatus off of their property, as they, too, were worried about sabotage.

He gave me what paperwork he had, I got into the rig, and headed for the New York State Thruway. I did not even have a road map, but after my years in college and teaching in New England, I knew that if I went west on the Thruway, and eventually headed southwest towards Denver, I would end up in Crested Butte. I stopped at the toll plaza, got my ticket, and started west. The first thing I noticed was two state police cruisers parked in the median in such a way that they had a good view of what I was driving. Hoping that I would not next see flashing emergency lights, I kept on, and no lights were seen. I'm not sure where my next stops were, only that one morning when I left a motel, I first saw signs for highway construction, then signs saying that the Interstate ended ahead. As luck would have it, I had passed a state police barracks not long before seeing those unwanted signs, so I turned back and went into the police station. The officer on duty laughed, saying that I was not the first to ask about where the highway had gone, and that they had been trying to get the signs changed.

One afternoon, as I neared Grand Island, Nebraska (by now I was on I-80), I was getting tired, so I left the highway and checked into a motel. I needed something from a drugstore, so I drove the fire engine to the nearest one. As I was doing that, I noticed a state police car following me at a not-great distance, which was somewhat worrisome. I had no way of knowing if he just wanted a good look at a fire engine of a type he'd likely never seen before, or something else. I made my purchase, and as I started to return to the motel, right behind me was likely the same trooper, which really started to get me concerned. Luck was again on my side: A flatbed semi-trailer between me and the cruiser shed its load of rebar, and that was the last I saw of the police.

Soon enough, I reached the junction for I-76 (I think it was numbered I-80N at the time,) which would take me to Denver. Somewhere across the Colorado state line, a motorist cut me off while he was entering the highway. I reached for the air horn pull, which sounded quite loudly—and would not shut off. I pulled off the road, stopped, turned on the flashers, shut down the engine, and waited for someone to help me. After a while, a Colorado trooper headed east stopped and waved me to cross over to see him. When I told him the problem, he said that there was a service plaza not far to the west and asked if I could make it there. I told him I thought so, as the airbrake system had an emergency release pressure tank, so I got back on board, and proceeded, loudly, to the off ramp. I slowed down to a crawl and with horn blaring made it safely to the service area and shut down the engine; the horn eventually ran out of air and stopped being a nuisance to everyone around.

I went inside to see if they had a mechanic. They said no, so I asked if they could lend me a few tools. (Our tools, all part of the contract, were in the hose bed in large boxes.) I was able to remove the horn's control valve; when I opened it, a small piece of brass, left over

from the valve being manufactured, fell out, so I reassembled everything, returned the tools, and started west again, now with only the roar of the diesel engine, the noise of the tires, etc., to keep me company. Somewhere, probably at the Grand Island motel, I had learned that there was a serious late-spring blizzard in Colorado, with many of the mountain passes closed. Even if Monarch Pass were open, I might have had trouble, as the front drive shaft had been removed for transit, so I did not have four-wheel drive. I came to a weigh station, so I pulled in, parked, and went inside to ask if they had current road conditions. This turned into somewhat of an argument: The man I talked to kept telling me to pull on to the scales, and then pay road tax. I told him that the fire engine belonged to the Crested Butte Fire Protection District (which was technically not true, as we had not accepted delivery) and that we collected taxes, and did not pay them. I finally convinced him to call his Denver office, whereupon he said goodbye.

Given the weather, I stopped in Denver for the night. It was so cold the next morning that I had a hard time starting the diesel; it was equipped with a cold-weather ether starting system, but of course, the gas cylinder was in a box in the hose bed. Just before I was about to give up and call a Detroit Diesel dealer, the engine coughed to life, and as Monarch Pass was opened, I headed south through South Park on U.S. 285 and turned west on U.S. Fifty. Descending the pass quite slowly, I turned north on Colorado 135, and as I started up Elk Avenue, turned on the flashing lights, the siren, and used the air horn. I parked on Elk Avenue near Third Street, and was soon mobbed by a plethora of excited and curious people who came to see the new fire engine. I eventually put the pumper into its new home and went to my home to see my wife and family. A few days later, a package arrived from the dealer, with further documents and a now-expired transit plate.

Training sessions were for two hours, one day every week, weather independent; fires and other emergencies don't check for the temperature, precipitation, nor time of day; they happen when they happen. The arrival of the new pumper occasioned some extra time to unpack and learn about all the new equipment before we started training with it; that needed to wait the arrival of the delivery engineer, who, while not happy about making the trip (he did not usually carry out that task), was quite helpful to us, especially when I filled him in on the history of the district and the lack of experience of the volunteers.

It was likely around this time that I proposed to the department that we purchase sew-on shoulder patches, as I felt this would help make the firefighters proud to be associated with the department, boost departmental morale, and though they were unlikely to recognize this, a vote for patches would be the first small step towards the firefighters taking ownership of their fire department. As the vote was positive, someone designed a few patches, and a second vote selected the Crested Butte Fire Protection District's own insignia. An order was placed, and after we received it, it did not take long for shirts with the patches on them to be seen around the area.

We were now in a position to start serious fire service training in how to drive the new pumper, how to operate the fire pump, how to pull hoses and use the nozzles, and all the many other things that needed to be learned. The new turnout gear started to arrive, the insulated short boots being the first; once everything was here, we could start learning not

just how to pull hoses and nozzles off the pumper, but how to do so while wearing proper protective gear, and once cold weather started to set in, how to do so when it was harder than to do so in the warmer months. In short, we were finally starting to move towards being a fully-operational emergency response organization, skilled, trained, and able to render assistance to those who needed it. Slowly, as I became confident of those abilities, I started to shed some of the responsibilities that I had had to assume earlier, and, for example, at small fires, step back and let an officer be in charge, to gain the experience he (or she, as we will see shortly) needed to actually be an officer in more than just a name or title.

One of the things that I learned from my fire service-related travel and reading was that the U.S. fire service, volunteer and career alike, was moving steadily into the field of providing emergency medical service. At the time, the only ambulance service available to the Crested Butte community, was the Gunnison County-subsidized ambulance service in Gunnison, so having the Crested Butte Fire Protection District provide such service seemed an excellent idea to me. A vote of the firefighters in favor (another step towards their taking ownership) gave me the right to propose this to the board, which likewise was in favor, if all the requirements could be met. We were extremely lucky to find that there were two young doctors in Gunnison whose specialty was emergency medicine and who offered to train our Emergency Medical Technicians. In fact, they were so eager to do this that they refused payment, and we had to practically force them to accept money for gasoline.

There was a Colorado state agency that was in charge of emergency medicine, and there were federal grants, which this agency administered, to pay for new ambulances. At that time, the state had been divided into medical districts, and our district went to bid for several ambulances at the same time. I was rather sure that our request would not be met at first, and it was not. All funded ambulances had to meet Federal Specification KKK-A-1822 for Start of Life vehicles. This specification defined three categories of ambulances, and I felt that a four-wheel-drive Type III (van conversion) would best meet our needs. A major ambulance manufacturer in Ohio could provide the requisite vehicle, and they had an arrangement with a conversion company in California to convert the ambulance to four-wheel drive. The snag was that Chevrolet, the maker of the van, had not yet seen such a four-wheel-drive conversion, and thus there would be no warranty on the van. After some time, Chevrolet did issue the warranty, our van was sent to California, and returned to the ambulance company's nearest dealer, in Salt Lake City, Utah.

I flew to Salt Lake, inspected and accepted the ambulance, and started for Gunnison. When I got near Gunnison, I tried several times to contact the Gunnison County Public Hospital by radio, as two-way radio is part of the KKK-A-1822 specification, and our four-channel radio was set up for our local and the state-wide emergency frequencies. I picked up the microphone, keyed it, and said, "Gunnison Hospital, this is the Crested Butte ambulance," which got no response. Finally, it was either the Gunnison police department or the sheriff's office which answered me, contacted the hospital for me, and I soon got a radio call from the hospital. Their reason for not answering? They did not know who was calling them on the radio!

Meanwhile, our benefactors, the doctors, were training our first EMTs, and I needed someone to take over running our Emergency Medical Services. The choice was easy: Fran Adams (I'm not sure she was yet married to Larry Adams, and I don't remember her maiden name) was already firefighter trained, so I appointed her in 1975 as the other assistant firer chief (we did not have an Assistant Chief for EMS or similar title), this at a time when there were very few female fire department officers of any rank nationwide. Our agreement with the Gunnison ambulance service was that we would normally respond to emergency calls south on Highway 135 to a location I don't remember, and that unless a doctor at the ski area declared a case to be an emergency, the Gunnison service would handle ski area calls, so that we would not take away a major source of its income.

Dispatching our EMTs was yet another problem, nicely solved by the Gunnison Police Department offering to do so at no cost to us. To start with, the EMTs had to agree to a roster, placing them on duty and near a telephone, on a fixed schedule, so that the police dispatcher would know who to call; we updated the roster regularly and provided updated copies to the dispatchers. Eventually I found a small paging system that we could afford, one which the Gunnison Police Department could activate and let whichever EMTs were carrying the pagers know where the call was.

Before the ambulance even went into official service, we got our first call, and two EMTs treated the patient in town, and with one EMT in the patient compartment, the other started driving towards Gunnison. A short while later, the dispatcher called and asked that I drive to where the ambulance had stopped, and take over driving, as the EMT in the rear needed the assistance of the other EMT. I did so, and part way down the highway, the ambulance's four-wheel-drive transfer case broke. I fiddled with it, and, somehow, got the ambulance driveable, delivered the patient and EMTs to the hospital, arranged homeward transportation, and took the vehicle to the local Chevrolet dealer. For some reason, we had a hard time getting a replacement transfer case, even though emergency vehicles were supposed to get priority treatment. After a few days, I called the owner of the dealership, who was a Gunnison volunteer firefighter, and told him the problem. He, in turn, called his district manager in Denver. I don't know how the conversation went, I only know that our replacement unit was taken off of the factory assembly line and arrived on the next morning's Frontier Airline flight from Denver; yet another problem solved with the able assistance of 'outsiders.'

On July 4, 1975, parked next to each other in the middle of 3rd Street, the fire engine and ambulance were dedicated, before the annual Independence Day parade began. By this time, things were really beginning to reach the point of both firefighting and EMS becoming standard parts of the community and of the lives of the volunteers, so I shall begin to conclude this document by simply delineating some of the salient events that followed.

Sometime later, we got a request from the ski area medical clinic to transport a critical case to the Crested Butte airport for air evacuation to St. Anthony Hospital in Denver, which ran the first hospital-based air ambulance service in the country. Due to the distance

from the hospital to Crested Butte, beyond the reach of the Alouette III helicopter, this trip would use a Beech King Air fixed-wing aircraft, based at Stapleton Airport in Denver, and operated by a fixed-based operator. The air medics would be transferred from the hospital to Stapleton by the helicopter, to save time. Air Ops at St. Anthony requested that we provide a fire engine at the Crested Butte airport, which we did. While waiting for the airplane, the airport got a call from its flight crew, on aviation radio, asking how far back the runway snow banks had been pushed, and I informed them accordingly. The King Air came back on the radio, informing any other aircraft that they were about to land, standard procedure at non-tower airports. The airplane came down near the runway, and suddenly increased engine power and went up at a very steep angle, and asked that our ambulance meet them at the Gunnison airport, which we did. We learned later that, sadly, the patient had died.

Later, I called the director of St. Anthony Flight for Life to ask what the problem had been. He told me that the fixed-base operator had had an incident only a week earlier, when a King Air wing clipped the snow bank at an airport in northwestern Colorado. I asked if there was anything that could be done to assist us with air evacuations; he said he would look into this, and call me back. Not long after than call, he did call back, and said that he was setting up a conference call, and would notify me when it was to take place. That call did eventuate; on the call was the hospital air-ops director, an Alouette flight crew member, a representative of the fixed-base King Air operation, the manager of Sardi Field (the Aspen airport,) a Sardi Field refueller, the Aspen Volunteer Fire Department fire chief, and myself. The air-ops director made a proposal: They would provide us with helicopter service if they could hot fuel at Sardi Field, meaning that they would not shut down the helicopter's engines. The Sardi Field manager was amenable, the Aspen fire chief said that they would provide fire coverage during the hot fueling, the refueller would refuel with fire apparatus standing by, and the Alouette flight crew representative said that they would fly under those conditions. This call did not take long, and in yet another example of the amazing cooperation shown to the Crested Butte Fire Protection District, we became the furthest-distance site for St. Anthony helicopter air ambulance service.

I don't recall either the date nor the name of the building on Elk Avenue where a major fire took place, but it was before the arrival of the new fire engine, likely in the fall of 1974. This was a very large, two-story building, with the bar on the first floor, living quarters on the second. The building was heated by a very large pot-bellied stove on the first floor, which had been fueled with coal for many years. I found out that they had started using wood instead and warned them that they were creating a very dangerous condition. The building did catch fire, and about all we could do was keep the propane tank located alongside cool so that it would not explode and ask the Gunnison Volunteer Fire Department for mutual aid, as the heat was beginning to damage buildings across the street. When the cinder block walls started to burn, we evacuated the building and let it burn. I sent a sample of the cinder block to a state laboratory, which reported that the cinder block really was made with cinders, high-carbon cinders from the CF&I coke ovens. Quite a brouhaha erupted in both local newspapers calling for my resignation; both papers backed down once I was able to provide them with some factual information about fire protection. (I like to claim that I am a very efficient fire chief: The U.S. Postal Service had been looking for a site for a new post

office, which I provided them at the site of this fire.)

The Town of Crested Butte had adopted the Uniform Building Code, the most commonly-used one in the western United States, but it was out of date and not enforced, so that many of the buildings were quite dangerous and in need of updating. Again showing its cooperation, the town adopted an up-to-date code and turned over enforcement to the new building inspector, Assistant Fire Chief Larry Adams and to the fire chief, and then went one step further at my request and adopted the Uniform Fire Code. I started inspecting commercial buildings and entered into written, long-term agreements with the owners to bring the buildings up to code over a set number of years. I purchased a uniform, consisting of shirt, pants, shoes, name tag, and badges; no hat, no gold braid. I found a very interesting change in how I was treated when I started wearing the uniform. Nearly everyone at least knew who I was and that my name was John; if I walked into a restaurant, I was greeted by a "Hi, John." Now, if I walked into the same business in uniform, the greeting was "Hi, Chief"; this was even true if I were simply walking down the street. The very wearing of a fire chief's uniform was completely new to the community, and they quickly began to respect the badge as being worn by an official of a government agency.

Unfortunately, the new town of Mt. Crested Butte was quite uncooperative. I requested to be placed on the agenda and appeared for the first time in dirty turnout gear, as we had just extinguished a fire in one of the Mt. Crested Butte motels. The council refused to give the fire department any authority. As I wrote earlier, we had established the tradition that one board position would be reserved for someone from Mt. Crested Butte, and we were now on a staggered election cycle. The Mt. Crested Butte position was taken by the new town manager, who made it clear that he only did so in order to have me removed as fire chief. At his first district board meeting, the town manager made a motion to that effect, and I offered to have my resignation on Russ Reycraft's desk the next morning if that was the desire of the board. Instead, the Mt. Crested Butte town manager resigned from the district board.

Around 1977, I broached the subject of my position going career, as it had already become a full-time one, and said that if I were to go career, I would resign from the board the day that that took place as it would be a conflict of interest to hold both positions. Both events did take place.

A fire one night in an outside chimney chase at a condominium building in Mt. Crested Butte looked like a giant Roman candle from my house. We responded, and drove the fire engine right past the burning building, with all the tourists yelling and pointing, as if we did not know where the fire was. The closest fire hydrant was at the opposite end of the dead-end street, so we drove to it, caught the hydrant, and used the pumper to lay our water supply line. Parked near the building, we were confronted by a very high wall of snow, making it quite hard to move our very heavy extension ladder to the site of the fire; a civilian offered to help, which we allowed him to do. We put the fire out, and returned to quarters. A few nights later, we had a call in Crested Butte; afterwards, I asked if anyone had found out who our helper had been at the "Roman Candle Fire." It turned out that he was a drunk

Miami, Florida, firefighter. The story did not stop there: At the next Fire Department Instructors Conference, I was the recorder for a seminar. The first speaker was a well-known assistant chief from the Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Fire Department, who gave his usual excellent presentation. The next up was an assistant chief from Denver, who usually was an equally fine speaker, but he froze and sat down. The chair of the seminar decided to turn it over to me, for which I was totally unprepared. Casting about for something to say, I told about our Miami helper, and then we took a break. During the break a few firefighters in the audience from Miami asked for the name of our assistant! I said I did not know, but that they ought to be able to find out who from their department was in Crested Butte at the time.

I wrote earlier about our accepting anyone who volunteered, which usually worked very well, but there were exceptions. We had one firefighter, for example, who clearly did not exhibit the calmness needed when dealing with emergencies. One day, when the siren went off, he got in his pickup truck and pulled out the choke to start the engine. He actually did pull out the choke knob, as well as the cable it was attached to, right out of the dashboard.

One day at training, we had a brand-new recruit. Remember that the fire engine had flow gauges; the the drill that day was for the person running the fire pump to flow one hundred twenty-five gallons of water per minute through one of the inch and a half pre-connected hose lines, which was our standard procedure, and would give those handling the hose a good feel for how the hose and nozzle reacted. Dick, our rookie, looked at me somewhat puzzled, and then asked how much water we were going to flow. This seemed reasonable, given that he had never held a fire hose, at least until about the fourth time he asked the same question. Sensing my frustration, another firefighter asked if I knew what Dick's background, and when I said that I did not, was told that no one really knew, only that he had been involved in secret rocket research for the U.S. government. With that knowledge, I was then able to explain to him that we calibrated the gauges twice a year, and that any approximation of the called-for 125 gpm was quite satisfactory for our purposes.

I think that by now you can see that we were truly becoming a real fire department, with well-trained, dedicated, and proud volunteer firefighters. I had continued to let go as I became satisfied that each such step was being taken wisely. For example, at first I wrote the proposed yearly budget, which the board (including me) more or less rubber stamped, as I had shown that I was doing so responsibly. After a few years, I began consulting with the other officers before submitting the request, modifying it when they were able to convince me to do so, and by perhaps 1977 or 1978, the budget was subjected to review by the entire department.

Early in 1979, I informed the board that I was going to resign the following July. They offered to increase my salary, but I made it quite clear that my resignation had nothing to do with money, nor was I upset about anything; rather, it was that we were moving out of state. By this time, I had come to the conclusion that I had accomplished my goal, a goal that I certainly did not have in mind when I first started this endeavor. All I wanted to do in 1971 was provide some sort of fire protection to the community. I did not even know what

a fire protection district was, much less how to write the specifications for a fire engine or train firefighters. After farewell parties given by the town and the United Congregational Church, my family and I departed Crested Butte, my task having been completed with the admirable, even amazing, and continuing cooperation and assistance of various organizations, individuals, and companies, and the efforts of a truly wonderful group of volunteer firefighters and EMTs. Without that, none of this history could have been written.