

Fires & Fire Fighting in Albury, 1863-1916

Talk by Greg Ryan, presented at A&DHS General Meeting, April 2017

There were at least 30 major fires to business premises which resulted in either totally destruction or severely damage in the 50 years that I will be dealing with, the 1860s to 1910s. Add to this record the homes that were destroyed by fire in the same 50 years, Albury needed an effective and efficient fire brigade, but as we shall see, the early efforts to form such a brigade were not very successful.

On January 3, 1863, the *Albury Banner* reported:

“On Sunday the inhabitants of Albury were roused from their afternoon siesta by the cry of ‘fire’ ... the black smoke which rose in a column, from Kiewa Street, soon told that a domestic calamity had occurred at our doors. The smoke soon burst into a flame from the premises, adjoining Fallon’s store, occupied by Mr Owen, a carpenter ... suddenly the wind veered round ... it looked as though the whole block of buildings was in imminent danger. Everyone came to the rescue. Lines were formed to the nearest wells, and buckets, unfortunately limited in number, were passed along, and speedily emptied on the burning mass. Providentially the wind shifted, and in little more than an hour the immediate danger was overcome ... Indeed, we never saw more neighbourly co-operation. We shall hope to see, from the specimen displayed last Sunday afternoon, Albury soon possess a most valuable and energetic fire brigade.”

Albury’s First Attempt to Form a Brigade - at least they tried

On February 14 1863, a meeting was held with the mayor presiding, to form the first Albury Volunteer Fire Brigade. An editorial in the *Banner* implored “It is the business of the offices to assist in supporting the brigade ... it is the business of the council to assist also and it is the business and interest of all to join the Albury Volunteer Fire Brigade.” On March 7, the first general meeting of the brigade was held and a letter from the Secretary of London & Liverpool Insurers was read approving the brigade rules and promising a sum to purchase an engine and to contribute to maintenance costs. James Fallon and Thomas Gaden were appointed trustees, Alderman Kenneth McClennan treasurer, C Phillips secretary, Albury’s town clerk, Henry Brooks elected as the brigade’s first Captain, Patrick Fallon was Senior Lieutenant.



A typical 19th century fire Engine

In November 1863, the brigade took delivery of an engine that they christened *faugh-a-ballagh*, an Irish battle cry meaning “clear the way.” The town was said to have paid about £100 for the engine. The engine was not used until May 1865, and that was to pump water from a cellar. The *Border Post* of May 17, 1865 reported that the engine proved “to be adapted for no better purpose than watering

a garden. It threw a small stream of water a distance of about nine feet ... it was at least half an hour before the pumps could be got to suck.”

The engine was of no use and spent several years behind the Rose Hotel in Kiewa St before the landlord offered it for sale by auction. It was said to have sold for £7.

In October 1868, fire destroyed Albury's oldest hotel, the Hume Inn, built by Robert Brown. The *Albury Banner* reported that “The hotel, with store, stables, etc have been completely gutted — the brick walls alone remaining.” During a three day inquest, the jury heard that prior to the fire, the windlass and bucket had been removed from well and water tanks overturned. The jury also questioned why the landlord (not Robert Brown) had completed an inventory of the property before the fire. They concluded “whether by accident or design, there was not sufficient evidence to show.” There was no mention in the newspapers of the fire brigade attending.

A Second Attempt to Form a Brigade - some Success

The first brigade folded in about 1873 and a new brigade formed in 1875 with Thomas Waller as captain. The *Border Post* reported that “the entrance fee for members was fixed at 2s.6d.” In March they advertised in the *Melbourne Argus* for a “second hand fire engine in thorough working condition.” It was reported in the *Leader* (Melbourne), that to pay for the engine, each of the forty volunteers “has had to canvas for subscriptions. Each member has had to pay for his own uniform.” The same newspaper reported that insurance companies had not contributed and “neither has the local municipal council lent a helping hand.”

On May 8, the *Australian Town and Country Journal* reported

“The Albury Volunteer Fire Brigade may now be considered fairly organised ... The brigade consists of about 40 effective members. A very good engine has been purchased, and the brigade consider themselves after a few weeks drill, fully prepared to cope successfully with any ordinary fire. It is intended to have a grand demonstration on the 24th inst. The Chiltern band has been hired for the occasion; there will be a torchlight procession in the evening, followed by a grand ball.”

In March 1875 the workshop of Frederick Selle at the rear of his furniture store in Dean St was destroyed by fire and a young man, Charles Henry died in the fire. The *Albury Banner* reported “another striking proof of the need of a water-supply for Albury was afforded by a fire attended unhappily with loss of human life ... as it happened, the large tank at Mr Higgins' was full of water, and the top being removed, a ladder was brought and buckets handed along from one to another and dashed on the roof and sides of the store. Another supply of water was obtained from the well; but both sources were soon drained to the last drop. Limited however as was the quantity of water available, it happily proved sufficient to prevent the fire from spreading”

A new engine, christened *The Rescue*, was tested in June 1875. The *Albury Banner* reported that the engine threw a stream of water over the Bank of NSW in Townsend St and over the Globe Hotel. The water “was provided gratuitously by water carriers in the town.”

In March 1876 a fire broke out in William Hill's store in Wodonga. It was reported that as the flames were “plainly visible in Albury, the Volunteer Fire Brigade at once set off.” Arriving too late to save Mr Hill's store, they were successful in “preventing the spread of the conflagration.”

On January 3, 1879 fire gutted the coach building factory of G E Robinson in Townsend St. The *Border Post* commented “the origin of this fire appears to be most suspicious, and call for something more than ordinary investigation by the police. No work was done in the factory the day previous, nor was any person resident on the premises, and it stands to reason that with the

description of articles in the factory at the time, spontaneous combustion was hardly possible ... the Fire Brigade did not put in an appearance.” This is hardly surprising given that the fire started at 4 am and Albury had no firebell.

Just two weeks later, a fire completely destroyed Higgins and Baker’s coach factory in Smollett St before spreading to and destroying the Exchange Theatre. The *Albury Banner* reported that “The pluck displayed by several of those who got upon the roof, and at imminent peril of their lives tore down the rafters of the theatre whilst the flames were actually bursting through the roof, was simply beyond all praise and there is not the least doubt in the world that to their exertions is due the saving of the hotel, and, indeed, of the entire block adjoining ... at the first alarm several water-carts started off for the river, but it was necessarily a considerable time before they could get back with their loads.”

The paper went on to report losses of several thousand pounds, “the furniture alone in the Exchange Hotel cost £2500” and also commented “The cellar was rushed by a crowd, who had done nothing to stay the progress of flames, and the liquor stolen wholesale. To give one example, 60 bottles of case whisky of the most expensive brand were taken away bodily, while champagne, wine, brandy, &c., were removed in an equally wholesale manner.” A jury found “that there was no evidence to show how the fire occurred.”

In spite of significant losses due to fire, for want of funds and frustration with poor water supply, in February 1879 this second brigade also disbanded and all their equipment sold.

Later that same year, there were other serious fires. In April a fire destroyed D’Alpuget’s hairdressing salon in Townsend St and the adjoining Australian Hotel was also damaged. Just two days later, in the early hours of May 1, the Albion Temperance Hotel in Swift St, belonging to James Fallon, was almost totally destroyed by fire.



Kia Ora, Townsend St

Then in August, the most severe of the year’s fires, the Imperial Hotel in Townsend St was totally destroyed and next door the Bank of NSW was completely gutted (the bank building became *Kia Ora*, a private home and the bank rebuilt in Dean St). Newspapers reported that at the inquest the verdict was returned that “The burning ... was the act of an incendiary, but there is not sufficient evidence to attach the crime to any individual.”

One week later, a fire destroyed the premises of Nathaniel Whight, baker & confectioner, at the back of the Border City Hotel in Townsend St. Also in August, Mr Fraenkel’s store in Townsend St was damaged by fire “the second time this store has been on fire, and the third fire which has happened to property belonging to Mr Fraenkel.” Then in November 1879, Stassen’s store on the Sydney Rd was completely destroyed.

In December a fire caused severe damage to the Albury Club Hotel in Dean St - newspapers reported that “it fortunately happened that a large body of water was in an adjacent pond, and the cellar door being burst open and plenty of water being thrown in, the flames were extinguished. The hotel had a very narrow escape of being utterly destroyed.”

The *Ovens & Murray Advertiser* headed its report with “Another mysterious conflagration took place in Albury on Thursday morning” when reporting a fire in October 1880. The fire in Kiewa St, close to the Rose Hotel, destroyed Mr Finney’s boot shop, Mr Armstrong’s fruit shop and Mr McDonald’s butchery. Newspapers commented “the need of a water supply was severely exemplified by this fire, as with a good head of water, more than half the damage might have been prevented.”

A Third Attempt to Form a Brigade - Failure

In January 1882, the *Ovens & Murray Advertiser* reported a fire at the rear of the Dean street ironmongery and hardware store of George Hunter, “but it was fortunately noticed in time. As we have no water and no fire-brigade, the central block in the town would have gone if the flames had got headway.” And in the same edition a correspondent commented “It is surprising that a large and rising town like Albury has not its fire-brigade ... Corowa are a long way ahead in this respect. But Albury was never noted for its public spirit in anything tending to the advancement of the place, and I suppose it will always remain a ‘sleepy hollow.’”

The January fire and perhaps the comparison to Corowa, prompted another effort to establish a fire brigade in Albury. In February 1882 a meeting was held at Charles Schmiedt’s Albury Hotel where a unanimous vote supported the move to form a brigade. At subsequent meetings, difficulties arose when it was suggested that Albury Municipal Council lend financial support. In March, a council resolution was passed that a fire brigade was necessary, that council contribute and that a committee of five take steps to enrol members to form a brigade.

At an April council meeting a motion was put that council contribute annually “a sum not exceeding £100 for the support of a volunteer fire brigade” – the motion was lost with only the proposer and seconder voting for the motion. Councillors argued that it was the responsibility of insurance companies to support a brigade. Three days later the *Australian Town & Country Journal* reported “in consequence of the refusal of the borough council to contribute towards the establishment and maintenance of the projected Volunteer Fire Brigade, the movement to organise such a body has fallen to the ground. The various insurance companies plainly intimated that unless the municipal body took the matter in hand they would give nothing.”

Also in June, two fires occurred at James Devine’s Racing Club Hotel on Wagga Rd (about 1055 Mate St, owned by Dr Andrews), the second destroying the building. A jury concluded “that there is nothing to show how such fires originated either in the first or second instance.”

In December of the same year, three adjoining buildings in Townsend St owned by Patrick Kelly, James Curran’s saddler’s shop, Mr Fagan’s fancy goods warehouse and Francis Sigg’s bakery were all destroyed by fire. At an inquest, the jury returned the verdict “we find that the premises situated as aforesaid were on the said night feloniously and wilfully set on fire by some person or persons to us, the jury aforesaid, unknown.”

In June 1884, before a new brigade was formed, a fire destroyed the building and stock of William Darke’s furniture store in Kiewa St. The fire spread south, destroying two houses occupied by a Miss Williams, dressmaker and Mrs Richards. An inquiry was held and the *O&M Advertiser* reported that “after hearing evidence, the jury retired, and five minutes afterwards said that eleven of them were in favour of a verdict ‘That the place was wilfully set on fire, but there was no evidence to show who did it.’ The other juryman (an insurance agent) held out for a verdict of accidental causes. The coroner said he could not take that finding, and locked the jury up for five hours. At the end of that time, the jury, being of the same opinion, were discharged.”

A Fourth Attempt to Form a Brigade - Success

The next attempt to form a brigade was more successful. A meeting was held in January 1885 to form an Albury Fire Brigade. Walter Billson became the brigade's first captain. On January 1, 1885, the *Ovens & Murray Advertiser* reported:

"A Fire-brigade for Albury. — Mr F Simmons, late of Corowa, and a member of the fire-brigade in that town, has taken the first step towards the organisation of a fire-brigade for Albury. His ideas are to form a band of good working men, such as bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers, etc. who have a thorough knowledge of buildings in general, into a salvage corps, and get a captain capable of giving them the necessary drill and keeping discipline, until the reticulation of the streets with water is an accomplished fact. Mr Walter Billson, formerly of the Beechworth Brigade, will be asked to act as captain; and from his experience, and the well-known activity of the working-men of Albury, no doubt a fire-brigade and salvage corps will be formed that will be a credit to the district. The uniforms will be found for each member as soon as possible; and now the New South Wales Fire-brigade Bill has passed, Albury may be sure of a subsidy from the Government, and with the help of the borough council, the public and the insurance offices, a fire-engine may be purchased within a few months."

The *Sydney Mail* reported on January 24: "The Albury Volunteer Fire Brigade is now a very substantial fact ... [with] 40 or 50 active and strong young men."

There was plenty of work for the new brigade. In late January 1885 fire destroyed Steel's boot shop and the adjoining warehouse of Griffith & Co in Dean St. In March a large fire broke out in James Higgins coach building factory. The *Sydney Evening News* reported "The Albury Fire Brigade, by its exertions, confined the fire ... although a six-roomed house and a shop adjoining the Royal Hotel, was burnt down." The *Ovens & Murray Advertiser* reported that at an inquest "The jury, without retiring, found 'That the premises were burnt by fire; but whether accidental or otherwise there was no evidence to show.'"

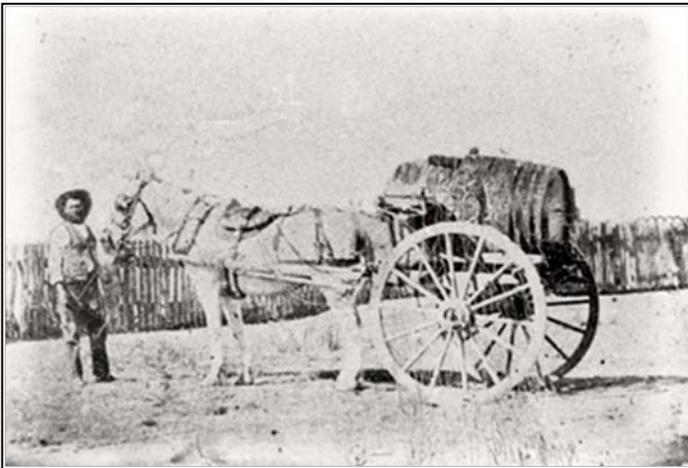
In August 1885 a fire broke out on the premises of Messrs Temby and Co, grocers of Kiewa St, above James Fallon's wine cellar. The brigade stopped the fire from spreading, but the roofing shingles were found to be saturated with kerosene and Fallon's cellarman reported that a number of casks were covered with kerosene. An inquest was held with a jury returning the verdict "We find that the premises occupied by Charles Temby, situated in Kiewa-street, were wilfully set on fire on the evening of August 4, by some person or persons unknown."



AMP and *Albury Banner* Buildings in 1885

It was not long before the largest fire Albury had seen, tested the new brigade. In December 1885 a gas jet ignited lace on display in the shop window of draper Joseph Johnson on the ground floor of the AMP building in Dean St. The fire destroyed that building and when the roof collapsed, the fire entered the third floor window of the next door *Albury Banner* office and worked its way to the ground floor. The fire was said to result in an estimated loss of £15,000 (almost \$2,000,000 in 2017 terms). The *Ovens & Murray Advertiser*

reported "The fire at Fallon's [the eaves caught fire] was soon put out, and the firemen, working like tigers, saved half the town from being burnt down. The men at the pumps worked well, and Father O'Connell and other sympathetic gentlemen kept their spirits up, by handing spirits round."



An Albury water cart

In the December fire, again the brigade had to rely on water carts for delivering water from the river. Newspapers reported that the firemen worked with buckets of water passed along a line.

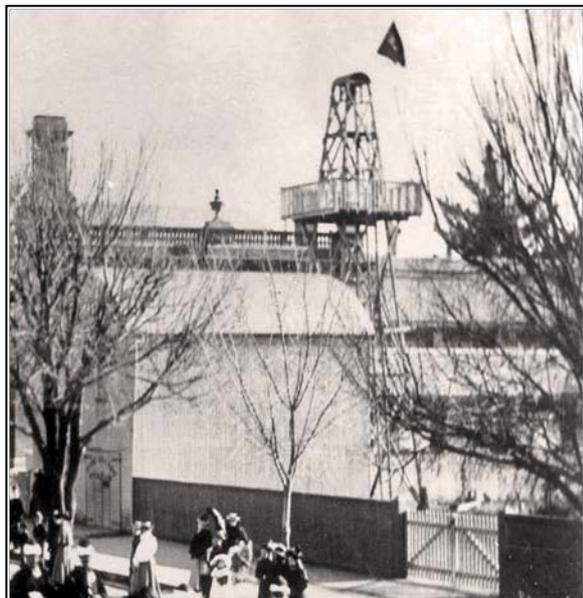
Albury's reticulated water supply was turned on in January 1886 and this perhaps prompted council to consider it now worth lending its support to the new brigade.

Several serious fires involved the brigade in these first few years including J Howard's upholstery business in Olive St destroyed, March 1886, W T Kelly's

draper's shop Dean St in February 1887 and a number of house fires.

In January 1886 the *Border Post* announced that "the fire alarm bell purchased by the fire brigade has arrived." It cost £23 and was said to weigh 200 pounds (about 91 kg) and could be heard for three miles. It was yet to have a bell tower. At this time the brigade operated out of a shed adjoining the Rose Hotel in Kiewa Street.

In January 1888, Walter Billson resigned as brigade captain and Thomas Chubb, his Lieutenant, took over. By May 1890, Chubb had handed the position over to Thomas Ryan.



Albury Fire Station, Dean St

It wasn't until 1888 that the council granted the brigade land to build a station. What they got was a galvanised iron shed that was officially handed over to the brigade in February 1889. The station was in Market Square (which became Dean Square and much later Queen Elizabeth II Square), next to the Mechanics Institute and fronting Dean Street. The *Border Post* reported "a banquet was given in the newly erected fire station to celebrate." Captain Thomas Chubb stating "for the first time the brigade has been placed on a sound footing."

In January 1893 the store of Charles Stassen in Wilson St was completely gutted by fire. Also in January 1893, a fire destroyed three properties in Olive St owned by Dr Kennedy, including the premises of draper and tea merchant Joseph

Moses. The same premises were the scene of an earlier fire, the subject of an inquest just days before. At the inquest for the second fire, "the jury returned a verdict that the premises were wilfully set on fire by some person or persons unknown."

In January 1897 fire damaged the grocery store of Francis Sigg on the corner of Dean & Olive streets - an inquest was told that the premises and stock were insured for £9500 and that four years earlier police had been warned "to keep a sharp lookout at Sigg's shop." The jury returned a verdict "that the premises had been wilfully set on fire, but there was no evidence to show by whom."



Albury Volunteer Fire Brigade, 1888

Major fires destroyed properties on consecutive days in November 1898. A row of three shops were destroyed and another two severely damaged on the eastern side of Olive St on November 21. Destroyed were the shops of Mr Wood, greengrocer, Mr Puttick, tailor and Mr Mitchell, baker; damaged were the shops of J Brann, draper and Mr Maxwell, heavy machinery. The fire was said to have started when Mrs Wood's apron caught fire. The next day fire severely damaged stock at the coach building business of E C Ellis & Son of Townsend St.

Kruger's tannery in Atkins St was totally destroyed by fire in December 1898. A jury returned a verdict that "how the fire originated, whether accidentally or otherwise, the evidence does not enable us to say."

The brigade remained a volunteer brigade into the twentieth century. As support from the government was not sufficient to run the brigade, fund raising activities occupied a lot of the brigade's time.

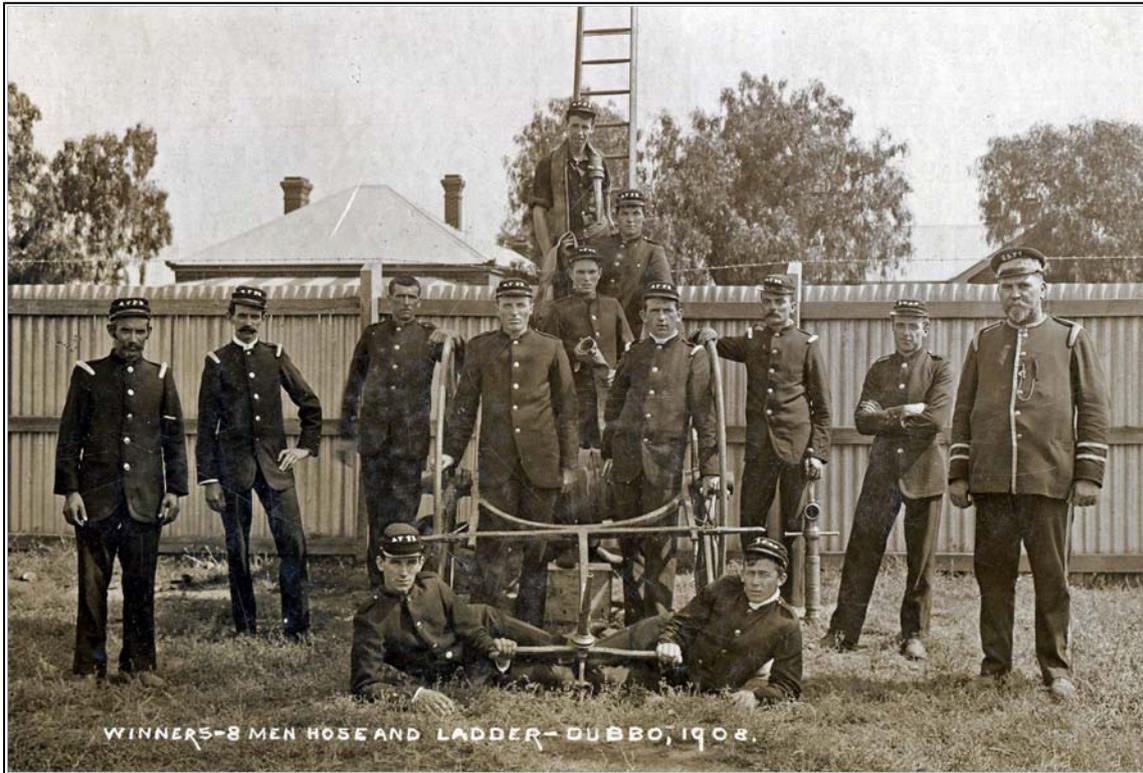
In December 1908, the *Albury Banner* reported "the new fire engine, recently procured by the local brigade out of the special grant of £250 from the Government, was publicly 'christened,' and a demonstration given on the Market Square. A staunch pair of lorry horses were attached to the engine." The paper went on to say that the engine will be known as *The Champion*.

By the early twentieth century, the Dean St fire station was proving inadequate. In 1910, NSW Fire Brigades' Board Superintendant Webb described the station as "a two storey barn of weather board and iron with earth flooring, and a disgrace to the principal street."

In June 1912, Albury received a motorised turbine for pumping water. The *Border Morning Mail* of June 10, 1912 reported "The new engine for the Albury Fire Brigade arrived yesterday in spite of the protests of Captain Ryan, and the municipal council ... the new engine is like the brigade's old one with the addition of a turbine at the back for pumping purposes. It, too, will need horses to draw it — but the brigade hasn't any horses."

Protests asking for a motorised vehicle received a promise from the Board of Fire Commissioners, but it was another four years before such a vehicle arrived.

Major fires in tested the brigade in 1909, 1910 and 1915. Hayes Flour Mill in Townsend St was severely damaged by fire in May 1909. An inquiry found that “the fire originated accidentally.” In December 1910, Abe Nathan’s store on the corner of Townsend St “was burnt to its foundations.” The *Albury Banner* reported that “The whole of the apparatus of the Fire Brigade was in work on the fire in an almost incredibly brief space of time. The regular members of the



Albury Volunteer Fire Brigade, 1908

brigade were all at work under Captain Ryan, and their efforts were ably supplemented by a number of men from the military camp, members of the police force, and a regiment of civilians.”

An inquiry concluded that “the evidence showed that the cause of such fire was accidental.”

The fire that destroyed Mates building in December 1915 was probably the largest fire that Albury had ever experience. The *Border Morning Mail* reported that the fire caused damages estimated at £62000 (about \$6,000,000 in 2017 terms). They went on to comment on firemen “having to haul by hand the turbine fire engine and its appliances to Mate’s fire.”

The brigade received much praise for confining most of the damage to the Mates building. An adjoining jeweller, Abraham Hart, whose stock received some damage, told the *Mail* “that he could not say enough in praise of the firemen, who did their work in a most admirable manner. He recognised that the firemen had made ‘a splendid save,’ and in recognition of this he stated that he would present each fireman with a gold medal.”

The *Border Morning Mail* reported that at the conclusion of an inquest into the cause of the fire “The coroner said there was nothing at all to indicate the origin of the fire. He then returned an open verdict, but how the fire occurred he was from the evidence unable to say.”

The management of T H Mate & Co thanked the firemen in a letter to the editor of the *Mail* “Will you kindly grant us space in your columns to publicly thank the captain and men of the



Mates Store fire, December 1915

Albury Fire Brigade for their splendid efforts against the fire which demolished our Dean street premises last night. All those who saw the conflagration will agree with us when we say that the pluck and tenacity of the firemen were beyond praise, and thanks to their untiring efforts, portion of our offices with important books of record were saved."

Summarising, of the thirty major fires in Albury between 1865 and 1915, 7 were adjudged to have been deliberately lit, several others considered "suspicious." Many however were quite accidental. All heating, lighting and power sources for industrial needs was provided from a burning source - wood, gas, coal, kerosene etc. Add to this the fact that much flammable material was used in construction, it is not so surprising that there were so many fires.

The Albury Municipal Council and the Board of Fire Commissioners took a long time to agree on plans for the new station. Finally, tenders were called for the new station in June 1915. A decision was made to move to a site in Kiewa St, several blocks north of Dean St. Not all were happy, opponents citing "four fires in the main business block in the last few months" as reason not to stray too far from Dean St.



Tom Ryan

The new Kiewa St station opened on August 18, 1916. The building cost £3,160 and included an engine room, watch room, recreation room, workshop and living quarters. At last Albury Fire Brigade took delivery of a motorised fire engine, built in the Board of Fire Commissioners workshops in Sydney and costing £750, the *Banner* pointing out that "It is a large 25 hp engine painted in red and gold."

James Grinton was the first resident fireman, living in the adjoining residence until his retirement in 1930. Grinton took over as fire captain from Tom Ryan, who retired after 31 years with Albury Volunteer Fire Brigade and over 20 years as captain.



Albury Civic Fire Station

Paying tribute to Captain Ryan at the opening of the new station, the president of the Board of Fire Commissioners, Mr Farrar MLC was quoted in the *Border Morning Mail* "He has given the best part of his life and vigour to the brigade ... Captain Ryan has not only looked after the town's protection in the event of fire, but he has also looked after the men who have been under him and the Albury brigade to-day, under him, has attained to the highest standard of efficiency."

Moving ahead to 2017, Albury has three stations, Albury Civic in Kiewa St, Albury Central in Mate St and Albury North in Nagle Rd.

