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By Jessica Crawford

It is not uncommon for the City of Liberal to receive donations from community members or relatives of community members. However, to receive a recent gift so rich in history, is rather noteworthy.

A bell on a Liberal fire apparatus dating back to 1916 made its way to Kearney, Neb., and found its way back home recently thanks to John Allen, son of former Liberal firefighter W.R. "Bill" Allen. Allen served on the Liberal department from 1939 to 1974.

"We have received a donation of considerable significance to the fire department," LFD Chief Kelly Kirk said. "A gentleman named John Allen from Kearney contacted me to inquire about the history of a fire bell that he had in his possession. He believed that the bell may have been taken from one of the City of Liberal's retired fire apparatus."

Kirk discussed a few possibilities with Allen, but felt retired chief Milton Rice would be the man with all the information Allen was searching for.

"He got past my knowledge real quick with the questions he was asking so I referred him to Milton Rice," Kirk said. "I believed he would have a better knowledge of the history and origin of the bell."

It was ultimately discovered the bell adorned Liberal's first fire engine, a 1916 Brockway Motor Truck – chemical pumper, rather some newer models. Kirk said all models that came after the 1916 truck either had electric sirens or airhorns. The bell, he said, would have been the only warning device for the 1916 truck.



“When we got the bell back here, Kory (Krause) and Milton got to looking through old photographs,” Kirk said. “Kory got out the 1916 picture and right in the middle of it sat the bell. When you look at it, that has to be it. If you think about it, that truck was bought in 1916, it probably had a 20 to 25 year life span and so it retired in the early 40s when Bill Allen would have started. They probably scrapped it out and he got the bell.”

Not only does the bell have a interesting history for the City of Liberal, the Allen family has fond memories of it as well.

“Mr. Allen related that his father, Bill Allen, was a firefighter in Liberal and used the bell to call his children to dinner,” Kirk said. “John said his dad had it mounted on a post on the patio and at night when the kids were out in the yard he would ring that bell and it was their cue to come home for supper. After his father passed away, John inherited and their family tradition was to ring it at family gatherings to signal mealtimes.”

Allen is currently a hospital administrator planning to move to Michigan to enjoy retirement. He felt it important to get the bell safely to Liberal before moving even farther away.

“He asked if we could make arrangements to pick it up before he moved to his retirement home,” Kirk said. “Milton Rice worked with Mr. Allen to make the necessary arrangements. Milton Rice's son, Guy Rice, and Liberal firefighter Tyson Rice own and operate Just 4 U Services here in Liberal. Guy Rice had deliveries scheduled in Colby Kansas last Thursday. He agreed to make the trip from Colby to Kearney to pick up the bell from Mr. Allen and return it to us.

“The trip from Colby to Kearney is 360 miles round trip,” Kirk explained. “Due to the blizzard conditions in the northwest part of Kansas last Wednesday and Thursday, it required an overnight stay to get the bell and make the delivery.”

Kirk not only expressed his gratitude to John Allen for generously giving the bell back to the city. He was also thankful for thoughtfulness of Guy Rice in regards to retrieving the bell from Nebraska.

The bell was delivered to the LFD last Thursday evening. Kirk said he would like to have the bell, which weighs approximately 100 pounds, mounted on an oak base. This way it could be portable and used for ceremonies in the future.

“We will now begin the process of making arrangements to have the bell mounted to some sort of decorative stand or platform engraved with this dedication,” Kirk said. “I envision the bell being incorporated into any ceremonies or significant events involving the fire department. This has turned out to be an opportunity to regain a very important part of the history of our city. One which we will care for and display proudly.”

Kirk again expressed his appreciation to the Allen family for their generous donation of a fine piece of history.

“We are very appreciative of the Allen family considering our department to be the final home and caretakers of the bell which was such an important part of their family for so many years, he said”

Allen donated the bell with the following dedication:

“In Memory of our dad Bill Allen”

“Donated by John W. Allen and Pam (Allen) Spry”

“This bell from a ‘retired’ Liberal, Kansas Fire Truck served two generations of our family as a ‘dinner bell.’

“When we heard the bell we came home for a family meal.”

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