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**Department Profile:
River Falls Fire Department**

**Firefighter's Classroom:
Drones Fly Into
the Fire Service**

**Milestones:
Eagle F.D.'s
Dave Rockteacher**



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PLT 9 P-9 P38 10697
RIVER FALLS FIRE DEPT
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River Falls F.D.

By Pete Wicklund
Photography by Fred Loomis

There is a cliché that's been around for many years, certainly one heard by many in the fire service over the years: Too many chiefs and not enough warriors. But, at the River Falls Fire Department, a larger field of officers is the pillar of a department reorganization, which is just completing its first year.

The department is a volunteer organization of 50 members overseen by a full-time chief. They are responsible for protecting a 148-square-mile service area that includes the University of Wisconsin – River Falls, and a large stretch of the Kinnickinnic River and even a portion of the St. Croix River. Among those 50 members are now more than a dozen officers: Three division chiefs; four battalion chiefs; six captains; and a health and safety officer.

Additionally, there are six engineers, who while not holding officer rank, are the firefighters primarily responsible for oversight of a specific vehicle or vehicles.

The new structure was endorsed not only by Chief Scott Nelson, the city Police and Fire Commission and the city administration. It was the membership itself that developed and signed off on the new footprint.

It started with a blunt directive from Nelson, who became the department's first full-time chief in 2010. Previously, Nelson, who began his career in Mankato, MN., had served as deputy director of public safety-fire in Red Wing, MN., and as the first full-time chief in Lakeville, MN.

“Over a year ago I told the membership

I'm not going to be here forever and you need to decide the direction of this department,” Nelson said during a late-September interview at his office. “You're going to get a new chief, whether it's internal or external, and we want to make this really solid so when the new chief comes in you have a really good organization where it can grow and build on the foundation we shape today ... I told the members ‘you need to survive into the future.’”

River Falls F.D. was like many a department, Nelson and several of his officers said. There was a lot of longtime tradition that, in some cases, persisted for no particular reason nor necessarily for the good of the department. In some cases, a promotion to officer meant retaining the title for the remainder of that person's time with the department. And some firefighters were not always



engaged, merely going through the motions.

Nelson told his department that every single day there are volunteer departments in the state and nation that can't get daytime responders, that can't recruit new blood, that are consolidating. So, for RFFD to survive into the future, what steps would they take?

To start, Nelson took seven members who represented a cross section of the department as far as experience, ranging from a new member in his second year on the department to members who had been on for over 40 years. Nelson told the committee, "OK, design me a department."

Nelson recalled that "they looked at me and said, 'are you serious?' And I said, 'Absolutely'."

The committee reviewed the department's organizational structure, created job

descriptions, reviewed annual stipend amounts and set up a process to apply for officer positions.

The end result was three specific department divisions: Training; operations; and community risk reduction, which encompasses inspections and public education. Also, the department did away with old bylaws, deciding instead to run the department on standard operating guidelines. An annual performance review schedule was implemented. A three-year term of office limit was placed for all officers with the exception of the city-appointed chief, with incumbents having to reapply for their positions at the end of the term if they desire to continue in their roles.

Compensation was changed to a flat rate per call, activity or training as opposed to a complicated and at times uneven stipend system.

Changes were made to the officer

structure, with the positions of chief engineer and lieutenants eliminated and the battalion chief and division chief positions implemented.

The changes did not come without some growing pains. A few members decided to part ways with the department, but many more enthusiastically embraced the change.

Tom Foley, division chief of operations, noted that prior to the restructuring, "People were here, but many were not participating; now they are participating. We're getting good input and solid input."

Foley adds that the restructuring "was not something that was forced from the top down; it was all inclusive."

Training

That all-inclusive philosophy also extends to the planning of trainings, which take place every Monday night at the RFFD

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Beautiful downtown River Falls

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firehouse. While making sure that the department stays on top of basics and essentials while balancing out new trends and developments in the fire service, Ed Vlack, division chief of training, lets his battalion chiefs work with other members to set up the specific trainings to meet that month's general topic, like extrication in

June or fire suppression in July.

"I don't want to do a lot of micromanaging, but I will tell them what I want to make sure we cover," Vlack said. "It's not like we've reinvented the wheel, but we've structured it differently."

But giving the officers a say in carrying out the trainings has had a noticeable ripple effect down to the general membership.

Molly Foley, a 24-year member of the department, says the trainings are now better structured, planned out in advance, and no longer done on the fly.

"Our training officers are just huge fire geeks," Molly Foley said. "They want to train you in new ways to do things, it's not just from your firefighter book ... and that's a good thing!"

Vlack said the department has borrowed a page from the Stillwater, MN., Fire Department playbook that emphasizes core training elements. RFFD now has 4½ to five pages of core training elements

for its members and the department is working on integrating skill expectation evaluations for the membership. A list of core training elements has also been set for the department officers.

"It's made a big difference in what we do," said Vlack, who noted that the results of the trainings are becoming evident during the department's calls.

Chief Nelson also noted that RFFD sponsored a fire academy and invited neighboring departments to attend and participate and a goal of Vlack's is to have more mutual aid trainings.

A unique training incentive

Another way to get more members to show up for trainings? Food. As he was getting ready to retire from his job as high school resource officer for the River Falls Police Department, Doug Rudesill, a 33-year member of the Fire Department, hit upon an idea. He talked to the teacher who handled the cooking classes in the school's home economics department and pitched an idea: "I said 'how would you like to cook for the Fire Department on



Smokey the Bear celebrates his 75th birthday



River Falls firefighters Jake Roche, Gabe Lancaster, Jordon Kirchoff, Phil Baumer, Bill Benedict and Bill's son Gavin prepare for annual open house celebration



Firefighters demonstrate extrication at open house



River Falls Chief, Scott Nelson



Captain Doug Rudesill with station visitors

Monday nights?"

The answer was an enthusiastic yes. The department pays for the food, the students then budget, plan menus and, on the dozen cooking stations in the foods classroom, prepare the food. In return, the students get community service credit and the firefighters get a meal they enjoy.

"We get tremendous meals. The meals are great," Rudesill said. "Some of our firefighters are single and this is the best meal they get for the week."

Chief Nelson adds that the meals sure beat pickle and pimento loaf sandwiches.

In addition to the meals for the department's trainings, the foods class helped out with providing barbecue beef for the department's open house that took place on Sept. 30.

Public outreach

Innovation and dedication show in other areas of the department as well. For example, in the Community Risk Reduction Division, River Falls F.D. has an award-winning public education program run under the direction of 27-year department veteran Pauline Williams. She gets the department to keep a high profile with fire prevention and public education efforts.

Department members assist Williams with visits to local daycares and entertaining some preschoolers at the fire station.

October means a busy time in the schools

with Fire Safety Education Month.

The department visits more than 1,500 students over the course of two weeks and more than 300 children spend time in the fire safety house learning the importance of escaping a smoke-filled room. More than 400 combined volunteer hours are spent in the schools during October. In addition, the department's safety house makes visits to other communities in Pierce, Dunn, Pepin and St. Croix counties.

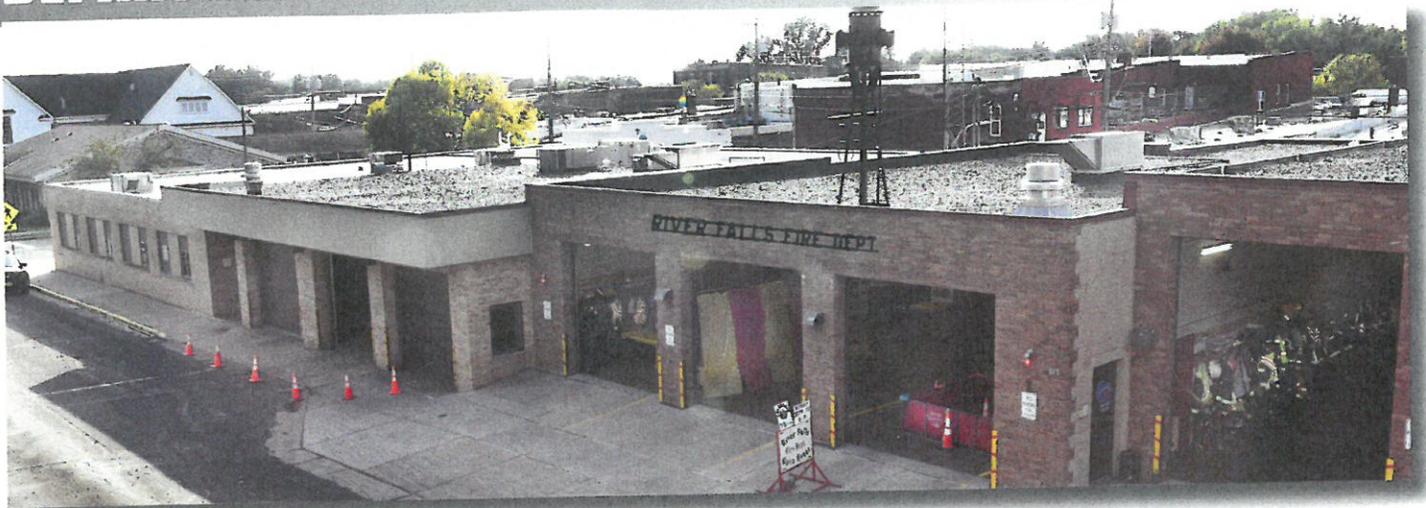
The department's big event is its open house, held on the last Monday of September. It's not just opening the station's doors and apparatus to the public; the street in front of the station is closed and demonstrations like extrication take place. There is food and bounce houses and other activities for kids. This year, in addition to the yearly NFPA theme, RFFD celebrated Smokey Bear's 75th birthday and stressed campfire safety. Smokey was even on hand to greet people.

Inspections

The department is responsible for more than 800 annual inspections at commercial, industrial and public structures and facilities and all of that is handled by four volunteer members of the department – there is no full-time inspector. Even with that tall order, Mike Moody, division chief of community risk reduction, says for 2019 his crews are expecting to complete reviews at more than 95 percent of the locations.

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DEPARTMENT PROFILE



River Falls downtown station

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Helping keep track of the inspection reports, as well as numerous other data for the department, are Molly Foley and Capt. Troy Malmer. Molly and Troy have mastered several software programs, most notably ImageTrend, and are performing the duties that many departments would have done by a paid administrative assistant, including preparing the payroll report for City Hall.

The future

For Chief Nelson and his crew, the main challenge for the coming year is to fully implement the department reorganization and iron out any bugs that might emerge.

"It's pretty solid and the membership is happy about that," Nelson said. "It's been a cool transition and it's been fun to watch. I'm not going to lie to you, it could have gone south as quickly as it went north. But we're heading in a north direction and everyone is on the train."

The department is also working with the city on the strong possibility of a new RFFD station. The current one presents challenges for today's taller fire apparatus and office and meeting space are also limited.

Nelson has also made a request of the city to add a second full-time position: deputy chief. That person would not only help with oversight but would be key to the transition when Nelson retires in a year or so.

But foremost, the department is emphasizing its core mantra of responsibility to its members.

"One of our biggest philosophies here is it's family first, your job is second and then it's this place," Division Chief Tom Foley said. "That's the way it has to be. If you're not happy with the first two, you're not going to make this place work."

River Falls F.D. at a glance:

Founded: 1885

Counties: Pierce and St. Croix

MABAS Divisions: 156 and 143

Department type: Municipal (rural areas protected via contractual agreement with the city)

Personnel: 50 volunteer, paid-per-call members

EMS: Service provided by River Falls Ambulance, a separate entity from the Fire Department.

Service area: 148 square miles, including all of the City of River Falls; all of the Town of River Falls and a large part of the Town of Clifton in Pierce County; all of the Town of Kinnickinnic, a large portion of the Town of Troy and a small portion of the Town of Pleasant Valley in St. Croix County.

Number of stations: 1, centrally located in Downtown River Falls.

Annual budget: \$830,000

ISO rating: 3

Call volume: 278 in 2018

Special teams: Hazmat (operations level; cold-water-rescue; extrication)

Fundraisers: None held by the department

Community Outreach: Open house held on the last Monday in September; very active at local schools (preschool through fifth); also take part in many local events.

River Falls F.D. apparatus roster:

Engine 4: 2001 Freightliner, 1,500 GPM, 1,000-gallon tank pumper

Engine 7: 1989 Ford, 1,250 GPM, 1,000-gallon tank pumper

Engine 15: 2015 Pierce, 1,500 GPM, 750-gallon tank rescue/pumper

Ladder 1: 2004 Pierce 100-foot aerial (2,000 GPM pump, 300-gallon tank)

Tender 1: 1994 Freightliner, 2,000-gallon tanker/personnel carrier

Tender 2: 1995 Freightliner, 2,000-gallon tanker/personnel carrier

Brush 1: 2001 Ford, 250 GPM grass/brush truck

Brush 2: 2012 Chevy Hi-Pressure GPM grass/brush truck

Kubota UTV Brush & Rescue Unit
Model A Ford, used for department promotions

1939 Ford used for department promotions

Fire Safety House trailer used for Fire Safety Education

2003 Fire Prevention enclosed trailer

2004 Specialized Rescue enclosed trailer

2017 Hazmat enclosed trailer

2019 Chevy Tahoe command vehicle