

OLDEST FIREMAN.

John Ray Began to "Run With the Machine" Almost 40 Years Ago, and is Still on Duty.



JOHN RAY, BOSTON'S VETERAN FIREMAN.

In South Boston, in the quarters of engine 2, there is a fireman who for almost 40 years ran with the old machines or rode on the new, who wore the first fire badge issued in Boston, and who was connected with the first steamer used in the Boston fire department.

His name is John Ray. He is the oldest fireman in point of continuous service on active duty at present, has seen all the fires of any importance which Boston has had in the last half century, and has been on duty at most of them, yet is as lively and active today as when he "ran with the old machine" in the days before the war.

Fireman Ray has seen the crude hand engines used in the 50s give way to the powerful engines of today, the hand hose supplanted by the hose wagon, and great ladder trucks replace the light little wagons which the ladder companies used in the early days and all that remains of the fire department of 40 years ago is here and there a relic of some pet machine.

"I entered the fire department about 1855," said fireman Ray to a Globe man a day or two ago. "I was about 18 years of age and went on only as a volunteer. I joined Union hose 2, on Hudson st, staid there about a year and a half, joined extinguisher 5, on East st, and on Feb 1, 1857, was elected a permanent member of the company.

"In January, 1860, I was transferred to the Lawrence steam fire engine, 7, on Purchase st, six years later went to engine 1, then on Broadway, South Boston, and Dec 27, 1893, I was transferred to this company, and here I am."

It was for the magnificent sum of 25 cents a fire that Mr Ray did duty as a substitute from 1855 to 1857, and if he wasn't there with his company, not only was the 25 cents lost but 25 more as well, that fine being levied on absentees.

After joining extinguisher 5, the "salary" was raised to \$100 a year, but even this amount was no inducement to sit in the engine house all day, and thus it was that the fire department at that time consisted mostly of call men.

The chief of the department received \$1200 a year, assistant chief \$250, and the foreman of each company, as he was called, was favored with \$150, while clerks of fire companies got \$125.

In 1860, when Boston realized the necessity of better means of protection against fire and the department was put on a permanent basis, a little better rate of salaries was paid and better apparatus was supplied.

It was in that year that the famous Lawrence steam fire engine, 7, the first steamer used by the Boston department, was put into commission, having been run a year under contract and proved a success. The steamer was made in Lawrence by an inventor, and was brought to Boston only after considerable argument by the fire companies, who best appreciated the city's needs.

As used in Boston, it was drawn by two horses and sometimes three, and it drew along after it a two-wheeled tender full of fuel and a second two-wheeled hose carriage, making three pieces of apparatus. It presented a comical sight, as Mr Ray tells the story.

During Mr Ray's connection with engine 7 he made a relief valve for the pump on the new engine to relieve the pressure on the hose, and with two or three other improvements it made quite a respectable engine during the three years that it was used, it being sold to an iron company in 63 and used as a pumping engine.

Not long after the introduction of en-

gine 7 several other engines of different makes were brought into Boston, and in less than two years there were 12 or more steamers in commission here, not to mention about the same number of hand engines and a few ladder trucks.

The hand engines did not suffer for want of energy to propel them, for in the days when they were used everybody helped to haul the rope, and even when coming face to face with flames the crowd of men and boys worked with a will, assisting the firemen, for they were for the moment firemen too.

It was hand engines that surrounded the big Battery wharf fire in 1855 and prevented its spread to the North end, and at the Gerrish market fire a year later.

Fireman Ray paused for a moment as he referred to the Battery wharf conflagration. The fire, he said, caught in the daytime and burned all night. Its spread was so rapid that help was called from places around Boston, and everybody who could help at all lent his aid, for at one time it looked as if the North end was doomed.

During the progress of the fire several companies of men were cut off, and had narrow escapes from death. Chelsea lost an engine there, while several other pieces of apparatus were more or less wrecked.

As the night progressed and the fires spread to the ships in the harbor, the scene, said Mr Ray, was one of awful grandeur. Waves of flame climbed aloft among the masts, placing the burning vessels in bold relief against the black sky.

The city was divided into districts, each having a district box. One of these was rung when a fire was discovered, and the companies responding to the box received the location of the fire from there.

All this was changed with the advent of the fire steamers, however, substantial engine houses were built and regular fire gongs put in and it was only a year or two later the present system of fire boxes was introduced.

In the general eagerness to make good time to a fire, horses were often kept out on the floor of the engine houses until 11 or 12 o'clock at night, for it was the firemen themselves who had been instrumental in getting the steamers and no pains were spared to prove their usefulness.

During the riots in 1862 and 63, the fire department was more than once placed in a perilous position and for a time the members deemed it expedient to carry arms.

"At the time of the Cooper st riot," said Mr Ray, "when the mob tried to break into the state armory and were fired on by battery 1, inside, the fire department was called out to subdue a blaze and it required the services of the Roxbury cavalry to enable them to work.

"The fire was a small one and was soon extinguished; but it was only the beginning of a series of annoyances which the department underwent while the war was raging.

"Often when an alarm rung the artillery were found on the streets to open a way for the engines and then surrounded the men to protect them at their work."

It was not until 1873, under Chief Damrell, that the firemen donned uniforms, their badges having previously distinguished them from others at a fire, while reporters, continued Mr Ray, as he told the story, had only to show their notebooks, each marked with the name of the paper they represented and they were admitted through the lines.

After the big fire of 1873 the fire commission was established and many other important changes were made for the betterment of the department. The event of 73 had taught a lesson.

"I do not think," said Mr Ray, "that that fire would have spread as it did if there had been enough horses to draw the apparatus at the city's command to the fire, but there was not, and the engines lay idle in the houses until they were removed and drawn to the fire by crowds of men."

At the Globe theater fire of 73 the Northampton st fire of 74, Mr Ray did effective duty.