



The Eagle/Richard Hanners

Ten volunteer members of the Prairie City Fire Department gathered at the fire hall Aug. 8 for their weekly meeting. From left are Chris Camarena Sr., Randy Hennen, Devin Packard, Carlos Bortell, Jonathan Lawrence, Chris Camarena Jr., Brandon Gillihan, Kirk Stebbens and Andy Hutzell. Kneeling in front is Chief Marvin Rynearson.

# Prairie City firefighters protect wide territory

By Richard Hanners  
Blue Mountain Eagle

Marvin Rynearson started hanging out with the Prairie City Fire Department in 1968 when he was just 15 years old. He officially joined when he turned 16. Now the chief, he'll mark his 51st year with the department in December.

"We've always maintained a mentoring group," he told the Eagle, noting that even now a few high school-aged kids are on the roster.

The rural area protected by the department is wide ranging, covering about 131 acres across the valley, extending from just past timberline at the north to just past timberline at the south.

West to east, the rural protection area runs from Pine Creek east to about 1 mile past the Conestoga wagon on Highway 26. The department is unique in the state for providing both wildland and structure protection in its service area.

All the firefighting equipment belongs to the rural side of the department — with the exception of the 1928 Model A Ford that runs down Front Street during each Fourth of July parade. The antique fire engine belongs to the city, Rynearson said.

"We used it during a downtown fire about 30 years ago," he said.

The department has two Type 1 structure engines built in 1995 and two wildland engines — a Type 6

on loan from the federal government and a Type 4 6-by-6 military-style engine. It also has two tenders and a vehicle for the chief. Extrication equipment is kept in one of the Type 1 engines, he said.

An all-volunteer department with about 20 on the roster, Rynearson said response varies depending on the season. Many of the local firefighters work on wildland crews in the summer.

"That's just the way it is," he said.

Rynearson said he could use about 10-15 more volunteers. Only 10 of the current roster are active, showing up at meetings and not just the big fires, and he'd prefer to see 20 active volunteers. The number of active volunteers

has declined some since the 1970s and 1980s.

He recalled two fires that were downtown and difficult. A fire that destroyed a movie theater dating back to the silent era left a vacant lot on the south side of Front Street.

"We did a good job of preventing damage to the adjacent buildings on that one," he recalled.

Another fire burned down the Jackson Apartments building where the post office stands now.

"Those were trying fires," he recalled.

The November 2017 fire at the Strawberry Village Apartment complex tragically took the lives of two young children who were trapped upstairs.

"We responded in seven minutes at 3 a.m. in the morning," Rynearson said. "You can't beat that."

When the firefighters arrived, however, the staircase was gone and they had to find another access route. By then, it was too late, he said.

Being a volunteer firefighter is rewarding if sometimes difficult or tragic. It provides a pathway to a career in firefighting with much of the same certification available from expensive schools.

Anyone 18 or older who wants to learn more should come to one of their meetings in the fire hall at 142 S. Kilbourne St. every Thursday at 6 p.m., Rynearson said.

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