

My Fire Truck and I

My friend Clem, (Master keeper of all great and true stories at the George Washington Chapter of the Model A club) upon hearing this story, of "My Fire Truck and I", stated repeatedly "that truck is meant to be yours, that truck **IS** meant to be yours." The story, of which you are about to read, has sections that seem stranger than fiction, but they are true.

In 2004, I received a telephone call from my twin sister that my father, Robert Willard French, had passed away in Florida. Per the agreed upon plans, I personally called my parents' closest friends in Bliss, NY; where they had lived for many years. One of the men, whom I phoned, was the Fire Chief of the Bliss Fire Department; my Dad had been a highly devoted volunteer fireman for many, many years. During the discussion of the funeral arrangements, to have the service at the Baptist Church in Bliss, then burial at a nearby cemetery, the Chief asked if there was anything else that he could do for me.



Without thinking, I stated that I would still like to buy the old Model AA fire truck that my Dad used to drive if they still owned it. We had moved to Bliss in about 1956, and Dad soon joined the volunteer fire department. My Dad would often take me down to the fire station with him when there were odd jobs to be done. One of my greatest joys was hand cranking the siren on this 1929 Buffalo Fire Truck. It is called a Buffalo because the Buffalo Fire Appliance Company did the conversion. I had expressed an interest in buying it in the 70's, but

the department would not sell it. After I got married in 1973, I constantly told my wife that someday I was going to buy an antique fire truck like the Model AA in Bliss. But, having moved away from Bliss in 1971, I had no idea if they still had the truck or not.

Well, there was about half a minute of silence, then the Chief said "Marty, you're not going to believe this, but, at the commissioners' meeting two weeks ago, we voted to sell the truck. We haven't told anyone yet, as we are trying to determine how much it is worth. We are now getting ready to advertise it for sale by sealed bid".

Wow!!!! They still had the truck! It was for sale! It would soon be mine! Of course, I would win with the highest bid; no one else could possibly want it more than I! The truck would soon be mine! Years of dreaming come true!

Value? How do you determine the value of a faded old fire truck? I knew that one of the men working on the construction site with me, Billy Jaeger and his father, Andy Jaeger owned both a Model A pickup and a Model AA truck. My neighbor owns a 1941 Mack fire truck, and is active in the Old Dominion Historical Fire Society. I asked lots of questions. I looked at fire trucks and Model AAs for sale on E-bay and several other sites. I asked more questions of other members of ODHFS. We all came up with what we thought was a fair and decent bid. Then, several collectors of fire apparatus, who knew how much I was going to bid, started asking too many questions about the bid address and due date.

Worry! Worry! Worry! Would they outbid me? How could I make sure that I won the bid? But, I remembered that fire departments' often get remorseful and want to buy back their old

equipment. So, on a two pronged approach, I raised my bid by 10% without telling any of the people who had helped me set the original bid price, and I included a clause giving the fire department the first right of refusal in buying the truck back; if ever my heirs or I decided to sell the truck. I won!



Worry! Worry! Now that I won the bid, how was I going to get the money to pay for it? Ah, saved by my wife and by my father's generosity, for as I was trying to decide who I could borrow money from, my wife remembered that my father had given us some stock certificates as a gift many years earlier. Lo and behold, when I sold the stock, it was just enough to pay for the truck and the costs of transporting it to my house.

It was during the time that I was making arrangements to pick up the truck, that my wife discovered that pictures of my fire

truck were included in two books. The first book, *The History of The Buffalo Fire Appliance Corporation* by Peter D. West, showed the delivery day (Nov 19, 1929) factory photo. The second book, *Antique Fire Apparatus of Western New York 1798-1978* by Jerry Clement, showed the truck sitting in the Bliss Fire Department about 2000.

Another uncanny twist to the story of the truck occurred in October of 2010 and is told by this e-mail that I sent to my friend Pete West.

Believe it or not, but I just got a 100% complete, 100% authentic, 1929 Buffalo Fire Appliance Fire Extinguisher and holding bucket, that exactly matches the one that is mounted on the drivers side of the truck, except it needs cleaning and polishing.

Well, there is more to this story. When I bought the truck in 2004, (after my Dad's funeral) the extinguisher on the rider's side was missing. I assumed that it had gotten damaged when the damage occurred to the fender (the dent beside the extinguisher mount), and had been lost or discarded.

Every time, that I showed a person the picture of my truck that is in your book on the Buffalo Fire Appliance Corporation, I agonized fact that the extinguisher, which so clearly shows in the photo, is now missing. Several times, I thought about transferring the one from the driver's side to the rider's side, just so the rider's side would match the photo.

A month ago, I got word that my Mom had passed away. Her wishes were to be cremated and buried with my father, at the cemetery near Bliss; where my truck came from. Two weeks ago, as I was exhibiting the truck at the Manassas Park Fire Dept open house, I was talking to one of my friends about how I got the truck after my father's death, and how I was soon going home to bury my Mom. I saw one of the chiefs bring some old gear out of a room labeled "storage." I had a flash of thought, and realized that I had never asked the Chief of the Bliss Fire Dept whether he knew the location of the missing extinguisher.

As soon as I got home, I called him and asked if he had any idea what had happened to it. His paraphrased comment was that it had been in the storage shed out back, and it was supposed to have been given to me when I got the truck. Since I didn't have it, it was probably still in the storage shed.

The next day, he called and stated that the complete extinguisher and base were still sitting in the storage shed; where he had put them years ago; when they were knocked off the running board. He then told me that I could pick them up after the funeral. The extinguisher is now reunited with the truck.

This though, is not the end of the story, for I have only told you about the recent years. On Nov 12, 2010, I was reading old western NY newspapers via the internet. I discovered that my truck had been influential on even my earliest of life, for as it is often said that "Truth is stranger than fiction" and "only time will tell how one event influences another." If you believe these sayings, then I have more of the story to tell.

As I was growing up, my father, Willard French, told me, a number of times, about the day that he was blowing straw into the barn on the farm, and the barn caught fire. The barn was located in Pike, NY about 7 miles from Bliss. When I bought the truck, from the Bliss Fire Department, I was speculating about whether or not it had responded to my father's barn fire. A number of people stated that it was unlikely that a truck would respond 7 miles, to another township, for mutual aid in those days.

I knew the barn had burned before I was born, but never knew the date of the fire. Imagine my emotions when I found this newspaper clipping from the Castilian, Thursday, Nov. 4, 1948. It is hard to read, but in the third column, just below the center of the page, is an item titled:

'FIRE DEPARTMENT CALLED TO FRENCH FARM NEAR PIKE'

Castile Fire Department responded last Friday morning, Oct 28, to the Willard French farm on Route 19, north of Pike when fire of undetermined origin destroyed the large barn. Companies from Pike and Bliss also fought the blaze. The flames and embers did not _____ on the house. Other farm buildings were saved. Mr. French was blowing buckwheat straw into the barn, and the men were in the field for another load when the barn was discovered on fire.

According to the records that I have received, the only truck that Bliss had at that time was my 1929 Model AA Fire truck. It WAS at my Dad's barn fire.

Now the even more eerie, strange set of truths. If you believe that life starts at conception, I was there when it was being used to fight the fire.

My mother had told of the agony of watching the barn burn and of watching the firemen's desperate battle to save the house and other buildings. Yes, as she stood there listening to the roar of the 1929 Model AA engine, in what is now MY fire truck, pumping water onto the fire, and watching the Bliss fire men use the truck and equipment to battle the blaze, my twin sister and I were smuggled inside her womb; six months prior to our birth.

Thus fore sayeth Clem, "that truck is meant to be yours."

Marty French