

Western people

A supplement to The Western Producer

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Western people

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Pumping power

After a couple of bad fires people in Riceton, Saskatchewan decided to build their own fire truck.

By DEANA DRIVER

If a community needs a fire truck, the logical solution is to buy one. But if a fire truck is needed and there is no money to buy one, the only reasonable solution is to build one.

At least that's what they did in the village of Riceton, Saskatchewan, about 45 kilometres southeast of Regina.

The village itself houses about 100 people and the idea of some sort of local fire protection had been talked about for years, said Neal Moyses, a Riceton farmer. "It's like the weather, talked about and nothing ever done."

He and a couple other local farmers changed all that in 1974.

The village's recreation complex caught fire during the previous winter. The Milestone fire department answered the call but they had problems getting their equipment operational once there. The delay only sealed the fate of the rink.

The entire building, which was a skating and curling rink, community kitchen and hall, burned to the ground. It was too much for the community to take sitting down.

Moyses and a couple of other local people called a meeting of village residents shortly after the rink fire. By collecting money at and after the meeting, they were able to buy a 20-horsepower portable pump plus hoses and small firefighting tools for use by Riceton firefighting volunteers.

"We decided to sell a membership to a local fire prevention association," Moyses said. For \$100 the subscriber is given a five-year membership in the Riceton Volunteer Fire Brigade. "What that will give you is no-cost fire protection," Moyses said.

Non-members who have a fire on their property have to pay brigade members by the hour, plus a cleanup charge. The money goes toward maintenance of equipment and building, training for the volunteers and some insurance coverage, Moyses said.

The portable pump was called into duty a few times in the next year or so for brush fires and fires caused by people burning garbage in high winds. In 1976 another

major fire prompted the firefighters to look for a better way to do the job.

The fire broke out on a farm near town. It was an extremely hot summer day and before the fire was put out, nine grain bins, a milking parlor, housing barn, loose calf barn, 4000 bales and a couple of calves were gone, Moyses said. The village's portable pump went for 13 hours that day to try to control the blaze and the Milestone fire department worked for eight of those hours as well.

"After that fire, we decided we needed more pumping power, more mobility," Moyses said. "Until that time we were just loading our equipment on the back of a half ton and going."

The fire brigade set out to find a fire truck. But new trucks cost about \$50,000 and Riceton just couldn't afford that amount. They decided to build their own model.

Moyses estimated he drove about 3000 miles that winter collecting memberships and looking at fire trucks. Dan Kirkpatrick, Riceton's fire chief, rode along for many of those miles.

A cab and chassis were purchased in the late fall of 1976 from a Regina company. The next three winters were spent literally rebuilding the vehicle piece by piece into a useful fire truck.

Moyses and Kirkpatrick credit another Riceton man, George Spry, with doing most of the rebuilding work. "He's been a very valuable man," said Kirkpatrick. "George probably put in more time than Dan and I did together," Moyses added.

The truck was torn apart and completely rebuilt from transmission to cab interior. The 600-gallon tank and fire truck components were designed by the men based on other fire vehicles they'd seen. A few pieces were modified to suit their own specific needs.

Since the truck uses surface water, a sieve was added to the end of the suction hose to keep out rocks and other debris. The portable pump is carried in a side compartment of the truck, so it can be a secondary system if needed. A portable 1000-gallon canvas tank was constructed to hold water if the source is too far from the fire.

"A lot of the main material on the truck was used material we scrounged and whatever," Moysesaid. The fire hall was once a garage for a car dealership in town and was purchased from the Riceton Co-op for a reasonable price in 1980 after the truck was functioning. Another big saving was in the cost of labor, including thread work done by Alex Sakundiak, another local volunteer. All told, the truck and garage cost about \$20,000, Moysesaid.

The truck's main pump produces 420 gallons per minute at 150 pounds per square inch, Moysesaid. Those numbers are standard output for a small fire truck, but Moysesaid the truck has put out 720 gallons at 100 pounds in tests.

The truck can handle two two-and-a-half-inch discharge lines and carries 30 feet of hard suction for both the hand pump and portable pump. There is 1200 feet of hose. Other equipment includes two extension ladders, a roof ladder, air packs for the firefighters and various nozzles. The truck also has room for chemical extinguishers, a stretcher, backboard and oxygen resuscitation equipment. The fire department has enough turnout gear for 13 firefighters plus Moyses and Kirkpatrick.

Riceton's home-built fire truck has been used a few times since it was completed in the spring of 1979. In fact, it was used even before it was finished, at a grass fire near town. The community of Gray, a short hop away, also subscribes to the Riceton fire service and has needed the truck for a garage fire, storage shed and house fire there in the past few years.

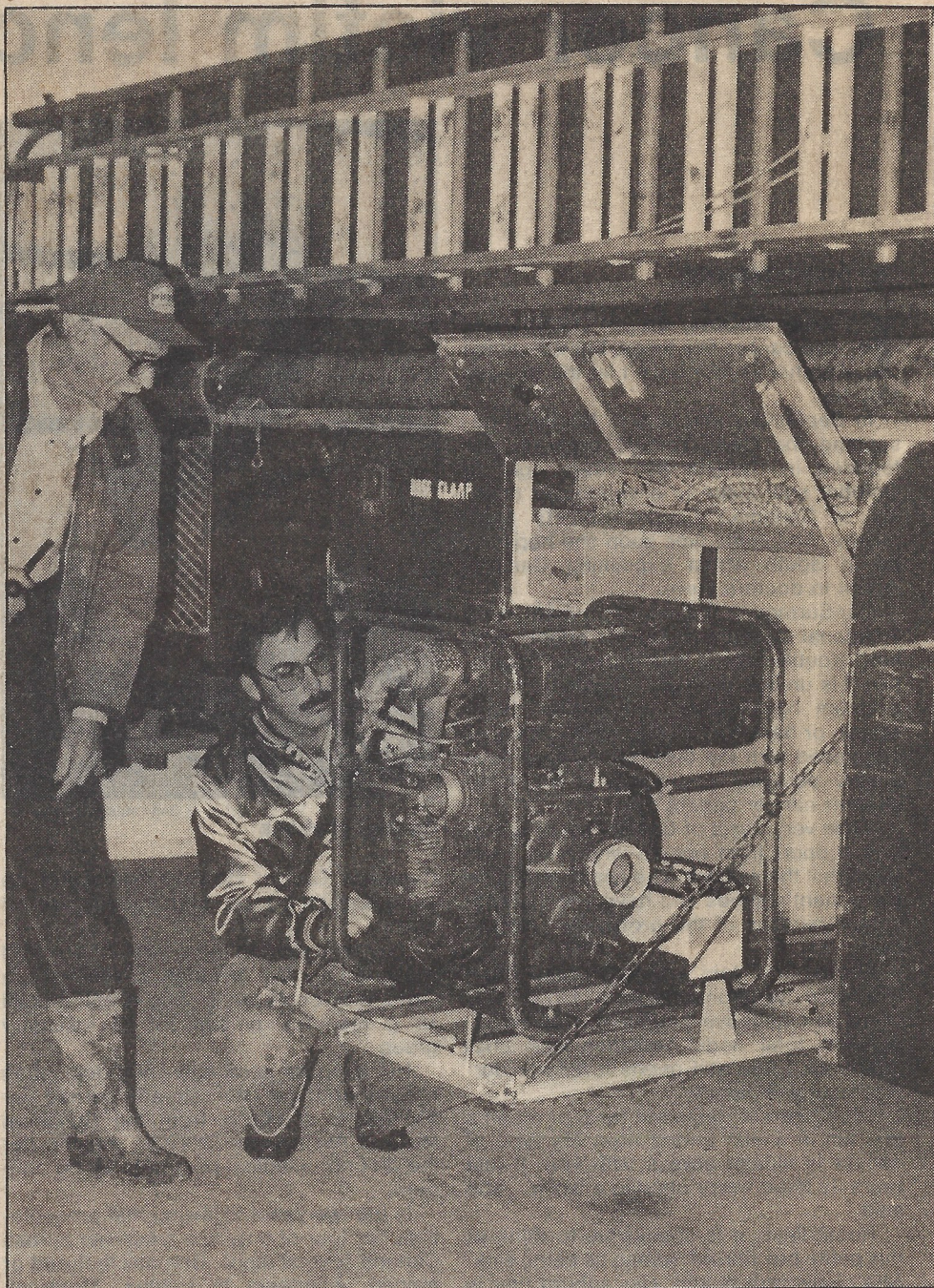
There have been some stubble fires and the like, but "nothing really major here since we built it," said Kirkpatrick. The truck "makes it out about twice a year." This fact makes it hard for the fire brigade to drum up members and volunteers.

"If we had a fire every month, there'd be no problem," Moysesaid. "There'd be people lining up. You'd be turning them away. Most of the people's attitudes toward fire prevention in a small community is apathy generally," he said.

The good response came right after the rink burned down. "That's what you have to have unfortunately — a tragedy," Kirkpatrick said.

The men said it is difficult getting enough volunteers to come to practices or training sessions. So far they have had three sessions. "It's always a battle trying to get enough people into the department," Moysesaid.

There are about 10 volunteers who have had extensive training and another 10 with some experience, Moysesaid. The provincial fire safety division has helped arrange training and practice sessions for Riceton, which include everything from rescue and ladder training to information about putting out oil and tire fires, Moysesaid. But if it came right down to it, only about seven people know how to properly prime the fire truck's pump to get it operating. (There are three different ways in which the pump can be primed — a precaution against what



Deana Driver photograph

Dan Kirkpatrick (left) and Neal Moyses examine portable pump on the Riceton fire truck.

happened to the Milestone department during the Riceton rink fire.)

Moyses and Kirkpatrick have given countless hours to the project and said they're always coming up with something else they should do for the truck or garage, but neither can spend as much time on it anymore. Spry left the project a while back because of health problems, and Kirkpatrick would like to do the same since he recently had heart surgery. As for Moyses, he's away much of the winter on business. So there's plenty of room for newcomers.

Moyses suggested that if a community has money to buy a commercial vehicle, then they should. "It's a hell of a lot of work to do

it yourself." But what's done is done and the Riceton Volunteer Fire Brigade is now doing quite well.

"We figure on spending roughly \$1000 a year on new equipment," Moysesaid. Light, heat and gas for the unit are about the only other expenses incurred.

There are about 60 members in the association and some money is obtained annually from the village and the rural municipality. An annual fireman's ball raises another \$500, which also goes a long way to paying costs.

"Right now we're financially solvent," Moysesaid. "Everything's paid for and there's money in the bank." ■