

November 8, 2022

Fellow San Rafael Fire Commissioners -

Chief White last month introduced you to Steve Rutkowski who is now retired but for many years was San Rafael Fire Department's Fire Mechanic. Chief White first met Steve at Diana's retirement coffee and they had a conversation about the antique hose cart from the 1800 now stored somewhere in a city building.

I want to talk today about the hose cart, Steve, and how it happens that an individual can make an outsized difference to an organization. While we all from time to time think that the contribution that we make to an organization that we belong to simply can't be replaced by someone else, we may end up finding out that it just wasn't too. Maybe we are really humble in our appreciation of ourselves, but know someone in the organization that it just can't function without. Well, that's probably not true either. But, every so often, if you are lucky, you will come across someone whose contributions are so unique. Steve Rutkowski was one of those.

The job of Fire Mechanic is usually defined as keeping the fire apparatus, the engines, trucks, medic units, command vehicles, and sundry other machinery in good repair. Steve did all of that while working from a repair shop barely big enough for one of our engines and definitely not big enough for the ladder trucks. Not only did the shop lack space, it also lacked some of the most basic equipment such as a hydraulic lift to get apparatus up in the air to allow working space to the machinery below. All of the work under an engine was accomplished by crawling underneath.

Steve went beyond the normal role of a fire mechanic learning the vital task of maintaining the SCBA air packs that keep firefighters alive in burning buildings, and designing then building solar charging systems for apparatus and command vehicles. He was also called upon to design and build many modifications to engines and medic units to overcome one shortcoming or another. But, one of my favorite Steve Rutkowski stories involves his creative ability to solve a particular problem.

The aerial ladder on fire trucks revolves like the turret on a tank, or like many types of construction equipment. The turret on fire trucks has 64 large bolts around the circular track that must be retorqued every year as part of their maintenance requirement. The procedure requires holding the bolt on the top of the platform with a wrench while applying a torque wrench to the nut on the bottom and tightening to the specified setting. It's a fairly simple task for two people. But, Steve often had to work alone because fire crews were busy with calls or other activities. Steve's solution was to modify a wrench so that it could hold the bolt on top, snake around other parts of the machinery, and end up where he could both hold the wrench with the bolt in one hand while tightening the nut with a torque wrench with the other. After Steve retired and the fire mechanic job was relocated to the Public Works Corporation Yard I was able to retrieve Steve's custom wrench which I then mounted and presented to him as a memento of his days at the San Rafael Fire Department. As for the photo, this is what amounts to a smile on Steve.



Then I want to double back to Chief White's meeting with Steve and their conversation about the antique hose wagon. This particular hose wagon was one of two that the department had in the late 1800's. They were pulled to a fire by hand with however many firefighters were available to do the pulling. The cart has a rope coiled around the front axle that could be extended as more "pullers" were available. Steve Rutkowski was the guy who spearheaded the restoration. I'm inserting a couple of photos from Steve's personal files of the restored hose carts. But, here's an interesting note. At the end of Steve's photos I've included an old black and white photo from the 1800's of one of these same carts being pulled by firemen during a Fourth of July parade on Fourth Street in San Rafael. The cart is heavily decorated with flags and bunting making it impossible to tell which cart it is, #3, or #4. But, there's no question that it's one of the two.









Larry Luckham, Chair

San Rafael Fire Commission