



N. Baldwin & Montecito Fire Horn Shortly before WWII

**By George Maurer
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Photo: Maggie Ellis

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It was a wonderful experience to again witness the activation of the old "fire horn" and to remember some of the highlights in its long history, and its predecessors, for warning certain residents to respond one way or the other.

The volunteer fire fighters were notified by the "Drip and Tinkle" Phone Company (that was composed of the telephone company and the water department, hence its name) operator that would activate the phones of fire department numbers that had dots alongside them to indicate they were firefighters, or Search and Rescue numbers on her board. She would give the address of the emergency. In addition, [there was] the bell in the tower of the Old North Church, at the corner of Hermosa and Sierra Madre Boulevard, that was also used to summon volunteers of the organizations.

Then came the sirens until it was noted to be confused with the air raid siren, so they installed the "Giant Frog", as the horn was referred to, in the hose-drying tower of the fire station, which at that time was located at the corner of Windsor Lane and Sierra Madre Boulevard.

The city numbered certain corners that were assigned numbers from which you could, supposedly, see the scene of the emergency. The horn was blown a certain number of times to indicate that intersection, for instance two then three for location 23. Almost every household had a chart in their kitchen cabinets to refer to when the horn blew.

The next step was the installation of the Pletron radios that every fire department member had in his home. The police/fire dispatcher could turn on these radios with an "alerting tone" which activated the radio and she would give the location of the emergency and "blow" the horn located in the hose-drying tower of the fire station, also located in the city hall. Later on small pocket-size radios were issued to each firefighter that had the same capabilities.

The ISO, the commission that sets fire insurance rates, required that the audible system continued to be used as a back-up to preserve the new lowered insurance rates. They also demanded that the system be tested every week and this was usually at 7 p.m. on Fridays. This coincided with the fire department's meeting and drills on the second and fourth Fridays.

A sidelight: When a fireman's wife had a baby and the fireman was returning to his home from the hospital, he would stop by the fire station and pull the lanyard hooked to the fire horn and set off the "Giant Frog" croaking to celebrate. When the fire station was moved to its present location, which at that time was opposite the Sierra Madre hospital, it was decided to move the horn to the corner of Montecito and Baldwin and to "blow" it at noon*. Following some protests, the horn use was discontinued until a petition with hundreds of signatures was presented to the city council requesting the return of the horn**. Many prominent citizens were wearing tee shirts with a drawing of the horn and the saying "let 'er blow", and appeared at a council meeting asking for the reactivation of the horn.

Not too long ago the horn was silenced and was declared inoperable. The Sierra Madre Kiwanis club raised money to again get it activated and has led the fight to bring about one of the most complete warning systems in the state. We have a local radio station broadcasting 24/7 and ready to broadcast emergency messages as needed. The ex-president of the Kiwanis Club was a broadcast engineer and disc jockey with the local commercial station in its early stages, and built our radio system and got it on the air. The club has been a constant backer of the reactivation process and provided some funding and manpower for the effort.



Photo: Gary Hood

With the present testing, under review, the club has made an offer to help continued expanding of the system if found necessary for complete coverage. They also prepared a brochure pointing out the many possible emergencies when the horn could prove a life-saver, such as a major water main break or contamination of the system, major road closure, closure of roads because of major brush fire, etc. It can also be used to announce non-profit events in the city.

The only other city that we are aware of that has such a complete system is Santa Barbara. We need to count our blessings for so many people and city council willing to become involved.

We are looking forward to the next step, completing the link with city hall so that the signal can be operated remotely. With the air tanks kept fully charged, the loss of electricity will not prevent its use, and a remote system that does not depend on "telephone" lines will continue to make our system almost 100 percent fail-proof.

Let's hope the system is never needed, but it is comforting to know it will work when needed.

* Author Mr. Maurer later added: "To the best of my knowledge, the horn was moved about 25 years ago, basically because of the nursing home being operated across the street... they chose to move it Montecito to avoid disturbing patients at the nursing home."

** [Ed. note: Mr. Maurer recalls that the horn was silenced about 2002]