

Formation of the Immokalee Fire Control District

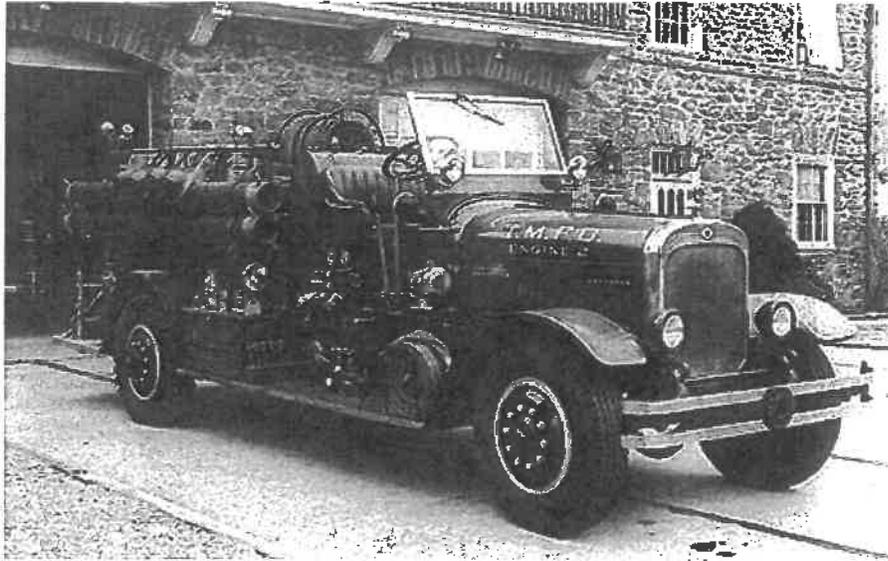
Transcribed from original letter written by Mr. Jack Whisnant

In the early days of Immokalee, a fire was usually a complete disaster to whatever it struck, be it home business, barn, packing house or whatever. The nearest available fire departments were located in LaBelle, twenty-five miles to the north, and Fort Myers, thirty-five miles to the west. In the first part of 1950, some Immokalee men; Lonnie Curry, Fred Edentiolo, Joe Brown, and several others, flew over to Belle Glade, where they met with a fire marshal to obtain information on acquiring fire protection equipment for Immokalee, and how to form a fire department. Some short while later, formation of the fire department was discussed at a Lions Club meeting. Donations were pledged throughout town to assist in purchasing equipment and interest built up, but soon faded as no monies materialized and no action was achieved.

In 1951, Joe P. Brown had become acquainted with Ollie W. Hancock, and having business in Everglades City, then the county seat of Collier County, the two men decided to return to Immokalee, by way of Naples and Fort Myers. On the way, they travelled along Cleveland Ave., where two fire trucks were seen at a filling station, one of which supported a "For Sale" sign. Upon seeing the "For Sale" sign, Mr. Brown advised Mr. Hancock, that he was "going to turn around, go back and purchase the fire engine", thereby assuring Immokalee of protection that was sorely needed.

It was learned at the service station, that three of the fire engines had been purchased and driven to Ft. Myers from Mamaroneck, NY. One having been already sold, one was to be kept, and the remaining engine to be sold to recover expenses involved with the other two. Although \$2500 was asked, Mr. Brown "Horse-traded" the price down to \$1650, and on the spot, borrowed \$500 on a 30-day note from Mr. Hancock, wrote a check to the owner for payment in full, and took possession of the fully functional apparatus. It was complete with 12-cylinder, dual ignition engine, hoses, nozzles and various pieces of firefighting equipment. Operating instructions were given, and with Mr. Hancock bringing up the rear in Mr. Browns automobile, Mr. Joe P. Brown, proud owner and driving his own fire engine, set off for Immokalee.

Once in Immokalee, the full length of Main Street with red lights blinking and the siren at full blast. This most unusual commotion aroused considerable curiosity, bringing a rather large number of citizens and business people into the street. The fire engine was finally brought to a stop a(t) Sam Heath's Immokalee Tavern, on the east end of Main Street, where a large crowd assembled.



Immokalee's first fire engine. 1929 American LaFrance while serving with the Town of Mamaroneck, NY.

Mr. Brown announced to all and every present, "There has been much talk and no action of a fire department for this community, therefore I am here and now, forming my own." In the crowd were Andy Hennings, local gasoline bulk plant operator, and James Whatley, machine shop owner, who promptly volunteered to become a crew for Mr. Brown and his marvelous machine.

The fire engine being of the pumper type, did not have a tank to haul water to a fire, but rather depended on fire hydrants, ponds, ditches or wells to obtain its water supply. The engine did have two pump units and plenty of hose. However unlike today, fire hydrants were not in existence in Immokalee, and the other sources were relied upon.

During the two years that followed, approximately seventeen fires were attended to by Messers. Brown, Hennings, and Whatley, accompanied by various other members of the community as circumstances allowed.

With a great deal of property saved and much tragic loss averted, although it is admitted some losses did occur, primarily from lack of sufficient water sources. There are three major fire saves accredited to this lone unit. One at Commers Camp, a close nestled community of cypress cabins just south of town. Were but for the intervention of Mr. Brown's fire machine, the whole camp may well have been reduced to ashes. On another occasion, the Fred's Barn Grocery, which was located in the building now occupied by Gateway Supermarket, was saved from destruction. The third major save involved a large wooden building close in at the Immokalee High School, and

had it not been extinguished, the whole school stood vulnerable to complete loss. In this instance, a borrow pit belonging to Mr. Cecil Howell and located a block and a half away, was utilized as a water supply. With Mr. Brown manning the truck pumps, Mr. Henning and Mr. Whatley, along with some other intervening volunteers, dragged hoses across the area to reach the fire and extinguish it. Damage was contained to within the one building and spared. Three weeks later, the school opened on schedule.

Soon after the school incident, a hue and cry was once more raised to establish an "official" fire department, complete with officers, firemen and station house, as well as equipment and perhaps a fire district tax to support the operation. This resulted in an organizational meeting being held in the building used as the Constable's Office and Masonic Lodge, also owned by Mr. Joe Brown at the time. At this meeting, donations were gathered to pay Mr. Brown, \$1650 for his engine and equipment, and tentative officers selected to man the proposed fire department. Upon purchase, the fire engine was removed from Mr. Brown's property, and housed in a tin shed belonging to Mr. Joe W. Smith, located just south of the present Post Office site.

- - At the first organizational meeting, 23 July, 1953

Mr. Jack Whisnant.



One of the first hydrants in Immokalee. This was located at the corner of Main St. & S. 2nd St. It was crafted by the firefighters, and fed by an artesian well. The hydrant was reported to supply in excess of 700 gpm. It was removed during water system improvements in 2018.