

A History of the 1917 Monrovia Seagrave Triple Combination Fire Truck

by Robb Stewart

The City of Monrovia didn't have any sort fire department for its first 20 years and when first formed in 1906, it was seen as more of a social club. In 1908, a used chemical and hose cart was donated to the volunteer fire department and was used several times in subsequent years. In 1909, the Scotia Hotel caught fire. The building wasn't a total loss, but eyewitnesses reported that "they believed that the fire laughed itself out while watching the efforts of the volunteers".

The city kept growing, along with increased fire danger, so in early 1910, L.B. Vollmer, the local Buick dealer, purchased a four cylinder, fifty horsepower Tourist combination hose and chemical truck, built in Los Angeles. This vehicle had been ordered by the city of Pasadena but wasn't delivered due to Pasadena's increasing requirements. Mr. Vollmer leased it to the city. Within a few years, it had developed frequent mechanical troubles and often didn't make it to fires when called. After several buildings were lost in this way, including La Vista Grande Hotel in May of 1915, fire chief George C. King asked the City Trustees to authorize the purchase of a modern fire apparatus. This hotel had been the pride of Monrovia and a center for social activity in town. It is a bit of irony that this hotel was owned by L.B. Vollmer, the owner of the city's fire truck.

The city then ordered from Seagrave the triple combination (containing engine driven pump, chemical and water tanks, hoses and ladders) that cost \$5000 when finally delivered in 1917. It is believed that the engine in this truck was already built in 1915, retaining earlier features that were changed the following year. The Tourist continued in service in Monrovia until a larger American-LaFrance ladder truck was purchased in 1924. It is rumored that he Chief King stored the Tourist in his garage and may still exist today.

Some time later, the Seagrave was sold to the Los Angeles County Volunteer Firefighters in La Canada Flintridge, then to La Habra Heights Volunteer Firefighters and some time in the 1950s or 1960s, it was purchased by William Harrah for his collection and stored at the Ponderosa Ranch. When Harrah's collection was being sold, this truck was purchased by Dan Webster of Carson City Nevada and kept in his collection there. Scott Dandridge, retired Battalion Chief of the Pasadena Fire Department and source for much of the information that I'm presenting here, was searching for that city's Seagrave pumper and was informed that it was in Dan Webster's collection.

After purchasing this truck, Scott did some research and discovered that it was Monrovia's 1917 Seagrave after all. He offered it to Monrovia's Fire Department, but not having the funds or interest, he contacted the Historical Society. In 2003, members Susan Motander and Judge Bruce Marrs, stepped up and made the purchase in order that

the truck would come back home at last. After spending a few years stored in their yard, a deal was finally struck to donate the Seagrave to the newly formed Save the Grave Foundation and moved to Coachcraft Auto Body for temporary storage.

Donations started rolling in to the nonprofit Save the Grave organization and some work was done to publicize the project, including displaying the truck at the San Marino Motor Classic car show and in front of the Monrovia Historical Museum on Mother's Day. Chris Kidd, an enthusiastic Monrovia booster, got involved and spent time with other citizens to help promote the cause and explain what would be involved in the restoration process. Knowing that the cost of this restoration could easily run over \$100,000, it would take a lot of fundraising to get it done.

Late in 2013, a single donor stepped forward and gave \$100,000 to the cause and the truck was quickly delivered to Chris' Tired Ironworks restoration shop. Chris' previous examination of the chassis made him confident that there would not be a large job to get the engine running and the truck drivable. Indeed, it was known to have been driven as recently as 2002 and there was no reason to believe that it couldn't be made a reliable vehicle. Chris and his mechanic, Kyle Osborn spent a number of hours cleaning out leaves and other debris before bringing the truck indoors to start judicious disassembly.

The massive 704 cubic inch, 79 horsepower T-head engine still turned freely with compression in all six cylinders. It was decided that the valves would be removed, ground and resealed. A surprisingly modern feature is the roller actuated valve lifters. All ancillaries such as carburetor, magneto, generator, and coolant water pump would be rebuilt. The 1915 Westinghouse starter still works well. Kyle has accomplished most of this work and the cylinder blocks have been cleaned and painted. The radiator was delivered to Harry and Son's for cleaning and evaluation. While there, another visitor recognized it as being from an early and large Seagrave and he proved to be a good additional source of information. Most importantly, he put Chris in contact with a collector that had a very rare and complete chemical tank that was just like the original and in excellent condition. This had been removed from this truck many years ago.

Chris has had many good experiences with the enthusiastic brotherhood of antique fire apparatus fanatics. Every one of them that he has spoken with has been helpful to some extent, and they are overjoyed to hear of the fate of this fire truck. The drive shaft is the only part of this truck that appears to have extensive rust, being that it is right under the (presumably leaky) 750 gallon per minute water pump. This may need some extra attention, but the rest of the drive train will likely need only cleaning, painting and careful lubrication.

Due to the incredible weight of this vehicle, the rear wood spoke wheels had been changed to heavy steel discs in the 1920s. The front wood is in pretty good condition and will be rebuilt and painted before new solid rubber tires are installed on all four wheels. The controls all need new nickel plating and a new wood steering wheel rim, but are otherwise very well preserved. The seat was getting rather flimsy, although the sheet metal is in good condition, so a new wood frame was made and the steel straightened. Chris plans to remove the body and fenders, get them sandblasted and then powder coated as a base for the final red paint. The frame, springs and axles can then be cleaned and painted. The rack that originally carried the ladders over the body had been cut off in the past, but will not be reconstructed, leaving more room for expected passengers in

future parades. Most of the other missing small parts will be rounded up or reconstructed in the coming months with the help of firefighting hobbyists. A search is on for the original electric lights, now missing, that were on the truck in recent years.

Due to the generous donations to Save the Grave, there is no reason that this great old fire truck will not be back on the road with gleaming new paint well before its 100th birthday in 2017. While it won't be taking part in any of our Horseless Carriage Club tours, I know that our membership can take pride in this community's effort in preserving our vehicular history for future generations to know and see up close.

(Note: Robb Stewart is a resident of Monrovia, has been a member of the Monrovia Historic Preservation Group since 1987, and is a vintage car enthusiast.)