



## Chapter Four

# 1940-1949

During the 1940's the world was at war and Houston was helping to win that war. Liberty ships were floating out of Todd Shipyard and in 1942 over one thousand men stood up on Main Street and volunteered for the Navy.

Houston had 820 fire alarm boxes scattered across a city that was approaching a half a million citizens. Keeping up a long standing tradition of community support the Fire Department teamed up with the War Chest (United Way) to help raise money for community projects.

The war would eventually end, but the loss of life due to fires in Houston would hit an all time high of 80 in 1943. The Gulf Hotel fire was the single largest contributor to that grisly record with 55 deaths.

Fire Fighters would experience upgrades in equipment like the 1945 American LaFrance 85 foot ladder trucks that were hydraulically

operated. District chiefs would get two way radios in their vehicles and Fire Fighters would get a new tool, a fog nozzle, to help battle the blazes.

On April 16th 1947 the "Grandcamp", a ship loaded with ammonium nitrate fertilizer blew up at Texas City creating the largest industrial disaster in American history. The explosion was felt as far away as Houston and over 500 people were estimated to have perished. Houston like many other surrounding communities sent fire fighters to aid with the search and rescue operation. A second ship, the "High Flyer", exploded later that evening creating fires that would take days to extinguish.

The war was over and returning Fire Fighters would resume their positions held by the auxiliaries.

#### Fire Chiefs:

George W. Richardson  
Roy B. Whittlesy  
Charley A. Middlekauf

#### Line of Duty Deaths:

William "Molly" Walker  
Hoarrace O. Gassoway  
James E. Lowth  
John "Red" B. Adams  
Vernon J. Dorsett  
Robert "Bobby" W. Milburn

**Left and Following Page:** The Samuel Hart Gallery, a popular antique furniture and art gallery caught fire in the early evening of September 11 1947. The store, located 1855 Main Street, just closed for the day, by the time the owner, Samual Hart arrived home, he was summoned back to the Gallery. The fire spread very quickly. The store was in a shopping center and was attached to other business. The Fire Fighters at the scene did a excellent job of saving the other business, however the gallery owned by Samual Hart for many years was completely destroyed. The photo on this page shows the front of the Gallery and was taken by 23-year-old Ronald Conn, an avid fire buff, who in the mid-1980's was President of the Houston Fire Museum. The photo on the next page shows the Rosedale Street side of the fire and shows how intense this fire was. The photo was taken by \*\* a professional photographer who just happened by the scene. (Page 80 from the family of Ron Conn Sr.; Page 82 The Story Sloane Collection)





**Left:** A group of employees from Humble Oil Corporation partner with the Fire Department to help promote the community war chest (United Way). Photo taken 1940's in front of the Humble Oil Company headquarters. (The Story Sloan Collection)

**Below:** J. B. Martin with one of the many of the "Fire House Mascots" he had during his career. (Family of J. B. Martin)

**Below Left:** Houston Fire Department participating in a World War II paper drive with two Boy Scouts helping with the effort. Photo taken in 1942. (Family of Vernon Dorsett)







**Above Left:** In 1944, Earl McWilliams, third Fire Fighter from the left entered the Houston Fire Department. His first assignment was at Fire House No. 26, 3813 Broadway. Shortly after this photo was taken he was drafted into the army to serve in WWII. The driver is J. B. Martin who is Chief “Whitey” Martin’s uncle. The man sitting next to J. B. is Arnold Teets. The other Fire Fighter far right is Floyd Russell. The fire truck is a American LaFrance. Photo taken 1941. (Family of J. B. Martin)



**Left:** Earl McWilliams had returned home from the military and entered his life once again as a proud Houston Fire Fighter. The names of the Fire Fighters in this photo are left to right, Driver J. B. Martin, Captain Mike Lathrop who in this photo is a 27 year veteran of the Houston Fire Department. The next man is Wilson Snow who also had just returned from the Army and had been a POW in Japan. The last man on the right is Robert “Bob” Jacobs Sr. The other crew members not in the photo are Earl McWilliams and James Lowth. Sadly very soon after this photo was taken, Engine 26 was involved in a “Train versus Fire Truck” crash. All the crew members were severely injured, and James Lowth did not survive the accident. See Chapter 8, page 208 for more details of this accident. Photo taken January, 1947. (Earl McWilliams)

**Opposite Page:** On July 13, 1945, the Aragon Ballroom and an adjacent building were heavily damaged in a four-alarm fire. It took Fire Fighters four hours to extinguish the fire. Twenty-three people were injured, including several Fire Fighters. Hundreds of guests of the Cotton Hotel, next door on Fannin and Rusk, were evacuated during the fire. Property loss was estimated at \$250,000. (Houston Fire Museum)

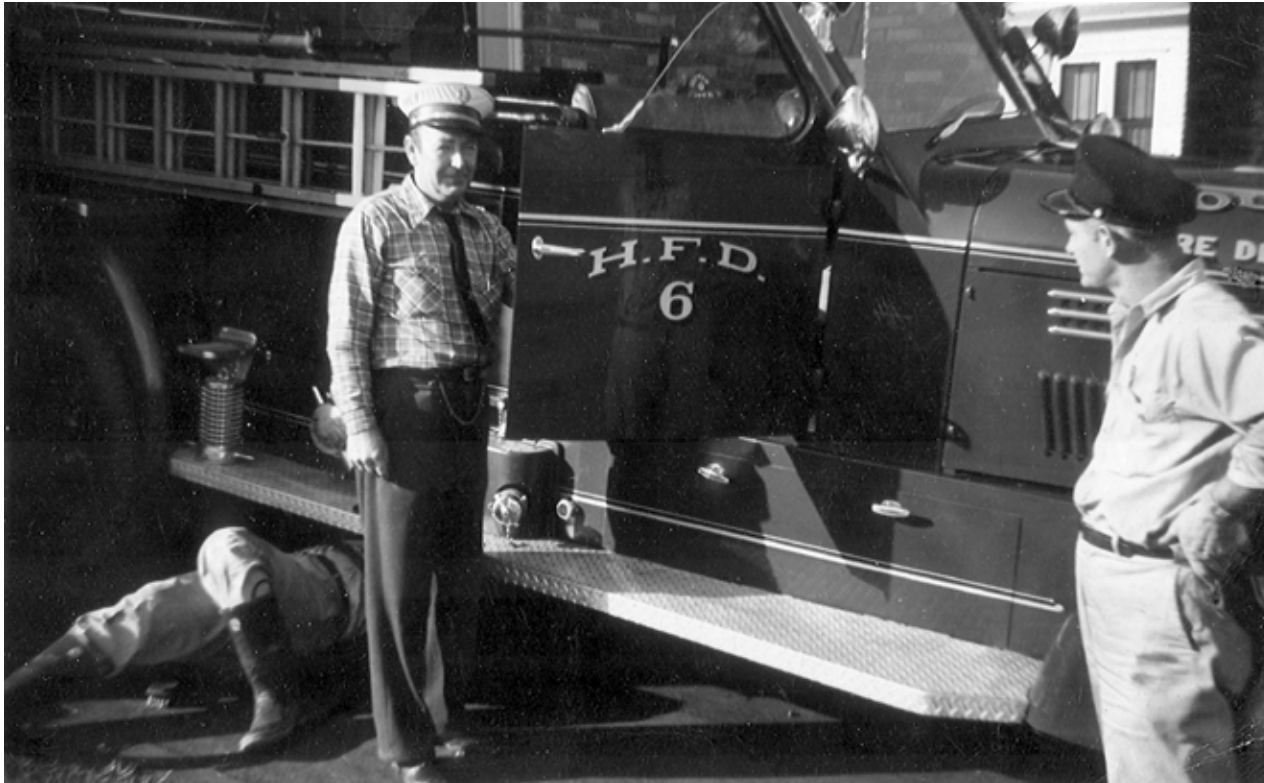
The afternoon of June 25th 1946 the Fire Department was called to the H. J. Cohn Furniture Warehouse located at 201 San Jacinto. When the Fire Fighters arrived, the business was heavily engulfed with fire and smoke. Water, smoke and fire damage caused an estimated cost of \$40,000. The business' furniture, mattress and other items were completely destroyed. The fire took several hours to control and 18 Fire Fighters were injured. A young man was arrested in connection with the fire. He had already been questioned for a fire at the near by Ambassador Hotel and the Majestic and Texan movie houses. (Houston Fire Museum)











**Above from Top Left to Bottom Right:** Houston Fire Department Fire Chiefs 1940-1949. (All Photos Houston Fire Department )

George W. Richardson, Fire Chief, 1947

Roy B. Whittlesy, Fire Chief, 1947-1948

Charley A. Middlekauf, Fire Chief, 1948-1951

**Above Left:** Fire House No. 6, Henderson and Decauser. Captain Leo Edmonds is in the middle of the photo. Far right is Claude "Froggy" Hughes and the name of the Fire Fighter under Engine 6 is not known. Photo taken 1944. (Family of Leo Edmonds)

**Left:** Fire Fighters relaxing after a fire. Chief Vernon Dorsett is the Fire Fighter sitting on the curb. Photo taken around 1945. (Family of Vernon Dorsett)

**Opposite Page:** The Crew of Fire House No. 2 in 1945. Top row from left to right, Robert "Slim" Templeton, Homer Lyles, Harrison McLean Jr., George Radcliff, Johnnie Brooks, Unknown, Unknown, Fred Hooker, Lester Carl Price and Thomas Cudd. Bottom row, James "Buddy" Walker, Bennett Cook, Unknown, Unknown, Robert "Bobby" Greer, Unknown, and Claude Konetzke. (Family of "Slim" Templeton)



San Jacinto High School photographer, Story Sloane, Jr., captured this series of photos on his way home from school. The series shows a home fire in the Montrose area of the city. Shown in the photo opposite page holding the ladder is Fire Fighter Bull Hooper.

**All photos:** (Story Sloane, Jr.)







Right: Caption (Credit)



Right: Caption (Credit)



**Left:** Caption (Credit)

**Top:** Caption. (Duane Troxel)

**Above:** Caption (Credit)





**Above Left and Left:** The ship the “Grandcamp”, loaded with ammonium nitrate fertilizer, blew up the morning of April 16, 1947 in Texas City. Gunpowder from WWII was being made into fertilizer to be shipped up north. The ship was docked at the Monsanto Company’s private docks. The Company headquarters was totally destroyed by the initial blast of the “Grandcamp”. Every car in their parking lot sustained substantial damage. (Story Sloane, Jr.)



**Opposite Page:** Men from the three HFD Engine Companies - 27, 3 and 17 - were sent down to Texas City for mutual aid. The Training Chief, Grover Adams, and the Houston Fire Department Photographer, J.D. Robinson, were also sent to help with relief efforts. (Houston Fire Department Photographer J.D. Robinson)



**Right:** Every home and business in Texas City received substantial damage from the blast. This store's windows were shattered from the explosion. (Story Sloane, Jr.)



**Right:** Smoke from the Monsanto Chemical Plant can be seen billowing in the distance from the Fire Department staging area. (Houston Fire Department Photographer J.D. Robinson)

**Opposite Page:** Part of the bow of what was left of the "Grandcamp" rests against a barge that was lifted out of the water by a tidal wave caused by the explosion.

Upon closer inspection, parts from Texas City Fire Department trucks can be seen in the wreckage. (Story Sloane, Jr.)









**Above Left:** Need Caption. (Caption Credit)

**Above:** Need Caption. (Family of Vernon Dorset)

**Left:** Need Caption. (Caption Credit)

**Opposite Page:** Need Caption. (Caption Credit)





**Top Left:** Fire House No. 18 in 1947, located 5000 Telephone Road. Identified in this photo from left to right are Captain Andrew “Tiger” Tipps, and John “Red” Adams. (Family of “Red” Adams)

**Above: Fire House No. 17 located 519 Sampson. Fire Fighter on the left is Alvin “Buster” Green. This was very early in his career.** (“Buster” Green)

**Left:** Fire House No. 26 in 1944, located 3813 Broadway. The fire Fighter on the left is Robert “Bob” Jacobs Sr. The Fire Fighter on the right is Walter Rector, he retired shortly after this photograph was taken. (Earl McWilliams)

**Opposite Page:** The crew of Fire House No. 10, From left to right, Pavlack HFD Painter, Captain Wyne Legg, “Red” Evans, Doyle Ebel, and Bill Brinegar. Photo taken in 1949. (Doyle Ebel)



**Above:** J. B. Martin in front of Engine 26, 1928 American LaFrance. Photographed in the apparatus bay of Fire House No. 26 in about 1946. J. B. proudly served the Houston Fire Department from 1931 to 1970. (Family of J. B. Martin)

**Top Right:** Fire House No. 27 built in 1940, located 6302 Lyons Avenue. When it opened it housed a 1940 Mack 750 GPM Engine The crew consisted of 1 captains, 1 driver, and 5 Pipe and Laddermen (Fire Fighters). (Houston Fire Museum)

**Right:** Fire House No. 31 built in 1947, located 522 Crosstimbers. When it opened it housed three trucks. 1944 American LaFrance 750 GPM Engine, 1940 Mack City Service Truck, and a 1946 White Water tank truck, with water capacity of 2500 gallon. The crew consisted of 2 captains, three drivers, and 10 Pipe and Laddermen (Fire Fighters). (Houston Fire Museum)

**Opposite Page:** Class of trainee who started their training February 1949. The group had just finished “Smoke School” and it was HFD tradition to take a group shot of the men upon completion of the day. The Fire Fighter in the sitting in the front of the photo on the right side was W. D. “Birdie” Thompson, who’s outstanding career spanned 42 years. (Houston Fire Department)









The crew of Engine 10 practicing hooking up to a fire hydrant. From left to right, Dee Leonard, A. P. Hartman, Floyd Wilburn, Orville "Slim" Roberts, and Robert "Shorty" Sullivan. Photo shot in 1947.  
(Family of A. P. Hartman)



This Page: Caption for City Photo. (Library of Congress)