

Motorization of the Riverhead Fire Dept

By George Bartunek

Although almost from its inception the automobile caught on in Riverhead, but it wasn't until 1920 that the Riverhead Fire Department purchased a motorized truck. Prior to that the Riverhead Fire Department's equipment consisted of "one hook and ladder, hand drawn; nine hose carriages, hand drawn; one steam fire engine, (and) two hand engines." (Riverhead News, July 16, 1920)

The first motorized trucks of the fire department were built on truck chassis and powered by reliable four cylinder Dodge Brothers engines. The engine had a displacement of 212.3 cubic inches which produced 30 to 35 hp and was used in all Dodge Brothers vehicles. Dodges were chosen due to the reputation of the reliable and rugged mechanics as well probably as the influence of the Morell clan.

William Frederick Morell was an immigrant from the Alsace-Lorraine region of France who was first a farmer in Cutchogue. Around 1900 he moved to Riverhead and bought an established business of a carriage maker. The May 25, 1901 edition of the Riverhead News carries an ad stating "Wm. F. Morell, Successor to C.M. Blydenburgh, Manufacturer of Fine Carriages." My information indicates that Morell had three sons (George, William Jr., and John) and three daughters. An ad placed in the May 2, 1908 edition of the Riverhead News indicates that "W.F. Morell & Son" had expanded their business by selling air cooled Franklins. I assume that the "Son" was the eldest, George. George Morell apparently parted ways with his father's carriage business because an April 1911 edition of Riverhead News advertises that "Morell & Lane" are distributors of Buick. The August 13, 1915 edition of the Riverhead News

announced that George Morell and a new partner (Corwell) were going to serve as a dealership for newly incorporated Dodge Brothers. The ad touts the "instantaneous responsiveness.....the abundance of power ---- the pronounced gliding sensation ----- the steadiness at high speed." An October 22, 1920 ad indicates that George K. Morell was then operating independent of any partner.

The July 16, 1920 edition of the Riverhead News reported that \$2,500 was voted on by the public for "an entering wedge to motorize our Fire Department". Only 18 votes were cast in favor of the fire department budget that included funding for the new fire truck. The report stated that for "\$2500 the department hopes to get a chassis (costing around \$1250) and make it into a regular motor hose cart, carrying with it hand fire extinguishers of the ordinary kind. The aim is to get to the fires more quickly than under the present arrangement". The first fire engine was apparently built for the "Reliable Engine and Hose Company".

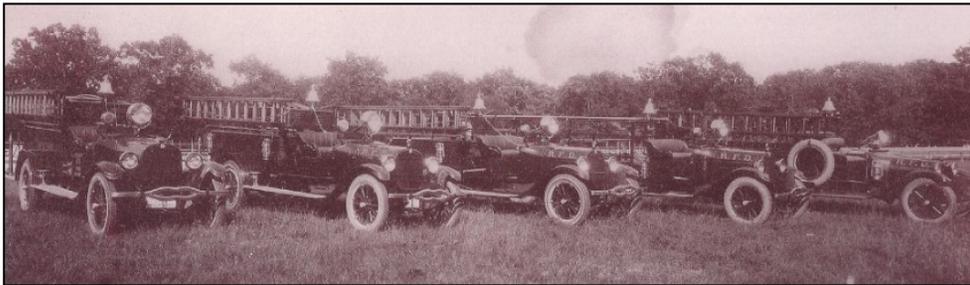
Exactly a year later the Riverhead News reported that the fire department asked the tax payers for another \$2500 for a second truck. The vote was 20 against and only six for the appropriation. Discouraged and disgruntled "some of the firemen openly expressed their indignation at what taxpayers had done. One of them ... declared: 'if your place gets afire we'll let it burn'." (Riverhead News, July 15, 1921)

The April 21, 1922 Riverhead News edition reported that the fire department would make another attempt to ask taxpayer support for the purchase of additional fire trucks. The same article reported that "Commissioner (William F.) Morell told the members of the (first) motor truck that 20 miles an hour was fast enough to drive that machine." In July 1922 the public voted in favor for the fire department to spend \$10,000 for the purchase of "new motor equipment".

The Riverhead News edition of July 14, 1922 reported that the vote for purchasing additional fire trucks was 23 in favor and 22 against and that “with the \$10,000 appropriated for motors the fire commissioners hope to get three engines, by buying a chassis for each (company) and then having bodies suitable to the needs of the department built by local workmen.”

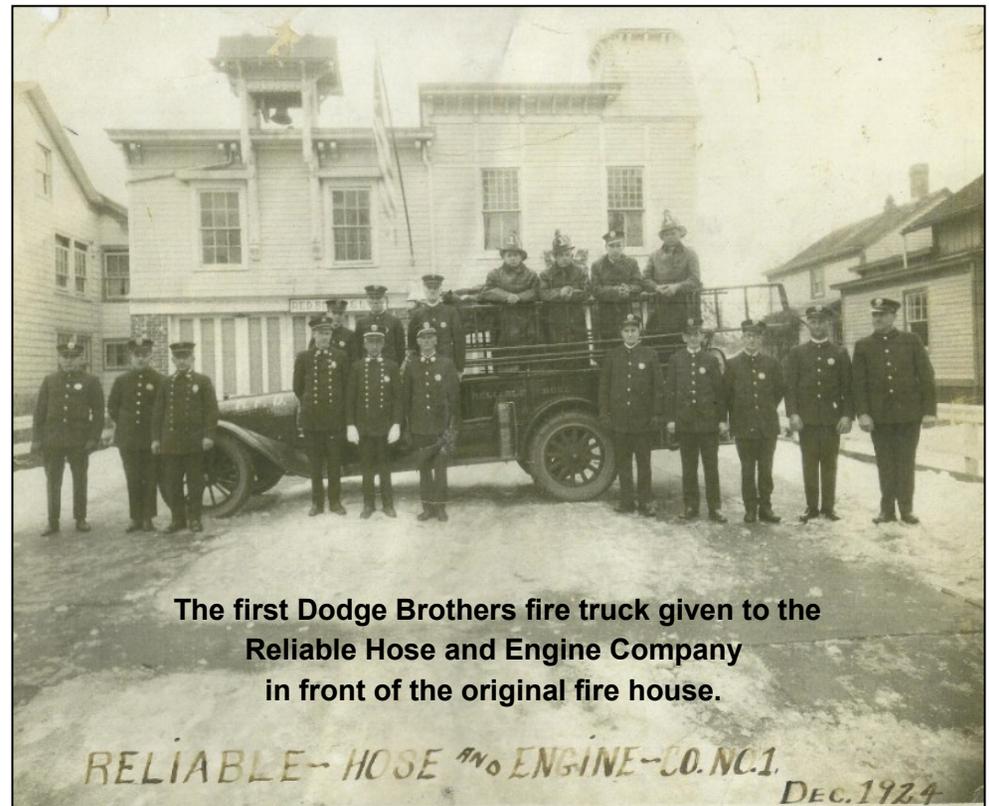
Long time Peconic Bay Region members certainly remember Bill and Carolyn “Topsy” Adams. Topsy was the daughter of John Morell who with the help of his elder brother George opened a Dodge dealership in Greenport around 1923. According to Topsy, it was George K. Morell and his father William Sr. who built the wooden bodies on the Dodge Brothers chassis.

The total expenditure of \$12,500 by the Riverhead Fire Department between 1920 and 1922 accounts for the construction of only four of the five fire trucks shown in the photograph accompanying this article. The fifth Dodge Brothers truck shown in the photo of the fleet line up may be accounted for based upon an article printed in the May 25, 1923 edition of the Riverhead News stating that the “commissioners voted to take into the department the Active Hose Co., lately formed by individual men who have converted a motor chassis (sic) into a fire truck.”

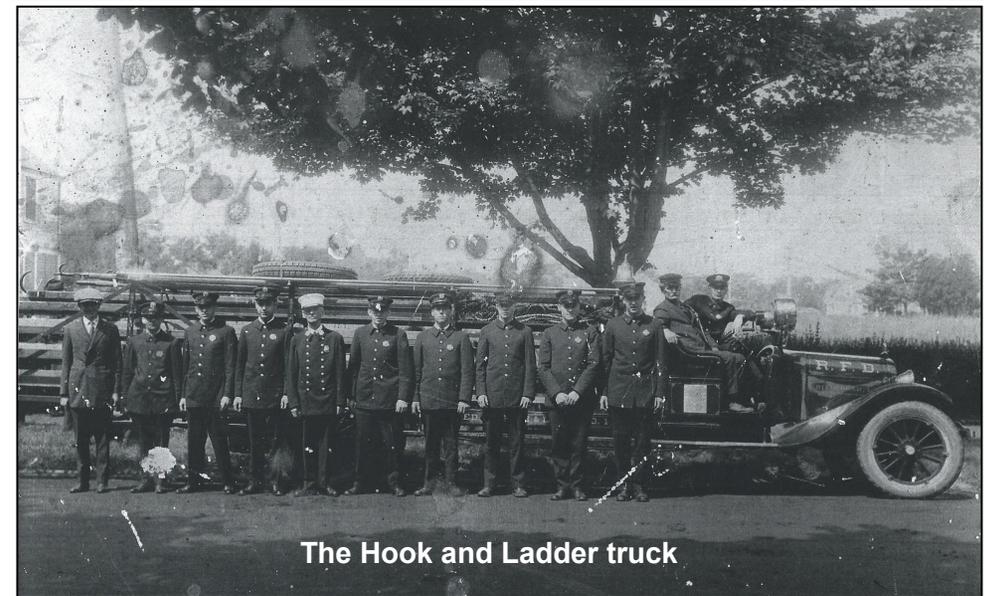


Line up of the fleet of Dodge Brothers trucks

Following WWII, the Riverhead Fire Department was selling the last of the four cylinder Dodges for \$100 each.



The first Dodge Brothers fire truck given to the Reliable Hose and Engine Company in front of the original fire house.



The Hook and Ladder truck

*Thank you George for the excellent contribution to Blue Smoke!
As always, very much appreciated!*