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Joined Department in 1873, Assisted in Fighting Sensational Fires In This City

JAMES HUGHES

For nearly 50 years James Hughes, affectionately known as "Jimmie" Hughes, has answered alarms for every big fire in the city of Boston, and yet at 70 years of age, his spirits are as young and his legs as active as when he answered alarms on Fort Hill, when the regular Fire Department of the city was first organized. He entered the department just after the Great Boston Fire of 1872, when the city, learning its lesson from the devastation wrought by that conflagration, organized a real Fire Department in place of the few engines, houses and "call" firemen who had protected the rapidly growing metropolis of New England in the old days.

On Oct 1, 1873, Jimmie donned the uniform and became a member of Ladder 8, organized and situated in Fort Hill sq, in the house it now occupies. Up to that time, Fort Hill was a real hill, rising to a height of 50 or more feet, he says. It was surrounded by shoe houses at that time, and after the fire, which swept that district, a lot of sheet-iron shacks were put up, in which the shoemen did business for years. Fort Hill sq, before the fire, not only had the hill, but it was covered with a forest of as large trees, Jimmie says, as any on the Common. The Boylston School, the place of education of many old Bostonians, was in the Fort Hill District.

Jimmie was with Ladder 8 and Engine 25, in the same headquarters, for over 10 years, and received his education in the science of fighting fires, of which Boston had many in those days, in the Fort Hill District. In 1883 he went to Hose 9 in South Boston and then to Chemical 8 when chemical apparatus came into use. The majority of engines in those days, he says, were very small, compared to those in use today. Engines 6 and 7 were the only first-class steamers in the department. They succeeded the old hand tubs and lasted many years.

"They had some big fires in the lumber and mill districts in the old days," he says, "and the water supply was not so complete as it is now. I remember well the Thanksgiving Day fire of 1887. It ran from Bedford st way up to Chauncy. Also, I recollect the sensational Lincoln-st fire, when Chief Egan climed hand-over-hand on a wire across the street when he was cut off from escape in a burning building. He reached the center of the street and then the wire sagged so that he could go no farther. Some wire men finally climbed to the roof of the building he was headed for, cut the wire, attached ropes and lowered him to the street. It was a thrilling experience. The chief was killed later in the memorable Merrimac-st fire."

Jimmie now belongs to the water tower company in the Fire Headquarters Building, but for two years has been employed in the repair department. He lives in Dorchester with his wife and four children. He has a family of nine children in all, two girls and seven boys. He had two sons in the Spanish War, and one in the World War.

"I always liked the life of a fireman," he says, "and would go into it again if I had my life to live over. A fireman can retire at 55 years of age if he has been in the department 25 years, yet I am 70 and have been a fireman 47 years, and don't want to retire yet."

Jimmie was born in Boston. He has been president of the Charitable Association of the Fire Department seven years. He also belongs to the Catholic Order of Foresters. He has two sons, Leo and Vincent, in the Dominican Order of Preachers, and one son, Cyril, at Aquinas College, Columbus, O.

"In the early days," he says, "all firemen had to go to fires, which were sounded on the bell alarm. Even if at meals, eating utensils had to be dropped and a rush made for the firehouse, when the bell sounded. They also had the street patrol for a time, night and day, but that was abolished years ago. Firemen worked much longer hours than they do now. Smaller pay, too. Why am I so young in action? Well, I suppose because I have always kept my interest modern. Work, too, if interesting work, will always keep one young. I work eight hours now and have no Sunday work.

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