

History of the Fire Pole

Firefighters usually remain above the ground floor of fire stations until they receive a call for help, after which they have to move down as quickly as possible. Until 1878, spiral staircases or sliding chutes were common, but not particularly fast. The firemen's pole allows firefighters to move down much more quickly than before, although it is not suitable for climbing up. The pole is attached to the ground floor, goes through a hole in the ceiling, and is attached as well to the ceiling of the floor above. In order to use a pole, a firefighter must put his/her arms around the pole, step into the hole, and use his/her legs to control the speed of the descent, somewhat similar to the technique used for abseiling.

David Kenyon of Chicago's Engine Company No. 21 worked in a three-story fire station; the ground floor containing the firefighting equipment, the floor above being the floor for recreation and sleeping, and the top floor being the hayloft which was used to store the winter supply of hay. During transport, the hay was secured to a wagon using a wooden binding pole, which was stored in the hayloft when not in use. Firefighter George Reid slid down the pole to respond to a call for help once, which inspired Captain David Kenyon to create a permanent pole.

In 1878 he convinced the Chief of Department to make the necessary hole in the building and install the pole, after agreeing to pay for any necessary maintenance. The Company crafted a pole out of a Georgia pine beam by shaving and sanding it into a 3" diameter pole which they gave several coats of varnish and a coat of paraffin.

After being the target of many jokes, people realized Company 21 was usually the first company to arrive when called, especially at night, and the Chief of Department ordered the poles to be installed in all Chicago fire stations. In 1880 the first brass pole was installed in the Boston Fire Department, and the poles become standard equipment all over the United States.

Fire houses were equipped with the brass pole and spiral staircases so the horses would not try to climb the stairs into the living quarters. Spiral staircases were difficult to descend and relatively slow when moving many men down to the wagons. The slide pole was a much more efficient way to move them quickly downstairs. Tradition, which the fire service thrives upon, is why there are still some in existence.

Taken from www.FirefighterNation.com

On the fire ground, if you become involved in a crisis situation, you will not rise to the occasion but, rather, default to your level of training.

Chris Bond, Captain
Ladder 1
Grand Island Fire Department
409 E. Fonner Park Rd.
cbond@grand-island.com
(308)385-5300