

Bertha makes it back to home bay

North Wales is ready to parade its fully restored '29 pumper. It was retired to Fla. a half-century ago.

By **Bonnie L. Cook**

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With two loud bangs and a flurry of sparks, the antique fire truck known as Bertha roared to life in front of her firehouse in North Wales.

Driver Bud Rhodes throttled down the enormous six-cylinder engine. Then, straining to turn the unpowered steering wheel, he headed her out into a world of Explorers and Subarus.

"It's awesome," said Jose Gonzalez and Samuel Gutierrez, of Philadelphia, two of the many who stopped on the town's main drag to view this unusual sight.

Eighteen years after the North Penn Volunteer Fire Company began its painstaking work, the company's 1929 American LaFrance Metropolitan pumper is fit and finished. The old girl has been restored, down to her silver bell and nickel trim.

She'll be unveiled formally Saturday at an afternoon parade and housing at the fire company, 141 S. Main St. The housing, in which she is backed three times into her bay at the station, is an old-time firemen's tradition.

Built by American LaFrance, of Elmira, N.Y., and priced at \$13,000, Bertha was "the Rolls-Royce," the biggest, most powerful fire truck of her day, said Al Novak, a firefighter and spokesman for the company.

She zipped along at speeds of 50 to 60 m.p.h., responding to as many as 40 calls a year in barns, houses and factories as far afield as Chalfont, Bucks County, and all points of Montgomery County.

When she arrived, Bertha could draw water from a pond or creek, pressurize it, and pump it out again at about 1,200 gallons per minute, Novak said, roughly what fire trucks can pump today.

"That's a lot of water," Novak said. He said Bertha would depart with a siren and the clanging of a bell. As she returned, the bell would sound again, he said.

Robert Kulp, who is 80 and lived three blocks from the firehouse as a boy, recalled waking up in the night to the sound of the fire truck's engine revving up before a call.

"When we heard this truck start up, you knew everything was OK. This truck had a heartbeat," Kulp said.

Bertha remained in service until 1958, when she was retired. She had been eclipsed by larger apparatus, including a 1946 Ford Harwick pumper and an American LaFrance ladder truck that the fire company bought in 1951.

She was sold to a fire department in Plant City, Fla., outside Tampa. For a time, she saw service there, but then was retired to the backyard of a fire official, and gave rides to kids, Novak said.

The story would have ended there had it not been for a committee composed of North Penn company firemen who were planning for the station's 100th anniversary celebration in 1988.

"Earl Wampole at one meeting said it would be nice if we could get Bertha back," Novak said. "Somebody suggested why don't we track her down?"

The committee put two Whitemarsh Township policemen on the case. Stolen-car tracker Ted Fry and chief Richard Zolko, both now deceased, found her in no time.

Jim Schiele, the North Penn fire company president, issued a check for a small sum, and Kulp, by then a local paving contractor, paid the \$1,500 for Bertha to be hauled back on a flatbed to North Wales.

No fire company money was spent on restoration, Novak said. Instead, the firefighters held pancake breakfasts, hoagie sales, coin-pitch games, and flea markets to raise the "tens of thousands of dollars" needed for the project, Schiele said.

Bertha's red paint had faded in the Florida sun. She was rusty. The firemen took her apart. Each piece was cleaned or replaced. When pieces weren't available, they were custom-made.

"We did that for the nickel plating for the radiator," Schiele said, "because [in 1929] chrome hadn't been refined yet."

When the volunteers completed all the work they knew how to do, they turned Bertha over to the Swab Wagon Co. of Elizabethville, Pa., for finishing.

Restored to her circa-1929 glory, she is ready to face the future.

"It's a magnet," Novak said of the antique truck. "People want to know the history. They think, 'Jeez, those guys have their heart in it. How can I get involved?'"

If You Go

The North Penn Volunteer Fire Company will hold a parade and judging of antique and modern fire apparatus Saturday at the North Wales Fire Station, 141 S. Main St.

Registration of fire trucks will be from 9 a.m. to noon, with the parade at 1 p.m.; the ceremonial housing of antique pumper "Bertha" will be at 2 p.m. There will be a party and awarding of trophies.

The event is free to the public. For more information, go to www.northpennfire.com or call 215-699-4337.

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