

# Fire Department moves to new facility with much ceremony

BY MICHELLE VAN HEE  
VAN HEE MEDIA EDITOR

On Sunday, December 4, the historic 1916 Madelia Fire Hall on Main Street was decommissioned and the firefighters, with much ceremony, brought their equipment to the new fire hall on the corner of Drew Avenue and Main Street.

Many people from the community gathered downtown and at the new facility as the Madelia firefighters – both current and retired – came together; the fire trucks were driven out of their stalls and lined up along Main Street in front of the old fire station. Pastor Kelly Heide from Faith Lutheran Church led the group in a prayer as they said goodbye to the fire hall that has served this community since the fire equipment was pulled by horses.

Then, with a Madelia Police Department squad car in the front position, those firefighters not driving a truck walked up Main Street accompanied by bagpiper Meridith Richmond in parade style to their new location. It was very moving and, although it was a happy occasion, there was a tinge of melancholy in the air and certainly a sense of the ending of an era.

Although this new fire hall, along with a new city hall and police station, is very much needed – and has been about a quarter century in the making –

there is always a bit of heaviness that comes with changes such as these when a community says goodbye to the old, with thanks to the buildings, and the people who have served from them, for so many years. But the older buildings are long past their prime and no longer serve the community in functional ways for today's standards. They will be torn down and replaced with newer buildings and possibly topped with apartments that will help the community grow and thrive for years to come.

When the fire trucks arrived at the new station, they were each parked in front of their new stalls – back ends to the doors – and the new fire hall was blessed by Reverend Greg Volbrecht, and the bagpiper played “Amazing Grace.” Then, as is tradition, the firefighters pushed the first truck inside the bay by hand.

So, what is the connection between the bagpipes and firefighters? Some research tells us the history of this started with the Great Potato Famine of the 1840s. Irish immigrants were coming in great numbers to the U.S. and Americans were unhappy about it. There was quite a bit of discrimination against the Irish; factories and shopkeepers even posted signs saying that Irish need not apply. However, some of the only jobs that were easily accessible to immigrants were ones that no one else wanted at that time: firefighters and police officers. Even the Irish were hired for these

positions because – although today those jobs are considered to be very heroic and honorable – long ago those jobs were very dirty, dangerous and the death toll was high. One of the deeply rooted Irish traditions that those immigrants brought with them to this new country was the playing of bagpipes at weddings, dances and funerals. On-duty deaths were frequent for firefighters and since many of those firefighters were Irish, bagpipes were part of that person's funeral ceremony. Eventually, families of firefighters who were not Irish started asking that the bagpipes also be played at their funerals. The hauntingly beautiful music of the bagpipes eventually became the traditional soundtrack at the funerals for fallen firefighters, along with other ceremonial occasions – such as moving to a new fire hall.

As for the apparatus push-in ceremony, this tradition dates back to the days of horse-drawn equipment when firefighters had to push the equipment into the bay. And the Madelia firefighters would have done that when the old fire hall was new because it was created for horse drawn fire equipment and still has remnants of this original use.

Madelia Mayor Mike Grote was the final person to speak at the ceremony. He thanked the community and the city government for making this new facility possible; it will serve the community well.