

## The Early History of the Eldorado Fire and Rescue Service, 1979–1987

John Liebson, Founder and First Volunteer Fire Chief

### 1. Introduction

This document is an attempt to recreate the early years of the Eldorado Fire Department. It relies on my personal recollections in the absence of any written documents, and is, thus, subject to errors; any such errors are entirely my responsibility. The document revolves around me. There is no intention on my part to brag; rather, it simply reflects the reality of the situation of the creation of Eldorado Fire and Rescue Service, as I was the individual most involved in this process.

My wife, son, and I moved to Eldorado in July, 1979, from Crested Butte, Colorado, where I had started the Crested Butte Fire Protection District, which I served as its first volunteer fire chief and then its first career fire chief. Given that background, I quickly found the Eldorado Volunteer Fire Brigade and joined it as a firefighter. The existence of the brigade, which I later found to be an incorporated non-profit organization, was a reflection of the Eldorado community at that time. Eldorado, in terms of population and homes was considerably smaller than it is today, and growth was very slow. There were no commercial buildings, the Eldorado school did not exist, none of the subdivisions along U.S. Highway 285 had been created, and so forth.

Please be aware that I do not mean to be demeaning to the then fire chief and assistant chief of the fire brigade; it is merely a report of what led to my creation of the Fire and Rescue Service. I don't recall the fire service background of the assistant fire chief, but do know that the chief was retired from a career in a major California fire department. I believe that his background contributed to his lack of knowledge of how a volunteer fire department should operate. I am to this day convinced that he was well-meaning but did not have an understanding of what Eldorado's fire service should be. The chief and assistant chief and I quickly became antagonists, as it was my feeling, based on my experience in Crested Butte, coupled with my widespread connection with the fire service nationwide, that the fire brigade was incapable of providing fire protection to Eldorado.

The fire brigade had only one piece of fire suppression equipment, a 1947 Bean High Pressure Fire Engine. Bean's idea was that applying small amounts of water at pressures well above those of all other fire engines, would allow rapid extinguishment of flames; a typical Bean pumper provided sixty gallons of water per minute at pressures as high as 850 pounds per square inch. This violated principles of physics, and field experience of fire departments that bought this equipment proved that it did not work. Most calls for the Eldorado Fire Brigade were for dump fires, at the site of today's waste transfer station. Dump fires are difficult to extinguish even with the application of thousands of gallons of water; the Bean had no chance of having any effect. (A typical modern pumper flows 250 gpm at 150 psi on each hand-held hose line, and has several such lines.)

As nearly all of the developed parts of Eldorado at that time were on the community water

system with adequate fire hydrants, and as the fire chief had made no effort to take advantage of this, I applied to New Mexico State Forestry for a grant to purchase a portable, gasoline-driven, fire pump capable of flowing 125 gpm at 150 psi—at least, I think that was the specification. Taking water from a hydrant, this pump would be capable of even higher rates of flow. With the letter awarding the grant in my possession, I made a motion at the monthly meeting of the fire brigade to purchase the pump and mount it on the tailboard of the Bean,. The fire chief objected, as I had made the application without his permission. I said that I did so as he had done nothing, but that we did not have to accept the grant. A vote was taken, the pump was purchased, and some training with it ensued.

Suffice it to say that things went downhill from there, to the point where, if nothing changed, I was going to resign from the fire brigade, as I was not willing to risk my life as a member of a dangerous fire department. I mentioned above that the brigade held monthly meetings, which were called training meetings, but which mainly consisted of brief business sessions. On the night of the December 1979, meeting, I told my wife that I was going, and she said that she thought I had resigned. I replied that, if nothing happened at that meeting, I would resign; I had no idea whatsoever as to what was going to eventuate. The chief opened the meeting by stating that he had an announcement to make; that announcement was that he recommended that I become the new fire chief, a statement that even silenced me for a short while! When I recovered, I thanked him and stated what I intended to do, namely to create a Santa Fe County Fire District, find the funding for the purchase of a new fire engine, the construction of a fire station, the purchase of proper firefighter turnout gear, etc. It must be noted that a few of the brigade members had taken the first steps towards creation of a fire district, but little had been accomplished.

The former chief later moved from Eldorado into the Hondo Fire Department's coverage area. I saw him from time to time, and to his credit, our discussions were on a friendly basis. Perhaps he was glad that the headaches were now mine and no longer his. Some of those problems were inevitable in any endeavor of this nature; others, however, were caused by such matters as incompetent government employees and failure to understand New Mexico statutes; I will discuss a few of these at the proper places in this history.

## 2. Creating the Eldorado Fire District

Under New Mexico law, most fire departments are considered county fire districts, and therefore are created by county commissions. As Santa Fe County had been through this procedure several times previously, setting up the fire district for Eldorado Fire and Rescue Service was rather straightforward and relatively easy. The first step was to establish the boundaries, which had to be done through the State Fire Marshal's Office, my first encounter with this state agency. Unfortunately, future events were to demonstrate that both Santa Fe County and the Fire Marshal's Office were to interfere all too often and not infrequently due to their failure to abide by the applicable laws and regulations.

Working with the Fire Marshal's Office and County land-use department, the boundaries were set. The major part of the future county fire district comprised the boundaries of Eldorado at Santa Fe as had been established by Santa Fe County, the 27,000-acre

Simpson Ranch. At the request of the state fire marshal, the boundaries were extended to cover the villages of Lamy and Galisteo, even though I pointed out that we would have a very difficult time providing fire protection to those areas, especially Galisteo, given the distance from wherever the Eldorado fire station would be located. However, as at the time there was no way for any other organization to provide first-responder coverage to the two villages, I agreed to this modification of the district. The next step was to have the Santa Fe County Commission hold a public hearing and enact the county enabling resolution. I appeared before the commission, made a brief presentation, and the commissioners approved the creation of the fire district.

### 3. Starting the Eldorado Fire Department

Now I had a fire district--the fire department was simply the operating arm of the district, and had no legal existence *per se*. I was the fire chief, but don't recall if that was by default or if the county commission appointed me. Given the circumstances, my first task was to prioritize the many things that needed to be done to create a fire department with adequate fire suppression equipment, to build a fire station, to purchase new firefighter turn-out gear, to meet other county fire chiefs, and most importantly, to recruit and train volunteer firefighters. It did not surprise me that most members of the Eldorado Fire Brigade quit: They were mostly older people who did not want to be firefighters and were not willing to give the time and exert the effort that would be required of members of the new department. (As an aside, it should be mentioned that the original name of the department was Eldorado Fire Department. The change to Eldorado Fire and Rescue Service came some time later, on a motion I made which was based on my knowledge that the use of "Fire and Rescue Service" was becoming wide-spread in the United States as better reflecting what the fire service really does.)

As can be seen by the list above, it was hard to set priorities given that in essence we needed everything, and getting all of that all at once would have been nice but impossible. As funding seemed to me to be the overriding need, I decided to investigate that issue. In New Mexico, all fire departments receive funding from the state's Fire Protection Fund. The monies for this fund are derived from a levy on fire insurance premiums. The amount of funding is determined by the Insurance Services Office (ISO) rating of the local fire department. ISO is an industry-supported organization that rates fire departments based on assessment of the departments' capabilities to provide fire protection, on a scale of Class 1 (highest) to Class 10 (lowest.) Eldorado, at its inception was a class 10, (Unprotected), department by default, and would not qualify for funding until it had been in existence for at least one year. In 2012, a Class 10 District would have received \$34,944, with no further payment for more than one fire station; I have been unable to determine what the rate was in 1981, only that it was substantially lower. Whatever that rate was, we would not receive our first payment for a year, and that payment required that, among other things, we had adequate fire protection equipment. I don't know if our portable pump was what qualified us, given that the Bean could hardly have been considered "adequate," or if the State Fire Marshal's Office, being aware of the realities facing most New Mexico fire departments, was simply very lenient about this.

I thought that there might be two other funding sources, at least one of which might be able to provide a large amount of money. Eldorado at Santa Fe was developed by Amrep, the same company that developed Rio Rancho, New Mexico, and which still had a substantial financial interest in Eldorado. I met with the Eldorado Community Improvement Association (ECIA) manager, who represented Amrep at the time (if I remember correctly,) and told him that I wanted to approach Amrep to ask them to buy a new fire engine for the Eldorado Fire Department, on the grounds that they had both a financial and an ethical obligation to the residents of Eldorado. The ECIA manager agreed to contact the Amrep executives in Rio Rancho on my behalf; I was very pleased when they said that they would consider the matter. Before I met with them, I did some preliminary investigations into the cost of what design of fire engine would best meet our needs. With that preliminary estimate, the ECIA manager and I met with Amrep; I was delighted when Amrep committed to the purchase; when the actual winning bid was for a higher amount, Amrep agreed to buy the fire engine.

In order for fire apparatus to be considered as part of an ISO rating, it must meet as a minimum the specifications called for in the relevant publication of the National Fire Protection Association, which at the time was Pamphlet 19. In writing the specifications, which would then be used to solicit bids from manufacturers, I needed not only to meet Pamphlet 19 requirements, but also those conditions specific to Eldorado. The single most important such consideration was that, based on the historical slow growth of Eldorado at Santa Fe, this would be the only fire engine the department would own for some time and, thus, needed to be a multi-purpose unit, so that it could serve for building fire suppression, could also (despite its size) be used for such matters as grass fires, and could also serve as a tanker to deliver water to, for example, Hondo Fire, and then return for a new load of water.

Taking all this into consideration, the specifications called for a fire pump rated at 1000 gallons per minute at 250 pounds per square inch pressure (a standard "midship" pump), a water tank holding 1500 gallons and capable of offloading in less than two minutes, on a single rear-axle chassis. Even though Amrep was paying for the fire engine, I had to submit the specifications to the State Fire Marshal for approval; that is always done when spending Fire Protection Funds, but in this case, it was so that, when we were ready for an ISO rating, we could show that the apparatus met the NFPA requirements as certified by the fire marshal. This was the first time that I ran into a problem with the fire marshal, who at that time personally reviewed all apparatus specifications.

One of the Eldorado-specific items was that the fire engine needed to be able to navigate the heavy load of water off-road. At that time, Avenida Torreon was in essence an off-road venue, as it was unused and, having not been graded for a long time, was extremely rough and rutted. As this road was an access to grasslands, as were other locations with difficult access in our fire district, I specified a particular 10-speed Road Ranger transmission, which had two extremely low gear ratios engaged by a switch separate from the regular shift lever. The fire marshal tried to get me to take that item out of the specifications, which I refused to do. This being before the Internet, it was not easy for me to find relevant information to use in defending my choice of transmission, but luckily one of the national fire service journals, to which I subscribed, had in its new deliveries column a photo and description of

a new piece of apparatus using the very same transmission for a volunteer fire department in Ohio. I copied that, and went back to the fire marshal, showed him the article and challenged him to find anything in Pamphlet 19 that would prevent the use of the Road Ranger. He withdrew his objection, which should never have been raised and which caused me to make unneeded efforts to defend my choice.

Specifications approved, I asked county purchasing if it could conduct the bid process due to the funding being provided by a private source, in light of the fact that the fire engine would, upon delivery, become the property of the county on behalf of the Eldorado Fire District. Purchasing turned the matter over to the county attorney, who issued a letter opinion setting out the conditions to be met, mainly dealing with the funds. The fire engine was let out to bid, and the successful bidder was a fire apparatus company in Albuquerque. (They merged with another company, then went out of business not too many years after our engine was delivered, a not-uncommon event in the American fire apparatus business. Ward LaFrance a long-standing major manufacturer closed shortly after the delivery of the first fire engine for Crested Butte, Colorado. Perhaps I am guilty...).

Still needing more funding, I then approached the ECIA board, which was very receptive and agreed to provide some initial funds; they continued to do so for several years. I think that we may have used their first contribution to purchase turnout gear. Given that the board was so cooperative, and that their source of funding was and continues to be the annual membership fee for each piece of property in Eldorado, it occurred to me that I had an obligation to keep the ECIA and property owners informed about their new fire department. The only way to do that at the time was for me to attend monthly public meetings of not only ECIA, but also of the Eldorado Residents Association, which was an active part of the community with well-attended meetings. My reports were always received gratefully, people quickly coming to understand that we would eventually not only provide them with adequate fire protection, but that that protection would also reduce the cost of their fire insurance.

One benefit of my attendance was that we gained a number of firefighter recruits, as people with little or no knowledge of the fire service learned from my monthly presentations what was involved. When added to the few remaining firefighters who had been fire brigade members, we soon had an adequate cadre that would eventually be ready to train on and use the new fire engine. Before that took place, I conducted monthly training sessions at the community clubhouse, introducing the basic physics of fire and fire suppression methods, as well as explaining how a fire engine worked. In addition, given that the engine was being built in Albuquerque, once the chassis was delivered and construction began, I made a number of progress inspections. (Most commonly, a fire department only makes one such inspection as the factories are usually too far removed to justify the travel costs.)

#### 4. Improper Use of State Fire Fund Monies and Related Issues

In speaking with other Santa Fe County fire chiefs, and chiefs from other departments at the annual New Mexico State Fire School, I learned that one problem that seemed endemic to county fire districts was illegal appropriation of State Fire Fund monies. The monies are

distributed to the county treasurers through the fire marshal's office solely for the use of fire districts. By statute, the counties are fiduciary agents, meaning that their responsibility is to ensure that funds are expended in line with both state statutes and regulations promulgated by the state fire marshal. The counties have no legal right to use any such funds for any purposes other than for their fire districts. (The counties are not the only government entities that play loosely with these funds: The state legislature is notorious for not passing through all the funds collected through the insurance companies to the fire marshal's office for forwarding to the counties.)

More than one fire chief told me that, having been funded at Level X for a given year, and having expended X less Y, they had found that the balance remaining in their appropriation was less than X less Y. County purchasing agents seemed to have the idea that they could control what the fire districts spent their funds on, again acting illegally. One chief told me that he went to his county purchasing agent to request a purchase order for hose wrenches, a standard item on a fire engine (they are even required by Pamphlet 19.) His request was immediately rejected, followed by the purchasing agent asking what hose wrenches are. My first such encounter came after the members of Eldorado Fire voted, at my request, to buy the first mobile radio in the department, to be installed in my personal vehicle. After speaking with the only vendor of such equipment in Santa Fe, I requested a purchase order; when I did so, the Santa Fe County purchasing agent stated that he would have to review the specifications. In no uncertain terms, I informed him that the Federal Communications Commission reviewed and approved specifications for mobile radios and showed him the FCC approval number on the printed specification sheet; I got my purchase order immediately.

Another problem discussed by fire chiefs was the county commission playing one department against others. Chief A might request funding from the commission for something not in the budget; the county might agree, but then tell the next chief who made such a request that no further funds were available. Another ploy was to turn down Chief A's request, and then fund a request from another chief. It seemed to me that the group of county fire chiefs needed a method of speaking with one voice, so I suggested that we ask the commission to establish a county fire chiefs association. I felt that such an organization needed to be one authorized by the commission, so that anything proposed to the commission would originate from a group already recognized by the commission. My fellow chiefs accepted my proposal, I asked for our group to be placed on a monthly commission agenda. We then appeared at a public commission meeting *en bloc*, the matter was debated, and the vote passed to set up our association.

Sometime later, at one of our regular monthly meetings, the chief from Edgewood raised a valid complaint that had not occurred to the rest of us. Given its location, the Edgewood fire department likely had the largest number of calls, and for various reasons the chief found himself driving the long distance between Edgewood and the Santa Fe County Courthouse to take care of administrative matters; the rest of us, living so much closer to Santa Fe, had not thought of his problem. The solution seemed to be a simple one, namely that a county fire marshal position be set up and funded by the county; the funding was, of course, the one real problem. The county chiefs again appeared as a group before the

commission, which, while not opposed to the idea, needed time to explore how they might fund this new position. Awaiting a positive resolution, I drew up a proposed job description, which made it quite clear that the county fire marshal should be someone well-acquainted with the fire service, and that this person would have strictly administrative responsibilities. That latter clause was intended to maintain the authority of the fire chiefs to run their departments without interference from the fire marshal. The position was created and funded and the first fire marshal hired; things started off well, but we shall revisit that later.

## 5. The Eldorado Dump, the County, and the Eldorado Fire Department

One of the first fire suppression issues we faced was the on-going problem of the county dump; this was long before open dumps were made illegal. Now that Eldorado at Santa Fe had an organized fire county fire department, even though that department was underequipped and under-trained, we had to accept the legal responsibility to at least attempt to extinguish dump fires, which were rather common.

In the earliest days, as we had no radio or paging dispatch capability, we continued to use the phone tree that the fire brigade had used to alert members. Due to my attending the ECIA and ERA meetings, I had become known as “Mr. Fire Chief,” one result of which was that, rather than calling the City of Santa Fe fire dispatcher to start the phone tree, residents would call me at home, whereupon I would start the phone tree, and ask the dispatcher to request the assistance of the Hondo Fire Department, the closest such agency.

We would go to the dump and try to use the Bean high-pressure pump to at least reduce the amount of smoke and flames, to little avail. We could not use the portable pump, as there was no water to connect it to. Hondo would bring a fire engine and a water tanker, and between us we would at least have a small effect on the fire. After a few such fire responses, which exposed us to toxic smoke and explosions from such things as paint spray cans but did not put out the fires, I decided to find out if any laws governed the operation of county dump sites. I found that state law required counties to keep dumps covered with dirt, which Santa Fe County rarely did. With that information, I informed the county that they were in violation of state statutes and that, due to the unacceptable danger to firefighters, we would no longer respond to fires at the Eldorado dump. I did not know if I was acting legally but did not care: Our health and lives were more important than fruitless efforts to extinguish dump fires. The county moved a piece of heavy earthmoving equipment to the dump, operated it frequently, and dump fires became a non-issue.

## 6. A New Fire Engine, A New Fire Station, A Serious Problem

Awaiting the delivery of our new fire engine, we made some structural modifications to the old stable building at the resident’s clubhouse where the Bean was stored, so that the new engine would fit inside. We bought a mobile radio and a 120-volt AC–12-volt DC power supply for it and had an external antenna installed, so that we would have radio communication. Around this time, we purchased pagers for the firefighters, and the City of Santa Fe Fire Department added the pager codes for Eldorado into its dispatch system. Dispatching was a service that the city kindly provided to county fire departments at no cost. The city

system was rather antiquated, but our ability to use it was a great benefit.

At the time that I was negotiating with Amrep for purchase of the fire engine, I also raised the subject of a site for a fire station. With the imminent delivery of our new fire engine, I again spoke with the ECIA manager to find out what real estate lots owned by Amrep would be suitable for the station. The one I chose is at 144 Avenida Vista Grande; Amrep proposed a site on Moya Place. When I pointed out that the latter location would make it impossible to build a drive-through fire station and make access difficult to Avenida Vista Grande, Amrep donated the site of today's Eldorado headquarters station at 144 Avenida Vista Grande. The entire Eldorado community owes a debt of gratitude to Amrep for its very generous financial contributions to the fire department.

I had no idea where funding for the building would come from. I don't recall, nor can I find anyone who might have the records, how or when a bond issue for the county fire departments became possible; I don't even know how it was funded. The county fire chiefs discussed this at length; again, I no longer know why Eldorado was entitled to a larger part of the bond issue proceeds than any other. However, with the site now property of the county and with bids in hand for construction of the station, I requested full funding from the bond issue, an amount to which we were entitled. After negotiations with departments which also had financial needs and which had not reached their maximum funding limits, I agreed to rescind \$20,000, reflecting the cost of the desired meeting and training room.

Feeling strongly that the room should be part of the new fire station, I started looking for funding. Quite to my surprise, ECIA offered to loan us the money at no interest, with repayment to be made from our state fire fund income. I presented this to the county fire marshal, asking that the county attorney issue an opinion as to the legality of the loan. The attorney's opinion was that, if I could obtain letters from three local commercial banks to the effect that they would not offer us no interest loans, we could borrow from ECIA. I knew two of the bank presidents and had no difficulty in getting their letters once I explained the situation; the third president was rather reluctant but did give me a letter.

I gave the letters to the fire marshal, who passed them on to the attorney, and we seemed to be set to borrow the funds from ECIA and proceed to build the station once the bonding was complete. However, after I had done the work to get the county attorney to approve the ECIA loan, the fire marshal chose to interfere by claiming that this was illegal. At that time, I did not realize why the fire marshal was interfering with operations of the Eldorado fire department; this will become clearer later in this document. I protested vehemently to the fire marshal that, as I had done as requested and the attorney had approved the matter, the fire marshal had no further say and if he persisted, I would broach the matter at a monthly public meeting of the county commission. Awarding of the bid and construction of the station proceeded.

The station having been turned over by the contractor, we moved from the stable to the new building. I unplugged and moved the radio, put it in the fire station office, connected the outdoor antenna, plugged in the power supply and radio, and turned it on. As the radio worked, I assumed that was that, but it turned out to be anything but that. Sometime after

taking possession of the station, as I was looking out the window in one of the rear overhead apparatus bay doors in our drive-through fire station, I noticed some water bubbling up around the driveway. Figuring that there was a simple leak in the water line, I went outside, only to find to my dismay that water was bubbling up through the ground at a myriad of places. This being a matter for the contractor, I contacted them, a plumber was dispatched, and it was eventually found that both the water line to the building and much of the inside water lines were riddled with holes.

After the outside water line was dug up, it was determined that the problem was caused by electrolytic corrosion. An electrician determined that there was DC current imposed on the cold water lines inside and outside the fire station. The only source of that had to be the power supply for the radio base station, so it was removed and replaced; the new supply did not cause any electrical leakage. The county fire marshal accused me of causing the problem, stating that I had obviously plugged in the power supply incorrectly in the new station, as there had been no problems in the stable where the new fire engine had been housed previous to moving into the new station. This accusation was absurd for two reasons: One, there is only one way to plug the power supply in and two, as there are no water lines in the stable, even a defective power supply could not have caused any problems.

The first step towards making an insurance claim to cover the cost of plumbing replacement was to determine in what manner the original power supply was defective. To do this, the vendor hired a New Mexico licensed engineer; the vendor, the engineer, and I met, and the engineer removed the metal cover of the power supply. The fault with the supply was immediately evident: A wire carrying DC current had been damaged during manufacture by being placed in contact with the cover, thereby removing some of the insulation. As the metal cover was grounded to the fire station electrical system, as required by the relevant electrical code, the current was imposed on the copper plumbing. The engineer submitted a formal report, the insurance claim was accepted by the manufacturer, and the plumbing was replaced. There was one final, amusing, facet to this: The insurance agent who handled the claim tried to get the vendor to submit a claim to his insurance company to cover part of the repair cost; when it was pointed out that both the manufacturer and the vendor were insured by the same company, the agent's request was withdrawn.

## 7. A Fire Department was Equipped and Trained

Not long after we moved into the new fire station, there was a dedication service for the new fire station. One of the items I had specified was a fire hydrant in front of the building, to provide a good location for water tankers to be refilled. One of the county commissioners, taking note of that, stated that he thought all county fire stations should have such hydrants. That would have been a good idea, had Eldorado's fire station not been the only station in the county that was on a water system.

Now that we had a home for our new fire engine, matters began to settle into routine. Training was held weekly, consisting of both classroom business and book learning, but also in moving outside, learning how to lay hose and apply water to fires, and so on. We did

manage a few times to scare residents, as we would be practicing around houses, with emergency lights flashing, hoses in the roads, hose nozzles open and water flowing where it would do no damage. Residents, approaching their homes, especially when it was dark, would quite understandably be worried that there might be a fire in their houses; I did try to be aware of their approach, stop and reassure them that it was only a training session, not an actual fire.

I learned that a friend, an Eldorado resident, was a specialist in industrial respiratory protection. He had worked at Los Alamos National Laboratory, then moved to Eldorado and started a consulting business. His expertise was such that he was qualified as an expert witness in courts all around the country. I convinced him to join the fire department, and once we had trained him in how the fire service used Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA,) I assigned him to take over our SCBA training, so that we probably had the best such training in Santa Fe County. By way of explanation, despite frequent mistaken information in the press about fire departments using oxygen masks, the vast majority of fire service SCBA units use purified and dried compressed air.

## 8. A Few Emergency Incidents

We did not have a high run rate, mainly due to the small population of Eldorado and that Hondo Fire had primary responsibility for I-25. While US 285 is in the Eldorado Fire District, there were not a large number of emergency calls there.

Hondo was handling a vehicle fire on the southbound lanes of I-25 north of the Eldorado exit. I responded to assist them, using my vehicle with its emergency lights on to block both southbound lanes of the highway. I was facing south when I heard a vehicle driving in the median past my roadblock. It was a Santa Fe County Deputy Sheriff. Hose lines were lifted to allow his car through, and later I had a chat with the sheriff, pointing out to him that his agency was required to obey state statutes, such as not going past fire department operations that blocked roads.

We responded to an accident in Eldorado when a young boy was hit and injured by a delivery truck. Soon after we arrived on-scene, a New Mexico State Police officer arrived, and started giving directions in a very loud voice. I asked him several times to be quiet, so that our firefighters could hear what they were doing, which he clearly did not appreciate, to the point that he actually threatened to arrest me. We had a chat, where I pointed out to him just how preposterous that threat was, and I thought that would take care of the matter. However, when a Hondo fire engine arrived, he started yelling even more, demanding that it be removed from the scene. We had no designated medical unit, of course, and Hondo's unit was out of service, so they had placed their medical equipment on the fire engine. While the officer was yelling, I started to laugh, as I saw that his performance was being witnessed by a group of cadets from the New Mexico State Police Academy and their instructor; they were nearby, heard the radio traffic and came to see what was happening. It suddenly got very quiet when the officer on the scene also noticed that he was being watched! When I got home, I called the State Police; the officer who took my call called me back a day or two later, after investigating what had happened. The officer who had

responded to our call had recently moved to the Santa Fe after being assigned to the State Police office in Cuba, where he would often be the only emergency responder on a scene and have to wait a long time for anyone else to arrive. Apparently, he just did not know what to do when a fire department had arrived before he did. I was told that he had been given some new training on how to act.

I had started a New Mexico Fire Chiefs Association, a forerunner to today's organization. I was away on a snowy weekend at a chiefs' meeting when there was a truck accident on the Lamy overpass. At that time, the highway bridge over the railroad track was made entirely out of wood. The State Police officer at the scene refused the request of the Eldorado fire officer in charge to get a load of sand before a tow truck removed the damaged vehicle, a request which was denied. When I returned home, several fire department members told me that, due to the lack of sand, the drive wheels on the tow truck were spinning so badly that the bridge deck was smoking. Had the bridge caught fire, it would most likely have been a total loss, cutting off U.S. Highway 285.

## 9. EMTs, Volunteers, and a Horse Arena

As I mentioned earlier, fire departments nationwide were expanding their service from fire protection to providing medical service (often titled "rescue") at a much higher level of professional training than was previously the norm. For career departments, this was partially as a response to lowering fire emergency calls due to improved code enforcement and related reasons, to the point where many such departments were finding it increasingly difficult to justify their budgets. Many volunteer fire departments (and there are many more volunteer than career departments,) moving into expanded medical response was simply a matter of a feeling that the members of the departments wanted to be of greater service to their communities. (That should not be taken as meaning that no career departments did not feel the same way.)

Having started an emergency medical response team in Crested Butte, it seemed to me that we should do the same thing in Eldorado. Accordingly, I made a motion at a fire department monthly meeting to that effect, a motion that was accepted enthusiastically. Not only did some firefighters agree to take the training required to be state certified as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs,) we even got some new volunteers who wanted only to be EMTs, not firefighters. We then voted to change our name to Eldorado Fire and Rescue Service, and a member offered to make and install the new sign on the street side of the new fire station. This was, to me, a wonderful example of the dedication of our volunteers. I suspect that many of them had never previously even thought of becoming firefighters or EMTs, much less becoming cross-trained, but they saw and took advantage of doing something voluntarily that was of obvious benefit to the community.

Unfortunately, while Eldorado Fire was constantly improving through continued training, the open exchange of ideas at regular meetings, and so forth, the county fire marshal actually increased his interference with us in direct violation of his job description. For example, we had been called to a grass fire south of our district. The fire marshal showed up, which he ought not to have done, and told me to uncouple hoses, move the fire engine, and deal with

a small finger of flame that had erupted. I ignored his illegal command, told two firefighters to take shovels and put some dirt on the flames; the finger of fire was extinguished.

A group of developers proposed a massive horse arena at the Eldorado stable area, a proposal that quickly raised tremendous opposition from Eldorado residents, mainly due to the size, which would have been out of keeping with the area. After this project was reported in the local newspaper, one county commissioner was quoted, more than once, as stating that he did not like the people in Eldorado; we will see him again. My opposition to the project was that, unless major changes were made to the plans, there would be no way under any circumstances that we could provide adequate fire protection.

Given the size of the arena, plan review was far beyond my capability, so I requested that a licensed fire protection engineer be hired by the developers to do the review. The fire marshal objected strenuously, hardly a position he ought to have taken. I continued to insist, but when it was agreed that an engineer would be hired, it turned out that there was not a single such engineer licensed in New Mexico. I contacted a fire service friend in Arizona, who found an Arizona-licensed engineer who agreed, for a fee, to review the plans. He could not, of course, place his seal on his review, not being licensed in New Mexico, but was willing to submit his recommendations in a letter. That being done, I would have accepted the arena were it to be built according to the engineer's recommendations. The cost of accepting those changes would have been so great that the developers abandoned their proposal.

## 10. Progress and the End

With the new station occupied and training progressing very well, thanks to the dedication of the volunteer firefighters and EMTs, it was time to request a rating survey from the Insurance Services Office. As ISO had long ago closed its New Mexico office, I contacted the Denver office to request the survey. The man who came to Eldorado to do the survey was the same person who had done the first ISO survey for Crested Butte, so we already had a good working relationship. He was here for some eight hours; the first two were devoted to looking at our records, flow-testing a few fire hydrants, and the like. The rest of the time he regaled me with the sad history of the New Mexico State Fire Marshal's Office, with which he had been connected through ISO for many years. We later received an ISO rating letter, giving us a Class 9 (non-hydrant area) and a Class 6 (fire-hydrant area) rating; this was the first fire department in New Mexico to receive such a split rating. A Class 6 rating would bring a substantial reduction in fire insurance ratings, a Class 9 a much smaller one; most importantly for the fire department is that the yearly income from the State Fire Fund for a Class 6 rating would bring a substantial increase.

I went to the State Fire Marshal to ask if we would be funded as a Class 6, and he found a way to try to avoid that, for reasons not only unknown to me, but also something I considered unreasonable. His statement was that the ISO rating letter listed as first a Class 9 and second as a Class 6, and that he would only approve a Class 6 payout if ISO would revise the letter to Class 6 first. I pointed out to him that, under ISO regulations, we were not supposed to appeal ratings unless we could prove serious errors, but that I would

nonetheless contact them. As it happened, I did know the ISO Colorado Chief Engineer, the person in charge of the office, so I wrote him a pleading letter, explaining why I was contacting him and soliciting his assistance. That was successful, and we became funded as a Class 6 fire department for the State Fire Fund.

That was really the last major development during my years as the Eldorado Fire Chief, other than a continued interference from the county fire marshal. Matters became so serious, that I made a motion at a County Fire Chiefs' meeting to fire the marshal, which did not succeed. Matters came to a head when the county fire marshal accused me, to my face, of being a "bad fire chief." (It was then that I finally realized that the county fire marshal had been trying to have me removed as fire chief, something not in his job description and for reasons unknown to me.) I immediately filed a formal complaint with the County Manager. When the Eldorado firefighters heard about this, they voted to withdraw their services on the grounds that they felt that they had the right to choose their own fire chief.

I engaged the services of the county commissioner who lived in Eldorado as an intermediary with the county. A formal meeting with the manager, the fire marshal, and me had been set up; the morning before the meeting, the commission advised me that, at the meeting, everything would be okay; I took that to mean that the fire marshal would be removed from office. Ten minutes after the meeting began, I knew that things were far from okay and soon found why out: In a complete violation of ethics and of written county commission regulations, the county commissioner who was on record as not liking the residents of Eldorado walked into the meeting. It was quite evident that he had interfered with a personnel issue, taking the side of the county fire marshal, and the county manager failed to carry out the duties of a manager. I need to point out that the commissioner who had been our intermediary did not interfere with a personnel matter; rather, she simply conveyed the feelings of the members of the fire department to the county manager.

I could have filed a second formal complaint but decided not to do that. I was tired of fighting with government, I had accomplished my goal of providing Eldorado with proper fire and emergency medical protection and was ready to leave the fire department, which took place a few days after the meeting. As a way of apologizing to me and the volunteer members of the fire department for the improper way that I had been treated, the county commission held a reception for me, thanking me on behalf of the county for my service to the Eldorado community. Six months later, at the request of the county fire chiefs, the county fire marshal was fired.

As a personal last note, while I did leave the active fire service, I did not leave the fire service community entirely, continuing to do training nationwide. I also had one last major contribution to make: At the time, there was a new technology in fire suppression that had been developed by the wildland fire service in the United States. I took on the project of adapting this and introducing it to the structural fire service. That technology is now in use world-wide, including by the City of Santa Fe Fire Department and by Eldorado Fire and Rescue Service.