

## **“Uncle Joe Ross” Arrives**

by Unknown

Moses Latta was not the first man to harness steam as a replacement for muscles in fire-fighting. The earliest steam fire engine had been fashioned in 1829 in London by George Braithwaite, a noted engineer. His assistant on the project was John Ericsson, who more than three decades later was to win recognition in this country as the designer of the ironclad “Monitor” of Civil War fame. Appropriately dubbed the “Novelty,” Braithwaite’s steam fire engine never captured the public’s fancy, although a few were sold on the Continent, one purchaser being the King of Prussia. In 1833 Braithwaite gave up his project.

The idea would not die quite so easily, however. In 1840 another English engineer, Paul Hodge, built a steam fire engine for several New York insurance companies which were finding the fire-fighting inefficiency of that day extremely costly.

Hodge’s engine never had a fair chance. For a long time not a single volunteer company in New York would undertake to man the cumbersome machine, fearing it would replace the volunteers’ beloved hand-pump engines and spoil what had become their favorite pastime—fighting fires in the rough and tumble old-fashioned way. After a little pressure, however, one fire company agreed to operate the machine, and a trial period of several months followed. Almost immediately, the firemen began grumbling about the engine’s awkwardness. They also claimed it didn’t produce enough steam. The constant derision that had greeted their innovation finally discouraged the sponsoring insurance companies. Concluding that the loss in the volunteers’ morale more than outweighed any advantages offered by steam, they dropped their short-lived crusade, and sold Hodge’s engine to a manufacturing firm. There it served the remainder of its days in the unglamorous role of a stationary engine.

The same John Ericsson who in 1829 worked with George Braithwaite on the world’s first steam fire engine, designed one of his own in 1841. But even though the engine looked good on paper, it was never actually built. The old aversion to progress by firemen of the day was responsible.

Not only New York but other cities as well were guilty of similar heel-dragging. In 1851, a Philadelphian named William Lay came up with another engine design. But again, antipathy, on the part of firemen prevented the engine from ever emerging beyond the drawing board. Fearful—and rightly so—that the advent of steam would spoil their “sport” and excitement, the firemen would not budge.

Such was the setting when, in 1852, Moses Latta of Cincinnati developed his first steam fire engine. This earliest Latta engine was only an experimental model, but it was good enough to prompt the Cincinnati city fathers in 1853 to loosen their municipal purse strings to the extent of \$5,000 for construction of the world’s first successful steam fire engine, the “Uncle Joe Ross.”

A colorful account of Latta and his engine appears in William T. King’s “The American Steam Fire Engine.” Describing Latta in his workshop, King wrote:

“It was a long, high room, the walls on the east side being hung with drawings of the engine. Beneath the drawings ran a long workbench, and at this stood a man; a very diminutive specimen of humanity, short and spare, stoop-shouldered, even to deformity.

“He had a square, white-paper hat on his head, and was busy measuring something. While looking at him, the stranger saw that his head redeemed his poor body; for it was massive, and the eyes had in them the light of genius....”

After explaining the wonders of his invention, Latta is said to have told a visitor: “The trouble is that there is no certainty that this, or any other steam fire engine, will ever be allowed to work at a fire. You are probably not aware how bitter is the feeling of the volunteer firemen against this engine. They say it shall never throw a stream of water on a fire in this city; and I sometimes fear that I shall never live to see this grand idea brought into the service of the world. The recent riots here show what a mob can do in our city. My steps are dogged. Spies are continually on my track ... threatening me with all sorts of ills and evils unless I drop work on this engine and pronounce it a failure.

“I’ll never give up! I’ll build it, and there are enough men in this city to see that it has a fair trial; and it shall have it. When it is finished, it will be heard from at the first fire, and woe to those who stand in its way.”

As the date of the trial approached, the Cincinnati firemen were in ferment. It would never do to destroy the engine before the trial, they reasoned. On the other hand, if the trial proved successful, it would be equally risky to destroy the engine then. Consequently, a plan was formulated: make no demonstration of any kind at the trial, but—if the engine was a success—wait for its first appearance at the scene of a real blaze. Then wreck the engine and render equally useless anyone who contributed to its operation.

The trial was a great success, exceeding even Latta’s highest hopes, and now the whole city waited for the first fire on which the “Uncle Joe Ross” would be used. They did not have to wait long. A few nights after the trial, a large warehouse broke into flames in the middle of the night. Historian King describes what followed:

“Down came the great steam fire engine, four mammoth gray horses in front of it at a gallop; the smoke streaming from its stack, the fire flashing from its grates. Its ponderous wheels ground the cobblestones into powder as they struck them; and as the great monster went down the hill, people woke as out of a trance and started after it ... the time had come.”

The engine had just started to “play” water on the flames when a cry rang out: “The hose is cut.” The volunteer firemen had taken the first step in carrying out their plan.

Then occurred one of the most critical of all the melees that characterized fire-fighting of that time—a pitched battle between ordinary citizens and the irate volunteer firemen. Fortunately for the engine, for Latta and for the public in general, the citizens proved the stronger. Thoroughly whipped, the firemen gave up the struggle and the big steamer soon had drowned out the fire.

The next day Latta found himself the hero of Cincinnati. Although few were aware of it at the time, the era of the steam fire engine had finally arrived.

Source:

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