



Hall of Flame

By Jan Cleere

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The young boy's eyes widen with delight as he rushes up one aisle and down another, attempting to absorb every engine, every motor, every piece of equipment in the Hall of Flame Museum of Firefighting, the world's largest collection of fire-fighting memorabilia. With his mother in hot pursuit, the towhead drinks in these wondrous machines as he roams the massive 50,000-square-foot collection in Phoenix's Papago Park. Red, green, brown, white, meticulously decorated fire trucks dance before his eyes. He's dazzled. And that's just what George F. Getz, Jr. envisioned when he founded the museum more than two decades ago.

Getz opened the doors of the Hall of Flame Museum in 1974, displaying and preserving his collection of fire equipment from around the world, and emphasizing fire safety for children and adults. Getz died in 1992 at the age of 83, but his dream "to promote fire safety and to preserve the objects that tell the story of firefighters through the Hall of Flame's programs and exhibits" remains a poignant memorial of his love of fire equipment and the men and women who risk their lives to douse nature's fiery temper.

Exploring the maze of exhibits — more than 130 vehicles and countless pieces of equipment, some dating back 300 years — brings out the child in everyone. As I follow the boy and his mother through the first hall of engines, we encounter the oldest machine in Getz' collection. The English Newsham engine, built in 1725, boasts a shiny red coat that belies its age. Despite its unsophisticated technology, its crew of 20 men could pump a whopping 90 gallons of water onto a fire.

It's hard to imagine a fire engine without a sleek layering of red paint. Over the centuries, red has been designated the color of warning for emergency vehicles. Don Hale, the museum's restorer for more than 20 years, transforms old, beat-up trucks with a shower of scarlet rain. Hale and his volunteer crew refinish, recondition and repair donated vehicles from all over the country.

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Around the corner from the Newsham, and vividly contradicting the red fire engine image, the Studebaker “Pung” fire sleigh sports a coat of rich, dark brown. Plowing through the winter snows of Michigan in the late 1800s, firefighters valiantly clinging to its sides, the fire sleigh imitates an old farm wagon with two seats in front and a wide flat bed that holds fire hoses and anyone brave enough to hang on. Lanterns on each side of the seat swayed with the motion of galloping horses as the men cautiously maneuvered through huge snowdrifts that could create more hazards than the fires.

One of the first aerial trucks, built in the late 1800s to protect the skyscraping buildings beginning to line the streets of Chicago, catches the youngster’s eye. Its wobbly wooden ladder could hold one, maybe two men at a time, and rose no higher than three or four stories. A far cry from today’s high-tech hydraulic ladders that reach to the skies.

Down another corridor sits one of the most majestic engines in the museum: the stark-white American La France Model 400. With its V-12 engine and 240 horsepower, this model captured the attention of passersby as it raced down America’s streets to rescue a family in distress or douse a burning building. This particular engine was used in Norfolk, Nebraska, from 1935 to 1960. The ornate gilded scroll work swirling across the body of the vehicle vividly captures the over-the-top era of touring cars and flapper skirts.

The museum’s newest exhibit, the National Firefighters Hall of Heroes, honors America’s finest fire fighters, paramedics, and emergency medical technicians (EMTs). I silently read the framed names of men and women who have died in the line of duty. While the decline in fire fighter deaths in the United States — from 138 in 1981 to 72 in 1997 — is impressive and encouraging, the empty frames that march across the stark, silent walls predict the future fate of too many more of these valiant heroes.

In addition to the exhibits, the museum offers a variety of programs — Firehouse Story Hour, Wet & Wild Workshop, Win a Firehouse Story Hour — teaching children about fire safety. I find my young friend exploring Safety House, a playhouse decorated with spotted Dalmatian curtains and smoke detectors. Cartoon signs point out the hidden perils of electrical outlets and exposed light sockets. Down the street from Safety House stands Haz Place, a doll house that lights up areas where hazards lurk.

Leaving the museum, I watch mom help her son don a small yellow slicker and fire hat as he prepares to board a miniature fire engine. He is ready to fight his first fire. If playing at fire fighting makes children more aware of fire-related dangers, it’s a game worth playing. And the Hall of flame Museum is definitely worth a visit by fire-fighting buffs of all ages.

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When You Go

The Hall of Flame Museum of Firefighting, 6101 East Van Buren Street, is in Papago Park across from the Phoenix Zoo and adjacent to Phoenix Municipal Stadium. Take Loop 202 to East Van Buren Street. Cross Galvan Parkway and turn right into parking lot. The museum opens year round Monday through Saturday 9 A.M. to 5 P.M., Sunday Noon to 4 P.M. Admissions: Adults - \$5, seniors 62+ - \$4, age 6 to 17 - \$3, age 3 to 5 - \$1.50, free under age 3. Call 275-3473 for additional information or to arrange guided tours for groups of 8 or more. The Hall is available for special functions and events.

Jan Cleere considers herself an almost-native Arizonan, having relocated to Phoenix more than 30 years ago. She remembers her grandfather's stories of his fire-fighting days in the small town of Franklin, Pennsylvania in the 1940s.