

## 1916 American LaFrance: Our First Automotive Fire Truck

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In 1976, the Town of Mount Airy received a letter from a Charlotte gentleman, stating he had an American-La France fire truck (Serial Number 1857) that had been purchased by the town in 1917. He had several offers from museums and antique dealers but preferred to keep the vehicle in its home surroundings and was hoping to find a responsible party in Mount Airy that would buy it.

The city responded that it was interested in bringing the truck home and getting it refurbished. Municipal funds could not be used to purchase the fire truck, so the Mount Airy Jaycees raised \$1,000 for the purchase. It was 1976, and Bicentennial fever was sweeping America.

Fire Department personnel and volunteer firemen spent endless hours preparing the body for restoration. Specialized interior work was done by local businesses that contributed their services. Then came the job of getting the engine running. There was great jubilation when the mechanical skills of city personnel produced the sound of the motor, hitting on all cylinders.

In July of 1917, the town of Mount Airy had approved the purchase of the city's first motorized fire truck for \$8,500, including delivery. It was a 1916 American-La France, manufactured in Elmira, New York, one of only four manufactured by American-La France that year. Of the four trucks, this is one of three that can still be accounted for.

The four-cylinder engine, 1,000 gallon pumper, could travel at speeds up to 48 miles per hour. It was a smooth ride for those used to the bumpy "hold on to your hat" rides, high atop the fire wagon pulled by Old Reuben.

The truck has dual rear wheels, solid rubber tires, a speedometer operating from the right front wheel, clutch-operated chain-drive transmission, and right hand drive. A "ram-head" intake manifold adorns the engine, which was built with no fuel pump, thus requiring the gas to flow by means of gravity.

This truck served the town well. Even when new fire trucks were purchased, one in 1926 and another in 1946, the 1916 stayed in service. It was eventually sold to the town of Dobson in 1947. Dobson later sold the truck to the town of Rural Hall. It was again sold in the 1950s to a Charlotte auto dealer. A family of dogs was living in the truck at the time of its rediscovery.