

THE POMPIER LADDER

The "[pompiers ladder](#)" (pronounced pom-peer) is probably named for French firefighters known as "Pompier" (pronounced pom-pee-yay). It is reported as "invented" by a St. Louis Lieutenant named Christ Hoell. In some fire departments across the country, it also became known as the "Hoell Rescue Device."

It turns out that this ladder was just one part of the "Pompier Life-Saving Service". This was a system published by Christ Hoell and introduced into the St. Louis Fire Department on Dec. 19, 1877. It included not only the ladder but techniques for other rescues.

According to Captain Hoell's great-granddaughter, the device was used in Europe before the U.S. It was when Hoell was working for the Elberfeld, Germany fire department that he became acquainted with the ladder. When he came to America, he brought the design and created and marketed a training manual and ladders.

Christ Hoell was born on December 7, 1849, in Hesse (Dusseldorf) Germany. Christ Hoell became a member of the Elberfeld Volunteer Fire Department in Elberfeld Germany for seven years. While there he learned and used the pompiers, which was a German fire ladder developed around 1828 by Mr. Behl in Schwabischgrund, Wurthemberg, Germany. Most rapid recognition of the ladder and development of the method of its use, took place in southern Germany. It was introduced in Elberfeld around 1864.

Christ Hoell left Germany in 1873 and came to America at age 27 with his wife, Wilhelmina (age 28), daughter, Emelie (4) and son, Oscar (10 months). He came on the ship Wesser where they traveled in steerage. Their manifest ID number was 0003340. His occupation was listed as

bricklayer. They came between 1872-1873. They came to St. Louis where several cousins, the Fehls, lived. The Fehls' were tobacconists. Christ was a stone mason until he was appointed to the St. Louis Fire Department. As a stone mason, Christ worked on St. Peter and Paul Church in Soulard. Christ and Wilhelmine's family continued to grow with the births of four additional children (Alexander, Oswald, Ottilie and Lydia).

After the Brooklyn theater and Southern Hotel fires (April 11, 1877) Christ wrote a letter to the German newspaper, the Westliche Post, suggesting the organization of a pompier corps as an auxiliary to the fire department, giving a list of the apparatus necessary and the uses to which each article in the outfit could be put. On the evening of April 19, 1877, a meeting of citizens at Central Turner's Hall at which Hoell was invited to be present and explained the system.

It was there decided to organize a volunteer company and organize a committee composed of E.D. Meier, C.H. Stiefel and Zero Marx. The committee members were appointed to look after the work, with Christ Hoell appointed captain of the corps and instructor of the pompier method. The organization was put into effect three days later. The pompier company, which was composed principally of painters, roofers and men accustomed to climbing ladders, numbered twenty men divided into two sections as follows:

First Section - J. Pillman, leader. Klinge, Cremer, L. Kaufmann, William Ruetz, F. Medart, Geo. Dauber, Zebuern, Harold J. Toeusffeldt.

Second Section - H. Aschendorf leader. Scheer, Schick, Frel, Olsbausen, Fred Bruder, Wenler, Henrichs.

Not one of these men had ever put their foot on a pompier ladder except Captain Hoell and the leaders. A voluntary subscription had already been taken up and the necessary apparatus purchased, and the company at once commenced a course of lessons under Captain Hoell.

On June 19, 1877, the Volunteer Corps gave a public display at the Peper Tobacco Ware, at the corner of Twelfth and Market streets.

Announcements having been made through the papers; an immense throng gathered about the building to witness the drill. Men, women and children struggled together under the scorching rays of the sun for an opportunity to see. Promptly at the time indicated the corps, numbering nineteen men and captained by Chris Hoell, were drawn up in line, ready to show the results of their practice.

The corps had been formed after the Southern Hotel fire, principally to show the utility of other equipment than those in use in the St. Louis Fire Department. The apparatus was simple but efficient, as would be demonstrated.

The exhibition closed with special salvages with a single rope by Capt. Hoell, which, in point of merit, were equal to any of the preceding display. The universal verdict was one highly commendatory of the Volunteer Life Saving Brigade, and of the efficiency of such an organization, equipped and maintained as part of the Fire Department, no sort of doubt was expressed.

In December of 1877 the St. Louis Fire Department organized its own pompier corps. Members of Ladder Companies 3 and 4 were chosen to begin the training under Captain Hoell. Firemen drilled on the new 12 foot long pompier ladders: a single beam of hickory, with rungs projecting from the side and surmounted by an iron hook bent at a long right angle, with serrated teeth on the underside of the hook. The ladders could be lifted overhead and hooked through windows at great depth. Hoell's new ladder belt had a large snap hook that allowed a fireman to attach himself to the ladder, or by taking turns of rope around the hook, developed enough friction to slide down a rope with control.

As his equipment and training caught on, he published a training guide for his ladder, belt, and other rescue tools.

After Capt. Hoell perfected the pompier ladder squads in the St. Louis Fire Department, in 1874, by request of the Fire commissioner of New York, he went there as an instructor of the system. The men of New York Fire Department were averse to it, and only three volunteers presented themselves. But Christ had rare energy and perseverance and he kept on. He convinced the men of the utility and feasibility of the scheme, and before he left, he gave an exhibition at French's Hotel which elicited the approval of all. Hoell was offered double the salary he was receiving in St. Louis to remain in New York as a permanent instructor but his such high ideals of loyalty to the department which had given him permission to make the trip, and he was so averse to disturbing his children's studies, that he refused and returned to his old post.

New York's first rescue with the Hoell rescue device (pompier ladder) occurred on April 7, 1884 and was performed by John Binns of Ladder Co. 3. The last rescue occurred on December 15, 1967. Gene Dowling of Ladder Co. 25 made the daring rescue in 30+ mile per hour winds. Both the first and the last rescues performed with the pompier ladder earned the James Gordon Bennet Medal, the highest honor bestowed to FDNY firefighters.

Upon returning to St. Louis, he became fire Captain. Hoell had been with Hook and Ladder No. 3 from the time of the organization up to 1885 when he was transferred to Hook and Ladder No. 6 in May of 1885, he became foreman newly organized No. 6 Truck company. There, as in all the years previous, he distinguished himself by faithful application to his duties.

With this simple apparatus, the St. Louis Fire Department and its imitators in other cities have done wonders and saved hundreds of lives.

Capt. Hoell perfected the pompier ladder squads in the St. Louis Fire Department,

On August 10, 1887, a fire broke out at the Spears Peanut warehouse. The stubborn blaze was battled throughout the night and into the next day. Captain Hoell and Fireman Jake Feldman carried a ladder towards the adjoining building, when suddenly the east and west walls of the warehouse wavered and collapsed. The north wall then fell in, and the wall of the adjoining building also collapsed.

After the collapse it was discovered that numerous firemen were injured and five were missing. A rescue effort was immediately begun. Fireman Feldman was found and removed he suffered a broken leg.

Another firemen was found with a broken shoulder. The dangerous search continued digging through the rubble. Rescuers came across the smashed wagon of Ladder 6.

Just before noon the body of Captain Chris Hoell was located in the rubble. He and two other members of the department Frank McDonald of Ladder 6 and Captain Bernard McKernan of Ladder 3 had been killed in the collapse.

He left behind a widow and five children. The family consisted of Mrs. Hoell and six children - Amelia, aged 17, Oscar, 15, Alexander, 13, Oswald, 11, Ottilia, 7 and Lydia, 4.

Many people owe their lives to this type of ladder and the daring firefighters who scaled the sides of buildings to save victims. The FDNY carried the pompier ladder on their trucks until July 11, 1996, when it was decommissioned. The Boston Fire Department still uses the ladder as part of its recruit training.

Chief David Traiforos, retired Franklin Park IL Fire Department, 50-year member of the fire service, member of the UHFS for over twenty years

Sources:

The following account of the life and death of Christ Hoell is provided by Captain Christ Hoell's great granddaughter, Gail Holzhausen.

Fire Service Information

Hook And Irons

Stories of FIRE by Paul Hashagen Chapter 5

