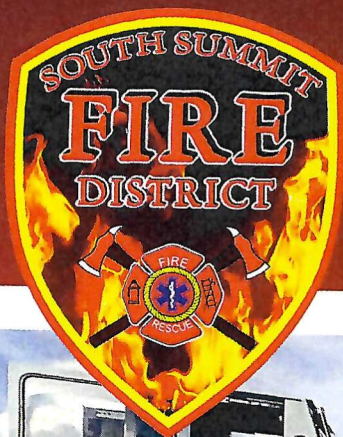




DEPARTMENT IN FOCUS SOUTH SUMMIT FIRE DISTRICT

By Thea Atkinson



2002 aerial ladder truck donated to SSFD

If you spend enough time in the Kamas Valley, you'll hear stories about the early days of the South Summit Fire District: neighbors dropping whatever they were doing when the alarm sounded, farmers leaving fields, mechanics leaving garages, ranchers climbing into pickups to head toward smoke, and firefighters showing up to structure fires wearing jeans, boots, and cowboy hats. For long-standing career departments, this may sound unbelievable, but in Summit County, those stories are less legend and more family history. Local, salt-of-the-earth volunteers built our organization one call, one training, and one generation at a time.

Our History

SSFD traces its unofficial beginnings to 1938, when local residents began organizing bucket brigades to protect homes, farms, and businesses in the Kamas Valley. In 1949, it was formally organized as the Kamas Fire Department, giving structure to what had previously been a largely grassroots effort. The biggest milestone came on June 24, 1952, when it officially became a fire district.

One of the most influential figures in those early years was Larry Holt, who was elected chief in 1940 and would become the district's longest-serving chief to date. In a tradition that feels uniquely small-town, the chief was elected each March by the members of the department.

A trailblazer for SSFD was Janet Atkinson. In 1989, she became the first woman to join SSFD. At a time when the fire service was even more overwhelmingly male than it is today, she earned the respect of her fellow firefighters through hard work and dedication. (Her leadership would eventually extend far beyond the district, culminating in her election in 2010 as the first female president of the Utah State Firefighters' Association.)

Another leader who left an enduring mark on the district was Mark Fry, who served as chief from 1986 to 2004. His legacy continues today

through his son, who serves as a full-time shift captain, reflecting the multigenerational commitment of SSFD's members.

Our organization was built by ordinary people who were willing to answer the call. As we continue to grow, we try not to lose sight of where we came from.

Training

In the beginning, the department's firefighters were largely self-trained. Experienced firefighters from larger, career departments volunteered their time to come to Kamas and teach them basic skills. Those informal classes were invaluable, but they also reflected the reality that rural departments often had to make do with whatever resources were available.

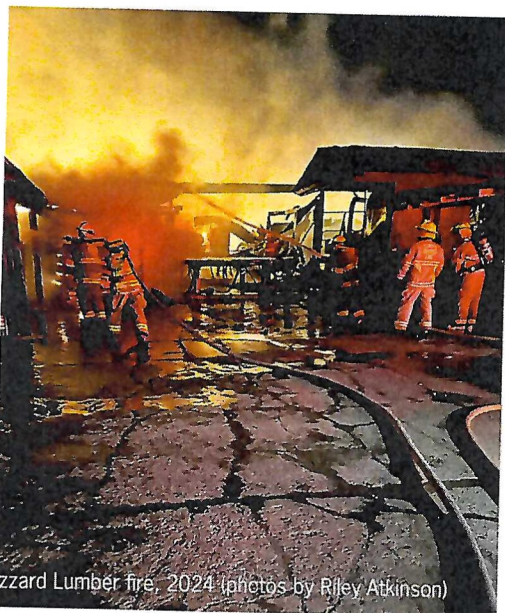
As funding improved, SSFD began participating in Utah Fire and Rescue Academy training programs, which proved to be a turning point. That investment in training has become one of the district's defining strengths.

A Fleet Built for Rural Reality

The South Summit Fire District's apparatus lineup reflects the challenges of protecting a large rural area that includes communities, agricultural properties, forested terrain, recreational areas, and wildland-urban interface. Our district operates an aerial ladder truck, three engines, two tenders, a type 4 brush



Old Oakley Post Office fire, June 2025



Hazard Lumber fire, 2024 (photos by Riley Atkinson)

engine, three type 6 brush engines, a mini pumper, three ALS-equipped ambulances, another on standby, an EMS UTV, a fire UTV, two snowmobiles, and four e-bikes.

Self-Governance

Unlike many municipal departments, the South Summit Fire District is self-governed by a board of elected commissioners. Decisions about funding, staffing, equipment, and long-term planning are made by leaders who are directly accountable to the residents they serve. It creates a level of local ownership that is increasingly rare in emergency services.

The Biggest Change in Decades

One of the most significant chapters in the South Summit Fire District's history began on January 1, 2024, when the district officially assumed responsibility for providing emergency medical services to the communities we serve.

Previously, EMS had been delivered through South Summit Ambulance Association and, later, was contracted through other agencies. During that time, SSFD responded in a supporting role for scene management, incident stabilization, property conservation, hazmat incidents, and other emergencies. Fire and EMS worked closely together, but they operated as separate services.



SSFD's Station 41 and its apparatus

To guide the transition to SSFD providing emergency medical services, the district hired Chief Scott Thorell in late 2023. His goal wasn't simply to bring ambulance service in-house; it was to build a strong EMS division from the ground up.

Recognizing that building a quality EMS program would take time, the district partnered with Wasatch Fire District, which staffed two advanced EMTs around the clock beginning January 1, 2024. That partnership ensured uninterrupted patient care while SSFD focused on training its own personnel and recruiting the next generation of firefighter/EMTs.

Over the next year, SSFD members and new volunteers completed extensive fire and EMS training, creating a pipeline of local talent. Those efforts paid off when SSFD transitioned to full-time staffing on January 1, 2025, launching three 24/7, four-person career crews. Of the 12 firefighters hired, nine came directly from the district's own training program, underscoring its commitment to growing talent from within.

SSFD Today

Now SSFD's Station 41 is staffed by four full-time firefighter/EMTs, while Station 42

is staffed by two part-time firefighter/EMTs for 12 hours each day. Combined with the district's 24/7 volunteer paramedic quick-response unit, SSFD has seven medically trained personnel available during daytime hours—representing a significant expansion of our ability to meet the community's growing emergency medical needs.

SSFD has evolved into a modern combination department with full-time, part-time, and volunteer personnel. The same valley where volunteers once fought fires in cowboy hats is now protected by dual-certified career personnel, modern apparatus, and an expanding emergency medical program. Our blend of professional staffing, advanced training, and hometown commitment has created an organization like no other.

The South Summit Fire District has grown significantly over the years, but what hasn't changed is this: we belong to our community. Our community has made us into what we are. Many of the people answering emergency calls are still locals. They own businesses, serve on city councils, farm, and see the people they serve every day. Our community has always been—and will continue to be—our greatest strength.