

Seat belts save lives – even firefighters'

By Kathryn Reed

Maybe if seat belts had been mandatory in the 1960s a 29-year-old Lake Valley firefighter would not have died.

The July 9, 1964, *Tahoe Daily Tribune* had a story about Larry Stewart who was a passenger in a pumper tanker driven by James Stephens. They were on their way to a fire at Camp Richardson. The engine went around a corner, the driver tried to avoid a car pulled off to the side, the ladders on the side of the engine were snagged on trees, and Stephens lost control. The fire truck ran into a tree.

The story says, "California Highway Patrolmen reaching the scene found Stewart pinned in the wreckage and Stephens standing nearby trying to give help."

Stewart died and was buried at Happy Homestead Cemetery. Stephens survived with minor injuries.

When asked about the incident, current Lake Valley spokeswoman Kileigh Labrado said only one person was in the fire engine. Asked what the findings from the investigation were – she didn't respond. Asked if there were seat belts in the engines then – more avoidance.

Ask any first responder and they'll tell you seat belts save lives. It's cops, firefighters, and paramedics who see the carnage when the safety devices aren't worn.

In California, the law has been on the books since 1986. A couple of states enacted seat belt laws in 1985, with the last holdout being Maine in 1995. While that is when the law took effect, vehicles had seat belts long before then.

Besides being a state law, a seat belt is a required piece of equipment in the fire industry just like a helmet.

In Burton Clark's book "I Can't Save You, But I'll Die Trying: The American Fire Culture" he has an entire chapter about seat belts.

Lake Valley is keeping pretty mum about the incident in August when a captain fell out of a moving fire engine after taking his seat belt off. The agency said it happened when he was taking his jacket off and it got hung up on the door lever.

The captain is out on medical leave. The extent of his injuries has not been released, nor is it known if he intends to return to work.

The agency also isn't revealing if any of the three on board will be or have been disciplined. In the fire industry it is the driver's responsibility to ensure everyone has a seat belt on.

As for the California Highway Patrol, they are not assessing blame to the driver.

"This collision was found to be 'other than driver' simply because the driver of the fire truck did not have anything to do with his passenger falling from the truck. The passenger was removing his jacket when part of his uniform caught the handle, opening the door and allowing the passenger to fall out," Officer Ruth Loehr told *Lake Tahoe News*. "No citations were issued. We do not normally write citations from collisions."

The state Occupational Safety and Health Administration is still investigating. A fine is the likely outcome.

Lake Valley is governed by a board of directors, but it is not kept in the loop on things like this.

"To my knowledge there are 'no protocols' for when the board

is notified of incidents," board Chairman Bob Bettencourt told *Lake Tahoe News*. "If there is a significant sensitive event or incident, it is brought to the board in a closed session which unfortunately cannot be disseminated outside the closed session."