

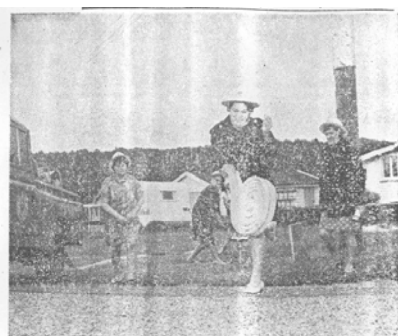
Property owners throughout most of Canterbury and the West Coast owe much for their protection from fire to small bands of well-trained men—and in one case women—the volunteer fire brigades.



The dash for the fire station.



They're off, with Nancy Wylie at the wheel



On the scene, the hose is rolled out.

# Fire alarm brings them running

THE STAR'S WEEKENDER MAGAZINE

Tom, Dick and Reg are among the 85 volunteer firemen in the Christchurch area. Nancy, Nora and Joyce are volunteer firefighters, too.

The three women firefighters live in the West Coast's Brunner district, about eight miles from Greymouth. During the 18 months they have been with the brigade they have helped fight about ten fires—including three houses and a big timber mill blaze.

Quite rightly, they are the pride of the Coast.

Mrs Nancy Wylie has four children. During the day, when the 15 male volunteer firemen are at work, she generally drives the district's fire engine—a converted Land Rover.

Her sister, Mrs Joyce Crough, who has six children, and a close friend, Mrs Nora Bernad, complete the trio.

But the list does not end there. Until she and her husband left the district, Mrs Logan was an active member of the brigade.

And also on hand to swell their ranks at times is Mrs Catherine Smith, wife of the man who took on the task of training the women as firefighters.

## SACRIFICES

Volunteer firefighters, by their decision to do a sometimes dangerous duty, save the nation a great deal of money every year—and not only in the property they save.

As the name suggests, they do not get paid, and on top of this they often have to make sacrifices when the alarm calls them into action.

There was that memorable day last March when the Brunner townsfolk prepared to go to Greymouth for the visit of Queen Elizabeth.

## By Michael Short

Mrs Wylie was in her best clothes, waiting with her children, for Mrs Sue Logan, wife of the local schoolmaster, to take her by car.

Then the siren sounded. "Sue and I had to go to the fire dressed as we were," Mrs Wylie recalls. "A house was on fire. Joyce, my sister, came too."

"Nora was the only one of the women volunteers to see the Queen that day—and that was only because she was in Greymouth."

"But at least Mr Logan, who now lives in the North Island, was able to take the children to see the Queen."

"We couldn't wet, all right... we older clothes and change into On another occasion, Mrs Wylie was in hospital, Mrs when the siren went. "I was on a pair of slippers, some other clothes and off I went," she said.

The Brunner Brigade serves three areas—Dobson, Shilwater and Taylorville, with a combined population of about 275. Before the Dobson mine closed down, the brigade was served by men only.

Volunteer fireman Alf Smith, of Shilwater, took on the challenge of training the women.

Mr Smith, 61, trained the housewives once a week for a year.

## READY

"The hardest thing early on was trying to remember what we'd been told the week before," Mrs Wylie said with a laugh.

"Then Alf Smith said we were ready."

"The siren went one day and I vaguely wondered where the fire was... it was a few seconds before I remembered that I was now a fire fighter."

"Now the hardest thing about the job is getting to the station. I live about half a mile away and usually I run."

"We're generally puffed out and shaking like a jelly by the time we get to the engine."

Mrs Wylie's pride sounded a little dented when she said: "We women have never tackled a fire from start to finish. The men generally arrive a few minutes after we've got to the blaze and the hoses are connected."

Just because they are women, though, doesn't mean they get special treatment.

"Joyce had to get inside a roof while fighting the mill fire. The men treat us like men. We do this job all. I wouldn't give up this job."

## SUSPENDED

There was laughter in the background and Mrs Wylie said: "That's my husband joking about having to be his own dinner when he's fighting a fire."

Brunner's women firefighters were suspended for a short time last year until a proper insurance cover could be arranged.

That problem was soon overcome and now they wear fireproof suits—the firemen's helmets are a bit too heavy—when they work. The worst part of being a volunteer firefighter?

"Seeing someone's house, with all their possessions, being destroyed by flames... it's just horrible," said Mrs Wylie.



Joyce Crough unstraps the hose couplings.



Catherine Smith turns on the water.



Nancy Wylie adjusts the pressure—and the hoses begin to play.



Nora Bernad and Joyce Crough on the hose . . . "The men in the brigade treat us as equals."

# New Brighton is busiest

Canterbury has 27 main volunteer fire brigades. Staffs vary from 15 to 24. Christchurch and Timaru are the only full-time brigades.

One of the busiest in the country is the New Brighton volunteer brigade. Last year it answered 253 calls. The Brighton brigade has a strength of 24. Summer has 25, Lyttelton 25 and there are 13 at Diamond Harbour, the newest volunteer station.



Reg Stokes, fire chief of New Brighton. "Volunteers hate missing a fire."

The Christchurch Metropolitan Fire Board gives Brighton, Sumner and Lyttelton a yearly grant of \$100 each.

In volunteer fire fighting circles, the Brighton brigade is renowned for its support from three generations of the Stokes family.

Since 1920 a Stokes has been in charge of the brigade. Today's fire chief at the seaside suburb is Reg Stokes. He joined as a 15-year-old messenger in 1929.

The first Stokes brothers Cecil and Robert—joined the brigade in 1914, six years after the district was first served by firefighters who toiled with manual pumps.

Cecil's four sons, including Reg, the present officer in charge, have run rapidly, pedalled furiously and driven fast to the fire station since 1929.

Eleven Stokes—all related—have served at Brighton, which has also had five Fitchetts and three Joneses.

Oldest serving fireman there is 64-year-old Stan James. Youngest is 18-year-old Ashley Fitchett.

Reg Stokes, who turned 57 the other day, admits that at times he missed seeing his children growing up. "Sometimes I spent too much time at the fire station. Now I tell our young married volunteers: 'Don't neglect your children too much because you're a firefighter. They're a dedicated lot these firemen. Even so, they can at times look sad, even unhappy, according to Reg Stokes."

"The other day I came back from a fire and found one of the men at the station with a face as long as a fiddle. He simply

hated missing that fire. It was only a grass fire anyway. "Yes, I'd say a lot of volunteers hate missing a fire. They

wouldn't be volunteers otherwise. "There's a lot of pleasure in co-operating fire."



Restocking hoses at the New Brighton fire station are from left: Volunteer fireman Ashley Fitchett, at 18 the youngest member of the brigade, Ray Kiesanowski and Keith Beardsley.