

NIILO KOPONEN AND THE EARLY DAYS OF CHENA-GOLDSTREAM VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT

by Bob Betts, CGVFD Volunteer (1980 – 1988)

What a Volunteer Fire Department is All About

Community. A core Quaker value. I remember Niilo's strong sense of being part of a larger community of early homesteaders on Chena Ridge, all building homes and clearing land in the early 1950s when sometimes the only way to get up Chena Ridge Road was to be towed through the mud by Niilo and his four-wheel drive truck. Neighbors helping neighbors - the essence of community spirit - and Niilo thrived on helping people out.

A BLM Fire Cache on Chena Ridge

With everyone using wood stoves and burning brush from cleared land fire was a real threat to life and property in those early days on the ridge when help from town was at best a long way off and at worst not coming at all. Chena Ridge needed fire protection and it needed to start somewhere, and to Niilo's thinking why not with the Koponens? Smokejumpers, BLM's aerial firefighters based at Ft. Wainwright, occasionally showed up at Sunday night sauna at the Koponens' in the late 1970s and Niilo asked John Culbertson if there was anything he could do to get BLM to help provide brush fire protection on Chena Ridge. Soon there was a small red fiberglass BLM fire cache positioned at the end of the Koponen driveway with an assortment of fire-fighting hand tools and two Fedco backpack water pumps . It wasn't much but from this seed was to sprout Chena Goldstream Volunteer Fire Department.

Koponen Land Donation to GCVFD for Station #2

A BLM fire tool cache was a start but it wasn't enough for Niilo. Chena Ridge needed a fire station and Niilo and Joan were willing to donate homestead land for what would become CGVFD Station #2 to be located on Chena Ridge just up the road from the Koponen home. A few late night meetings attended by "Chena

Ridgers” and the organization of a volunteer fire department began to take shape. Towards the end of the 1970s a fire station was under construction, with neighbors and future volunteers coming together to get the station built. The first medical response from Station #2 was to treat a broken leg resulting from a volunteer carpenter who fell off the roof of the half built fire station. The need for both fire and medical response on Chena Ridge was evident from the beginning.

My involvement with CGVFD began in 1980 when my wife Marty and I rented the Browns’ cabin on the Koponen Homestead. We were just a hundred yards down the ridge road from the fire station. By the summer of 1980 Station #2 was in full operation and the late night fire and ambulance sirens were frequent enough that it soon became apparent we either had to move or join the fire department. Marty and I both became volunteer firefighters (and eventually medics) in 1980 and were to remain active with CGVFD until 1988 when we relocated to Juneau.

Niilo Hands Over Engine 415

Niilo was an active volunteer firefighter in addition to his role as a CGVFD board member at the time I joined the department. Among other responsibilities Niilo was the primary Engineer of 415, the initial attack fire truck based at Station #2. Soon Niilo was training me to take over for him as Engineer on 415 with the responsibility for maintaining the readiness of the initial attack engine. I was Niilo’s understudy for several months gaining inspiration from his enthusiasm and experience and coming to appreciate this aspect of his life – a manifestation of his deep sense of commitment to a spirit of community.

House fire on Chena Pump Road – up on the roof with Niilo

When our pagers went off, no matter what time of day or night I could almost always count on seeing Niilo at the scene in his heavy bunkers, fire boots and yellow Chena-Goldstream helmet – always in the thick of it wherever he was needed. Once at a house fire on Chena Pump Road Niilo and I had climbed up a ladder onto the roof of the smoldering frame house after the initial attack had knocked the flames down using both the 1 ½” and 2 ½” initial attack hose lines off

Engine 415. Our job was to vent the house by cutting a small hole near the apex of the roof. After cutting the opening we sat down together on the roof to get our breath. In those early days we took all the volunteers we could get and trained them as fast as we could but sometimes the training didn't quite keep up with the turnover in volunteers. Sitting on the roof Niilo smiled and related that when he had gotten to the scene in his own car just ahead of me and before the hose lines had been deployed from the fire engine he had turned to a new volunteer and shouted *Bring me an 1 ½ " quick!* The volunteer turned and started to run back to the engine but stopped after a few steps. He came back to Niilo and asked *An inch and a half of what?* Niilo repeated that story many times over the years and it always got a good laugh.

The Koponen House is almost lost

One thing about having a fire station on your homestead property – help is close by if you need it. In the summer of 1982 Marty and I had been living in the cabin on the Koponen homestead for two years. One afternoon in mid May when the grass was bone dry, just before green-up, Marty walked out the front door of our cabin and heard a crackling sound coming from the direction of the Koponen house. It sounded maybe like horses walking in leaves on the other side of the trees that screened our cabin from the main homestead house. It's a good thing she went to check. A trash fire that had been started in the outdoor incinerator near the red caboose had escaped the incinerator, spread through the dry grass and had just reached several hay bales stacked against the attached greenhouse. One hay bale was already on fire. Marty kicked the hay bales away from the greenhouse and ran in the Koponen house to call 911. I sprinted to the fire station and found two firefighters on duty who were able to get Engine 415 rolling before the 911 call came in from University dispatch. I followed with Tanker 423 and the three of us made the initial attack on the Koponen house just as the greenhouse started to catch fire. No Koponens were home at the time and I remember the door between the greenhouse and the interior of the house was open and there was dry hay spread along the narrow floor of the greenhouse leading into the house. A few more minutes and the fire would have been in the

main house. It is only fitting I suppose that one of the best “saves” I ever experienced during my time with CGVFD was Niilo’s own house.

A Subscription Department: The frustration of standing by as a residence burns

The birth of Chena Goldstream VFD was not always easy. Early on Niilo and the rest of the fire department board had a major issue to grapple with. Federal and State funding was available to construct rural fire stations and to acquire fire apparatus, ambulances, and equipment as well as to initially cover the costs of six paid paramedics but the need for operating expenses to keep the department going was a long term problem and borough tax money was just not there. To Niilo and the rest of the board the solution seemed to be to run the department as a subscription service with individual landowners paying for their own fire protection and for a time CGVFD did operate as a subscription service. The downside was that subscriber and non-subscriber property had to be quickly determined by dispatch and go or no go response decisions rapidly made. More than once an initial attack on a non-subscriber residence had to be called off with the emotional intensity that entailed for both home owner and emergency responders. At least once the owner of a burning residence had to be firmly told that he could not buy membership while his house was on fire even as fire equipment and volunteers stood by as the building burned. This was an untenable situation for both property owners and volunteers. There was an exception to not responding to a non-subscriber’s fire if there was the potential for loss of life - but if no danger to human life was apparent at arrival on scene, the initial attack was to be called off. Some volunteers became so upset at not being able to suppress non-subscriber house fires that they left the department. For awhile it became so crazy that volunteers were told they could respond in their own vehicles and help carry belongings out of a burning house but they couldn’t use CGVFD protective clothing and helmets in doing so. It was not a good period in the history of the department and it seemed for a time that the department might not survive. But Niilo, the other board members, and most of the volunteers persevered through this period and eventually in the mid 1980s, the Fairbanks North Star Borough taxpayers came to see the necessity of supporting a rural fire department with tax dollars. Eventually four CGVFD

stations were built to provide fire and medical protection covering Chena Ridge and the Goldstream Valley and today CGVFD has come unto its own from Niilo's early homesteading dream of neighbors helping neighbors.

CGVFD Volunteers

People who give their time and energy to help others as volunteer firefighters and medics are among the most caring and compassionate in any society and the friendships I made with other volunteers during my time with CGVFD are some of the strongest bonds of friendship I have ever experienced. You don't enter a burning building with people you don't like or can't trust. Among my fellow volunteers at CGVFD Niilo stands out as one of the outstanding examples of what a person can be if they follow their dreams and vision of a better world. It was Niilo who encouraged me to join the fire department. He never pressured me to join, that was not Niilo's way. He led by example. He still leads all of us who knew him by his example.

One last run with CGVFD

There are so many stories, many involving Niilo, others relating to the rural fire department and ambulance service he played a major role in bringing into existence. I don't know what Niilo's last run with CGVFD was but I will always remember my very last run from the Chena Ridge station, just before Marty and I moved to Juneau. I had already turned in my pager, fire fighting and first responder gear, as well as my CGVFD captain's badge and was at the station saying good-bye to friends I had shared so much with over eight years of emergency service. A call came in reporting a plane making an emergency landing at Fairbanks International Airport with a possible heart attack victim. I had just resigned my paramedic position with the department but I was the most qualified medic in the station at the moment. I did what I expect Niilo would do. I jumped in the ambulance with the EMTs and went to meet the plane. CGVFD routinely transported medivac patients coming in on bush flights and we all expected this to be just another single engine Cessna from someplace like Ft. Yukon. We got there ahead of the flight and stood by the ambulance scanning the sky for a single engine plane as we watched a Northwest Orient 747 land.

Then we stared in amazement as the massive passenger jet taxied right up to us and came to a stop towering above the ambulance. A door opened, stairs came down, and a stewardess high up in a small doorway motioned us aboard. Inside there must have been 300 people all watching intently as we followed the stewardess down the aisle to an Asian man in distress. Our CGVFD medical training kicked in and in spite of performing in front of an audience of hundreds we did what we needed to do and somehow got the patient who was indeed experiencing a heart attack out of the 747 jumbo jet, into the ambulance, and safely to Fairbanks Memorial Hospital. That was my last CGVFD run and I imagine that if Niilo had been there he would have been proud of us for doing the job that he thought needed doing by Chena Ridgers.

Koponen Station

Today, Station #2 on Chena Ridge has been transformed and is almost unrecognizable as the much smaller fire station that Niilo and I had made so many fire and ambulance runs from in the 1980s. A large sign proclaims its new name in honor of Niilo: KOPONEN STATION CGVFD, a tribute to the man who had a vision of what could be done by neighbors working together. Niilo will continue to be there in spirit with every fire and medical response. There will be something of him in the dedication of every CGVFD firefighter and medic who is unselfishly serving his or her community in a way that Niilo envisioned when he set up that first fire cache at the end of his driveway for neighbors to use.

Addendum by John Culbertson

Chena Ridge Fire Cache

Discussions of the need for a volunteer fire company on Chena Ridge were common in sauna on Sunday night in the mid seventies. Fire protection on the ridge at that time consisted of one university engine staffed by students if it was available and greatly delayed water trucks from BLM and Fort Wainwright. During the summer, when the fire got big enough, an air tanker and crew in the form of several pickup loads of smokejumpers would eventually show up. Buildings burned down, burning structures set fire to the woods and woods fires commuted to buildings.

Discussions swung back and forth between the need for fire protection, dislike of taxes and general resentment of all things government. Niilo kept his comments to the practical, avoiding politics by focusing on the need for taking action on fires as a matter of being a good citizen and neighbor. This generally cooled down the arguing. Many had felt some loss by fire. Still, progress eluded the group.

One day Niilo asked me if I thought BLM might supply a small cache of fire tools for his land. So I went to the BLM warehouse and asked the foreman if they were open to such a thing. The foreman was pleased that somebody wanted a cache as they had a number of them and were vexed with not getting them out in the field, distrust of government being mentioned as a factor. He told me if you can get it up there, you can have it.

I told Niilo, no problem and he asked me to get what I could get and showed me where to put it. So I loaded up the red fiberglass cache in the back of a BLM pickup and hauled it up to Koponens. The cache was small, and I placed two Pulaski's, two fire shovels and two Fedco backpack pumps in it, which was all it could hold.

Niilo came out to inspect my progress and noted it might be wise to remove the FIRE TOOLS sign on the front so as to not distract people with any anti government grumbling. The sign read, *"If these tools are needed for fighting fire, break seal. Return all tools to this box. Molesting, destroying, or removing this*

property for other purposes is prohibited and all violators will be prosecuted." As he removed the sign with his pocket knife Niilo chuckled that we wanted to form a fire company not start a revolt. He made his own little sign with a Dymo tape gun, "Chena Ridge fire Tools."

The tools were used on several back yard fires and became a positive point in eventual agreement that a fire truck was needed. A problem developed with people borrowing the Fedco's to water gardens and by the end of the summer Niilo asked that I put the BLM sign back up to discourage the practice. BLM was so pleased that the following year I was assigned to put as many out in the field as possible; eventually placing caches at Ester, along the Steece Highway, Parks Highway, Nenana, Healy, Denali Park, GAA Borough, and Gridwood.

After retiring, I rented Browns house from the Koponons and in my ramblings discovered the old cache in the bone yard of the lower field near the tractor. The sign was still there, and some forty years later I removed it once again for use with fire prevention talks. It is a classic sign from a great era with the original BLM logo of a surveyor, forester, oilman, cowboy and miner; tools of the trade slung over the shoulder, together looking to the future. Not so far removed from those citizens on Chena Ridge with Niilo at the lead forming a fire company for the common good.