

04-08-1935 – LA CA – Fred W. Toenjes – FF Attempted Flood Rescue

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In Memory of

Captain Fred W. Toenjes

Engine Company No. 43

Appointed February 3, 1919

Died April 8, 1935

Drowned in Walnut Creek during flood rescue
near Sawtelle Blvd. and Westminster Ave.

CAPTAIN FRED W. TOENJES

2.73 INCHES
RAIN FALLS
IN CITY;
MORE DUE

**Floating Garage Hurls Fireman
to Death; 4 Marooned
on Bridge Saved**

Big Tujunga flood control dam was reported brim full early today, and the flood gates were opened to allow a flow of water down Big Tujunga wash. Motorists in the San Fernando valley were warned to use care at the dips on the highways where it crossed the wash. Flood control authorities said the dam was in no danger, as it was designed for just such conditions as prevailed today.

Storm waters, rushing down from the hills around Los Angeles, where more than two inches of rain fell early today, claimed the life of one man, when a floating garage in a flooded wash struck a rescue party of firemen and caused the drowning of a fire captain.

Capt. Fred W. Toenjes of 2034 South Bedford street, had responded to a call from the Palms station to rescue two women and two men stalled in an automobile on a bridge at Sawtelle boulevard and Westminster avenue.

With Fred Kessler and H. Giles, firemen, Captain Toenjes was wading along the road near the bridge when the garage came barging along in the darkness and struck the three men.



Kessler was knocked partly unconscious and Giles rescued him, but when the men started back Captain Toenjes had disappeared. His body was recovered at Sawtelle and Venice boulevards about an hour later.

CAPTAIN FRED W. TOENJES

Funeral services for the late Captain Fred William Toenjes, Engine Company 43, "B" Platoon, were held at the Little Church of the Flowers, Forest Lawn Memorial Park, Glendale, California on Friday, April 12, at 10:00 a.m.

Captain Toenjes was born on August 16, 1898, Los Angeles, California, and passed away on April 8, 1935. He was appointed to the Los Angeles Fire Department on September 1, 1919, appointed Auto Fireman on July 17, 1923, appointed Engineer April 1, 1939, and appointed Captain only a short time before his sudden death, the date of his appointment being December 19, 1934.

Captain Toenjes lost his life while trying to save others from the swirling flood which surged down an open storm drain and ripped out part of a bridge at Westminster Avenue and Sawtelle Boulevard early Monday morning, March 8, 1935. Captain Toenjes was apparently struck on the head by a piece of debris and stunned. Some hours later his former comrades found his body a mile below at Sawtelle and Blvds.

The funeral services were under the auspices of the Los Angeles Firemen's Relief Association, Dr. G. A. Briegleb, honorary chaplain, officiating, and the American Lodge, No. 475 F. & A. M. Interment was at Forest Lawn Memorial Park, Glendale, California.

He leaves to mourn his loss his widow, the former Hylda Ritzert, his two small sons, Robert, age five, and Don, age four, his brothers, Adolph W., Walter Theodore, and Captain Henry Toenjes, of the Fire Department, his sisters, Mrs. Otilia Bailey, Mrs. Amanda Rasmussen of Canada, Mrs. Martha Bates, Dora Toenjes, and a host of friends and comrades

The Grape Vine, April 15, 1935

By Bill Goss

THE rain that had been falling in a steady patter for the past three or four shifts changed into a downpour that made the old building on Motor avenue in Palms that was used for the quarters of Engine 43, seem as though it were located at the foot of some gigantic waterfall. The crew of three men under the command of Captain Fred W. Toenjes was getting ready to hit the hay for the night and each man had to put a chair or box beside his bed to keep his turnouts out of the two inches of water already covering the dormitory floor. One of the gang jokingly spoke up, "If this keeps up they had better make this Boat Company 43."

The night passed peacefully until about 3:14 a.m., the date being April 18, 1935, when the local phone connected with the Culver City system, aroused the men from their sleep. At that time Engine 43 had no fire phone, only the local line to Culver City, and a business phone connected to the board at 59s. Matter of fact most of 43s calls on fires came via the local exchange. Such was the case on this rainy night. Captain Toenjes was notified that there were some people and some goats stranded in an automobile in deep and swift water that was running over the small bridge that carries Sawtelle boulevard across Walnut creek just north of Westminster avenue.



**Source: Los Angeles Fire Department Photo
Walt Pittman Collection
1938
Engine Company No. 43
10416 National Boulevard
Palms**

As the officer was giving the directions to Acting Engineer Fred Kessler, on the big Seagrave triple, Fireman Bert Espinall, getting into his coat, remarked: "We'll only have one chance to get to that location Cap, and that's by way of Charnock road, everything else is under too much water."

Kessler headed the wagon out of the house into the storm, down Motor avenue, then a right turn on Charnock. If they could make it through a couple of low places before they got to the big hill that leads to Sepulveda and Sawtelle boulevards all would be well and they could reach the location. Pushing through hub deep water the big engine coughed several times but kept plodding right along, and making another turn to the right onto Sawtelle the rig rolled a couple of blocks to the intersection of Westminster.

Captain Toenjes and his men climbed off the wagon and as the headlights pierced the murkiness ahead they could see the stranded auto about 100 feet to the north of the bridge with four people in it. Walnut creek in ordinary conditions was a little rivulet that drained the ranch and bean fields of the area in times of rain such as this, and it was only about 20 to 25 feet wide and three to five feet below the level of the surrounding terrain at the most. Usually bone dry, the creek on this night was a raging torrent, running about six feet deep and the water was spread out on the adjoining flatland as far as one could see. The water was running over the top

of the bridge to a depth of about two feet and it was all a man could do to keep his footing in the treacherous current.

Sending Giles, the third member of the crew, to the phone in a near-by pumping station, to call the Board, Captain Toenjes ordered Aspinall and Kessler to get a life line off the rig. Taking hold of the line the trio started through the water to the marooned car. Meanwhile an old wagon shed and part of a fence had slipped off the bank of the creek and floated up against the east rail of the bridge, forming a partial dam, around which the water poured with the speed of an express train. Cautiously proceeding across the bridge the men could hear the old shed groan and snap as the water pounded it to pieces and hurled boards and timbers downstream.

Reaching the north side of the bridge the men started edging towards the automobile when the remainder of the shed gave way sending a tidal wave of water and debris over them, washing Captain Toenjes and Kessler into a ditch that drained the road and thence into the creek itself. Aspinall was slammed against the south rail and blindly he groped his way back to the engine, where he discovered that his comrades had disappeared.

Heading for the phone Aspinall encountered Giles returning to the rescue site, and sent him back to call for help. As the two men waded through the dark waters calling for their buddies, Chief Kuykendall of Battalion 9 was informed of the missing firemen. Engine 62 was taken out of service and its crew put on Truck 62 under the command of Captain Raymond E. Birkenshaw and dispatched to the scene. As Aspinall and Giles searched, they could hear the sirens and see the red lights of the buggy and truck glimmering across the flooded fields, but they would only come so far and then stop. Deciding that 62s was unable to get through due to all the water, Bert sent Giles to call the operator and have him dispatch Truck 26 via Charnock road.

At 4:10 both trucks and the Chief arrived at the location. The truckmen quickly spanned a twenty-foot ladder from the bridge to a small embankment on the west side of the road and then another to the car. From there the two couples were removed to a place of safety. The rescue being completed an immediate search was ordered for the two missing firemen.

By this time it had stopped raining and along with the water receding a little, the first signs of daylight were commencing to show through the darkness. Assistant Chief Atwell, commander of Division Four, having been apprized of the situation, drove up to take charge of the hunt.

About 150 feet below the bridge, Kessler was found to be safe, but marooned on the north bank of the stream. Tumbling through the swirling water he had managed to grab onto a shrub and pull himself up onto the bank. He was sent back to the engine house for a shower and a change of clothing and then to the Receiving Hospital for examination and treatment.

Meanwhile both banks of the creek were searched for Captain Toenjes, from the bridge on to Venice boulevard, nearly a mile downstream. About 6:30 a.m., on their second trip, Captain Birkenshaw and Fireman Fred Billingsley stopped to check through a grove of eucalyptus trees that straddles the stream about 1,000 feet above Venice boulevard, where Victoria would intersect if cut through. There snagged on the trees were harness parts, pieces of furniture, and many articles of clothing and apparel. Seeing what appeared to be the shoulder or the bottom of a baby bob up to the surface as the water ebbed and flowed, Billingsley called to Birkenshaw: "There's a baby's body out there."

Summoning Chief Kuykendall and his operator, Harold Bradley, on the opposite shore, they carefully waded out into the stream and there they discovered instead of a baby, the body of the missing officer, jack-knifed around the trunk of a tree.

His boots missing, turnout coat gone, and his sweatshirt partially off, Captain Toenjes had apparently attempted to remove his heavy clothes and swim for the bank, until he either was struck by some of the floating debris or his head on a rock, there was a bad wound on the back of his head. This blow, it is believed rendered him unconscious and he drowned.

The irony of the needless waste of Captain Toenjes life lies in two facts, first by ten o'clock of the same morning, the violent rivulet was again without water in its bed and secondly the people in the car could have safely waded to the embankment on the west side of the road to the north of the bridge and waited there for the water to recede or proceeded along it to a place of safety to the north.

Captain Fred Toenjes is survived by his widow, Mrs. Hilda Toenjes, two sons, Donald, now aged 14, and Robert, now 13. He was of German descent, born in Los Angeles on August 16, 1897. Appointed to the Los Angeles Fire Department on January 31, 1919, he was promoted to autofireman in 1923, to engineer in 1932 and to Captain on December 12, 1934.

Captain Toenjes was buried at Forest Lawn Memorial Park and beautiful and fitting services for this quiet-spoken very well liked officer, were held at Little Church of the Flowers under the combined auspices of the Masolic lodge and the Los Angeles Firemen's Relief Association, with Chaplain Cordell officiating.

The Grape Vine, January 1945

