

The Berwyn Fire Company & Peacock Rescue Society

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Fire companies traditionally have been called upon to rescue cats or other animals from tree tops — but peacocks? It happened some three decades ago, in early 1951. It was a cold, winter night, with more than a foot of snow on the ground. Six peacocks, owned by a Clarence Johnson who lived on Pugh Road, near Valley Forge Road in Tredyffrin Township, had escaped from their pen and flown into a nearby tree. After alternately attempting to cajole and frighten them down from their perches, with equal lack of success, their anxious owner, realizing that the birds would freeze to death if left out overnight, called the fire company for help.

The volunteers soon arrived on the scene in their ladder truck, a 1934 American LaFrance fire engine with 50-foot ladders. Placing a ladder against the branches of the tree, the firemen climbed up to rescue and recapture the birds. But just as they were about to reach them, the peacocks noisily flew off to another tree. Another ladder was put up beside the second tree. It was the hope of the firemen that they would either reach the birds in their new roost or chase them back again to the first tree. Instead, as the firemen were once again just about to reach their quarry, the birds flew off, to a third tree!

"It looked like the only way we could recapture them," Frank Kelley, the assistant Fire Chief in charge of the operation, later recalled, "would be to cut down all the trees!" But then he had another idea. Checking to be sure that his plan would not harm the birds and that blankets were available — he decided to try to "flush" them out.

At his suggestion, a booster line was hooked up to the fire truck and taken into a nearby tree. From there, using a fine spray, the firemen doused the peacocks with water. In the cold weather, after about a half hour or so the water froze on the peacocks' feathers. The birds were thus virtually immobilized.

When the firemen again climbed their ladders to reach them, the frozen peacocks, unable to fly, succeeded only in toppling over and falling down into the soft snow below. There they were easily picked up, wrapped in blankets, put into baskets, and returned to their grateful owner.

Johnson then placed them next to the furnace in the basement. The ice on the peacocks melted and the birds were carefully thawed out and none the worse for wear, despite their experience — when the Berwyn Fire Company rescued six peacocks from their perches in a tree.

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The rescue of the peacocks, as depicted several years later by a cartoonist for the Boston Herald.