**Putnamville Correctional Facility**

Originally known as the Indiana State Farm, the Putnamville Correctional Facility was built in 1914. The Indiana General Assembly created the farm on property along the National Road in Putnamville, Indiana, and developed thousands of acres of farmland which also included a vast dairy operation. The offenders that were assigned to the facility cared for the land and the cattle and worked off their sentences. Over the years as the State of Indiana continued to grow their farming operations at the facility as well as create a quarry and brick making factories, the need for fire protection increased. Located approximately seven miles south of Greencastle and 13 miles east of Brazil, it would take a fire truck almost half an hour to get to the facility. Since many of the barns held cattle, lumber, or hay, a fire would have devastating results.

It is believed that the State of Indiana assigned the first fire trucks to the State Farm in early 1950. These trucks were operated by offenders who lived in the fire station that was built inside the facility. The inmates were shown how to run the trucks: When the facility was contacted about a fire, inmates were alerted, drove the trucks to the site and fought the fire. Sometimes state employees would assist the offenders and other times they would not. The department was assigned to cover the Indiana State Farm grounds, located along US 40 and Manhattan/Greencastle Road; the small town of Putnamville; and the areas surrounding the town. On December 1,1950, the department made a run to the Earl McCullough property located one mile north of Putnamville for a hog barn fire. While several hogs perished in the fire, the department was praised for saving the other barns on the property, all while battling very cold temperatures and strong winds.

In its early days the fire department regularly responded to calls from the Reelsville area, which at the time did not have an organized fire department, as well as assisting Greencastle and Brazil. The inmates would respond and do what they could, then return to the firehouse to clean the hose and all of the equipment to ready it for the next call. In that era, since inmates were low-level offenders working off their sentences, no thought was given to their taking the fire trucks out and not returning to the farm. Thankfully, there were few fires on Indiana State property. Though incidents were almost always small fires, on November 15, 1958, the Farm’s old horse barn, which contained $500 in lumber and 500 bales of hay, caught fire. By the time an employee noticed the fire and alerted the department, the building was fully engulfed. Although the Greencastle Township fire engine and two firefighters assisted the prison fire department with this blaze, the building was a total loss.

The next big incident the fire department faced on State Farm property occurred on August 11, 1963. At around 10:30 p.m., a large riot broke out in Dorm 4. Guards were quickly overwhelmed by the melee that escalated into a fight involving an estimated 400 to 500 inmates. The riot group set fire to the laundry building and damaged several other buildings at the facility. Quickly overwhelmed, the inmate firefighters and the guards requested assistance from the Reelsville and Greencastle fire departments. At 11 p.m. when Reelsville arrived, the building was engulfed, but the area departments, farm employees, and inmates together brought the fire under control quickly. Although the State Police responded and were able to bring the riot under control by 1 a.m. the next morning, there were several injuries and 14 prisoners escaped. By the next morning’s breakfast, all was quiet, and the inmate firefighters were back at their post in the firehouse ready to respond to calls. Laundry services were interrupted for one week only.

Inmate firefighters continued to man the fire department for several more years. Many residents recall seeing them responding to calls in neighboring areas during the 1960s and 1970s. Firefighters were allowed to ride on the tailboard of fire trucks in those days and normally you would see two inmates in the fire truck and three or four standing on the back of the truck. This standard lasted until 1977 when the facility started receiving convicted felons and went from a minimum to a medium security facility. As a result, facility employees became eligible to serve in the department, with the State creating a fire chief’s position and providing training that allowed employees to become State of Indiana certified firefighters. Since the 1980s, numerous employees served in the department, received state firefighting certification, then became firefighters and responders in local communities.

The department was known as the State Farm Volunteer Fire Department, but around 1990 the facility transitioned from the Indiana State Farm facility to the Putnamville Correctional Facility, so the department’s name was changed as well. The Putnamville Correctional Facility Volunteer Fire Department is one of four fire departments within the Indiana Department of Corrections. Branchville, Wabash Correctional Facility, and Putnamville all have departments that have employees as members, and the Indiana State Prison in Michigan City still has an inmate- operated department within the walls of the facility, but they are not allowed to respond to calls outside of the facility.

Currently, Putnamville has an engine and a tanker that is housed in their fire station, which is located inside the fence of the main facility. Their primary response coverage is inside the facility, which houses approximately 2600 inmates, and extends to the houses and buildings along U.S. 40, to County Road 200 West and to the State Police Post. They are also first due with tanker and manpower responsibilities on Box Alarms with Reelsville and Cloverdale Township Fire Departments. During an emergency or water shortage, they respond to other Putnam and Clay County Fire Departments and other prisons as needed, since they have staff available during the daytime hours. Although most people do not realize this department exists, it has a long history of providing valuable assistance to the surrounding communities during fires or other emergencies.