

OF FIRES AND FIREMEN

Like most early villages of Wisconsin, built almost entirely of wood, Stevens Point experienced a series of disastrous fires in the first decades of its growth. One of these occurred in 1853 when fire broke out at the Phelps Tavern-House, at the foot of Main Street, which would have burned to the ground but for the "vigilance and activity of the pinery boys [who] saved the building."¹ The editors of the *Pinery*, in reporting this fire, made their first plea for a fire engine — a plea which they continued to make for the next several years before anything materialized.

On Christmas day, 1854, American House burned to the ground and several nearby dwellings were saved only by the heroic efforts of a "bucket brigade of 300 men. . ."²

On June 13, 1860 the *Pinery* reported that Main Street was partly in ruins as a result of a fire that destroyed the City Hotel located at the northwest corner of First & Main, formerly the site of the United States Hotel in the early 1850s. Several other buildings lying between the hotel and the Wisconsin River were also destroyed. Main Street was again in flames in August 1861. This time the volunteer fire company, despite a strong north wind, was praised for preventing the fire from spreading south across Clark Street.

The worst fire in the early history of the city in loss of life occurred on the night of June 5, 1889 when the St. James Hotel, opposite the Wisconsin Central (Soo) Depot, burned and three people were suffocated, namely, Charles Oatball, night clerk; Maggie Riley, dining

¹ *Pinery*, July 13, 1853.

² *Ibid.*, Dec. 30, 1854.

room girl; and Ingerber Dryeson, pastry cook. Oatball lost his life in an attempt to rescue Miss Riley, his fiancée. From the position of their bodies found in a doorway on the second floor it was evident that his last act was a gesture to protect her from the flames which had enveloped the hallway and prevented escape. Guests at the hotel that night included Mr. & Mrs. Tom Thumb noted dwarfs of circus fame, who were performing at McCulloch's Hall when the fire broke out.

Nearly all the saw mills, planing mills, flour and feed mills in the city were destroyed by fire at one time or another.

One of the most serious fires in the city's history occurred July 5, 1886. That year the Fourth of July fell on a Sunday and the fifth was celebrated. As a result of a firecracker a fire started near the river bank and quickly spread to the North Side Lumber Company mill and yards located about 80 rods north of the foot of Main Street. Fanned by a strong westerly wind, the fire continued to spread over the North Side and for a time it was feared that the entire city might be destroyed. Picket brigades of volunteers fought off roof fires as far east as the 800 block and despite this at least one house on Division Street was burned.

The Moll-Glennon Company dry goods store was one of three buildings badly damaged in a sensational blaze on Jan. 6, 1942. Missing after the fire started were Miss Elizabeth Moll and Mrs. Ellen Heffron who jointly occupied an apartment above the building. Thousands of gallons of water were poured into the wreckage in freezing temperatures. The body of Mrs. Heffron was found in mid-morning seated upright in a chair, coated with ice. The body of Miss Moll was found later in the day. This led to public demands for better fire fighting equipment.

The bucket brigade of the 1850s was given its first modern fire fighting equipment in 1860. Alderman Anson Rood was appointed on February 11 to go to Chicago to make the purchase which was a hand pump known as "Fire King No. 1." This was a second-

hand affair acquired originally by Chicago in 1835 and used probably into the 1850s. It was brought to Stevens Point and used until 1875 and perhaps on occasions later, before it was retired. Learning of this the Chicago Historical Society attempted to buy it back in 1904, but the price of \$500 was considered too high. In 1922 a representative of the Chicago Historical Society came to Stevens Point to locate the pumper which meanwhile was being used as a pump with ditching crew on the Buena Vista marsh. "Fire King No. 1" was bought for \$100 from its new owners and learning of this, the city of Stevens Point, which still had possession of the hose cart and reel also acquired in 1860, made a gift of the latter to the Chicago Historical Society where both the pumper and reel are now on exhibit.¹

There are no official records on the organization and proceedings of the Volunteer Company in the early 1860s, but in the period from 1868 to 1872 several hundred documents² have been preserved, all on individual slips of paper, large and small, which throw a sharp light on the doings as well as the mechanics of the organization. This was no longer a group of mere volunteers who might run willy-nilly down the street to a fire, as the name might suggest, but a specialized and highly dedicated group of citizens, deeply aware of their responsibilities, jealous of their reputation, and anxious to be of service to the community.

A constitution and by-laws had been adopted by the Volunteer Company some time before 1868. This prescribed penalties for failure to attend meetings, and disciplinary measures for malfeasance of duty. Leading citizens of the small city, not members of the company, were proposed for honorary membership which, at least in 1872, entailed dues of \$5 per annum. Obviously, an organization which did not pay any salary except to the engineer and secretary — \$25 a year to each — had to be based on something other than monetary self-interest. It became, in fact, an honor and a mark of social

¹ *Chicago History*, (Chicago Historical Society, Vol. V, no. 1, 1957), pp. 9-14.

² In collection of Portage County Historical Society.

distinction to belong to the company. It also became a club which enjoyed dances, oyster suppers, snack lunches and beer. In 1872 Ball & Pratt handed in a bill of \$6.94 for pickles, mustard, cracknels, finger snaps, tomato catsup, and one can opener. During the same year a big spread was also arranged which included roast beef, dried beef, pickles, tripe, pickled feet, beef tongue, vegetables, garden sauce, biscuits, pies, cakes, ice cream and lemonade. At other times the menu was simply cheese and crackers, no doubt washed down with Adam Kuhl's beer.

The first steam fire engine was acquired in 1874, a year before the new station house was completed on North Second Street and which is still standing. The city had no horses to haul the \$4,500 engine this first year and to make up for this, offered \$5 to the owner of the first team that arrived at the station after the fire bell rang in the tower. Considerable rivalry ensued at times for the privilege of hauling the engine. On one occasion, probably in 1876, a fire occurred in the northwest corner of the Public Square and a farmer passing by with a yoke of oxen unhooked and hurried over to the station.

A team of horses to haul the fire engine, a span of chestnut Morgans, was purchased for the city in 1877 by Owen Clark at a cost of \$382 which included harnesses. Another horse, a bay, was acquired to pull the hose cart which was driven by John Brinker. Arthur Sturtevant drove the fire engine team while James Gardner served as engineer through most of the 1880s. Whenever the engine crew went out on a call, two big stag hounds owned by Sturtevant loped alongside the horses, barking and baying to warn pedestrians and traffic to the side.

The first fire truck, chain drive and hard rubber tires, equipped with motor-driven pump, was introduced to Fire Station No. 1 on Nov. 9, 1917 and driven for a number of years by Thomas Helminski. When the truck arrived and the horses were retired, one who looked back with nostalgia on the passing of the horse-

driven engine was Herman Krembs, associated with the fire department from 1886 to 1931, who wrote in his *Journal-Diary*:

"There was romance and thrill in a dash of a fine team of horses drawing the sparklin (sparkling) engine with its trailing column of smoke. The fire fighter always was and always will be a hero. The horse shared his human companion's glory. What a thrill it was for the little boys and girls to be taken down to the engine house and there be lifted in the arms of a fireman and up to pet the horses on the nose."¹

A second volunteer fire company was located on the South Side at least as early as 1880. Land was purchased on the South Side for a fire station in 1885, and first mention of "Company No. 2" in the minutes appears in an entry of May 21, 1888 when trouble arose over a misunderstanding with Company No. 1 on the North Side relative to a Memorial Day celebration. The South Side company refused to "come out" for the parade because "the line of march wasn't to the South Side." Apparently forgotten by the time of the Fourth of July when both companies agreed to compete for prizes offered by the city, this may have marked the beginning of contests between the two stations which continued for a number of years — the most common form of competition being a horse race. While oldsters placed bets on the race, youngsters from the North and South Sides organized gangs which fought each other over the results. Meanwhile, the South Side was equipped with a new fire engine, "The General Ellis," in 1885.

On Feb. 19, 1892, a resolution was introduced in the Common Council by Alderman John Leahy to establish a paid fire department. The pay scale started at \$35 a month for ordinary fireman to \$100 for chief. The first fire call performed by the newly-paid company occurred on the first day of paid duty, June 21, 1892, when the Stevens Point fire engine was shipped by train, via Junction City, to Wausau to assist in fighting a big fire. The railway companies made no charge for this special train.

¹In collection of Portage County Historical Society.

In a series of entries apparently made many years after the event, Herman Krembs explains in his Journal-Diary that Charles Leahy commenced working in the paid department in 1892; Alexander ("Sandy") Love, 1894; Tom Helminski, 1895; Lyman Rowe, 1898; Mike Helminski, 1906; George K. McDonald, 1912; Frank Kirsling, 1918; Peter Yorton, 1919; Anton Tuskowski, 1922; Lyman Rowe Jr., 1923; Joseph Szafranski, 1923; George H. Fisher, 1927; Mike Miller, 1929; Joe Pleet, 1931; Carl Kitowski, 1933; Roman Kubisiak, 1933; and Edgar W. Darkes, 1935. In still later entries, it is learned that Lloyd Mrozinski joined the force in 1925, and that Charles H. Packard served as chief from 1907 to 1929. His place was taken by Herman Krembs who retired in 1931. Next in seniority to Krembs was Charles Leahy who joined the force in 1892 and became chief on the retirement of Krembs. Krembs and Leahy established another record for having served without a day off from 1892 to 1908. During this period fire fighters worked 24-hour shifts, 365 days a year. This system was replaced, probably in 1908, by the double platoon when firemen served 24 hours on and 24 hours off duty.

Frank Kirsling was made chief in 1932 upon the retirement of Leahy and served until 1937 when he was replaced by George K. McDonald, acting. The latter resigned a month later owing to ill health. His place was taken temporarily by Paul Tuszka who served until November when he was replaced by Carl Kitowski who continued until November 1938. He was replaced by Roman Kubisiak who asked to be relieved in February 1940. His place was filled by Tuszka until April 1943, and on May 1 Carl Maslowski became chief and has since continued in this capacity.

Serving the Stevens Point Fire Department in 1958, aside from Maslowski, were, First Platoon, Station 1, Carl Kitowski, captain, and Victor Soik, Edward Zurzwski, and James Pieczynski; First Platoon, Station 2, Raymond Steinke, Lieutenant, and Leonard Jakusz, Dale Tuszka, and Raymond Bartkowiak. Serving in the Second Platoon, Station 1, were Roman Kubisiak, captain, and Stan-

ley Jakusz, Edmund Worzalla, and Frank Nachman; in the Second Platoon, Station 2, were Frank Tretatowski, lieutenant, and John Eckerson, Peter Lazare, and Richard Tuszka.

A bell to remember in Stevens Point was the one installed in the tower of Fire Station No. 1 in 1876. It was used not only to warn of fires, but for many years served as a curfew. In 1941 Chapter No. 30 of Disabled American Veterans of World War I erected this bell at the corner of Church & Clark Streets as part of a memorial of Mme. Ernestine Schumann-Heink. Colonel Ferdinand Hirzy, a veteran of World War I & II, married Else Heink, the granddaughter of the famous contralto singer who appeared in Stevens Point both in concert and on private visits.

Alex Wallace treasures many memories of the North Side fire station which he justifiably claims was a "second home" to him as a boy living on the North Side. He recalls an incident in the 1890s after the crew of the paid fire department had taken up quarters in the station house. The men were having difficulty sleeping on moonlight nights because a large dog, kept by the owner of a small hotel nearby, bayed at the moon. Two of the firemen decided to put a stop to this, and, one night when the moon was in eclipse, slid down the slough in a skiff and put ashore a short distance from the dog house. Crawling up to within throwing distance, one of them tossed a firecracker in the direction of the dog house and retreated to the skiff before the explosion occurred. The next morning one of them sauntered over to a nearby saloon to pick up any rumors and arrived just in time to hear the hotel owner proclaiming to the barkeeper: "Dem anarchists tried to blow up my place last night. Tossed a stick of dynamite right into my dog house and would have killed my dog if I hadn't sold him yesterday!"

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