



Owatonna Fire Department History



By: Leon Ellis
Retired Owatonna Full-Time Firefighter

1875 - The first fire department was organized with the election of M.R. Strong as the fire chief. The firemen would use small hose carts that were stored in different sections around town. The first organization was called the Spring City Fire Department.

1877 to 1879 - H. Randall was the second fire chief to serve.

1879 to 1884 - C.W. Hadley was the next fire chief.

It cost firemen \$1.00 to join this department and there was NO pay!!!!

August 1883 to 1884 - State Fair was held in Owatonna.

1884 - The fire department was disbanded and then reorganized as a new fire department led by S.S. Green, a local grain dealer. At the direction of the city council, he was to organize a group of not more than 40 men. They had two fire wagons, a hose cart with 600 feet of hose arranged to attach to the city force pumps. These force pumps were located as follows: Bridge and Oak, City Park (Morehouse??), Rose and Cedar, Vine and Cedar. The force pumps were like a railroad car with 8 men, four on each side stroking the pump.

The firemen at this time received \$0.25 for attending meetings and \$1.00 for working at a fire. The firemen had uniforms and were required to wear their uniform and have inspections done once a month.

The fire alarm was a bell on a tower, a rope was attached and it was hand operated.

August 9, 1887 - Firemen were asked to attend and parade at the laying of the cornerstone for the state school. Firemen not excused and not showing would be fined \$1.00. All members showing up and parading will receive \$1.00.

1890 - The first water works was built in Morehouse Park.

April 1, 1895 - Firemen organized the Fire Department Relief Association signed by the register of deeds and the Secretary of State of Minnesota.

September 2, 1895 - E.M. Twiford had reported to the city council the matter that the firemen had organized a Relief Association under the provisions of the state laws and reported that it was recognized by the city council. Note was made of a loan made to the city council from the department.

December 2, 1895 - City recorder said that he had reported the Relief Association to the state authorities as required by law.

March 2, 1886 - A committee was appointed to try and find a better place to have their meetings.

September 7, 1886 - It was reported that the treasurer had loaned the city \$205.86 and received \$12.35 interest.

September 6, 1887 - The treasurer was instructed to loan the city \$1,000.00 at 6% interest. On November 1, it was reported that \$45.00 was received as interest for 9 months.

1887 - City hall was located on West Main St, just west (three or four lots) of today's fire station. How long it was there is unknown.

May 2, 1888 - The association dues were \$2.00 a year.

October 3, 1888 - E. Lippert received \$6.00 from the Relief Association for an injury received at a fire. He was laid up for 6 days. He had stepped on a nail.

October 3, 1888 - Firemen approached the city council and discussed the need for new ladders on the hook and ladder unit as the old ladders were unfit for use and requested that they find the funds to replace them.

November 7, 1888 - The treasurer loaned the city \$1,000.00 and received \$60.00 interest.

1889 - The fire department equipment consisted of four units: three hose carts and one hook and ladder unit. Ten firemen were assigned to each one of the units. Firemen that wanted to transfer from one unit to a different unit had to get permission from the fire chief. In the minutes of the fire department records, one of the firemen had moved to a different house and it was farther away from the station and he asked to be moved to the hook and ladder unit.

It was very common for the firemen to receive a box of cigars as a thank you after fires from the property owner.

September 11, 1889 - City council was considering installing a Gamewell Fire Alarm system around town.

October 29, 1889 - Gamewell fire alarm system was purchased for \$1595.00 and was installed in the Parrott & Smith Hardware store.

February 5, 1900 - Firemen hosted Masquerade Ball with a street parade preceding the ball.

1900 - The Fire Department had requested the city council to build a new city hall.

May 7, 1900 - While hauling the hook and ladder unit to the Dr. Souer fire, Fireman Liveford damaged Firemen Huber's buggy to the amount of \$1.50. On motion by the membership, the secretary was ordered to draw an order for payment.

1902 - The Gamewell fire alarm system was moved to the waterworks building and later to the city hall.

September 28, 1903 - The firemen purchased the two lots west of the metropolitan theater for \$3,126.00.

April 1, 1904 - Fire Chief's annual report was as follows:

Property on hand:

- 3 Hose carts
- 1 Hook and ladder
- 2,300 feet of good hose
- 200 feet of poor hose
- 1 - 48' extension ladder
- 1 - 30' extension ladder
- 2 - 18' ladders
- 2 - 16' ladders
- 1 - 14' roof ladder
- 1 - 14' roof ladder
- 2 gopher hose leak stops
- 7 pike poles
- 5 nozzles
- 1 spray nozzle
- 3 axes
- 4 smoke arrestors
- 30 rubber coats
- 5 torches (lights)
- 20 rubber cafés (buckets??)

Alarms turned in:

- Fire boxes pulled: 15, 36, 34, 16, 24, 45, 26
- Number of miles traveled to and from fires: 10 1/8
- Number of feet hose laid: 12,800
- Number of ladders raised: 1,020
- Time worked at fires: 56 ½
- Value of buildings damaged by fire: \$155,650.00
- Value of stock and fixtures damaged: \$41,500.00
- Value of insurance involved: \$90,400.00
- Value of insurance paid: \$41,236.00

July 11, 1904 - The chief notified the association that the taxes on the two lots had not been paid. Discussion ensued that the lots should be exempt from taxes. A committee went to the county and asked about the lots being exempt.

August 1, 1904 - Taxes on the two lots had to be paid: \$43.31.

October 3, 1904 - The County refunded the taxes on the two lots as they were ruled tax exempt.

October 3, 1904 - Offer from the Metropolitan Opera Theater to use the lots for billboard purposes. It was decided that they would rent the space for \$15.00 per year in advance.

May 16, 1905 - Firemen offered the two lots, 44' by 132', and \$1,000.00 cash to the city for the city hall / fire hall building.

September 4, 1905 - Carnival committee made a contract with Smith Greater Carnival Co. The firemen are to pay \$30.00 towards electric lights and to receive 50% of all concessions and 15% of all paid shows.

September 19, 1905 - A special election was held to ask the citizens for the submission of a \$15,000.00 bond to build the city hall / fire station which passed.

October 1905 - One month after passage of the bond, a taxpayer challenged the legality of the voting process in the courts. The process was declared illegal.

March 1906 - The bonds were voted on again and this time passed again by a majority vote of 112 votes. The voting was watched very closely this time.

July 17, 1906 - Bids were received for the construction of the building. Hammel and Anderson won the bid with \$19,643.00.

August 17, 1906 - The two lots, 44 feet width by 132 feet length, were deeded to the city subject to a proposition. The firemen would donate the lots and the city needed to build a new city / firemen's hall, three stories tall, spending not less than \$15,000.00 and \$1,000.00 cash to help offset some of the cost for the building and equipment, and a 25 year lease for the third floor for the firemen.

September 8, 1906 - The cornerstone was laid and the fire chief presented the city the deed to the lots and \$1,000.00. All firemen were present for the occasion.

January 5, 1906 - There were 103 fire hydrants in the city. Each hydrant rental was \$50.00 per year.

May 15, 1906 - Cost of the firemen's hall was \$19,643.00.

October 5, 1907 - Opening celebration of the new firemen's hall had a banquet and a dance. Every business, profession and trade was represented in the festivities. Music was provided by the Owatonna Military Band.

November 5, 1907 - The bell for the fire hall was ordered and all equipment was moved into the new building.

1907 - The city purchased a team of horses, costing \$455.00 Harnesses were suspended from the ceiling so they would drop directly onto the horses. A hose wagon was also purchased for \$1,325.00 and was used for many years.

Masquerade dances were held annually in January or February.

June 22, 1908 - Firemen accept an offer of the Parker Carnival Co to come here the week of July 6-11 under the direction of the firemen. The department was to receive 25% of all concessions and 10% of all paid admissions. The department was to advertise in the papers not to exceed \$30.00.

September 15, 1908 - A combination Chemical and Hose wagon was purchased from American La France for \$1,325.00.

December 7, 1908 - Bylaws approved. No person shall be eligible to membership in this association who has not served for a period of at least 6 months as an active member of OFD. However, he may receive "sick benefits" from the date of such service in this department, as is the case of the other members.

In order to be eligible for an office or to vote in this association, such member must have served for a period of 5 years as an active member of the OFD and shall not be entitled to any rights or privileges to the third floor of the city hall building until he shall have served 15 prior years consecutive as an active member of the OFD and been elected an honorary member of this association. This passed unanimously.

March 5, 1909 - LA Thiel, Chicago, IL was hired to decorate the 3rd floor for bid of \$1,979.00.

April 5, 1909 - Firemen to ask city council for an iron ladder to be installed in the tower for use in reaching the wind up mechanism.

September 6, 1909 - Firemen awarded bid to the lowest bidder for fixtures on the third floor and to be installed without further delay.

November 1, 1909 - Opening dance was held Saturday, November 6. The price of the tickets was \$1.00 per couple. Rental of the fire hall was to be \$25.00 and down.

1910 - There were 25 members of the department, one who was employed continually and six who slept in the fire hall. There was also a branch fire house on Rose Street, between Oak and Cedar Street.

March 6, 1911 - Trustees were ordered to have an up to date fire escape installed on the fire hall.

June 1911 - State Fire Convention was held in Owatonna.

February 5, 1912 - Dance committee decided that cost of dance admission would be \$1.00 for gents, \$0.25 for ladies.

1914 - Contract was signed with NW Bell Telephone Co to carry the fire alarm box signals.

1915 - Owatonna purchased its first "motorized" fire truck: a 1915 Jeffery. Cost may have been \$1,955.00.

April 3, 1916 - Sold hose cart for \$15.00.

August 7, 1916 - Firemen Darby was fined \$1.00 for not turning out in uniform for 4th of July parade. Vote "Ayes" by all.

August 7, 1916 - Firemen wanted to pay for the building of a pavilion and bathrooms in Morehouse Park. It was found out that by rulings of the city attorney and the State Attorney General, it was illegal for the firemen to spend their Relief Association money on things not directly related to the fire department.

May 7, 1917 - Fire committee recommended the purchase of a 1915 Jeffery fire truck to the city council.

June 4, 1917 - Bill for the Jeffery and equipment was allowed, subject to approval by the committee of firemen.

March 4, 1918 - Firemen were to hold dance with Red White Blue orchestra donating their services with proceeds turned over to the Red Cross. Later in the meeting, the firemen decided the fee for hall rent would be waived and that the fire department would donate 20% to each \$100.00 taken in.

August 31, 1918 - First fair held at the new grounds.

July 5, 1920 - Firemen bought a parcel of land near the Morehouse Park from Mr. Darby. On motion, it was voted to procure 1 acre of land west of the city pump station \$450.00.

1920 - The city hired 3 fulltime men to man the fire station.

February 7, 1921 - Firemen wanted to build a pavilion, motion made and seconded to make plans, specifications and cost estimates.

July 3, 1922 - Questions of patrons of dance under 18 to be allowed in dance halls. Manager Fenner was to go to St. Paul and take upon the matter with proper officials. Fire Department was to pay expenses of the trip.

August 15, 1922 - Team of horses purchased for \$300.00 less \$50.00 for the old team.

June 4, 1923 - Fireman Fenner was appointed as a policeman for the firemen's dance hall for the ensuing year.

1923 to 1924 - The city had three elevated water tanks.

March 2, 1925 - Family of deceased fireman Schoen donated a clock in his memory to be placed in the firemen's quarters.

August 3, 1925 - City council authorized the fire department to answer fire alarms in the county not more than 8 miles out and that they could only take the small truck on these calls.

September to October 1925 - The city appropriated \$9,800.00 for a certain make of pumper not suitable to the department, whereupon the firemen agreed to, and did pay the sum of \$3,000.00 in connection with the city for the cost of a new Seagrave Pumper truck, costing \$12,800.00. The city purchased its first "pumper" fire truck. The city made the first payment on the 1925 Seagrave 750 gpm fire truck \$9,037.50. In 1926, the city made the second and final payment on the truck \$3,675.00.

February 1, 1926 - Firemen approved the building of a pavilion.

March 1, 1926 - A committee was appointed to see if they could use their funds to build the pavilion.

April 4, 1926 - Ruled by the city attorney and confirmed by the state attorney general. "No part of the relief funds could be used for the pavilion unless it was for fire department purposes".

July 12, 1926 - Firemen asked the city council to employ the city electrician to attend fires for the purpose of disconnecting the electrical wires for the safety of the firemen.

October 4, 1926 - Questions about renting the fire hall to the Klan for the winter months. Motion made and seconded to rent it for the winter months.

January 3, 1927 - Resolution to Senator and Representative to allow firemen to spend their funds on hand legally.

February 6, 1928 - Fire hall was to be rented for amusement only, and to get an extension of the lease from the city for the 3rd floor from the city council.

April 15, 1928 - Fireman Lippert passed away and it was his dying wish for a fireman burial at Forest Hills. Firemen's Band marched to fireman Lippert's home and headed the funeral cortege to the grave in Forest Hills where fireman Twiford should conduct the services at the grave and pay the parting eulogy.

September 2, 1929 - Loaned \$3,000.00, interest free for 5 years, to the city for a new fire truck.

October 7, 1929 - Firemen gave the city \$2,500.00 towards a new 1930 Seagrave fire truck. The city purchased another standard Seagrave 500 gpm fire truck, years later it was sold for \$2,500.00 to a private party.

1931 - State Fire Convention was held in Owatonna.

January 2, 1934 - Talk of deeding over the lot (Morehouse Park) to the city.

February 5, 1934 - Firemen drafted proposal of the lot to the city for purpose of waterworks improvement or park purpose. Vote failed on 7 yeas, 13 nays.

1942 - The city hired its first full time fire chief, Ed Slazak.

Firemen held their annual firemen's bingo as far back as Nov 5, 1946 on the third floor of the fire hall.

1951 - SE Regional fire school was held in Owatonna.

1952 - The stop lights were installed in front of the fire hall and other locations in the city.

March 1, 1952 - Ed Slezak was appointed as volunteer fire chief. November 1, 1952, he was appointed Owatonna's first full time Fire Chief. He had been a member of the department since May 5, 1927.

1952 - Red lights were purchased by the city for each of the firemen to put on their personal cars for purpose of responding to the fire calls.

Trucks:

- 1925 Seagrave 750gpm
- 1930 Seagrave 500gpm. Later sold in 1965
- 1948 Ward La France 1000gpm. Bought used from St. Paul Fire Department, the truck was stretched and the ladder was added here in Owatonna.

- 1949 FWD 500gpm, Owned by the Rural Fire Association.
- 1953 Chevy tanker, Owned by the Rural Fire Association.
- 1956 Pirsh 1000gpm.
- 1964 Mack 1000gpm.

1970 - Ed Slezak directed the Village of Yesteryear Fire Department. This garage was a part of the Dunnel House when it was located on East Main St. With the help of a group of firemen from the other county fire departments (Medford, Ellendale, Blooming Prairie), Owatonna made this exhibit possible. The bell is from the Geneva school.

1974 - All the city offices moved out of the building to the new West Hills complex. It was the State School that was purchased from the State of Minnesota.

1975 - The city built on a truck bay to house a new 75 foot Mack Ariel as the floors in the existing building were not adequate to hold the weight of this new truck.

1996 - The fire hall was remodeled and a new truck bay was added where the Metropolitan Theater had previously been located.

2006 - Purchased a new aerial truck: an E-One Bronto Aerial truck with a 100' ladder for approximately \$850,000.

2007 - Owatonna Rural Fire Association purchased a new tanker truck: a 2007 Freightliner, 450gpm, 3500 gallon fire truck for approximately \$150,000.

2008 - Renovation of the 3rd floor and installation of the elevator began. Total cost was approximately \$370,000, which was paid with the ½ cent sales tax initiative.

Chiefs of the department over the years:

- 1875-1879 M R Srong
- 1879-1884 H Randal
- 1884-1885 S S Green
- 1886-1887 E M Twiford
- 1888-1892 C E Luce
- 1892-1895 F G Schuman
- 1895-1898 E M Twiford
- 1899-1900 O Wood
- 1901-1919 E M Twiford
- 1919-1927 F G Schuman
- 1927-1933 Andrew Erdman
- 1933-1942 A C Smith
- 1942-1972 Ed Slazak
- 1972-1987 Frank Anderson
- 1987-1988 Paul Illg
- 1988-2001 Jerry Rosenthal
- 2001-Present Mike Johnson