



Germania Fire Company Number 2

## **150 Years of Fighting Fires in the City of Oshkosh**

As the City of Oshkosh began to develop and grow in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the threat of fire destroying this new development evolved as well. This new city was founded on the sawmills with both process and product producing a hazard of fires along with the threat of conflagration that any dense development brings.

The need to protect the lives and investments of its citizens was recognized early in Oshkosh's history with action taken as early as 1854 to purchase hooks and ladders to be used in the event of fire. This action was followed up less than two years later with the formation of the first volunteer

fire company in Oshkosh, which we are celebrating this year.

On October 23, 1856 Pioneer Engine Company Number One, the first organized fire company, was born as the members gathered at Marks Hall. The name of this company was changed a short time later to the Number One Niagara Company. William Wall was elected as the foreman of this company at its first meeting. The funding for this company came from a special tax levy of one percent issued just the day before on October 22, 1856. The Niagara was followed by a second company on February 4, 1857 which was known as the Germania Fire Engine Company

Number Two. As the name would imply, its ranks were primarily of German decent and they elected Jacob Gruenwald as their foreman. These first two volunteer fire companies operated independently until April 21, 1857 when Captain N. Emerson was elected the first Chief Engineer overseeing the entire City department. The Union Hook and Ladder Company was also formed in these early years, putting the number of fire companies with their own stations in the City at three.

In these early years the bells would ring and men would drop their daily business for the emergency at hand. The early apparatus, often referred to in the day as “machines”, were pulled to the scene and operated by manpower. Bucket brigades were at times the source of supply to fill the machine with water so an appropriate stream could be developed by the hand-operated pumping apparatus. At other times, the hand operated pump could draw suction from the river, nearby cistern, or horse trough. In those days the fire company was not just a group dedicated to public safety, but was a social group as well and included the ranks of many influential people in the community. These early fire companies not only provided fire service to the community, but also volunteered their service in the Civil War, enlisting their service on April 22 of 1861.

In 1859, on May 10<sup>th</sup> the first of the great fires to hit Oshkosh occurred, putting the fire department to the test. Every building on Ferry Street, now North Main Street, was destroyed. Several other devastating conflagrations struck Oshkosh in 1866, 1874, and the largest of all on April 28, 1875. The fire

of 1875 destroyed most of the business district including 70 stores, 40 factories, and 500 homes. These great fires are each a story unto themselves and have been covered very well by other authors.

The first big change for the fire department came in 1863 when the next engine company was formed, Phoenix Steam Engine Company One, although they did not actually receive their “steamer”, as the steam fire engines were referred to, until June 21, 1866. Another fire house was then constructed on West Algoma and the Niagara Company moved to that location. This building included a dance hall and social center on the second floor. The next engine company to be formed was the Brooklyn in 1868 which was also a steam engine. This brought our fire companies in the City to four, which the Brooklyn was appropriately numbered. In 1872, the Germania hand-engine company had been disbanded.



Engine 3 William H Doe

It would not be until 1874 that another engine company would be formed, which was another steam engine company, the William H. Doe, which was given the number three designation as there were now three engine companies and one ladder company.

The advent of the steam fire engine set the tone for some other big changes for the department. The first of which was the need for more power to pull the apparatus, which had been done by men, but now the need for horsepower arose with the heavy machines. The steam engines themselves were not simple to operate and required a skilled “engineer” to maintain and operate the engine. These two changes, along with growth and demand for service, started the migration to a fully paid fire department. In 1877, the decision was made to switch to a fully paid fire department; the engineers and drivers were absorbed into this newly formed department and “hosemen” were added to the roster. The department was also given its first full-time Fire Chief, H.P. Schmidt. The personnel of the department worked a grueling schedule of six days on and one day off, returning to sleep in the firehouse on their day off. Surprisingly, many of the men were married and had families. With this schedule they were allowed to go home for a meal on a daily basis.

The department served the community well over the next twenty-five years, going to a total of six fire stations by 1902. Over this period, the department added the “The Truck House” (on State Street) next to City Hall which housed the “Hook and Ladder” - Number Five and a “hose wagon”, Engine Seven. Station six, housing Engine Six, was located at 10<sup>th</sup> and Ohio. These two new engine companies were simply hose wagons with no pumping apparatus. The switch to hose wagons came with the City water works and hydrant system. In those days, the practice was to connect hose line for fire stream directly to the hydrants.

An engine company was added in 1906, Engine Company Eight, on New York and Central. This led to the closing of the Phoenix Engine house in the 500 Block of Main Street, with Engine One now moving to the truck house.



State Street “Truck House”

The beginning of another major change for the department started in 1907. The first motorized vehicle for the department was added, which was a chief’s car. It would not be until May of 1913 that the first motorized firefighting apparatus would arrive, and not without controversy. The following quote from the Daily Northwestern puts the resistance to change in perspective, “Will irritate a great many people and most of the fireman who haven’t any time for the ‘Red Devil’ at all and wish way down in their hearts that it will prove a complete failure.” There was some credence to the argument, though at the time streets were primarily dirt and automotive technology was somewhat lacking and unreliable. Despite this resistance, the momentum for change could not be stopped



1924 La France Pumper

The horse-drawn apparatus began to slowly be replaced. Oshkosh was one of the last larger cities to hold onto horses as long as possible. The last fire company to be pulled by horses was Number Six on Ohio Street and on March 20, 1924 a motorized apparatus brought an end to the horse-drawn era of the department.

The workweek of firefighters was also an item changing in the teens and twenties as the schedule was reduced to one day on and four off. In 1922, pressed by a new national law, the workweek was reduced to 24 hours on and 24 hours off, which created the first two shifts of the department. Guiding the department into this period of change many years before that was Chief Robert Brauer, who served as Chief Engineer for 32 years. Chief Brauer had started with the department all the way back to the volunteer days as “torch boy”, leading the response and lighting their way with a handheld torch.

Over the next twenty years, several events brought progress and change to a halt. Those events being the Great Depression, the decline of the

woodworking industry, and finally World War II. This string of events put the department in need of many changes by 1946 and the era of the modern fire department began to appear.

Leo Girens became the Fire Chief in 1945 and set the blue prints for change, which started with the establishment of fire prevention and fire training bureaus. All places of business and industry were now inspected to prevent fires and the personnel were trained to modern standards with the training officer receiving guidance from the Milwaukee Fire Department (a relationship that carries through to this day). Fire stations were deteriorating and the old Brooklyn Number Four and Doe Number Three houses were closed. Number Four moved to 11<sup>th</sup> and Nebraska and Number Three moved into the Six House on Ohio when Engine Six was changed over to a ladder company.



Station 4 11<sup>th</sup> and Nebraska

Two-way radios were added for the first time, allowing communications directly to fire apparatus. The apparatus fleet was majorly overhauled over the next six years, with replacement apparatus beginning to resemble what we have today. Chief Girens tenure was cut short when he passed away at the age of 47, bringing Chief Art Apel to the head

position. Tragedy struck again as Chief Apel died from injuries sustained at a fire at the Badger Lumber Company on November 14, 1954. This was the last line-of-duty firefighter death the department has experienced. Chief Bernie Geffers was soon followed by Chief Otto Stoegbauer, who kept the momentum. Chief Stoegbauer brought fire prevention up to a high standard, which received National awards in 1957.



Station 6 10<sup>th</sup> and Ohio

The department was headed for more change in the 60's as the workweek was to shorten another day, bringing it to what it is today. The work schedule was changed to 24 hours on duty followed by 48 hours off duty, with a third shift being added. The 60's also saw the addition of a fire patrol boat and dive team to the department and the replacement of the headquarters station on State Street. The old Truck House was closed in 1970, and the new Central Fire Station opened.

The 1970's were now under way and the greatest changes yet for the department were on the horizon. In 1975, Station Four was moved once again to Wittman Field. The Oshkosh Fire Department assumed the dual duty at that station of protecting the City as well as the aircraft and passengers landing and departing,

with this relationship still in place today. 1976 was to bring one of the biggest changes of all to the department. Ambulance service was made the responsibility of the fire department when the City and the private provider at the time could not come to an agreement.

The department literally went into service the night after the conclusion of the council meeting, with no lead time. The department continued to respond as we do, to date. Under the guidance of Chief Cal Phillips, the ambulance service evolved into a modern paramedic ambulance service, with firefighters being cross-trained as firefighters and paramedics. As usual, in frugal Oshkosh fashion, this service was taken on without the addition of any staff to the department.



1976 Ambulance

Entering into the 80's, the department saw one responsibility leave as the advent of 911 service began answering emergency calls and dispatching both Fire and Sheriff Departments. The alarm office at the Central Station was disbanded and four alarm operator

positions were eliminated. The 80's also brought difficult financial times again for our City with reductions on the department looming. Out of these potential reductions, along with western growth of the city, Station "Three and Six's" as it was known now, was moved to 9<sup>th</sup> and Washburn, and the closure of Station Two was held off. The department remained at five stations, as it had been since 1946.

A period of growth emerged in the 90's when the city grew by almost 1,000 people and more area, which impacted the demand and response times of the fire department. Fire Chief Stan Tadych led the charge to evaluate the department's ability to deliver effective service which brought about a plan that would mean major changes and growth for the fire department. Three fire stations were to be built, two being replacements and one being an additional station. Station 18, the last from the horse drawn-era, moved to Bowen and Murdock streets. This was followed the next year by Station 17 moving from Congress Avenue to Algoma and Murdock. Then came the addition of Station 19 in 1999. To facilitate this addition to the department, a switch was made from engine and ladder companies to engines and combination ladder engine companies, commonly referred to as Quints. This allowed the addition of the sixth fire station, adding only seven personnel instead of the twelve to staff things traditionally. A Heavy Rescue company was added to the roster at this time as a part of the "Quint company concept". The Rescue, carried equipment formerly found on the individual ladder companies. It also carried unique rescue equipment, which was spread out on

other vehicles and left at the station, only to be retrieved when needed.

The boom times were short lived and the newly reorganized department, along with the City, was once again faced with difficult economic times. In 1993, the department was faced with the loss of personnel due to budget issues when an opportunity arose to expand the emergency medical services. The City was requested to submit a proposal to provide ambulance service to the towns of Algoma, Omro, Rushford, Utica, Winneconne, and Poygan, along with the Village of Winneconne and City of Omro. The City already had agreements with the Town of Black Wolf and a portion of Algoma. This proposal was accepted and service began on January 1, 2004, along with more involvement in non-emergency ambulance transports. The additional service brought revenue for the City that allowed the personnel to be retained, and with demand and revenue exceeding expectations, an additional ambulance and six personnel were added.

This brings us to where we are today, a modern, progressive fire department with six fire stations same as it was at the turn of the century, staffed by 108 personnel. In the beginning the department was built to respond to fires, but the hazards and needs of the times have changed. The department still responds to fires but has added emergency medical service, airport response, hazardous materials response, and technical rescue coverage for a variety of hazards from ice and water to building collapse. As of late preparedness for terrorism response has been added.

This article primarily focused on the buildings and apparatus of the department along with a few of its leaders, but the real story and what made this department great, as it still does, are the people who served. There is not enough space in this text to cover the stories of the heroism, life, and camaraderie of the firefighters of the City of Oshkosh. So the best I can do at this time, is dedicate this article to past and present members of the City of Oshkosh Fire Department. Thanks to you for your service. It is my honor to serve you and this City as the Fire Chief at this historic time.

*Timothy R Franz*