

Honoring 100 Years of Council-Manager Government in Winnetka

It feels like Winnetka has always existed just as it is today. When my family moved to this quaint village, we were drawn by the lovely homes, the convenience of train tracks running beneath street bridges, and a delightful forest preserve enfolding the village on the west. But in honor of the 100th anniversary of the founding of our council-manager form of government I delved into Winnetka's history to find out how this all developed. What I found is nothing short of a fascinating story of the people and organizations that built our favorite hometown.

Winnetka's story has always been about civic-minded villagers working together to carve out of the wilderness a beautiful haven for raising families. At first, decisions were made at town meetings. Artemus Carter, who would become our first village president, initiated regular gatherings to discuss civic issues. Rev. Quincy Dowd of the Congregational Church transformed the discussion club into an institution that catered to the village's needs. And Captain Larned contributed parliamentary procedures from the New England town meeting.

In 1868, the key concern for this growing community of 200-or-so residents revolved around the desire for quality schools. At meetings that year it was decided to organize as a village to gain the powers necessary to meet the growing needs of their community. A committee submitted a bill to the Illinois legislature and in March 1869 Winnetka was granted a special charter – the Winnetka Charter – outlining the powers and structure of our first form of government and became officially “The Village of Winnetka.”

A village council was promptly elected with a president and five trustees. Made up of local villagers who volunteered their time, the village council passed laws and levied taxes. It provided for the improvement of streets and construction of sidewalks. It wrote and enforced laws preventing such activities as allowing live stock to run at large or the sale or consumption of “spirituous, vivous malt or any fermented liquors.”

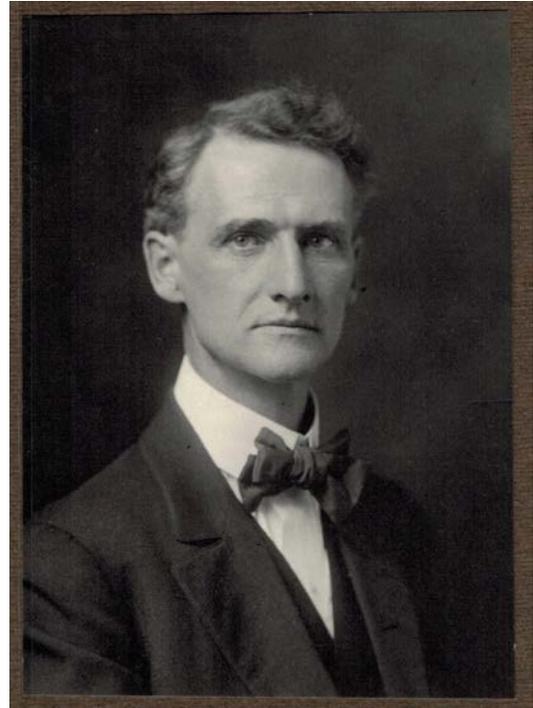
This form of charter government worked well at first but quickly became overwhelmed as the village's population grew to over 1,800 residents by the turn of the century. During this time the Village constructed its own municipal water plant and gas utility, bringing water and electricity to homes for the first time. But many other services were falling through the cracks. Winnetka's spirit shone as villagers formed civic organizations to address these concerns. The Village Improvement Association was organized to agitate for a new railroad station and then took on the task of arranging for garbage collection and street cleaning. Other organizations sprang up to address such problems as liquor traffic, dumping of sewage and charitable aid. Still, residents complained about village streets little better than mud holes and street lighting in need of maintenance.

By 1915 the citizens of Winnetka were shouldering a lot of the work we now consider the role of our local government. And the village president and council – all part-time volunteers – struggled to run a quickly expanding operation. Our neighbors in Glencoe faced similar issues and had just adopted a novel form of government known as the Council-Manager Plan. They were the first to successfully adopt it in Illinois. Winnetka's leaders watched with keen interest as the Glencoe manager assumed his duties in January 1914. But it wasn't until the end of that year when problems came to a head with Winnetka's public utility and its highly controversial superintendent, that the village council would have its opportunity to take this same momentous step, seemingly unnoticed.

The superintendent of Winnetka's water and light plant at the time was F.E. Herdman, a former village trustee and President. While popular as village president, his dictatorial leadership style did not work in his new role as superintendent. Tensions flared with the Council. Employees hated him. The plant fell into disrepair and customer complaints were swamping the village president. So in 1914, the Council hired a young engineer, Robert L. Fitzgerald, from a prominent engineering firm to assess the problems at the utility. His report made it clear that Mr. Herdman's administrative practices were at fault.

By the end of 1914, the village council was ready to act. Mr. Herdman was dismissed and a new position of Business Manager was created that combined the duties of utility superintendent with Village administrative responsibilities. Mr. Fitzgerald, the young engineer who had impressed the council with his business analysis, was hired on January 5, 1915.

While the dismissal of F. E. Herdman was controversial and divisive, there was little controversy over the reorganization within Village staff. Yet this simple change to a council-manager form of government would be key to Winnetka's progress over the next century, and efforts to protect it from dissolution would transform the political landscape of our favorite hometown.



The dismissal of F.E. Herdman, Winnetka's superintendent of its water and light plant, opened the door for appointing Winnetka's first village manager. *PHOTO COURTESY OF WINNETKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.*