

1915: A Time for New Management in Winnetka

“The times they are a-changing.” So goes the Bob Dylan song. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, when Winnetka was busy sweeping this small, dusty village into modernity, the world was a far different place than today and the winds of change were blowing.

Great advances in technology jolted society with innovations such as electric lights, telephones and automobiles. The British steam liner Titanic set sail in 1912. Charlie Chaplin hit the screen in 1915 and would be an international sensation until “talkies” emerged in the late 1920s.

The Progressive movement pushed political and social reforms with four amendments to the U. S. Constitution. A federal income tax was enacted in 1913. Voters were granted the right to elect their U. S. Senators. While women in Illinois voted in their first local elections in April 1914, they gained full voting rights with the 1920 passage of the 19th amendment.

The push for prohibition resulted in the 18th amendment but it also prompted powerful crime syndicates to expand into bootlegging, leaving Chicago notorious for brutal gangster crime and violence.

World peace fell apart as Europe’s hostilities broke out in World War I in 1914 and the U.S. was drawn into the conflict in 1917.

At home, Winnetka was trying to pull itself out of the mud – literally.

The automobile had made its debut on Winnetka’s dirt streets as a novelty just before the turn of the century, but by 1915 the Village struggled to keep up with road improvements to handle the traffic.

The influx of new families drove Winnetka’s population to double in each of the first three decades of the new century. Village services lagged demand, administration was inefficient and complaints rang through to the village president at all hours of the day and night.

A New Plan for Village Management

Around the nation, cities and towns like Winnetka were struggling to make their local governments work more effectively and shed the old “spoils” system. The council manager form of government developed in an effort to combine the strong political leadership of elected officials, in the form of a council, with the strong managerial experience and continuity of an appointed government manager.

In this division of roles, the administration of government would be shielded from political influence. But all policy-making and legislative power would be retained by the elected council members.

At the end of 1914 a crisis in Winnetka, brought about by the need to replace the superintendent of its water and light plant, provided an opportunity to fix two problems at once. By hiring a village manager to handle both the utility plant and village administrative responsibilities, Winnetka's shift to the manager plan was essentially a reorganization from within the government. It was accomplished by a simple resolution of the Village Council and accepted with little controversy.

Winnetka's First Village Manager

A Purdue University mechanical engineer with experience in water, light and gas utilities, Robert L. Fitzgerald conducted an investigation of the problems at Winnetka's water and light utility in 1914. The Village Council was sufficiently impressed that they dismissed the plant superintendent and hired the young Fitzgerald to manage not only the municipal utility but administer affairs of village government. There was no national search for a candidate. He was hired within weeks.

When Fitzgerald arrived in early January 1915 he set up office on the second floor of the old Village Hall, a brick structure located where the current fire station sits. He took charge of the water and electric plant and started the process of assuming administrative duties for the Council. It is reported that he expected these duties to consist of handling citizen complaints and petitions. One wonders how quickly he and the Village Council fully grasped the possibilities of the new arrangement.

Prior to 1915, all Village department heads reported directly to the Village President. Some administrative duties were performed by elected officials such as the Collector. And many of Winnetka's services were provided through a variety of independent agencies. All these needed to be brought under the administration of the new manager.

Robert Fitzgerald had plenty of work to do.

Yet world events would intervene and two years later Mr. Fitzgerald was called to active duty in World War I. During his deployment a former colleague, Herbert L. Woolhiser, stepped in as acting manager. When Fitzgerald returned from the war in 1918, he elected not to return to Winnetka and Mr. Woolhiser assumed permanent responsibilities.

Over Mr. Woolhiser's thirty-four-year tenure, Winnetka's new form of government administration would take root. This quiet, self-effacing man set the standards for city management in a time of great change.

The times they were a-changing. And he managed.



Robert L. Fitzgerald, Winnetka's first village manager. Winnetka's shift to the manager plan was essentially a reorganization from within the government. It was accomplished by a simple resolution of the Village Council and accepted with little controversy. *Photo courtesy of the Winnetka Historical Society*

The British passenger liner, the RMS Titanic, sank early in the morning of April 15, 1912. More than 1,500 passengers and crew lost their lives.



Amidst great fanfare, in 1900 a celebration was held in the village assembly hall to debut the arrival of two modern services in Winnetka: the electric light and the telephone.



Charlie Chaplin debuted in his iconic role, "The Tramp", in 1915.



Women first voted in Illinois in April 1914.



The United States was drawn into World War I in April 1917. Winnetka's first Village Manager, Robert L. Fitzgerald, was called to active duty and served in the Engineer Corps. He survived the war but did not return to Winnetka.