

Ready to Respond

Fire, that dreadful menace, played a threatening role throughout our early years. During the Chicago Fire of 1871, residents shook in horror as they saw the skies ablaze over the city. That same year, our Elm Street railroad station burnt down, destroying all early records of Winnetka's Village government. The 1903 Iroquois Theatre fire, the deadliest theater fire in U. S. history, took the lives of 603 people, including 2 adults and 3 children from Winnetka.

Wild fires, chimney fires, cinders from the smoldering marsh fires posed a constant threat to businesses and homeowners. Vigilance was the order of the day, and local residents formed volunteer fire companies to protect their families and their property.

The Village Takes Charge

As Winnetka launched into the 20th century, it was time to begin professionalizing and upgrading the capabilities of Winnetka's fire protection services. In 1902 the Village Council officially established the Winnetka Fire Department and provided a dedicated horse, shed and equipment. The fire marshal and fire fighters, all local tradesmen, were granted nominal pay for their services.

With the new water utility established in 1893, Winnetka had already installed 200 Crane Company fire hydrants throughout the village. Then, with the arrival of telephone and electric service in 1900, fire fighting got a new tool, but also a new hazard. Arrangements were made with the telephone company to contact each firefighter in the event of a fire. This silent alarm system would not fully replace the fire gong – a large suspended locomotive wheel – until 1919.

The new fire hazard for the new century came as more and more Winnetka homes were wired for electric lights. Fires caused by defective electrical wiring became a common source of house fires along with leaking gas and chimney fires.

Professional Management

A significant step in professionalizing the department came in 1919 during the years of reorganization under new Village Manager H. L. Woolhiser. With the growth of the village and its public safety services, the fire department was spun out from under the Chief of Police and placed in the hands of a new professional Fire Marshal, G. M. Houren.

By this time the Village had entered into a mutual aid agreement with neighboring communities to assist on large fires. The department's horse and hose cart had been replaced with a new fire truck and modern equipment. Interestingly, the first fire truck "blew up" on its way to a fire because of faulty maintenance of the vehicle. Its replacement fared much better.

Winnetka got its first ambulance as a gift from a citizen's group in 1914. This Ford truck with canvass enclosure played an extensive role during the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918. By October of that year 150 Winnetkans had been diagnosed with the disease. The strain of the epidemic, exacerbated by a shortage of doctors due to the war in Europe, prompted the establishment of an emergency hospital at the Indian Hill Country Club.

By the 1920s, the Fire Department needed larger facilities than its portion of the old Village Hall. So when the new Village Hall was constructed in 1925 to house the Village administration and Police Department, the old structure was remodeled as a spacious modern fire station. Looking more like a French chateau than a fire station, the pleasant architectural design blended well with its residential neighborhood.

All Hazards Response

Through the years, the mission of Winnetka's Fire Department has embraced all aspects of hazard protection. From preventative measures, such as public education and fire inspections, to fire suppression and emergency medical and rescue services, the Fire Department serves as "An All Hazards Response Department."

The hazards have evolved. New techniques and technologies have been developed. And the level of skill required to protect this community has risen dramatically. But what has not changed is the commitment of each member of this department to protect our families and our property.



In 1925, as Village administration and the Police Department moved into the new Village Hall, the old Academy Hall was remodeled as a modern fire station.