

Herbert LaDue Woolhiser: Winnetka's Definitive Village Manager

A young man remembered his first impression of Winnetka on a magical Christmas Eve in 1916. He and his host walked to the village common where a great crowd had gathered for the traditional carol sing-along around a lighted tree. The air was crisp. An earlier snowfall covered the ground and the village was a most beautiful sight. As he watched the families of this attractive community gather in such friendly fashion, he sensed that there was something quite special about Winnetka. Little did he know then that he would spend the next 34 years serving this community.

Herbert Woolhiser's host that evening was Winnetka's village manager, Robert Fitzgerald. The two had been associates at the same Chicago engineering firm. Woolhiser was invited to come out from Chicago that day to consult on operations of Winnetka's electric plant. Perhaps they also discussed that Fitzgerald would soon be called to active duty in WWI and the Village would need a replacement.

A few months later, Fitzgerald's unit was called up and Woolhiser was asked to serve as acting manager.

When Woolhiser came to Winnetka in May 1917 he knew little about the details of municipal government, but was intrigued about the possibilities of the new council-manager plan. Woolhiser later recalled, "I was particularly impressed by the fact that Winnetka must be a very progressive community to have adopted the new plan and was therefore a good community in which to live."

A Worthwhile Experiment

A century ago, local municipalities around the country were struggling to make their governments more effective and less subject to political favoritism. Staunton, Virginia, began the experiment, appointing the first city manager in 1908. Other cities cautiously joined.

There were many questions to answer and obstacles to success.

How to legally establish this form of government? Many cities lost their managers in legal challenges. River Forest was the first in Illinois to hire a manager in 1913, but lost it in a public referendum in 1915. Glencoe faced a legal injunction against paying its new manager in 1914. It was crucial to survive early legal challenges to give the experiment a chance to succeed or fail on its own merits. At first the appointment of Mr. Fitzgerald in Winnetka went quietly. However, he relates that soon "the opposition turned on the steamroller politics, but inside of a year we were able to justify our position."

How to define the role of the village manager? How does it fit with the elected and appointed officers such as the treasurer, collector, and clerk? There was no legal roadmap for resolving these issues. Each municipality experimented and chose somewhat different means to resolve them.

When Winnetka appointed its first manager, his duties were not defined. Mr. Fitzgerald related, “[The village council] told me to go in and find my place. They promised support, and I have had it.” This style of bringing in “a good man” and giving him a free hand would serve well in establishing Winnetka’s progressive village management.

Winnetka’s Definitive Manager

Although Mr. Fitzgerald can be credited with founding the role of manager in Winnetka, his term in office was so short that his name has been largely forgotten. It would be Herbert Woolhiser who would come to define the village manager.

In a 1938 dissertation on Winnetka’s 23-year experience with the council manager plan, two Northwestern University students emphasized the role of Mr. Woolhiser. “His personality colored and shaped the development of administrative practices and techniques to such an extent that it is impossible to understand the village government without understanding the personality and the background of the manager.”

He was described as “a shy, quiet, self-effacing man whose reluctance to appear in public was matched only by his vigor and efficiency as an administrator.” A native of South Wayne, WI, whose father was a country doctor and mother a pharmacist, he received an engineering degree at the University of Wisconsin and went on to consult for public utilities.



Herbert Woolhiser was Winnetka’s village manager for 34 years beginning in 1917.

His public persona in the village was that of a pleasant neighbor and valued member of local organizations. He took no position on public issues and steadfastly avoided the limelight.

As an administrative professional, his talents and contributions were quickly recognized and relied upon. His reforms of the city's utilities produced profits that flowed to the village's coffers, giving Winnetka an enviable showcase of its quality government. With a style that was "tactful in manner yet forceful in action," he got things done. His style of innovation was based on experience and he was quickly recognized as a role model and leader among his colleagues in this new profession of government management.

For the next 34 years, Woolhiser would be the constant in Winnetka's village government responsible for maintaining the high quality of life through a time of dramatic growth and change.