

## **Article 7: The Knock-Out Election of 1915**

In 1900 Winnetka celebrated the dawn of a new century at a special town meeting in the newly renovated village assembly room. With great fanfare, Village president Frank Herdman presided over the festivities that included turning on electric current for the first time in Winnetka and a demonstration of Winnetka's new telephone service.

Such village-wide gatherings were common. Folks got acquainted, welcomed new neighbors and discussed village issues. But as the lights turned on for a new era in Winnetka, old customs began to fade and gave rise to new ones.

### **From Frustrations To ...**

By the time Winnetka appointed its first village manager in 1915, the village had endured a series of frustrations. For years village homeowners had gone without gas service since an 1894 referendum vote defeated the proposed gas franchise. At the time, discussion was greatly influenced by Henry Lloyd, a staunch supporter of municipal utility ownership. Since then the issue had been studied time and again. Lloyd passed away in 1903, but one of his sons continued to press for municipal ownership. Then in 1908 the village council put the issue up once again to a referendum vote. Mr. Lloyd called a town meeting and passed a resolution by 68 to 65 recommending a vote against the gas franchise. Despite this, voters overwhelmingly approved the franchise by 314 to 147. So after a fifteen-year wait Winnetkans finally got gas service.

In 1911 the Village had the opportunity to join with other communities along Sheridan Road for the improvement and maintenance of this public road. This involved transferring jurisdiction for the thoroughfare over to the Lincoln Park Board. But the emotional issue was fear that the Lincoln Park Board would destroy the Winnetka ravines. The matter was put to a public referendum and defeated – by a *single* vote. With this decision, the village took upon itself responsibility for improving and maintaining its portion Sheridan Road.

As the village dealt with decisions related to local ownership and control, its existing municipal utilities were in need of attention. The water plant constructed in 1893 required maintenance and improvements, plus the addition of a water filtration plant for quality drinking water. By 1913 utility customer complaints were a constant headache for the village council. The problem clearly lay with former village president, Frank Herdman, who was now serving as superintendent of the water and light plant but undeniably unfit for the job. Yet the politics of firing a well-connected village resident seemed insurmountable.

### **... A Plan for Good Government**

Winnetka's unique success as a community is frequently ascribed to the wisdom of "a group of able and far-sighted individuals". 1915 was a pivotal year in their efforts.

Several Winnetka businessmen would meet for discussions over lunch at the City Club of Chicago. This group, including both Democrats and Republicans, discussed village issues. The list of attendees reads like a Who's Who of Winnetka civic leadership.

Frustrations with running village government made three things clear: 1) Herdman should be dismissed and a village manager hired, 2) changes should be made in village administration to remove politics from employment, police and billing matters, and 3) these changes needed to be preserved over time by a village council committed to this concept of good government.

By January 1915 the first of these was accomplished when the village council hired Winnetka's first village manager. Next the group reached out to others to form a Committee of One Hundred and Five to slate candidates for a Citizen's Party ticket that would support their platform. The opposition promptly organized as the Winnetka Party and a great electoral battle ensued with caucuses and rallies, full-page newspaper ads and electoral hijinks.

In the end, the Citizen's Party swept the election. But the leadership group knew that the gains made in steering Winnetka toward good government could be easily lost without sustained quality leadership on village council. The electoral success of 1915 and the need to preserve their concept of good government would give rise to a new Winnetka custom – the Winnetka Caucus.



Eugene Rummler headed the Citizens' Party ticket that swept the 1915 village council elections. Their platform supported the appointment of a village manager.  
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