

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

*Growing Up
in St. Paul
My Family and La Nuova Vita*

Eugene A. Rancone
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Fall 2013

Volume 48, Number 3

Five Firemen Buried Under Falling Walls

Remembering Heroes: The Midway Transfer Fire of 1900

Patrick L. Shannon

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The Firefighters' Memorial, Oakland Cemetery, St. Paul, on a cloudy October day. This is where three of the five firefighters who died in the Midway fire of 1900 are buried. In 1868 the Firemen's Association purchased six lots at Oakland Cemetery for the burial of members who were killed while fighting fires. Later more lots were added. Then in 1890 identical bronze memorials designed by William A. Van Slyke were installed at Oakland and Calvary cemeteries to honor these heroes. For more on the Midway fire and the men who died fighting it, see page 3. Photo courtesy of Patrick L. Shannon.

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Ramsey County History is published quarterly
by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323
Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, MN
55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. Copy-
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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 48, Number 3

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ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations
to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program
of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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*Publication of Ramsey County History is supported in part by a gift from
Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr.
and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon*

A Message from the Editorial Board

Sometimes, history reminds us that we are fortunate to live in a later age. In this issue, Patrick Shannon's story of the great Midway fire of 1900 recounts how five firemen perished in the blaze that consumed the wooden interior of the McCormick Harvester Building. No smoke alarms or sprinkler systems were present, and the ill-placed hydrants lacked enough water to adequately supply the horse-drawn hose wagons. On the other hand, some stories are timeless. Gene Rancone's tale of growing up in St. Paul in a strong Italian family stresses the hard work and family bonds that can still strengthen the resolve of a young person finding his way in the world. And, of course, politics is always with us. Ruby Hunt, an articulate former St. Paul City Council member, gives us an insider's view of the infamous Rosalie Butler–Milton Rosen feud that made newspaper headlines in the 1960s and '70s. Maybe those times were not "the thrilling days of yesteryear," as the Lone Ranger might have it, but their stories make for a lively read today.

If you value *Ramsey County History* and want to ensure it continues to publish interesting and colorful stories of the people and events that have shaped our community's history, then please make a contribution to the Ramsey County Historical Society's Annual Appeal. You can either send your gift to RCHS at 323 Landmark Center, 75 Fifth Street West, St. Paul, MN 55102 or call RCHS at (651) 222-0701. We appreciate your help.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

Five Firemen Buried Under Falling Walls

Remembering Heroes: The Midway Transfer Fire of 1900

Patrick L. Shannon

Today society considers our firefighters, police officers, military service members, and emergency responders as heroes because they often endanger their lives to protect ours. That association, however, is not something new. In 1900 the St. Paul Fire Department battled a ferocious blaze that left it with five fallen heroes. Those firefighters may be forgotten today, but their courage and dedication lives on. When those men perished, the city of St. Paul experienced the single-most disastrous casualty since its founding forty-six years earlier. We need to remember these courageous firefighters.

St. Paul's Fire Department

At the turn of the twentieth century, the St. Paul Board of Fire Commissioners oversaw the operations of the St. Paul Fire Department.¹ Chief Engineer Hart N. Cook, who worked his way up through the ranks, led the department, which numbered 202 men. By this time, St. Paul had a population of 163,065 and the boundaries of the city had expanded over time as its residential population increased. In 1858, St. Paul took up less than five square miles, but in 1887 it annexed West St. Paul. This decision expanded its geographical size to more than 55 square miles. By 1890 the city included the Frogtown neighborhood north of University Avenue; the North End; Lake Como; Merriam Park; Macalester Park (now known as Highland Park); St. Anthony Park; and Groveland

Park. When the Ryan Hotel had been constructed in 1885, it was the city's first building with more than five stories. Soon the ten-story Globe Building (1887) at Fourth and Cedar streets and the thirteen-story Pioneer Building (1889) at Fourth and Robert had surpassed it. All of these changes added to the many responsibilities of the Fire Department.

At that time, men who wanted to become St. Paul firefighters had to meet the following requirements: male over 5' 7" with full citizenship; between the ages 21–33 years; able to read and write English; must be a St. Paul resident for at least two years; and prepared to serve 60 days on probation. The equipment of the St. Paul Fire Department consisted of fifteen steamers, four chemical engines, one water tower, eight hook and ladder



Chief Hart N. Cook, St. Paul Fire Department. This and the individual photos of St. Paul firemen that follow are all from the History of the Police and Fire Departments of the Twin Cities (1899).

trucks, thirteen hose wagons, five horse carriages, twenty-one supply wagons, and five chiefs' buggies. According to the R.L. Polk *City Directory* for St. Paul, "The department is fully equipped and ranks among the best in United States."² In 1900, the department's budget was approximately \$195,000. In addition, mem-

Directions for Giving a Fire Alarm in St. Paul in 1900

1. To give an alarm, go to the nearest box, open the door, pull the hook to the bottom of the slot once and let go; then close the door and remain at the box until some of the apparatus arrives and direct them to the fire.
2. Do not pull the hook if the small bell in the box is striking, as that indicates an alarm has already been given.
3. The alarm is struck on the Engine house gongs in this way: Alarm Box 34 would be indicated by 3 blows (1-1-1) with a pause of 2 seconds between each blow, then a pause of 6 seconds followed by 4 blows (1-1-1-1). This alarm is repeated 4 times with a pause of 14 seconds between each round, and thus giving the alarm from box 34 four different times.

bers of the department were prohibited from attending local political conventions and having any part in politics, except to vote. Firemen would be subject a fine of a month's pay for going into a saloon in uniform or accepting a drink of liquor while on duty.

In those days the relations between members of the fire department with members of the police department were sometimes fragile as illustrated by an incident that took place on Thursday, October 11, 1900. At approximately 6:45 p.m., there was a serious fire at the City Hotel located at 444 St. Peter Street. Police officer David F. Hennessey, who was guarding the entrance to the stairway in the hotel, attempted to stop the fire chief from going to the third story of the burning hotel. Hennessey grabbed Chief Cook by the collar and attempted pull him back. Cook and other firemen pushed Hennessey out of the way. Hennessey continued to pursue Cook and grabbed him at the next landing, yelling an "epitaph" at him. Cook swung his lantern at Hennessey striking him in the face breaking the lantern's glass causing a cut on Hennessey's face. While this was going on, F. C. Gembe, the hotel's manager, was shouting, "Stop fighting and put out the fire." When the fire was under control, the chief stepped onto the sidewalk from the building and three police officers immediately arrested Cook and tossed him into a paddy wagon. He was transported to the city jail where he made bail of \$25.00. The charge was later dropped.

Fire! Fire!

Ten days later, on Sunday, October 21, 1900, at approximately 12:09 a.m., John Donnelly, who was returning home from a dance, came across a small fire in the east end of the A.V. Hinman Packing House in the Minnesota Transfer District. He immediately sent in an alarm for a fire at the packing house which was located east of Vandalia Street, 200 feet north of University Avenue, in the St. Paul Midway area. Steam Fire Engine Station Number 13, located on northeast corner, of Hampden Avenue and Raymond, was dispatched to the scene. The fire wagons from Station 13 had a difficult time



Looking west about a half block east of Cretin Avenue, just north of University, these railroad tracks are today in a location similar to the tracks that the Midway fire crossed in 1900 to reach the McCormick warehouse building. Photo courtesy of Patrick L. Shannon.

getting over the railroad bridge near University Avenue, which was poorly maintained by the railroad, and were delayed in getting to the scene. Upon arriving, Lieutenant F.M. Edey, ranking officer of Company 13, called in a general alarm because of the fury of the fire.

Companies 8, 9 and 14 soon joined the fireman of Company 13.³ These firemen fought bravely, but "they were handicapped by the lack of fireplugs."⁴ Grease from the floors of the packing house quickly spread the fire throughout the building. At the same time, a strong south wind pushed the flames to a neighboring one-story, frame warehouse belonging to the Northwestern Lime Company. That building's wood board walls provided an excellent vehicle to ignite and transmit the blaze to the next building, the administrative building for the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company. The fire quickly spread to the attached four-story brick distributing plant of McCormick Harvester. The four floors of this plant were filled with machinery packed in wooden crates for shipping. The crates and the wooden floors of the plant were soon on fire.

Fueled by the grease and wood materials, the fire rapidly made headway through the row of combustible build-

ings, leaping from one to another as if suffocating the buildings underneath it. The Robbin's Ice House and a tenant building, which was occupied by five families, stood at the rear of the Harvester Company's building. The spreading flames quickly put them in jeopardy. Fortunately, the families escaped with only minor injuries and some belongings. At the same time, railroad employees were busy attempting to couple some box cars to an engine to move them from a nearby siding to a safer location, but their efforts failed. With the strong wind and the massive volume of the fire, the twenty wooden box cars were soon burning. By 1:30 a.m., the Midway Transfer District was a complete inferno.

Assistant Chief William H. Irvine, who was the ranking officer at the scene, directed the efforts of Engine Companies 9 and 13. He led a group of men to the south wall of the Harvester Building, where he determined the fire should be fought. The firemen attempted to open steel shutters on the building, but the heat pushed them back. Spectators and other firemen were now yelling to the firefighters that the building's walls were bulging. Irvine sent his men back ap-

proximately 50 feet from the wall while continuing to direct their hose nozzles toward the building. By then the fire in the walls had grown so hot that some of the bricks were turning white. Pipemen Burt P. Irish and Louis Wagner directed streams of water on the McCormick Building from their hoses. Firemen Andrew J. Johnson and William J. Peel were holding their hoses a short distance past them. Irvine was close by directing the crew with additional men positioned further back.

The towering flames in the Midway area could be seen from miles away and seemed to enlighten the entire sky of St. Paul. All available fire companies were now fighting the blaze, even fire com-

panies from southeast Minneapolis. The strong wind, shortage of fire hydrants, the heavy tasks of coupling hoses and dragging them long distances from the fire plugs, the heat radiated from the inferno, and the limited ability to communicate with one another handicapped the firefighters involved. Controlling the hundreds of spectators who had gathered in the area around the blaze added to the dilemma of what to do.

By 2:00 a.m., the heavy machinery packed in wooden shipping crates and the wooden floors holding the machinery in the four-story McCormick Harvester Building were fully engulfed in flames. A loud explosive “thud” was heard as the machinery stored on fourth floor

fell through the floor to the third level. This crash was immediately followed by the third floor collapsing to the second floor. Instantly, the southern wall of the McCormick Harvester Building exploded violently outward. Chief Irvine turned to escape and took about three steps when he was buried by machinery, bricks, and debris. The others with him attempted to run, but they too were buried. A total of six firefighters were submerged in the hot brick and heavy machinery.

Immediately, others who were fighting the fire turned to rescue the fallen firemen. Saving these men now had priority over putting out the fire. Firemen, railroad crews, police officers, and specta-



Built in 1894, this is St. Paul Engine House 13 on Raymond Avenue on the northwest corner of Hampden about 1908. Along with other stations, firemen from this station responded when the call came to fight the Midway fire in 1900. On the left is an 1885 Clapp & Jones Extra First Class Steamer with a hose wagon alongside. Over time, the St. Paul Fire Department phased out the use of horses with its fire wagons, but the last horses were not retired from service and replaced by gasoline-powered vehicles until 1924. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



This photo of a St. Paul fire in 1900 illustrates how firemen usually fought industrial fires at that time. The firefighters are positioned close to the burning building, which was similar in height to the McCormick building that collapsed in the Midway fire. As part of the procedure for setting up to fight a fire, the horses that pulled the fire apparatus were released and secured at a distance for their protection. These firefighters are concentrating the water from their hoses on one area of the fire. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

tors formed groups to remove debris and search for the buried firefighters. The Great Northern Railroad's Number 33 wrecking crew was brought in to assist in removing the heavy machinery. The hot debris that was stacked nearest the fallen building was eight feet in depth with another eight feet of machinery on top of that. Teams of horses from the hose carts were brought in to assist in dragging off the broken machinery. Only a sparse group of firefighters was left to contain

the fire while all who could frantically attempted to free their fallen comrades

Firefighters Andrew Johnson and William Peel, who were dragging the hose lines a distance of several feet behind the four fighters, were also buried. They were the first to be rescued under the three to five feet of debris. Peel, who was yelling "get me out of here boys," was the first to be found. He was sent home to recover from his bruises and burns. Next Johnson was uncovered. He, too, appeared to be in stable condition, but he complained

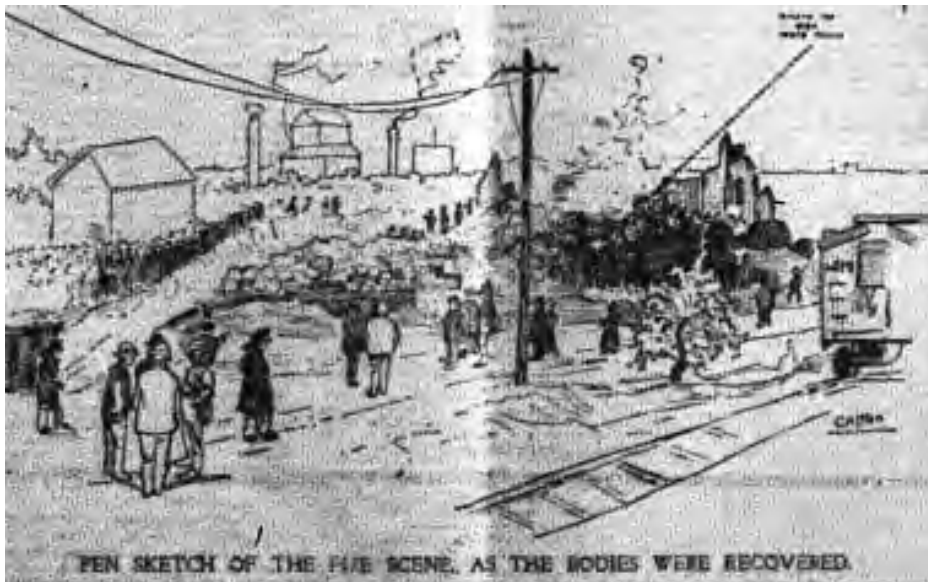
of some internal injuries. He was sent to Bethesda Hospital for observation. The hospital reported that he was not in any immediate danger. That left four firefighters unaccounted for.

In spite of the large number of men who were clearing away the piles of hot brick and machinery, several hours passed before the first body, which was that of Assistant Chief Irvine, was freed from the pile of hot debris. The *Pioneer Press* described the discovery of Irvine in these words: "There were number of cuts about the dead man's head, one of his legs was broken, the trunk was crushed, and his entire body burned and charred. A few feet away, the mangled remains of Lieut. Edey were located and were taken out. Further up towards the foundation of the building, Wagner and Irish were found beside the hose they had dropped when the crash came. Wagner's body was found with his feet toward the building, face down and his hands crossed. Irish was lying with his face down and his left leg folded under his body. His head was crushed and his right arm was burnt off to the elbow."⁵ The search concluded with the discovery of Irish at noon, twelve hours after the initial alarm was given.

The Aftermath

The firefighters carried the bodies of their comrades and placed them on an open wagon where many spectators attempted to view them. Firemen and police had to fight with many onlookers to stop them from approaching the wagon. One onlooker was knocked to the ground during the skirmish. Twenty police officers on foot and six on mounted horses kept the crowd from harm's way as the walls continued to topple in the smoldering ruins. No arrests were made as many of the citizens helped in the rescue of the firefighters.

The bodies of Assistant Chief Irvine, Lieutenant Frank M. Edey, and Bert P. Irish were taken to Dampier's undertaking rooms with Louis Wagner taken to Schroeder's undertaking rooms.⁶ The following morning Irvine was transferred to his residence at 235 W. Sixth Street, where his widow and two children waited for him. There, on Tuesday morning,



The St. Paul Dispatch published this pen sketch of the fire scene in the Midway as the bodies of the firemen who died in that blaze were recovered. The McCormick building was nothing but a pile of machinery, farm equipment, and bricks. The onlookers were a major problem for the police in enforcing crowd control. Photo courtesy of the St. Paul Dispatch, October 22, 1900.

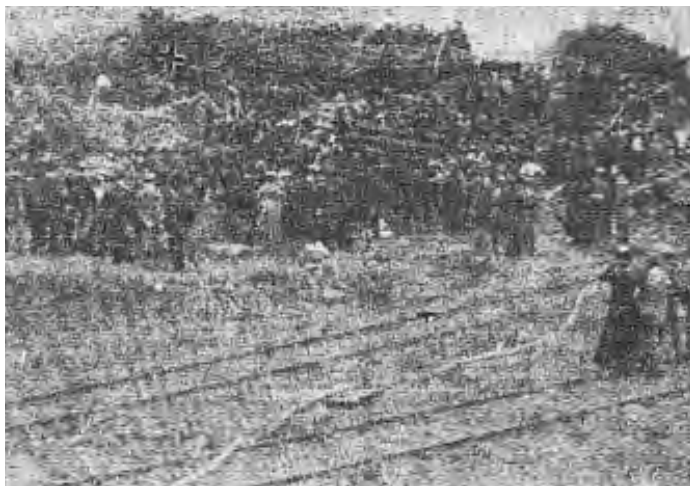
October 23, a private funeral was conducted by Rev. W. A. Gerrie, pastor of the Bethany Congregational Church. The same morning, Lieutenant Edey's body was taken to his home at 843 Raymond Avenue, where a private funeral was conducted by Rev. W.C. Sage of St. Anthony Park Methodist Church. The remains of Louis Wager were held at the undertaking parlor to be transported to a family plot in Young America. Pipeman Irish's body remained in a vault until his parents, who

lived outstate, were able to make proper arrangements.

At three o'clock on Tuesday afternoon, October 23, a public funeral for the four fallen firemen was held at the great Opera House in St. Paul.⁷ Thousands of the general public swarmed into the Opera House. So many that, for safety reasons, the majority of them had to stay outside during the service. The four caskets were on the stage draped in flowers, with their families sitting on the stage

with them. Palms bordered the stage and two of the many floral arrangements held wreaths that read "His Last Call" and "Faithful until Death." Several distinguished clergymen gave eloquent eulogies about the heroic self-sacrifice these men had made and how their dedication to the protection of others would live on in the firefighters who followed them. "The fireman's life is always one in danger, a life of obedience to death," stated Rev. A.B. Meldrum. Choirs sang "Over the River of Death," "Rock of Ages," and "Go to Thy Rest in Peace." The *Pioneer Press* stated that "The police department under generous inspiration refuted the suspicion of unseemly attitude toward the fire department. The police rivaled the firemen in honoring those whose self-sacrifice exalts a department joined with the police department in the worthy service of protecting life and property."⁸

Following the service, a long procession of mourners made its way from the Opera House to Oakland Cemetery. Eight mounted policeman led the procession followed by the two horse-drawn wagons carrying the bodies of Irvine and Edey. Sixty St. Paul firemen came next. Then Seibert's Third Regiment Band, playing a dirge,⁹ and 48 police officers followed. People gathered to pay their respects to their fallen heroes all along the streets leading to the cemetery. "As the hearses came into view, specta-



Because debris from the McCormick building exploded outward and in some areas was piled eight feet high, recovery of the bodies of the firemen who died was difficult. Photo courtesy of the St. Paul Globe, October 22, 1900.



The body of Assistant Chief William Irvine was found in the area at the top left of this photo. Many of the bricks on the ground were white hot prior to the building giving way. Photo courtesy of the St. Paul Globe, October 22, 1900.

Our Fallen Heroes



William H. Irvine, Second Assistant Engineer, age 41, joined the department in in 1878 for a year and then rejoined in 1884 with the rank of Ladderman. He was steadily promoted and in October 1898 was appointed Assistant Engineer.¹² He left a widow and two daughters ages twelve and sixteen. He lived at 235 West Sixth Street, St. Paul.

Burt Pierson Irish, Pipeman, age 28. He joined the department in 1898 and was stationed at Merriam Park. At the time of his death, he was Second Pipeman and Driver for Engine 13. While fighting a fire at Concordia College in 1899, his feet were severely frozen. He left a widow and seven-year-old daughter, Ethel. He resided at 814 Raymond Avenue.



Francis M. Edey, Lieutenant, age 46, joined the department 1888 and was appointed to Company No. 9. Two years later, he was promoted to First Pipeman and in 1898 promoted to Lieutenant and transferred to Engine Company 13. He left a wife and a twenty-four-year-old son, Bertram P. The Edey family resided at 843 Raymond.

Louis Wagner, Pipeman, age 32. He joined the department in 1898 and was promoted to the position of steamer driver in Engine Company 13 in 1899. In February of 1899, his feet were badly frozen and his neck burned at the Concordia College fire. He left a wife and three children: Bertha, age six; Louis, age four; and Luverne, age three months. Wagner resided at 2043 Long Avenue.



Andrew J. Johnson, Pipeman, age 29, joined the department in March of 1899 and was awarded several accommodations for faithfulness and attention. He was survived by three sisters and his parents who lived in Sweden. He was engaged to Miss Emily Anderson who was at his side in the hospital when he died. Johnson resided at 459 Eighth Street.

tors with one accord doffed their hats and remained uncovered until the entire procession had passed.”¹⁰ It was nearly dark when the two firefighters were buried adjacent to the Firemen’s Memorial in Oakland Cemetery. That same day, Pipeman Louis Wagner was transported to Young America, where he was buried in a family plot.

On Thursday afternoon, October 25, the body of Burt P. Irish was buried near the Firemen’s Memorial. W.C. Sage, pastor of St. Anthony Park Methodist Church, conducted the ceremony. Unfortunately it was also the day when Andrew J. Johnson, Pipeman of Engine No. 9, died from internal injuries he received when the wall collapsed on him. He was 29 years old and was to be married to Miss Emily Anderson in two weeks. His funeral was held on Sunday, October 28, 1900, at St. Sigfrid’s Church¹¹ followed by burial at the Firemen’s Memorial at Oakland.

In addition to the five men who lost

their lives fighting the fire in the early morning hours of October 21, 1900, the property losses that included the slaughtering plant, the lime warehouse, an ice house, and the McCormick Harvester warehouse at the Midway Transfer site were later estimated to have been between \$75,000 and \$100,000. In today’s dollars, that would be more than \$2,000,000. Over time, those property losses could be replaced, but the lives of the five men who perished could not. That was truly a tragic day for St. Paul and its citizens.

Patrick L. Shannon is a retired criminal investigator for the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension. He is a member of the the RCHS and this is his first article in Ramsey County History. He particularly thanks Officer Clarence E. Hawkins of the St. Paul Fire Department for his assistance with this article.

Endnotes

1. In 1900 the headquarters of the St. Paul Fire Department was located at the northwest corner of Eighth and Minnesota streets.
2. *St. Paul City Directory* (St. Paul: R.L. Polk, 1900), 34.
3. Fire Company 8 was located at the northwest corner of Eighth and Minnesota streets; Company 9 was at the northeast corner of Marion and Edmund streets. Company 14 was located at the southeast corner of Cleveland and St. Anthony avenues.
4. *Minneapolis Journal*, October 22, 1900, p. 5.
5. *St Paul Pioneer Press*, October 22, 1900, p. 1.
6. The Dampier establishment was at 313 Wabash Street; Schroeder’s was 18½ E. Sixth Street.
7. The Opera House stood on the southeast corner of St. Peter and Sixth streets.
8. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 24, 1900, p. 8.
9. A type of funeral hymn that typically includes slow, solemn, or mournful music.
10. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 24, 1900, p. 8.
11. The church was located on the southeast corner of Eighth and Locust streets.
12. In 1900 the title for the Assistant Chief was Assistant Engineer.

How Would the St. Paul Fire Department Handle the Midway Transfer Fire Today?

According to Assistant Training Officer Clarence E. Hawkins of the St. Paul Fire Department, modern fire code requirements and firefighting techniques would require today’s personnel to deal with a potentially volatile situation such as the one that occurred in the Midway Transfer area in this way:

- A fire inspection would have prevented heavy equipment from being loaded on the floors of the McCormick buildings as was done in 1900.
- A sprinkler system would have to be present in each of the commercial buildings, which would help prevent the fire from spreading.
- Today’s water supply in the city of St. Paul requires larger water mains and closer spacing of fire hydrants.
- Current health codes would require the packing house to have better housekeeping for possible hazards such as grease, which would have slowed the spread of the fire.
- Current fire tactics set the safety zone for firefighters working around a building with a collapse potential at one and one half the distance of the height of the building. This precaution reduces the chance of firefighters from being trapped under a falling wall the way they were in 1900.
- Modern firefighting apparatus allows a greater supply of water to be available, from a longer distance, which increases the safety of the firefighters.
- Firefighters are trained to recognize building construction and concepts of structural collapse of burning buildings.
- The adoption of the practice of having a safety officer at each fire scene has increased the safety of today’s firefighters.

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

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The sculpture La Nuova Vita (the New Life) by Estanulos Contrares stands outside the entrance to the Amhoist (now Landmark) Tower at the corner of Fourth and St. Peter streets. Gene Rancone led the development of this mixed-use office and residential building in the early 1980s and commissioned this statue to honor the legacy of his grandparents, who came to St. Paul from Italy to begin a new life in America. For more on Gene Rancone, see page 10. Photo courtesy of Eugene A. Rancone.