

RAMSEY COUNTY
History

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The burning of St. Paul's International Hotel in 1869. See article on "the men who ran with the machine," St. Paul's volunteer firemen, beginning on page 4. "The Mystery of the Leaking Lake" begins on page 18.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Ramsey County History is your magazine. Without readers who have an interest in St. Paul, Ramsey County and the surrounding area, this magazine cannot be a forum for ideas and discovery about the history of Ramsey County.

Because the Editorial Board wants to encourage and support writing about urban and rural history relating to St. Paul and Ramsey County, we invite you to send us any suggestions or ideas for future articles or topics to be presented in this magazine. Perhaps there is a favorite landmark, person, group or institution that you would like to know more about. Whether your question concerns the origin of a street name in St. Paul or the origin of a neighborhood in Ramsey County, let us know of your interest and desire to learn more. Please call or write our editor, our executive director or the Society's general office in Landmark Center.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

Fire on the Frontier

Tradesmen, Merchants: The Men Who Ran With

Thomas J. Kelley

Situated halfway between the North Pole and the Equator, St. Paul could never have become a permanent year-round community without fire. But, as the frontier community grew unguided and uncontrolled, fire became a serious threat.

This is an account of the origin and development of the institution that protects the citizens of St. Paul and their property from the dangers of fire. It begins with the spontaneous voluntary efforts of conscientious citizens equipped with nothing more than buckets, and concludes a quarter of a century later when they were disbanded to make room for paid professional firefighters.

St. Paul was named after the first building erected for public purposes, the Chapel of St. Paul. In 1841 Roman Catholic voyageurs helped erect a rude log house on a bluff above the Mississippi River four miles downstream from its junction with the Minnesota River. Father Lucian Galti-

er dedicated the chapel on November 1, 1841.

By 1843, as settlers continued moving into the area, building projects were begun, and fires followed. In this rough, frontier village, any building that caught fire was doomed. The only defense was to



"The Fire," an engraving published in September, 1878, in *St. Nicholas* magazine. This graphically illustrates the dangers and difficulties surrounding St. Paul's fire fighting volunteers as they struggled to protect their community.



James J. Hill in 1863

build houses far enough apart so that a fire in one would not spread to others.

Apparently the little community of trappers, traders and farmers remained almost unchanged for the next six years. This conclusion is based on a letter describing her arrival in St. Paul by Harriet Bishop, St. Paul's first school teacher.

"I landed, July 10th, 1847, at Little Crow Village (Sioux) four miles below St. Paul and was conducted to the house of the Missionary (Rev. T.S. Williamson, M.D.) followed by the whole band of Indians, men, women and children, to whom I was an object of curiosity, and who had many questions to ask concerning me. In due time my baggage, with myself and a proper escort embarked in a canoe for the point of final destination.

"Nature's stillness reigned profound, save the splash of the paddle, and the musical concert of blood-thirsty mosquitoes . . . When they pointed to a few log buildings on a commanding bluff and said, 'That is St. Paul,' I could merely open my eyes and say, 'I am glad we are there.' Our canoe was moored, an Indian blanket was

the Machine

placed on the ground, and I was placed on it. While an attendant shielded me with an umbrella and fought mosquitos, another brought from a cold spring, water—reviving-strength water.

"We proceeded to the nearest house. Dr. Williamson had arranged that this should be my home. . . . at this time three families composed the white population; half-breeds and Canadian French the remainder, probably in all about one hundred. There was not a frame building in the town and the last named lived in hovels of most abject appearance, destitute of every comfort."

Another writer described pre-territorial St. Paul:

"Until the election of a delegate to Congress in 1848 by the citizens within the present limits of Minnesota, St. Paul was but a cluster of log huts, many of them with birch bark roofs, occupied by voyageurs and half-breeds in the employ of Indian traders."

In March, 1849, a bill passed Congress organizing the Territory of Minnesota, and creating St. Paul as its capital. When navigation opened in the Spring of 1849 the rush of immigration began. Governor Alexander Ramsey arrived in June of 1849 and the first territorial legislature convened in September. By the end of the year there were more than a thousand inhabitants in St. Paul. Some estimates of the population were as high as 1,200 but the number varied greatly between summer and winter.

The newly arrived inhabitants of the territorial capital were too busy building a city to think about doing anything to protect it from fire. They were rudely awakened to the need for organized fire protection on May 16, 1850, when a workman lost control of a pile of burning wood chips next to the newly erected Presbyterian chapel on Washington Street across from Rice Park. The entire population of



Fire barn of Minnehaha Engine Company No. 2 at Third and Jackson Streets in 1870. For twenty years, this and two other companies formed the backbone of the St. Paul Fire Department.

the community watched the chapel burn as efforts to check the fire with buckets of water proved futile. The building was a total loss.

The fire made a great impression on the community and the city council because the chapel erected by the Reverend Edward D. Neill was the first Protestant church in the white settlement of Minnesota. It was the forerunner of House of Hope Presbyterian Church.

The town council responded to the fire by enacting an ordinance in the fall of 1850 requiring every owner of any house, storage cellar, warehouse, or any building in which any stove, fireplace or flue is used to provide and keep in good repair two sufficient and substantial buckets which shall be marked with paint in plain conspicuous letters with the word "fire" on one side and the owner's name on the other. Specifications were established for the construction of chimneys of fireproof material, and it was declared unlawful to burn chips, shavings or other combustibles within sixty feet of a store or building.

A further reaction to the Presbyterian Chapel fire was an attempt to raise money for the purchase of a fire engine by means of a series of entertainments. There were no more serious fires to inspire enthusiasm and, as support waned, the project died. A

year later, the town council discussed fire protection, but no action was taken.

Exasperated by the council's failure to act, one of its members, R.C. Knox, a 24-year-old carpenter, organized a volunteer bucket brigade. He appealed unsuccessfully to the town council for ladders and fire equipment. Finally, after a fire that could have been put out if ladders had been available, Knox passed a subscription list around and collected enough money to cover the cost of a set of ladders (which he personally made). Equipped with ladders, Knox, on his own initiative and without any legal warrant, organized a hook and ladder company. The company, made up of Knox and his friends, practiced making runs with their ladders and buckets to imaginary fires.

Unfortunately, the first fire the company was called upon to fight was in a house on a bluff and the nearest water was the Mississippi River, too far away for the operation of the bucket brigade. The next big fire was in the splendid, newly completed Daniels Hotel on Eagle Street at Seven Corners. The brigade was again frustrated by the lack of a ready water supply and had to stand by while the building was completely consumed by the fire. The problems created by the absence of usable water access and the lack of public support

lowered the brigade's morale, and the group simply faded from existence.

St. Paul grew rapidly after it became the territorial capital and in 1854 it received its charter and became an incorporated city. On April 18, at the opening session of the new city council, Mayor David Olmstead expressed his concern about the city's lack of fire protection. He proposed that the city provide cisterns to supply water for fighting fires. The city council followed up on the mayor's suggestion by passing building ordinances and fire limits.

The first major fire in the newly incorporated city destroyed Norman Kittson's recently constructed Sintomine Hotel in Lowertown. Just as a chapel fire four years earlier had moved the town council to pass a fire ordinance, the destruction of the stylish Sintomine Hotel by fire in 1854 led to the formal organization of a hook and ladder company.

Thus began a colorful and exciting period in the history of firefighting, the era of the volunteer fire-fighting companies.

ERA OF THE VOLUNTEERS

When St. Paul officially became a city in 1854 with the granting of a corporate charter by the state legislature, the new city council, aroused by the Sintomine Hotel fire, exercised its authority by officially sanctioning the establishment of the volunteer Pioneer Hook and Ladder Company. The constitution and by-laws of the company were adopted November 6, 1854.

The eighteen members of the Pioneers were following an American tradition that extended back beyond the founding of the country. The first volunteer fire company in this country, the Union Company, was formed in Philadelphia in 1736 upon the recommendation of Benjamin Franklin, who became its first chief. George Washington was a volunteer fireman in the Friendship Company of Alexandria, Virginia, which was formed in about 1775. He purchased a pumping machine from Gibbs of Philadelphia and presented it to his company.

The St. Paul city council's endorsement of the volunteer company gave it the power to pull down shanties or to destroy property to prevent a fire from spreading. The council's generosity in allocating authority and responsibility did not extend to mon-

"The men who ran with the machine were tradesmen and merchants, carpenters and empire builders. They pledged their time and their strength to keep their community safe from fire, and when their government failed to provide them with adequate equipment, they pledged their credit so they would have what they needed to do the job."



John S. Prince

ey. An appeal to the public also failed to produce enough money to buy equipment, so the volunteers themselves had to raise \$75 to pay for ladders, buckets, ropes and axes.

Throughout the winter of 1854-55 the Pioneers, which now had thirty members, were busy. The company apparently spent as much time lobbying the St. Paul city council as it did fighting fires.

Early in the Spring of 1855, the council responded to the company's repeated petitions by appropriating \$200 for the fire company with the provision that it change its name to the Hook and Ladder Company of St. Paul. Despite the official name change, the volunteers continued to be known as the Pioneer Hook and Ladder Company. After its modest success in securing money from the city council and its failure to raise much from public sub-

scriptions, the company did what it had to do to get needed firefighting apparatus. The volunteers went into debt on their own.

The volunteers had been meeting in the carpenter shop of R.C. Knox, the founder of St. Paul's first firefighting organization. Now, their expanded inventory of equipment made it necessary for them to find a home of their own. They sought money for a building and a fire engine. The council came up with \$325 for a fire engine and leased space in the same building that housed Knox's carpenter shop on Fourth Street near St. Peter Street. A bell was installed in the firehouse, a gift from the Reverend Neill. It was the bell that survived the fire which destroyed the first Protestant church in St. Paul in May, 1850. The company fitted out the building and rounded out its supply of equipment by once again going into debt, this time for \$600.

The council paid off the debt, but with the provision that all of the property and equipment held by the Pioneer Hook and Ladder Company become the property of the city and that the organization now be called the St. Paul Fire Department. But the new name and the new equipment didn't change one thing: volunteers continued to do the work of the department. Just as in the territorial days when R.C. Knox and his friends carried the buckets and ladders when they ran to fires, volunteers pulled the pumper as they raced through the streets to the fire.

The term for these dashes was "running with the machine" and the volunteers were known as "the men who run with the machine." When they arrived at the fire they seized the pump handles or levers and provided the power which pumped water through the hoses onto the fire.

Often the fires that called out the volunteers and their machines occurred at night after the men already had put in a full day at their trades and shops. Each year there would be an epidemic of residential fires on the first cold nights of winter. Many of the homes in St. Paul in the mid-1850s were hastily built wood structures heated by simple fireplaces or small stoves that were worked to the limit of their capacity in the cold Minnesota winter. Chimney fires were common. They occurred when resins from the burning wood fuel were



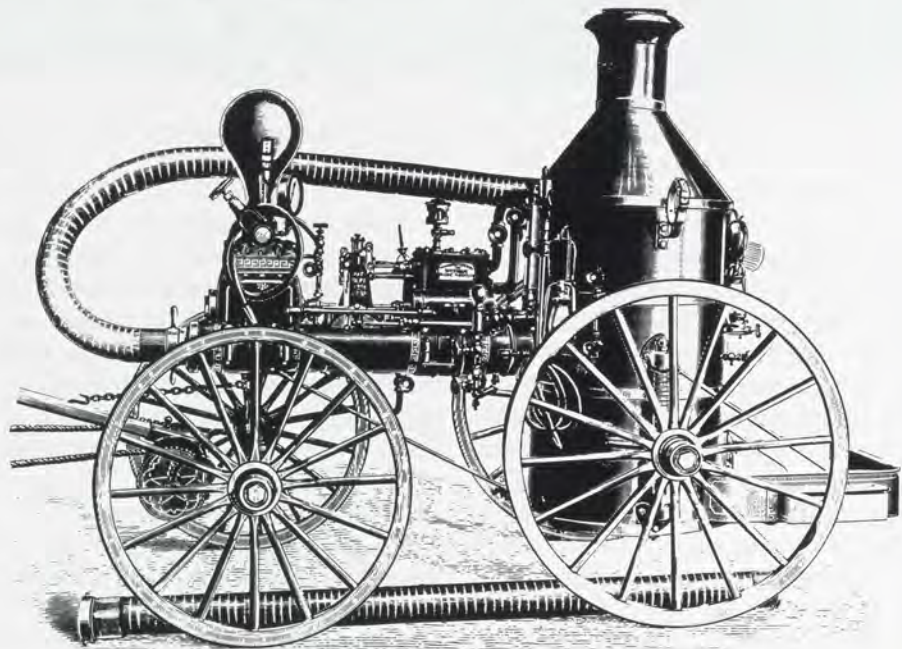
"Running with the machine." In this segment (left) of a scene from the 1840s, the men are pulling a hose cart similar to the cart used by St. Paul's volunteer firemen. The hand-drawn steamer below also could be horse-drawn and when it was, the firemen rode along on the platform at right. They would throw the big pipe into a cistern or the river and steam from the boiler would power the pump. This small steamer was built from 1890 to 1899 by the Waterous Company, a St. Paul manufacturer of fire fighting equipment since 1886.

deposited by rising smoke in the chimneys where they would ignite and throw sparks onto the dry wood shingle roofs.

Arson was involved in many of the fires in commercial buildings. In 1838 the first fire recorded in St. Paul's history, the burning of a lean-to owned by Pierre Parrant, was alleged to have been started by a disgruntled Indian customer of Parrant's bootleg whiskey dispensary located at the mouth of Fountain Cave and the Mississippi. Whether deliberately started or accidental in origin, thieves attended the fires with intentions of looting.

Two destructive fires in 1857, incendiary in origin, inspired the expansion of the St. Paul Fire Department. On the night of August 4, the entire block of buildings on the north side of Third Street between St. Peter and Market Streets went up in flames. The fire had been deliberately set in an alley between two buildings. Two weeks later a fire was intentionally started behind a saloon on Robert Street and before the fire could be brought under control a number of buildings including a number of saloons, two hotels, the Galena House and the Canada House went up in flames. The city council was criticized after the Robert Street fire for not enforcing the fire regulations or providing adequate water and equipment for the members of the fire department to do their jobs.

For St. Paul, 1857 was a boom year (at least until the Panic of 1857 struck that fall) so the city council could respond positively to the criticism by ordering two new fire



NOS. 1 AND 2 ENGINE.

engines. Just as private voluntary action preceded official action in creating the Pioneer Hook and Ladder company, the first overt response to the two fires in August was the organization of two volunteer companies in anticipation of the city council action.

On September 15, 1857, the Hope Engine Company No. 1 petitioned the city council to become part of the city fire department. The city council quickly made the Hope Company a part of the department and granted its request for quarters early in 1858. On December 8, 1857, a third company, the Minnehaha Engine

Company No. 2, was admitted to the St. Paul Fire Department. The new engines arrived in 1858 and were manned by the waiting companies. These two companies, along with the Pioneers, formed the backbone of the St. Paul Fire Department for the next twenty years.

A description of what it took to become and remain a member in good standing of a volunteer company is found in the minutes of the Minnehaha Engine Company No. 2, written in 1859 by the company's secretary, James J. Hill. The future empire builder was then a clerk in the office of a steamboat line.



St. Paul in 1857. The street running diagonally across the picture is Fourth Street heading toward Robert and Jackson, where the city began and a fire in March of 1860 destroyed thirty-four buildings, including St. Paul's first store built in 1842. Photo: Upton.

It was not enough for a citizen to volunteer to serve in a fire company. He also had to be elected, and five black balls would result in rejection. Each member paid monthly dues of 50 cents. Although some reports suggested that volunteers could be held criminally liable for not showing up at a fire, Hill's report shows that the volunteers provided their own enforcement by fining members 50 cents when they failed to appear at the scene.

A city council commitment to supply the volunteer companies with housing and more equipment was frustrated at first because it coincided in time with the Panic of 1857, and the city was unable to sell its bonds in the eastern bond market.

Eventually, Robert A. Smith succeeded in selling the bonds and two double decker suction engines with a supply of hose were acquired. (The hoses used with those rigs had an inside diameter of one-half inch.) Smith's success helped him be elected Ramsey County treasurer, a post he held for twelve years, after which he became one of St. Paul's most popular mayors.

The volunteers followed up their success in getting the engines by pressuring the council to provide permanent buildings for the engines. After a heated debate over the cost of the proposed houses, the coun-

cil voted an appropriation providing for three buildings. Two engine houses and a hook and ladder house were constructed in 1859 on leased ground on Jackson near Third and on Wabasha near Fifth and the third house was built on a piece of city-owned land at Washington and Third Streets. The companies moved into their new quarters during the winter of 1858-1859.

The Minnehahas, made up largely of prominent Lowertown business leaders, treated their house as a club and social center for its members. They held dances and social gatherings and soon the other two companies expanded their social activities. These activities first introduced women to the activities of the volunteers but soon the women were involved in more than just the social activities of the companies.

In time, each company had a steward who looked after the fire house between fires but when the company was called out he joined the other volunteers. When the steward departed, the women took over. They prepared food and coffee in anticipation of the volunteers' return. If the fire was not put out quickly, they took the food and coffee to the scene of the fire. With their presence at the scene, the women's role

was expanded and at serious fires the women provided aid to the injured and temporary homes and necessities for the victims. These activities all served to improve the social and political status of the city's fire companies.

For the 104 volunteer members of the St. Paul Fire Department, their company had become a civic responsibility, a social club and an energy outlet. A fireman looked upon his group with pride. The members made regular practice runs with their equipment to stay in shape for the race to a fire.

They also were proud of their equipment. There was much brass on the engines to be polished and that which was not brass was brightly painted and embellished with fancy designs. To complement their engines, the members of the companies fitted themselves out with uniforms at their own expense. The uniform consisted of a cap, a badge and a bright red flannel shirt with the name of the company sewn on it. The St. Paul volunteers became the first firefighters in the state to use leather firemen's hats.

They held informal contests to see which company was the fastest or which engine could throw a stream of water the highest. There were also the unscheduled

contests to see who could arrive at a fire first, a practice that was encouraged later by insurance companies who offered small cash prizes for the first company to make it to the fire.

The men, anxious to show off themselves and their engines, turned the first annual parade of the St. Paul Fire Department on September 15, 1859, into a virtual holiday. The procession was headed by a band followed by Chief Charles H. Williams, his assistants and the four fire wardens. The volunteer units were led by a visiting group, the recently formed St. Anthony (now Minneapolis) Volunteer Fire Company.

They were followed by the old Pioneers, the Hope Engine Company, the Minnehahas and the Rotary Independent Engine Company. The latter was an informal private company made up of employees of the Prince Saw Mill. Its name came from the Rotary Engine provided for the company by Colonel John S. Prince, the owner of the saw mill and later mayor of St. Paul for two terms.

James J. Hill described the parade as being "peacefully and creditably" staged. He wrote that, following the parade the Minnehaha Company No. 2 and the visiting St. Anthony crew held a contest to see which company could squirt the most imposing stream of water over the Catholic church roof. The Minnehahas won.

The mayor and city council viewed the parade from a platform constructed for the event on City Hall Square, across from Rice Park. Mayor Daniel A. Robertson was so fired up by the event that he was moved to become the second mayor to pledge his support for the building of cisterns so water would be readily available for fighting fires. Despite the pledges, the cisterns were not built.

Just as in the territorial days when it took a fire to move the city council to pay for some ladders for a bucket brigade, a major fire prompted the city fathers to cause cisterns to be built. In the early morning hours of March 16, 1860, fire broke out in a small wooden out-building on the river side of Third Street (now Kellogg Boulevard) near Jackson Street. The two rows of buildings which stood on Third Street between Jackson and Robert Streets included the city's first houses,

hotels, and stores, for it was here on ground high enough to be dry and close enough to the river to be convenient to the levee that the city started.

The fire spread quickly through these buildings which had been hastily constructed, mostly of wood and close together. That night thirty-four structures, including St. Paul's first store built in 1842 and its first frame barn built in 1847, were

"They used the political strength that comes from being part of a common cause to improve their city. Their collective pressure forced a reluctant municipal government to provide ladders and cisterns and pumps and fire houses."

destroyed and twenty families were made homeless. Only two buildings survived the conflagration, and they were of masonry construction.

Following the fire, six cisterns were built along Third Street between Jackson Street and Seven Corners and new buildings soon replaced those destroyed by the fire. The payment for the cisterns was the last large expenditure by the city for some time because the city had no money for the fire department during the Civil War.

Although members of volunteer fire companies were exempt from military duty, many of St. Paul's volunteer firefighters enlisted in the Union army. The turnover in department personnel was so great that there were three chiefs during 1863. Another perquisite enjoyed by volunteers, exemption from the poll tax, was removed by the state legislature about this time, but the city wiped out the impact of the law by refunding the dollar annual tax to each of the volunteers.

It was fortunate that during the war years when money was short and many of the volunteers were away in the army there were few serious fires. The only two fires the volunteers couldn't cope with during this period involved hotels on Third Street. On October 10, 1862, the Winslow House at Seven Corners, one of the city's first hotels, burned and during the early morning of December 20, 1863 the American

House, also at Seven Corners, was totally destroyed.

Just after the conclusion of the war, a fire in a wooden house spread to the Cosmopolitan Hotel. Although the three-story building was built of stone, it was completely destroyed. Once again a disastrous fire triggered a successful argument by the fire department for improved apparatus. Chief Bartlett Presley used the fire to justify his proposal for the purchase of a steam-driven fire engine. The department's case was reinforced on July 1, 1866, when the Jefferson school was completely destroyed by a fire set by an arsonist. The new steamer, called "City of Saint Paul," was delivered August 11, 1866.

It was a 4,000-pound rotary steam powered fire engine built in Seneca Falls, New York, by H.C. Silsby, who along with an engineer from Cincinnati accompanied the engine up the river to St. Paul on a boat. The engine alone cost \$5,200, plus \$4,500 for hose and hose carriage.

Changes in the equipment used to fight fires were changing the role of the volunteer and foreshadowed his replacement by full-time firefighters. The new steam powered engine would require an engineer to oversee its operation, and one was hired. The day when men would run through the streets pulling their fire engine had come to an end. This heavy machine, like the companies' heavy new hook and ladder trucks, required horses to move it. Horses and their daily care and feeding were becoming an important part of the fireman's life.

The Hope Engine Company was given the honor of providing a home for the engine in its new engine house at Seventh and Chestnut Streets. The Hopes also were given the responsibility for providing a new team of horses to pull the big steamer. And when the city appointed an engineer for the machine, it was over the protest of the Hopes. Whether this action or some other grievance precipitated the Hopes' dissatisfaction is not known, but on April 16, 1867, the Hope Engine company voted to disband.

About the same time that new machines were being developed to stop fires, a dangerous new product for starting fires, kerosene, was becoming popular. The first of hundreds of tragic fires attributed to

kerosene took the lives of two servant girls in the Fall of 1866. Sophia Martin and Lena Boden, who were employed at a boarding house at Third and Washington Streets, were attempting to start a fire when the three gallon can of kerosene they were using exploded.

In 1866, a short time after the explosion, Hose Company Number 1 was formed to replace the disbanded Hope Company and it took over the new steam engine and hose cart and the engine house at Seventh and Chestnut.

Arson continued to be a serious cause of fires. On January 7, 1867, the Mansion House, a popular hotel at Fifth and Wabasha Streets, was set on fire for the second time. Hose was laid to a cistern on Wabasha. Water was poured on the fire and it was almost under control when the water stopped. When a fireman went back

to check the reservoir, he found that the hose had been chopped through in several places.

In June of 1867 the shops of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad were completely destroyed, for a loss of about \$150,000. The Minnehaha Company, on foot, completed the two-mile dash to the fire ahead of the horse drawn engine but the run was in vain. When they arrived, there was no water.

Forced to stand by helplessly while fire completely destroyed buildings that might have been saved but for the lack of water, the volunteer firefighters were among the earliest and strongest advocates for the establishment of a water works.

They thought their advocacy had succeeded when the city granted a charter to the St. Paul Water Company in 1857 but nothing was done to implement it. Ten

years later Fire Chief Bartlett Presley said in his annual report that the fire fighting organization was in excellent condition but it could not fight fire without water. In 1867 there were nine cisterns in the water system. The six that had been built on Third Street in 1860 were not dependable and three that had been added later were not sufficient to serve the outlying neighborhoods of the rapidly expanding river city of 15,000.

Chief Presley concluded his appeal with a challenge to the water works company:

"May propitious circumstances cast their gladdening rays on that undertaking and hasten its consumation, and should such a glorious halo fail to awaken the St. Paul Water Works Company, I would suggest that in place of that mythical organization some tangible company take hold of it



Engine House No. 1 on St. Peter Street, as it looked in 1882 after the era of the volunteer firemen ended. Built around 1871, it housed the St. Paul Hose Company. The extension on the left was added in 1876. In 1886 the fire department moved to Main and Ninth Streets. Photo: G. A. Ladd.



A fire on Third Street near Wabasha around 1870. Always high drama, a fire draws a crowd, as it has here. These are volunteer firemen scaling this three-story building.

and do it at once. Delays are dangerous is old but true; let those who cannot perform step aside and let those in who will."

Perhaps it was Presley's eloquence that moved the company to act. By August 23, 1869, water was being piped from Lake Phalen and distributed to portions of the business and residential districts of the city. The city council arranged to have ten fire hydrants installed on each mile of street.

Arsonists struck again in 1867. The Mackubin Block and three adjoining buildings at Third and Washington Streets were destroyed. As in the Mansion House fire,

the fire fighting equipment was sabotaged, this time by driving a plug into the supply pipe of the steam engine.

Colonel John S. Prince's saw mill, which had been the source of lumber for most of the buildings in St. Paul, went up in smoke, halting much of the construction in the city. Moved to action by the fire, Colonel Prince sponsored the organization of the Trout Brook Hose Company. Acting on the request of the organizer of the company, Alderman Thomas Madden, the city council gave the company \$400 to start building a house at Seventh and Locust Streets. The following year, Hope Engine

Company No. 2 was formed.

The International Hotel fire of 1869 presented all the elements of success and frustration that a volunteer fire department could encounter. At 5 o'clock on the bitterly cold morning of February 3, a porter discovered an overturned lamp blazing in the laundry of the hotel at Seventh and Jackson Streets. Most of the guests, including a number of legislators in the city for the session, were removed to safety in a quiet and orderly manner. There was so little panic that some of them lingered to gather their belongings and had to be rescued when the danger became apparent.



The St. Paul Fire Department's No. 4 station at Tenth Street and Broadway. Although this photograph was taken around 1900, well into the era of horse-drawn equipment, the fire barn probably was one of the three built in 1871.

The nearby Minnehaha Company responded almost at once. Dense smoke was already pouring from the building when they arrived, making it impossible for them to reach the source of the fire. The city's water works were not yet completed and when the water from the cistern was exhausted, the firefighters took their steamer down to the river and pumped water through 2,000 feet of hose onto the flames.

Although the building could not be saved, the firemen worked valiantly and an immense amount of fine furniture was rescued; a grand piano was carried to the head of the grand staircase, slid down the stairs and saved. The rescued property was stored on a vacant lot while the firemen were busy confining the fire to the hotel and two adjoining buildings. While the whole town was turned out, the salvaged furniture and belongings were looted by thieves.

There were no casualties among the hotel guests but several firemen were seriously injured, Joseph Dreis most seriously when his skull was fractured by a blow from a hook. There were several versions of the hook being used by firemen at the time, all of them dangerous. In its simplest form, it was a wooden pole with a metal hook on one end like a boat hook or a pike pole and was used to extend the fireman's reach when pulling down burning walls.

Another version had rungs. It could be hooked onto a parapet, balcony or window ledge and used like a conventional ladder. Its most spectacular application was its use to scale a multi-storied building. When a firefighter reached the limit of his conventional extension ladder, he would reach up with the hook, catch a window ledge and climb up to the window, repeating the exercise at each story.

The Minnehaha Company, because of the men who made up its membership and

its performance, was becoming the most prominent unit among the volunteer companies. In the Fall of 1869, the city supplied it with a new steamer and hose and moved it into a new house at Seventh and Sibley Streets.

On May 7, 1870, the volunteer companies were again tested by a fire in a building on the river side of Third Street at the head of Market Street. The building known as the Concert Hall presented unique problems for the firefighters. Although it looked like a three story structure, it had five more stories below the Third Street level and was occupied by both business and residential tenants. Alongside the building were the ruins of a burned building. The hall caught fire below the street level from a fire smoldering in the adjacent ruin. The fire was not discovered until it broke out in flames near the Third Street level and by then the firemen could no longer get at the flames on the lower floors.

There were three casualties among the occupants of the building.

Two brothers, Charles and August Mueller, who operated a tailorshop in the building, were trapped on the river side of the top floor. The spectators saw the brothers embrace. Then August plunged eight stories to the ground below. His inert body was carried back from the burning building and his brother made the same leap. Both men were presumed dead by those who watched, but they were treated and both survived. Not so fortunate was Dora McClellan, a young woman who had just opened a dressmaking shop in the building. It was not known that she was in the building until her body was found later in the ruins.

Among the firefighters, Frank Jansen of the St. Paul Hose Company was injured and James Conway of the Hope Hose Company was badly burned. Donald McDonald, foreman of Minnehaha Company No. 3, prevented some further casualties by stopping a runaway horse which charged down Third Street into the crowd at the fire.

Three new fire houses were built in 1871: a house on St. Peter near Seventh Street for the St. Paul Hose Company which was expanded to accommodate the Pioneers when they had to move from their fire house on Courthouse Square; a house at Leech and Ramsey Streets for the Hopes

“They turned out for parades on holidays and the sound of the bell at midnight. They did all of this without hope of reward beyond the gratitude of their fellow citizens and the satisfaction that comes from a job well done.”

and another at Tenth and Broadway Streets. A new steamer hose cart was purchased for the Hope and Trout Brook Companies. Meanwhile, a fire took place in Chicago which would affect fire departments and fire codes in St. Paul and throughout the nation.

In the fall of 1871, after a summer with almost no rain, Chicago's wells and cisterns were dry. Chicago was a city of wood; most of its buildings were wood, there were 651 miles of wood sidewalks, and fifty-six miles of its streets were paved with wood block. On October 7 sixteen acres of its streets went up in flames. Several fire engines were lost in the fight against that fire.

On Sunday evening, October 8, another fire started which, before rain put it out the following Tuesday, October 10, wiped out five square miles of the city, including all of the city's business district, all of the public buildings, the municipal water works,

hotels, newspaper offices and railroad depots. Five hundred lives were lost, 150,000 people were made homeless and \$200 million in property was lost.

As a result of the Chicago fire, alarm systems and fire fighting equipment were improved. A system was developed so that when men and machines of one or more fire houses were called out, the men and equipment from the city's idle fire companies were deployed and no portion of the city was left unprotected. Variations of this procedure were adopted in cities throughout the country, including St. Paul.

The building codes were changed radically, following the great fire. When Chicago's business district was rebuilt, the building codes called for brick and stone and iron and steel materials. Variations of these codes were adopted in St. Paul and elsewhere.

Representative of the technical changes taking place was the replacement of the traditional fire bell with electric signal boxes. Fifteen of the new devices were installed in St. Paul in 1873. One writer suggested that the alarm boxes were demoralizing the volunteers and accounted for a reduction in their ranks but it is more likely that a set of rules passed by the city council restricting the firemen's activity in the fire houses irritated the volunteers. Dances in the fire houses already had been prohibited and now the houses were to be closed on Sunday. The restrictions on the social activities of the volunteer companies, combined with a policy of paying the members at the top in the organizations, caused resentment from the unpaid volunteers.

In 1874 the city of West St. Paul gave up its corporate charter and became the sixth ward of the city of St. Paul. A volunteer company known as Rescue Engine Company No. 5 was organized and made its home in the former West St. Paul town hall. The city council began taking an active part in the supervision of the fire department. Among the reforms enacted by the council was elimination of the board of fire wardens, an institution that was as old as the fire department itself. The board inspected buildings of the city and could order the destruction of any that were a threat to public safety. The move to abolish



John S. Prince's saw mill, as seen from Dayton's Bluff in 1865. Burned to the ground two years later, the saw mill had been the major source of lumber for most of the buildings in St. Paul.



Shops and round house of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, the predecessor of the Great Northern, circa 1875. The railroad's earlier shops were destroyed by a fire in June of 1867.

the board probably was inspired as much by pressure from disgruntled citizens who resented the great power vested in the board as it was from any concerns for government efficiency.

The police department was assigned the duties of the fire wardens. The police felt that it was asking too much to expect them to inspect buildings and chimneys, so the council took on the work of the wardens and then assigned it to six members of the fire department. Traditionally, the volunteers had selected their own leaders but now the chief of the department, who was selected by the council, was authorized to appoint his own subordinates.

On January 1, 1877, Chief R. O. Strong reported that there were six volunteer companies with only 182 active members. Less than ten years earlier there had been 325 active members. The Hope Company disbanded shortly after the first of the year, 1877. The city council was determined to take summary action to disband the volunteer companies and to establish a professional fire department.

The volunteers held meetings of protest and passed resolutions urging the council to maintain the volunteer department. The council responded by passing a resolution of its own saying that St. Paul had the finest fire department in the Northwest, but the growth of the city made it the duty of the council to hire men to do the work the volunteers had been doing. Whereupon the council passed an ordinance disbanding all

the companies, prohibiting meetings in the engine houses, and requiring the custodians of department property to turn it over to the city. Thus ended the era of the volunteer fire department.

For a quarter of a century, the volunteer fire companies protected the people and the property of a young, burgeoning community while that city grew in size and sophistication to the point where it required a full-time paid fire department. The men who ran with the machine were tradesmen and merchants, carpenters and empire builders. They pledged their time and their strength to keep their community safe from fire, and when their government failed to provide them with adequate equipment, they pledged their credit so they would have what they needed to do the job.

They used the political strength that comes from being part of a common cause to improve their city. Their collective pressure forced a reluctant municipal government to provide ladders and cisterns and pumpers and fire houses.

They turned out for parades on holidays and the sound of the bell at midnight. They did all of this without hope of reward beyond the gratitude of their fellow citizens and the satisfaction that comes from a job well done.

Sources

Instead of creating distractions for the reader by endlessly giving sources and en-

closing phrases in quotation marks, or interrupting the text with footnotes, I have taken the liberty of condensing, rearranging and liberally paraphrasing these source materials. Reference notes and works consulted will be available at the office of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, St. Paul, Minn.

Steve Haebig, a summer intern from Macalester College, assisted me in researching this article. Much of the description of the early history of St. Paul and of the St. Paul Fire Department is drawn from:

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This is Thomas J. Kelley's second article for Ramsey County History. His first, published in 1988, traced the history of St. Paul's American National Bank and the Bremer brothers. Retired as director of Community Services for the city of St. Paul, Kelley is a member of Ramsey County History's editorial board and a former member of the Ramsey County Historical Society's board of directors.



Before the days of boom boxes, canoeists at Phalen Park in the 1920s brought along their victrolas to listen to music. For a history of the park and of Lake Phalen, see the article beginning on page 18.

R.C.H.S.
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