

Birmingham Background

• Local History in Story and Picture •
As Compiled and Written by RUTH ANNE SILBAR

Hose Cart, Alarm System Built in 1890 for Volunteer Firemen

Water had hardly begun to gurgle through the newly laid pipes of the village water works before The Birmingham Eccentric started promoting a fire department.

The editors of The Eccentric, George H. Mitchell and Almeron Whitehead, were persistent and consistent. From the beginning of the newspaper's existence in 1878, a plentiful supply of water and an organized fire department had been advocated through the newspaper's "Home Notes."

"Our waterworks," said The Eccentric of Sept. 1880, "now George H. Mitchell (a promoter being ready and running in line for the fire department). Tom Hanna (a local shoe dealer and shoe dealer of the village) and the village organized fire department. The Birmingham Eccentric, let's organize one at once!"

The idea caught on and soon the village acted upon it. The Hanna of the (Alex) Parks and went ahead with plans for a fire alarm system and a fire hose cart to be built.

Samuel C. Mills was talked of as the best man for the job. He was a fire chief because, according to the newspaper, he had some experience in such affairs and was cool and level-headed.

THE VILLAGE board did not appoint Sam Mills as fire chief but by January 1891, the principal alarm box of the "very complete and perfected" fire alarm system was installed in Sam Mills' cooper shop on East Maple. And the new hose cart was nearly done.

During the following months, a group of men informally organized into a volunteer fire fighting group.

They were George E. Daines, owner of the National Hotel, Mel Clement (a blacksmith),

The basic pattern of human behavior doesn't change much in a thousand years; self-preservation is built in as a habit, self-propagation in the development of civic or economic controls over others.

and the second new hose cart was ignored by the village trustees.

IT WASN'T long before the fire ladders had a real workout. That was the November night in 1891 when Francis Roche's cooper shop on Ann street burned down.

The nearby homes of Mr. Hanks, Mr. Blodgett and Mrs. Sturman were threatened, but with the exception of Mrs. Sturman's barn, which was partially burned, the buildings were saved.

At the fire George E. Daines was foreman and general director. New volunteers to the fire fighting group went into action as pipe men. They were Ed Keyser, Gaylord Simpson and Tom Cooper.

VOLNEY NIXON (owner of a general store) was there, too, but not as a fireman. However, for those fire fighters on that cold November night, Volney knew just what to do and when to do it.

"The particular service rendered by Volney Nixon is not to be mentioned here," said The Eccentric, "but it was appreciated by the wet and tired lads who will always remember Volney's hospitality."

The Roche fire brought out the inadequacies of the fire fighting facilities of the village. Too much time had been lost in summoning the fire fighters, for while the fire alarm worked fine, it only signalled the engineer down at the water works to put on more pressure.

What was needed now was an alarm that every fire fighter in the village could hear.

SOON AFTER the Roche fire, a paper was circulated in Birmingham. Signers pledged donations toward the purchase of a fire bell. A suitable tower for the bell was to be erected. Hoses could be hung at one end inside the tower and the lower part of the tower was to be used for the storage of the hose carts, ladders and other fire fighting apparatus.

In February of 1892, the handsome residence of Orrin Poppleton came very near going up in smoke. His house on East Maple (just recently torn down to make way for the new Kroger store) was set so far back from the street that the hose could not reach it. "It is positively dangerous to the property of our citizens," said

The Eccentric, "to delay any longer the purchase of several hundred feet more hose and another hose cart."

THE VILLAGE board just needed a little prodding and they got it from the local newsheet.

In August of that year the city fathers secured a location for the fire tower at the rear of the building belonging to the George Blakeslee estate (now the rear of Wilson's Drug store on Woodward). The tower, as it was planned, would cost about \$250. Some of the subscriptions to the fund for buying the fire bell were as yet unpaid and all those who had subscribed were instructed to hand in their sums to L. B. Peabody whose general store was on the southwest corner of Maple and Saginaw (Woodward).

While the fire tower was being built that August, the curious boys of the village could not stay away. They got in the way of the workmen and generally proved a bother and a nuisance.

FINALLY, a "Positively No Admittance" sign appeared but it was short lived and another crudely lettered sign "Welcome" was in sight. That, too, came down.

By November 1892, the fire tower was completed, the reason for the delay being, it was said, the scarcity of McKinley tin.

However, the fire bell was now in position all ready to ring in case of fire, the electric alarm was all set to go off on the slightest touch. The keys to the fire alarm box and to the tower were both in the box with a glass front.

All that was necessary now, in case of fire, was to break the glass, turn in the alarm to the engineer at the pump house who at once put on a fire pressure, then take the hose cart and hasten away to the scene of disaster.

EVERYTHING considered, the people of Birmingham were proud of their fire tower and felt that the village had about as complete an outfit for fighting fires as many city fire departments.

Wes Faint, local painter and decorator, known throughout the vicinity as a good story teller, had a story about the fire tower. It was so good that The Eccentric

printed it, but how much (or little) of it was based on actual fact, no one now can tell.

"Wes Faint says that a U. S. Port Huron detective captured two Chinese men, Franklin who had smuggled themselves over the border."

"On their way back, they came down Maple Ave. and passed our new hose and ladder building. On sight of the picturesque edifice, both Mongolians fell to their knees and expressed to the officer that they wanted to stay here 'till time-a'—first Joss house that they had seen since leaving China."

THE VILLAGE at this time did not have a village hall. Meetings of the village board usually were held in one of the rooms of the old National Hotel. After the tower was completed and painted, The Eccentric had another suggestion, but one which never was followed.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea to finish off a room on the first floor of stairs in the fire tower, for a council chamber and village clerk's office where the village archives can be kept. There is plenty of room for such an office."

The fire ladders all distinguished themselves at the first fire in the village after the completion of the fire tower. It was Mott Smith's brick dwelling on Middle street (now Hamilton) whose home was saved in December 1892 by the new volunteer fire department and the waterworks' system.

AS THE months went on, however, it was realized that the tower was everybody's business was nobody's business. When a fire occurred in the village everybody rushed to it.

Yet there was no one in the crowd who felt authorized to give orders or felt sure that they would be obeyed. Confusion reigned.

Said The Eccentric in May, 1894: "Half a dozen men will run to do the same thing at the same time and the result is that they make a mess of it or if they do not, it is done in such a manner

that one man could do the same thing in half the time, if he only knew how and was not bothered by others."

A NEW organization for fighting fires was formed at the fire tower of G. E. Daines in May, 1894. Lyman B. Peabody was called upon to chair the meeting and Dr. D. M. Johnston (dentist) briefly stated the object of the gathering.

Almeron Whitehead was elected secretary of the meeting and the name of the organization, "Star Hose Co. No. 1" was decided upon. Whitehead, Daines and Johnston were appointed a committee to draft a suitable constitution and by-laws for the company and the following men were enrolled as members: A. Whitehead, D. M. Johnston, J. F. Wooster, E. A. O'Neal, John Hanna, S. W. Harbison, V. Nixon, S. C. Mills, T. A. Ward, W. E. McClellan, A. R. Parks, H. C. Wilson, George E. Daines, George H. Mitchell and Mel Clement.

AT A MEETING held the following week to approve the constitution drawn up by the committee, M. G. Jones, L. B. Peabody, Arthur Blakeslee, Charles Schlaack, William Nathan Fall and Webster Bray were added to the list of members at their request.

That week on Saturday night, the Ladies Library Association put on a play "Down by the Sea" for the benefit of the new firemen.

Parm H. Sherman was the director and had full charge.

D. M. Johnston made arrangements to have the play repeated the following Monday evening for the benefit of the new firemen's Star Hose Co. No. 1.

The entertainment was given and when it was considered that the play had been given once before and only two days notice was allowed, the receipts (which were \$34) was considered phenomenal.

THANKS of the Star Hose Co. No. 1 were unanimously and enthusiastically tendered to Mrs. Susan Sherman, Harry Benedict and members of the dramatic company for their generous efforts which proved so successful for the benefit of the fire ladders.

The money was used to buy rubber coats and hats for the active members of the fire fighting company.

The Eccentric in May, 1894 reported: "We now look for efficient work by a well organized company and a gradual development by the boys through persistent practice."

"We earnestly bespeak for the fire ladders, the hearty cooperation and sincere endorsement and assistance of all the citizens of the village. We never know when our own property may be endangered.

"THE FIREMEN are always ready to devote their time and risk their lives in the voluntary effort to save life and property."

Such was the development and growth of the volunteer fire department in the days when Birmingham was a small village, numbering a little more than 900 inhabitants.

THE FIREMEN are always ready to devote their time and risk their lives in the voluntary effort to save life and property."

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