

## **Fire Department Marks Centennial**

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From buckets to hoses, hand pumpers to machine water pumps, the Sun Prairie Volunteer Fire Department is 100 years old.

The organization began in April of 1891, amidst the discussion by the Sun Prairie Village Board that the village needed a fire department to protect the businesses and residences within the village. The department's formation was brought on by the fire at the Nicholas Barth residence, one of the oldest buildings in the village in early February 1891.

“A glance sufficed to show the impossibility of saving the burning structures and the efforts of the crowd which soon assembled, were directed to prevent the fire from spreading to John Hecker's house and harness shop to the north.

“The fire is supposed to have originated in the ice house but from what cause is a profound mystery,” according to a newspaper account taken from the archives of *The Star* and *The Countryman* on Feb. 12, 1891.

The first incarnation of the Sun Prairie Volunteer Fire Department was the Sun Prairie Hook and Ladder Company, which was organized in April, 1891, with 22 men. The company was operated by foremen and assistant foremen, unlike its current organization of presidents and officers.

“Saturday evening, March 4, 1891, special meeting of the (village) board. Resolved, by the president and trustees of the Village of Sun Prairie, that the board purchase a set of hooks, ladders, and trucks complete with twenty-five fire buckets, at a cost not to exceed \$225, free on board (railroad) cars in Chicago. (Adopted). 1890 Census, 704 Population,” the board resolution read.

On March 26, the board again discussed the fire department. "A meeting will be held at the village hall next Tuesday evening for the purpose of organizing a fire company. It is hoped that all of the available timber embodied in the young men of the village will be present so that the complete organization of the company may be affected.

"A hook and ladder truck with full equipment has been ordered by the village board which will soon be here. Let it be received by a fully organized company on its arrival," the recorder wrote. On April 16, the town of Bristol voted to join with Sun Prairie, and the town of Burke for the purchase of a new 300 gallon water tanker for the fire protection district.

T.P. Cross was elected foreman and E. Baker as first assistant foreman of the hook and ladder company. George Marvin was named second assistant foreman, and J.B. Rood was elected financial secretary. F.C. Gibbons was the recording secretary, and F.F. Dott was the treasurer.

On April 27, the village board met again, this time to discuss the payment for the fire truck. "The bill of E.B. Preston and Company of Chicago for \$225 for fire apparatus, which was laid over from the former meeting was taken up, discussed, allowed and the clerk instructed to draw an order for the amount."

The department made its first run on May 4, as recorded by an unknown observer. "The Hook and Ladder Company made its initial run this evening. The trial was for the purpose of seeing how quickly they could make the run from the Bird Barn on Center Street, where the apparatus is at present stored, to the Exchange Hotel barn, a distance of about 60 rods (330 yards or 990 feet).

The boys made the run, had their ladders up and water on the roof in exactly two minutes.”

The department’s first regular meeting took place on May 8, 1891 in the village hall on King Street. Until November, 1892, the only equipment the department used was a hook and ladder truck. Bucket brigades that included women were used to fight fires.

From the May 28, 1891 files of *The Star* and *The Countryman*, the village board voted to move the village hall four feet south to allow for the construction of an addition to the north side to store trucks and other equipment of the hook and ladder company. At that time, the location of city hall was on King St; the later city hall was built on the northeast corner of Main and Bristol Streets in 1895.

In November of 1891, the first equipment including a hook and ladder as well as a truck with buckets, was purchased by the village of Sun Prairie. The equipment might have been stored in the old jail on King Street.

The department reorganized in 1892 with Ephram Baker serving as the company's first chief. The charter members were listed as J.F. Dott, E.E. Beers, C.A. Lewis, W.W. Hayden, W.N. Mosel, J.H. Hayden, J.B. Rood, Dr. T.P. Crosse, George Reidner, Adam Garlach, and Ephram Baker.

The department used three cisterns (hydrants) on the corner of Main and Market, Bristol and Main, and Jones and Main Streets.

The first company, like its present day counterpart, enjoyed an unusual relationship with the fire department: it was not governed by the village. The village government, however, directly controlled the use of equipment purchased for firefighting purposes. The department's alarm bell was purchased in 1892. A rope connected to the bell and down the side of city hall. Anyone spotting a fire would race to the city hall and ring the alarm bell.

A village ordinance officially organized the Hook and Ladder Company in February of 1893. The ordinance specified that all city firefighting equipment would be turned over to the Hook and Ladder Company, as well as the Engine Company. Each of the two companies would be composed of no less than 122 "able bodied" men, ranging from 18-50 years of age. The horses and equipment from the company were probably kept at the Bird Livery Stable on Center Street, because the fire department borrowed their horses as needed, or pulled the wagons by hand.

At the time the department was formed by ordinance in 1893, C.A. Lewis was appointed fire chief by the village council. B.B. Cobb was appointed assistant chief by the council in the same month.

The early department proved to be a driving force in city politics. In only its fourth year (1895), the department organized a petition to build a new city hall. The building included in the basement a five hundred gallon cistern as a water source for use by the department. The department's equipment was stored in the city hall after 1895.

The department's first chemical fire engine was purchased in 1896. In the same year, the department prepared to sharpen its skills in a competition with other departments, as a letter by an unknown recording secretary indicates:

“At a meeting of the village board Monday evening, W.W. Hayden was appointed chief of the Sun Prairie Fire Department and Dr. T.P. Crosse assistant chief. The fire company is now finely equipped, and expect to take part in the state fireman's tournament to be held in Waterloo in the month of June. A hook and ladder team will soon go into training for the event. The entire company, together with the apparatus, were photographed standing in front of city hall Tuesday afternoon. The members were attired in their uniforms and presented a fine appearance.”

The company moved into the 20th century. On Dec. 9, 1908, the village entered into a contract with Peter Pirsch & Company for the purpose of buying a model number 6 hose cart and the Pirsch fireman's extension wall and roof ladder.

The total cost of the equipment was \$262, and was probably the first fire equipment purchased by the department after the chemical fire engine.

Horses (or sometimes firefighters) pulled the department's fire equipment until 1927. Hand water pumps shot the water through the hoses.

The first shift to modernized technology (besides installing the electric siren in the mid-1920s) for the department came in 1927, when the department purchased its first motorized truck from

the Stoughton Wagon Company for \$5,000. But, by 1936, Chief Slim Gaumitz reported that the truck was in such poor condition that it could no longer be used safely outside the city.

In 1930, a farmer's fire protection committee was organized to raise enough money to purchase a motor-driven, chemical engine and pumpers which were to offer service to the farmers, as well as to village residents. Approximately 300 farmers contributed between \$5 and \$50, with non-contributors billed for each call.

The present Sun Prairie Volunteer Fire Department was incorporated in 1955, one year before the village incorporated as a city. In 1956, the fire department moved to the municipal building at 124 Columbus Street. Sun Prairie's Police and Fire Commission was organized on Feb. 27, 1963, with then mayor A.J. Thomas as the presiding officer.

In 1964, the department investigated the Chase Lumber fire, one of the most spectacular fires in Sun Prairie history, according to veteran firefighters.

Flames could be seen as far away as 20 miles, according to a report published in the Jan. 9, 1964

edition of *The Star-Countryman*.

The blaze caused \$150,000 damage at the Chase Lumber Company, located at that time in downtown Sun Prairie. Sun Prairie Fire Chief Milton Tester said the blaze threatened the entire downtown area. The Chase fire was made even more spectacular due to the fact that a robbery occurred at the Sun Prairie Sav-U store during the fire. The robbery netted the armed gunman \$2,811.07.

The department moved in 1970, after outgrowing the Municipal Building, when it moved into its current headquarters on N. Bristol St.

Most recent major fires included the Nelson Jewelry store fire in 1966; the Schweiger Drug store fire, the Gawne Ford Agency, O'Grady's, and Moldrem furniture fires, all of which occurred in 1975.

The 1970's and early 1980s witnessed Paul Blaschka, Gene Hensen, and now Arnie Kleven assume the duties as chief to supervise the growth of the department to the present day.