

P3 / PRESIDENT'S LETTER

After fires, tragic as they may be, we have rebirth and rejuvenation. Looking forward to more of that for the SLPHS.

P4-5 / PHOTO SPREAD

Revisit the Fire Department's transition to the "modern" era in 1938.

P8 / DISPATCH LOOK-BACK

Ever wonder what happened to discarded Christmas trees in the 1950s?



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PARK HISTORY TODAY

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Volume 21.2 / Summer 2022

Editor's Note: I moved with my family to the Park thirty-six summers ago, and we were almost immediately introduced to the St. Louis Park Fire Department. I was outside cooking some unusually fatty ribs on my new Weber when a concerned neighbor decided that the thick smoke coming from my backyard looked dangerous and phoned it in.

A pumper truck arrived out front and an appropriate contingent of firefighting personnel followed the smoke to my backyard. We quickly determined that all was well, the ribs were looking magnificent, and the firefighters returned to the station.

Our city institutions of public safety are easy to take for granted but have been protecting life and property here since the Park became a village in 1886. We review the storied history of the St. Louis Park Fire Department in this issue, as usual, relying on detailed histories compiled by Jeanne Andersen on our website and other files in our collections.



IN MEMORIAM / HONOR ROLE

The St. Louis Park Historical Society has received gifts from the following persons, in memory of, or in honor of, loved ones:

- From **Ms. Jenny Hanson**, Chicago, IL, IN HONOR OF her uncle, **James Robbins** (Trustee of the SLPHS), on 6 December 2021.
- From **Ms. Shelley Hendrickson** IN MEMORY OF **David M. Litsey**, distinguished educator of English and writing at St. Louis Park High School, on 6 April 2022.

FIGHTING FIRES IN THE PARK

In 1866, two decades before the Park became an official village, the Pratt School building, at the corner of Excelsior Road and Wooddale Ave. (then, the Schoolhouse Road) burned down. As the only "community" building in the area since its construction in 1859, the school was immediately rebuilt.

In 1891, T.B. Walker's industrial vision began to form when Monitor Drill Company, with 100 workers moved from Horicon, Wisconsin, built a new plant in the Village along with the Jarless Spring Carriage Company and the Malleable Iron Company. Among the hundred employees transferred from Wisconsin was Joseph S. Williams, who organized the first village bucket brigade in 1892. Williams served as fire chief for 52 years; he and his four sons eventually would accrue 163 total years of service fighting fires in St. Louis Park.

By 1892, Walker had connected the Village to Minneapolis via his new streetcar line, extended southwest from Minnetonka Boulevard along newly-platted Lake Street to serve his planned town center of industry and commerce.

At the turn of the 19th century, multiple Walker Houses burned; five in 1893 and seven in 1900. They had been built on 25-foot-wide lots platted by T.B. Walker in 1890 and the narrow houses were only six feet apart. In 1893, the young village formed its first all-volunteer bucket brigade, and in 1901 the Village organized its first official fire department, with twenty members. Population of the Village in 1900 was 1,325 people.

The St. Louis Park Bucket Brigade had 20 members, including George Gibson, Charles Hamilton, Joe Williams, John Williams, Charles "Butch" Miller, Louis Brown, George Wilbur and Joe Fisher. Meetings were held in the Walker Building, the "Brick Block" of then downtown St. Louis Park. The first piece of equipment purchased was a horse-drawn vehicle with two 80-gallon tanks.

In 1905, the Village's first major commercial fire destroyed the Minnesota Sugar Beet Company complex, originally the Esterly Company. The three-story, brick, multiple-building complex stood about where the south end of Oak Hill Park sits on Louisiana Avenue.

In 1910, the Commander-Larrabee Grain Elevators, (on the M&SL tracks at the southwest corner of future Highways 100 and 700, burned and were replaced by new, cylindrical concrete storage bins.

In 1912, the Great Northern Hotel, (before and after-fire photos below), just up the hill to the east of the old Sugar Beet complex, was destroyed by fire. Although its fifty rooms were fully occupied, there was no loss of life.

In 1917, a huge fire hit the Walker Building. It started at the meat market of A.M. Shields, then the center of Park's business section. It destroyed the east one-third of the two-story brick building, proving the efficacy of the building's 32-inch-thick brick interior fire walls. The blaze was discovered by Dan Saara, who ran a rooming house on the second floor of the Walker Building that housed 100 men who worked a couple of blocks away at the Monitor Drill. Other businesses in the building were Doc Brown's Barber Shop, the Athens Restaurant, and M. Dworsky & Son, general merchandise. The small moving picture house operated by Jake Werner and Eric Liljenfors did not reopen after the fire.

In 1918, the Village purchased a former saloon from the Minneapolis Brewing Company for \$2,000. The building, at 36th Street between Brunswick and Dakota, across the street from Bandstand Park (now Jorvig Park) became the

new fire barn. It was used until 1938. Firemen were issued fisherman-style raincoats and hats, which were not warm enough for the winters. Paid members were given \$3 per fire, payable at the end of the year. Joe Williams blew a steam whistle at the Monitor Drill to call volunteers to the fire; the number of blasts told them which section of town the fire was in. The sound of the whistle carried 10-15 miles.

In 1921, the Pockrandt Lumber Company was destroyed by a fire that lit up the skies for miles around and swept over 25 city blocks according to Minneapolis Morning Tribune reports. Half a million board feet of lumber and 720 tons of coal were consumed. Lack of water pressure hindered the fire department, which could make no progress against the fire's intensity, although a M&SL engine was able to attach and rescue three box cars full of lumber.

Also in 1921, 40,000 gallons of oil exploded at the Republic Creosoting Company buildings which had replaced the Sugar Beet complex causing damage was estimated at \$25,000. A new process being used to separate the oil for creosoting work was blamed as the probable cause. The blast tore the roof from the building... A fourth vat adjoining the three that exploded was saved." A Minneapolis engine company was called to assist in fighting the fire. The next year, half of the condensory plant was destroyed on the site. Four Minneapolis fire companies battled desperately for several hours before the oil-fed blaze was subdued. Five huge tanks containing 1,000,000 gallons of creosoting oil were menaced by the fire." The five tanks and the main building of the company were saved when a tunnel between the tanks was blocked.

In 1930, the advent of the Village's new water system, installed with help from the federal Works Progress Administration, made it possible for the Park to buy a new red and yellow pumper truck named "Molly" from American LaFrance for \$13,500. The truck had six cylinders, triple ignition, an 855 cubic engine, and could pump 1,000 gallons of water per minute; it was the first quad pumper in the area. Molly has been restored and is on display at Fire Station Number 1 on Wooddale Avenue.

On February 14, 1930, the vacant Monitor Drill Company buildings, owned by Minneapolis Moline after its operations were moved to Hopkins, burned down under what some say were suspicious circumstances. A paid fire department was established in 1930, with Joe S. Williams appointed Chief and Axel Carlstrom Assistant Chief.

In the hot summer of 1936, the entire state seemed to be afire. The great North Side Peat Swamp Fire was recalled by Park native John Yngve in a first-hand account:

The times were tough. The summers were dry. The hot

LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT

After every fire is a period of rejuvenation. In this issue, Bill explores the various notable fires in the city over the years along with the crews that battled them. While it is sad to think about all the historic buildings that were lost due to fire – such as the Great Northern Hotel that housed workers in the original downtown area, or the Hamilton Building that was the imposing sibling across the street from the Walker Building and helped form a true Main Street. We should also remember that in many cases we were able to rebuild and find new, different and sometimes better uses for those sites.

For example, Lumber Stores, Inc., which had its name emblazoned on the historic Peavy Grain Elevator alongside Highway 100, saw its lumber yard burn down in 1962. But that allowed the young Nordic Ware company to expand its growing business – and to eventually put its own name on that same tower.

We are all experiencing a sort of rejuvenation coming out of the COVID era. Our organization was recently at Parktacular, our city's summer celebration, which has happened under various names dating back to the early 1900s. The event was skipped in 2020, and was a limited 1-day small event in 2021. But this year, the organization did a great job bringing back the full summer experience. While there were fewer vendors than in years past, I am confident they will grow and evolve to create a great community event for many more years to come.

The Historical Society is also looking forward to a period of rejuvenation. After two years of relative quiet, we have a lot of new things in the works. We just completed a talk with the SLP Ambassadors as a kickoff to their historic themed scavenger hunt, which is back after a two-year break. There is signage in the works for our new rail track and railway cornerstone displays at the Depot. We are partnering with Brookside neighborhood on a walking tour. And there are at least two speaking engagements with local organizations where we have a chance to share the history of our great city.

So, we are back to regular programming. We welcome your ideas or stories to help with this period of rejuvenation – or even better, your involvement in any of our activities.

With Park pride,

Ted



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Founded in 1971, the St. Louis Park Historical Society collects, preserves and shares the history of St. Louis Park. The *ReEcho: Park History Today* is an official publication of the Society.

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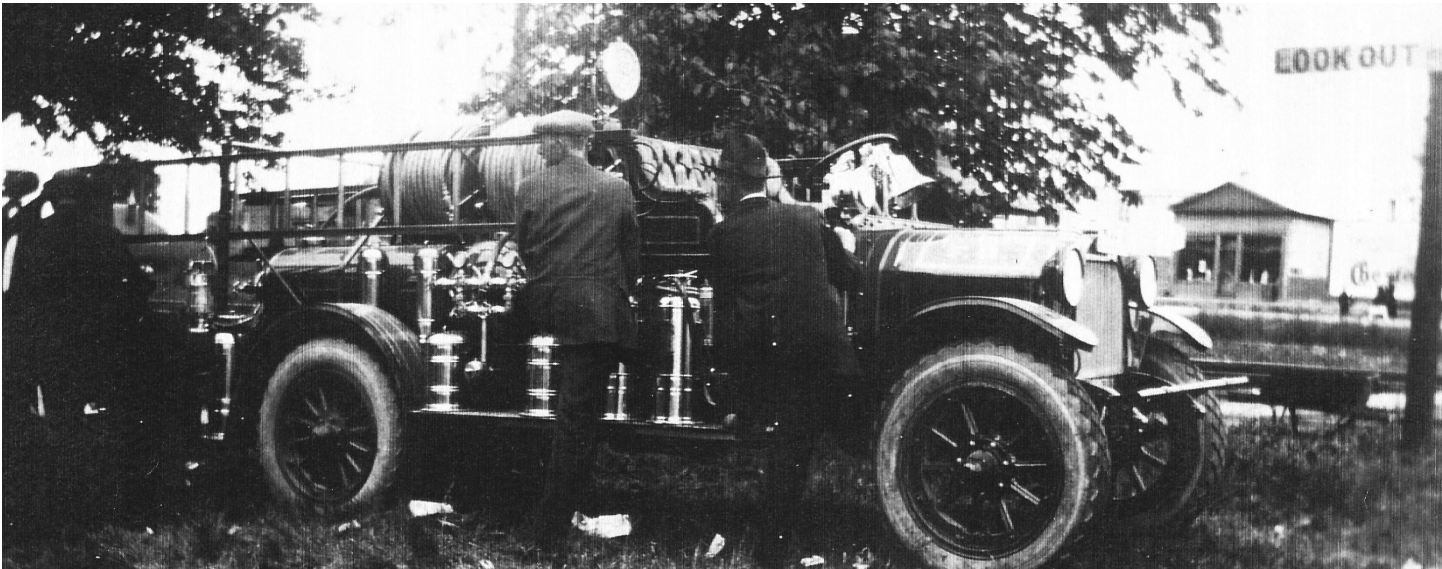
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The aerial photo above from 1940 spots the Village Hall, the new Fire Barn, and the site of the original Monitor plant and steam whistle, which burned down in 1929. The newly-purchased fire engine, "Molly," and the Village Hall/Fire Barn of 1938 are shown below.



The Monitor Drill Company arrived in the Park in 1892, (just north of the M&SL tracks and just east of present-day Louisiana Avenue), and became the Village's largest employer until 1929. The company brought the fire-fighting Williams family along with it. The Monitor fire whistle, (above, left), is on display at Fire Station #1 on Wooddale Avenue, with "Molly" the village's first real fire engine.

St. Louis Park Historical Society founder Marie Hartmann remembered the whistle blasts this way: 1) Between Milwaukee Road/M&SL tracks and Minnetonka Blvd; 2) Between the tracks south to Excelsior Blvd; 3) North of Great Northern tracks; 4) Fern Hill, Zarthan to Louisiana, Great Northern tracks to M&SL; 5) Brookside: Between Excelsior Blvd. and 44th Street; 6) Oak Hill, Louisiana to Hopkins limits.



dry summers reached a high in 1936 with five consecutive days in July of over 100 degrees. It was so dry. The news was of the droughts, the farm collapse, and the migrations from the dust bowls, the dust storms, and the hard times.

It was so hot, much the same as this year, but worse. People slept outside in the parks. Each day the radio and newspapers brought forth stories of how bad it was and how it might improve, but each day it got hotter and hotter and dryer and dryer and the rains did not come. The farms dried up; the markets dried up; the dust bowl was pictured in the papers; eggs were pictured frying on the pavement in Minneapolis, and no relief came.

Suddenly, south of Cedar Lake Road, southeast of Eliot School, a grass fire started. The wind blew, the fire spread, moving northerly across the open fields north of Cedar Lake Road and then spread to the 40 acres of peat swamp that was dry, dry. The fire truck arrived with its small tanks of water, and people came with buckets and gunny sacks which they soaked to slap out the grass fire, but it could not easily be stopped, and so the efforts were to stop the fire from reaching home, saving the homes which were at risk.

The fire swept north, sped by winds from the southwest across the swamp, leaving the dry peat burning and then across Superior Blvd. on to the Lawrence M. Larson farm at Cedar Lake Road and Texas. Then the gun club, and then easterly on the north side of the Blvd., where it was finally stopped by the railroad tracks, leaving behind two huge 40 acre peat fires burning on both sides of Superior Blvd., with no hope of extinguishing it. It burned for hours, days, months, and finally into the next year, burning even through the winter below the snow, finally stopping, leaving behind fine peat ash which filled the homes with dust and leaving a smell which took years to leave.

It was an adventure for a boy to help beat out the flames and to bring water to replenish the water used to beat out the flames as they approached the houses, and to carry water to the workers who were digging ditches, trenches to fill with sand because the peat was burning under the road and under the railroad tracks. We would look out of Grandma's home at night and see it surrounded by 40 acres of red coals, read red coals of peat burning on all sides except the small island where sat the home.

In 1956, the clubhouse of the Westwood Hills Golf Course suffered a devastating fire. Every Park firefighter used every piece of equipment to fight the fire, while firefighters from Hopkins manned the station in case of other fires. Four pumper trucks brought water, but when that was used up, the nearest hydrant was almost a mile away. The land that was once the golf course was later developed into houses and the Westwood Nature Center.

On Christmas day 1958, the Hamilton Building, which, along with the Walker Building across the street, was intended to be the core of "downtown" St. Louis Park, was gutted by fire. Lars Johnson led the firefighting effort, which required the assistance of the Golden Valley, Hopkins, and Edina Fire Departments. First floor tenants were Betty's Cafeteria and the Storybook Photography Studio; photographic chemicals were said to have fed the flames. Hundreds of spectators on nearby Highway 7 crowded the area despite the bitterly cold weather. The cause of the fire was never conclusively determined.

In 1962 a fire at Lumber Stores, Inc. on Highway 7 required five trucks from the Park, two from Edina, and two from Hopkins to extinguish. It resulted in \$100,000 in damage. The yard was at the site of the current Nordic Ware plant.

In 1964, Kurt "Cord" Scheibe, a Park firefighter since 1922, died of a heart attack at age 61 while fighting a small fire in the "bag room" at the National Lead Company. Scheibe was born in 1903 in Germany and had come to the Park with his parents in 1907. He lived at 5825 Goodrich Avenue.

On October 8, 1971, the burning of the Pizza House, (now under the footprint of Excelsior & Grand Phase I), became the most tragic in Park history. Firefighters Arnold "Arnie" Johnson of 4124 Brookside, a professional, and Robert "Bob" McElmurry, a volunteer who was the son-in-law of Pete Williams, perished in the blaze. Johnson and McElmurry entered the building when the fire appeared to be under control, but it was smoldering between the ceiling and the roof. The ceiling collapsed on them, and, after an unsuccessful rescue attempt the roof itself caved in on them.

In 1973, the locally beloved Red Owl store in Miracle Mile, burned down and was not rebuilt.

In 1977, in perhaps the most spectacular fire in Park history, the Belco/Burdick Grain Elevators at 31st and Glenhurst exploded and burned in a huge inferno. Chief Luke Stemmer recalled "The fire was believed to have started as a result of a series of explosions, each one bigger than the one that preceded it, with the last on blowing the roof off of Belco #1's head house." Flames shot 100 feet in the air, the smoke was visible 30 miles away, and thousands of spectators converged on the site.



The fire raged for hours; some fire fighters worked up to 26 hours in a row. Backup crews came from over a dozen neighboring jurisdictions, including Minneapolis, St. Paul, Minnetonka, Hopkins, Golden Valley, Richfield, Eden Prairie, West Champlin, Bloomington, Edina, Brooklyn Park, Brooklyn Center, Shakopee, and Chaska.

The insurance company managed to save 70-90 percent of the grain for use as feed. In July, the remaining grain had begun to ferment, causing neighborhood complaints. One resident said that “the stench of wet, burnt Cheerios lasted until 1979.” The site was recycled in 1999 for the three-block long Inglewood Trails apartment complex.

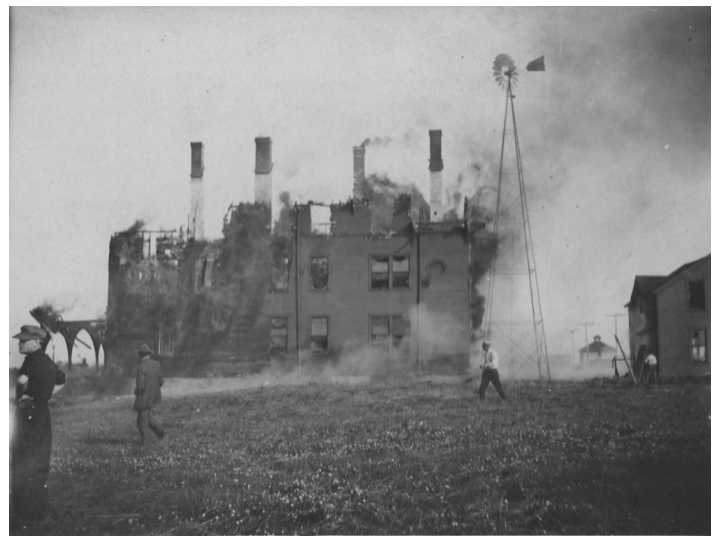
In 2013, when current Fire Chief, Steve Koering, arrived on the scene, he dove into Department history to get up to speed on his new job, tracing the origins of the Village’s fire-fighting efforts from informal volunteers to a more formal, Village-organized force, and back.

He concluded that the St. Louis Park Fire Department would be a century old in 2015, having been formally constituted by the State Fire Marshall in 1915, after relying on the City of Minneapolis for ineffective service for several years.

Koering recalls with some awe the long Williams family history of service in volunteer capacity, while understanding that in the 21st Century, the volunteer model could no longer meet community needs, requiring costly retraining of replacements for retiring volunteers every 5-7 years. With City Manager Tom Harmening, he directed the Department’s reorganization from partly volunteer setup most recently dating from 1996 to an all-professional enterprise. It was completed in 2020, and, as Koering notes, “did not come easy.”

Chief Koering also noted the evolving role of his department in public health risk reduction and prevention, and the increasing number of women in service. And, in this time of Covid, he noted the recent loss of two SLP firefighters to premature retirement due to Covid-induced disability.

Finally, Koering reminded us to visit the Minnesota Fallen Firefighters Memorial on the Capitol grounds in St. Paul where the three SLP firefighters who died in the line of duty – Kurt Scheibe, Bob McElmurry, and Arnie Johnson – are recognized.



Fires damaged or destroyed several of T.B. Walker’s early efforts at commercial and industrial development in the Park, including the Great Northern Hotel in 1912, (top and center), and the east third of the Walker Building (above, 1917).





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PARK HISTORY TODAY

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DISPATCH LOOKBACK

Back in the early 1950s, before our village was an actual city and before it collected yard waste for composting, the disposal of Christmas trees after their short season was a problem to be solved. For a few years, the solution became an occasion for community-building and fiery celebration. In the January 3, 1951 Dispatch, residents were instructed to deliver their used trees to Minikahda Vista Park, where a giant tree bonfire provided free hand-warming and conviviality, while neighbors could be entertained by a local Ice Queen.

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WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 3, 1951

Tree Burning Set For Jan. 6

TO BE FEATURED PERFORMER *Huge Blaze Saturday Night To Start Promptly At 8 P.M.*



All persons who have Christmas trees are requested to leave them at Minnekada Vista Park, 39th and Inglewood not later than the afternoon of January 5th. To make this event a real "bang up" job, it is suggested that all residents bring their old Christmas trees to that address. The more trees the bigger the blaze. It is one of the most simple and easiest ways to dispose of your old Christmas tree, without fuss or bother.

The Park's own Carol Banbury will exhibit her form of figure skating that has won her fame in the annual Figure Skating Club events held yearly in the Minneapolis arena. Along with her are Joan and Kay Nicholson; Shirley Matteson; Louise Ann Sundin; Manette Regnier; Gretchen Gross; Barbara Barrette; Pat Deline; Marilyn Nielsen; Dale Banbury and Kenney Moor.