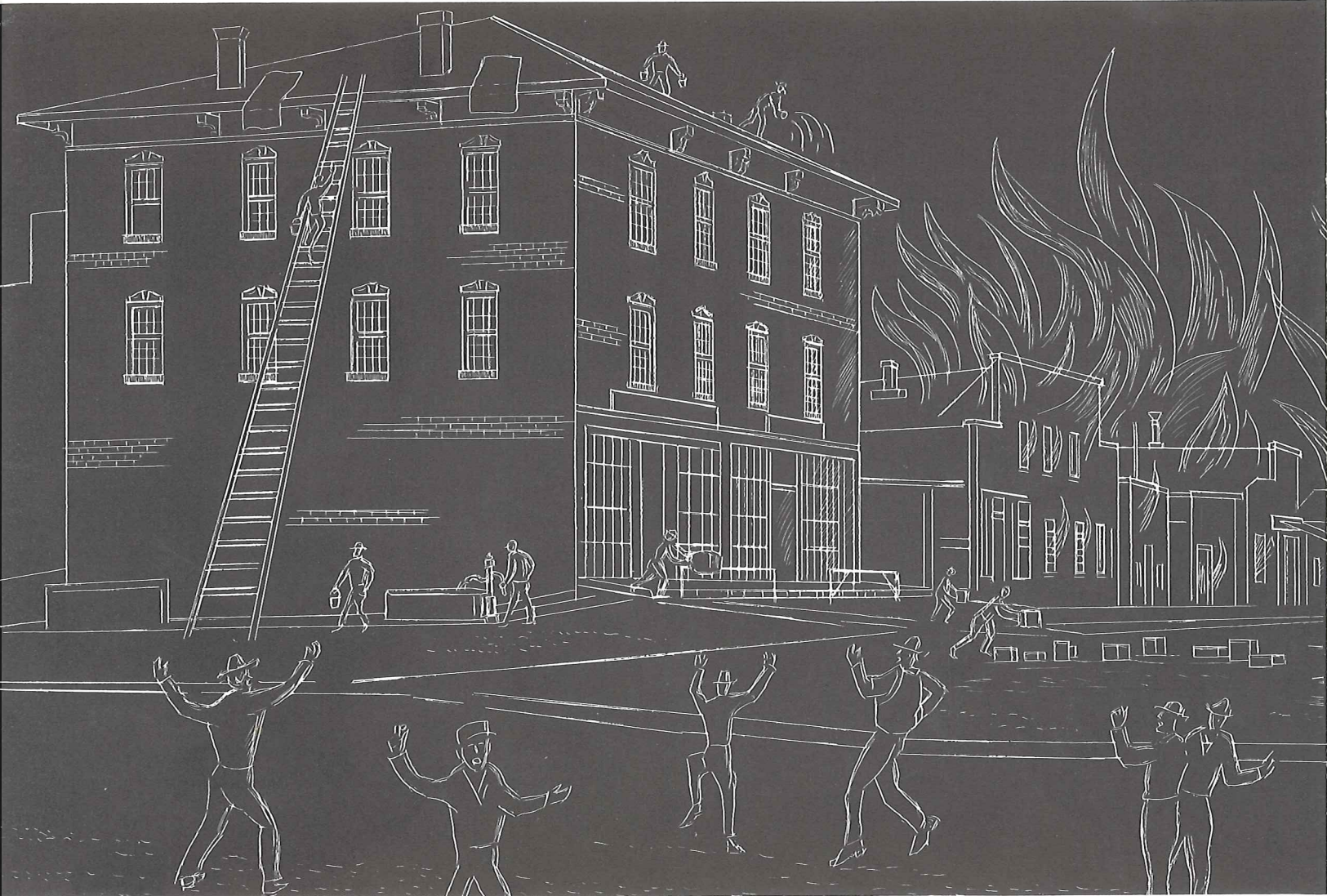


# Over the Years

A Publication of the Dakota County Historical Society

Volume 32, Number 2, November 1992



## Flames Over Farmington

1873-1928

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**Over the Years** -Published twice a year, this feature publication focuses in depth on a particular historical topic.

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\*Invitations to exhibit openings, programs, tours and special events.

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# Over the Years

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Historical Society  
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The Staff and Board of Directors of the Dakota County Historical Society thank David Schreier for allowing us to publish "Flames Over Farmington." His interest in the 120-year history of firefighting in his hometown led us to create a new exhibit at the Museum entitled "Fire and Flames," which opened in October 1992, and which will remain on exhibit until the summer of 1993.

We also thank Rebecca Snyder, Research Librarian at the Museum, who edited the original manuscript and assisted with the design and layout of the publication.

The publication of *Over the Years* is made possible by the generous support of our members through their annual investment in the Dakota County Historical Society.

On the cover: Winona artist Jim Heinlen created this rendition of Farmington's Great Fire of 1879. The building in the center is the Griebie Building which extinguished the fire when it collapsed.



# Flames over Farmington

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by David Schreier

*"If Prometheus was worthy of the wrath of  
heaven for kindling the first fire  
upon the earth, how ought all the gods to  
honor the men who make it their  
professional business to put it out?"*

*John Godfrey Saxe  
American journalist, poet, and lecturer, ca. 1850*

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## Preface

**T**his publication, *Flames Over Farmington*, a history of a volunteer fire department, was an accident.

In 1990 David Schreier, a member and former trustee of the Dakota County Historical Society, was researching the membership of the Canby Post No. 47 of the Grand Army of the Republic in Farmington. Using the museum's microfilmed newspapers of the 19th century, he was able to follow the lives of Civil War veterans in southern Dakota County in the 1880s and 1890s.

During his research, the author came across a number of stories about fires. He was surprised to learn that many of Farmington's firefighters at that time were the same Civil War veterans he was researching.

Being familiar with Farmington's history, Mr. Schreier located the newspaper article describing the "Great Fire of 1879." He read an account rich with detail and drama, one which was very different from the story found in Reverend Neill's *History of Dakota County*. He then set out to find the date of the department's first establishment. After searching through issues of the *Farmington Press* he found the date---January 11, 1873.

In the spring of 1991, he met with Farmington's Fire Chief, Ken Kuchera, who graciously copied the minutes of the department's meetings dating back to 1897, nearly 400 pages of documentation.

*Flames over Farmington* contains a fraction of the newspaper articles and meeting minutes researched by Mr. Schreier. It is the history of the men who made it their business to protect the lives and property of Farmington from 1873 to 1928---Farmington's Volunteer Fire Department's first 55 years.

To paraphrase John Godfrey Saxe: If not the gods, how ought we to honor these men? This brief history is a beginning.



"Facing the Enemy" by Currier and Ives, 1858. Courtesy, CIGNA Museum and Art Collection.



*The village of Farmington was home to dozens of thriving businesses by 1867. At the far left is the railway water tank which stood at the foot of Oak Street. The three story building with the four-sided cupola was the Occidental Hotel, built by George Record in 1866, and later known as the Niskern Hotel. The last structure on the right was the Egle Bros. billiard parlor and boarding house, later known as the Egle Hotel. By 1879, the year of the great fire, H.B. Whittaker owned the shoe store next to the Niskern Hotel and Ben Richardson, a former slave, ran his barber shop in the middle structure. The Bank of Farmington completed the row of businesses on the north side of Oak Street. All of these buildings, and several others on adjacent blocks, were destroyed in the flames of the Farmington fire of 1879. The two head houses of the railroad's grain elevator, the last building to be destroyed in the fire, can be seen behind the buildings.*

## STURDY SOLDIERS

Just after the close of the Civil War . . . many sturdy soldiers, or, rather, farmers---for that was to be their new occupation---were looking about for a place to locate. A number decided to establish their new homes on the plat that is now Farmington. Among these settlers were many who had seen severe fighting and had covered themselves with glory and honor in fighting for this, their new home." *Dakota County Tribune*, June 21, 1907.

Many of these sturdy soldiers did become farmers, while others became businessmen in the village of Farmington, Minnesota, a community which quickly grew in the heart of Dakota County's farm country. The village was founded in the summer of 1865 and was incorporated in the spring of 1872.

Just a year earlier, in 1871, the city of Chicago had suffered from the worst fire in the nation's history. Nearly three and one-half square miles in the heart of the city were destroyed. Between 150 and 300 people were feared dead and nearly 100,000 were left homeless.

With the Great Fire of Chicago fresh in their minds, some of Farmington's businessmen realized that their newly incorporated village should have a fire department. A preliminary meeting was held on Saturday evening, January 4, 1873, to organize the first volunteers. Twenty-five people attended and put down their names and subscriptions.

A week later on Saturday, January 11, another meeting was held at the Whittaker and Woodard goods store. That evening a "Hook and Ladder



Courtesy, CIGNA Museum and Art Collection

Entitled "Prompt to the Rescue," this 1858 Currier & Ives print is one in a series honoring the American fireman. Early firefighters risked their lives to help others to safety, often doing so without the aid of equipment, protective clothing and, in some cases, without access to pumps and hoses. Bucket brigades passed water from the closest well, while the firemen climbed to rooftops with wet blankets to stop fires from spreading.

Company" was organized with 33 names signed to the company list. The company was a self-governing institution, establishing its own rules and electing its own officers. Samuel Herbert, a Civil War veteran, became foreman; Lawrence Egle, a saloon keeper, first assistant foreman; Ole Anderson, a merchant, clerk; and P. Woodard, a merchant, treasurer. Fire meetings were set for Monday evenings.<sup>2</sup> At the January 27 meeting, A.D. Hendryx, a merchant, was named second assistant foreman and it was resolved that "the Company shall be called the 'Eagle Hook and Ladder Company Number One,' and that [they] shall wear the following uniform: A blue-black beaver cloth cap, with the front piece of black leather, with white standing letters of 'Eagle Hook and Ladder Co., No. 1'; a Navy-blue flannel, double-breasted shirt with white trimmings; a black leather belt, with white standing letters as follows: Foreman; 1st Assistant Foreman; 2nd Assistant Foreman; Sec'y; Treasurer; and the member's name of the Company on their belts." On motion, the meeting adjourned to meet the next Monday night, at seven o'clock sharp, at George Dilley's office with the public invited to attend to see the by-laws and regulations.<sup>3</sup>

John Emery, editor and publisher of the *Farmington Press*, voiced his support by writing, "Is there not local spirit and pride enough in this corporation to help on so good a work as a Fire Department? For firemen we want young and able-bodied men, with a few older heads

to steady them. Caste and occupation should make no difference, if the parties are steady, and will come to time at call....A Hook and Ladder Company is forming here. Mr. Sam'l Herbert is the foreman, and is working earnestly to get in the requisite numbers. Help him along. Give him an encouraging word. Put your name down on the roll, and pay over one dollar to the fund. If you are too old, too stiff, or too dignified for the service, send a representative from your house or your store. We shall want the services of firemen here one day---and it may not be far distant. We ask all parties to give this subject their attention, and not forever stand aloof for fear of soiling hands or clothes. Don't kill every enterprise for the public good by pure neglect. Turn out---attend the meetings---see what is going on---and advance a good cause."<sup>4</sup>

At a March meeting, the village trustees agreed to accept the Eagle Hook and Ladder Company as organized. The trustees set aside funds to help purchase fire equipment.<sup>5</sup>

## HOOKS SAVE BUILDINGS. LADDERS SAVE LIVES.

Samuel Herbert, a skilled blacksmith and wagon maker, designed, built, and donated a hook and ladder wagon. The village trustees purchased for the fire company three firemen's axes, three hand hooks with poles, one chain hook, a rope chain and pole, and 18 three-gallon water buckets.<sup>6</sup> A young machinist, Edward Needham, a member of the First Minnesota Regular Volunteers who fought at the battle of Gettysburg, developed a simple and inexpensive fire extinguisher, effective for fighting fires and watering the garden.

**If you are too old, too stiff, or too dignified for the service, send a representative from your house or your store. We shall want the services of firemen here one day---and it may not be far distant.**

The firemen began a campaign to sell subscriptions for the purpose of purchasing a fire bell. When their uniforms arrived in May they also made plans for a firemen's ball on the Fourth of July to raise funds. The village's own July Fourth celebration committee approached the fire company with an invitation to participate in their daylong celebration and the fire company readily accepted. On July 4, 1873, "the procession was headed by the Farmington Hook and Ladder Co. of Firemen which made a fine show on parade, in their new and trig uniforms, under the command of their foreman, Mr. Sam'l Herbert."<sup>8</sup> It was the first of many such appearances. Another invitation was received

and accepted when the St. Paul Fire Department asked the Farmington Company to appear in the parade at the Fifteenth Annual State Fair held at the Driving Park Grounds between Minneapolis and St. Paul in September 1873.<sup>9</sup>

Subscriptions for the fire bell, however, did not sell well. The fire company gave up the idea of purchasing a bell and returned the money collected to the donors.<sup>10</sup> Instead, in the event of a fire, the bell at the Church of the Advent on Oak Street would be rung.<sup>11</sup> Finally in 1876, the United States' centennial year, sufficient funds were acquired to buy a 400 pound bell which proved to be inadequate.<sup>12</sup> The "little tinkler" was returned and a second bell, an 800 pounder, was purchased from a St. Paul foundry.<sup>13</sup> It arrived in April 1876, and the village erected it in a tower near the jail.<sup>14</sup>

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### "HAVE WE A FIRE-BUG AMONG US?"

In the first years of the fire company, house fires which began in chimneys and roofs during the winter months and summer prairie fires which occasionally destroyed the outlying buildings of the village, were common. A new and more serious threat soon challenged the firefighters.

On Monday night, May 18, 1876, at about ten o'clock, an alarm sounded from the firebell and the village was immediately aroused. A fire had broken out in McCarthy's store and was quickly extinguished. Mr. McCarthy and his clerk had left the store about an hour before the alarm and were in another building at the time. The smoke from the fire had penetrated the home above the store. A bench piled up with dry goods was burned in several places. Still smelling smoke, the firemen entered the cellar and discovered a crock on fire, filled with kerosene-soaked cotton, placed on a shelf under the main floor. This fire was also quickly extinguished. When one of the boys ran to have the bell tower opened to sound the alarm he found the bell-rope knotted up, making it difficult to ring the bell. This surely was an accident. The fires were not.<sup>15</sup>

**"We have a demon spirit among us that will stop at no outrage on others," wrote John Emery, "and it behooves all to be on their guard."18**

The arsonist would be back. The Stowell Block on the east side of Third Street felt his handiwork on November 27, 1876. Midnight was the hour he chose to enter the cellar at the rear of the building. Scraps of cloth, wood, and kindling were placed on the stairway leading to the Anderson and Larson dry goods and grocery store above. The arsonist ignited the fire and left unnoticed. Mr.

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## New Advertisements.

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### \$50 Reward.

**The above reward will be paid for detection and conviction of the person or persons who set fire to the store building occupied by Andrews & Larson on the night of the 27th of Nov. 1876.**

**G. W. DILLEY,  
L. P. FLUKE,  
W. L. KNOWLES,  
Farmington Board of Trustees.**

*The members of the village board quickly responded to the threat of arson by offering a reward for the "detection and conviction" of the culprit in the December 7, 1876, issue of the Farmington Press.*

Ole Anderson, who was sleeping in the store, was awakened by the smell of smoke. He made a search of the building and saw the light of the fire from the cellar below. The alarm was sounded and the fire was soon extinguished. The cellar was considerably charred. Robert Perkins and Samuel Herbert found boot tracks plainly visible on the cellar's earthen floor. The tracks were the only clue to the arsonist's identity.<sup>16</sup> A \$50 reward was offered for his conviction.<sup>17</sup> A week later on Wednesday night, December 6, 1876, the arsonist returned and successfully destroyed the Stowell Block, the Herbert Hotel, and two smaller buildings belonging to D.J. Johnson. Mr. Anderson was again awakened, this time by flames, and had to jump from a rear window to save his own life. Nothing from the store was saved. The upper part of the building housed the Finch and Hayes billiard and barroom, which was destroyed by flames. The Herbert Hotel caught fire from the store, but much of the furniture from the hotel was saved. Johnson's tailor shop and house adjoining the Herbert Hotel on the south were also soon on fire and the firemen began pulling apart the Johnson home with their hooks to save the Devitt building on the corner. With great effort the water brigade stopped the fire and the remaining structures were saved, but heaps of ashes and charred rubbish were all that remained of four buildings. "We have a demon spirit among us that will stop at no outrage on others," wrote John Emery, "and it behooves all to be on their guard."<sup>18</sup>

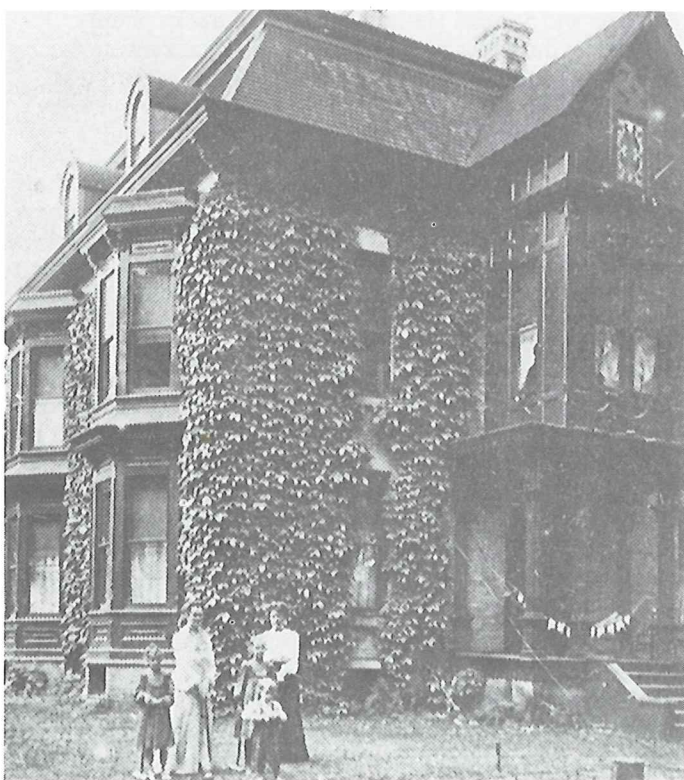
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### TILE AND BRICKS

Farmington was growing rapidly as new and better buildings were being constructed. Asa Fletcher, a pioneer grocer, moved a wooden building he owned from the corner of Third and Oak Streets to the rear of his own property and had the first "fire-proof" tile building constructed in its place in 1877. Fletcher's Block was



The Knowles block, built in 1877, was the second "fire-proof building" in Farmington. Shielded with wet blankets and showered with water it escaped destruction during the Great Fire of 1879. Next door was the drug emporium of one of Farmington's most famous pioneers, LP. Fluke, who opened for business in 1868. Michael Moes is pictured second from the right in this early photo, and Dominic Moes, who served as the treasurer of the Cataract Fire Company for many years, is the second man from the left.



According to the *Farmington Press* of November 26, 1879, Dr. LP. Dodge's "new tall house," on the southeast corner of Fourth and Oak Streets, escaped the great fire without damage. Dr. Levi Parker Dodge, Farmington's first physician, and his wife, Henrietta, had two sons and a grandson who were also doctors. In this photograph, the family plays croquet on the lawn in front of the landmark home.

venered with blond Chaska brick. On the opposite corner of Third and Oak, John Knowles, a pioneer merchant, also constructed a tile building. It had a veneer of red Hastings brick. Both buildings had metal store fronts and metal roofs instead of wood.<sup>19</sup> John Thurston, a pioneer druggist, was the first to veneer his wooden store with brick. Many other business people in town followed their examples.

During the spring of 1879, Charles Griebie, a Swiss immigrant and Civil War veteran, also had his business veneered with brick. Thirty five thousand red Hastings bricks covered all four sides of his three story building. According to the *Farmington Press*, the Griebie Block is "the largest, the most tasty and ample structure for a store in this town, or indeed in the County." The building had "a finely ornamented front, a broad sidewalk, and has a good well and pump for the conveniences of horses." The reconstructed block was completed in July.<sup>20</sup> In four months the building would be in ruins. Mr. Griebie's efforts were not in vain---they would save the town.

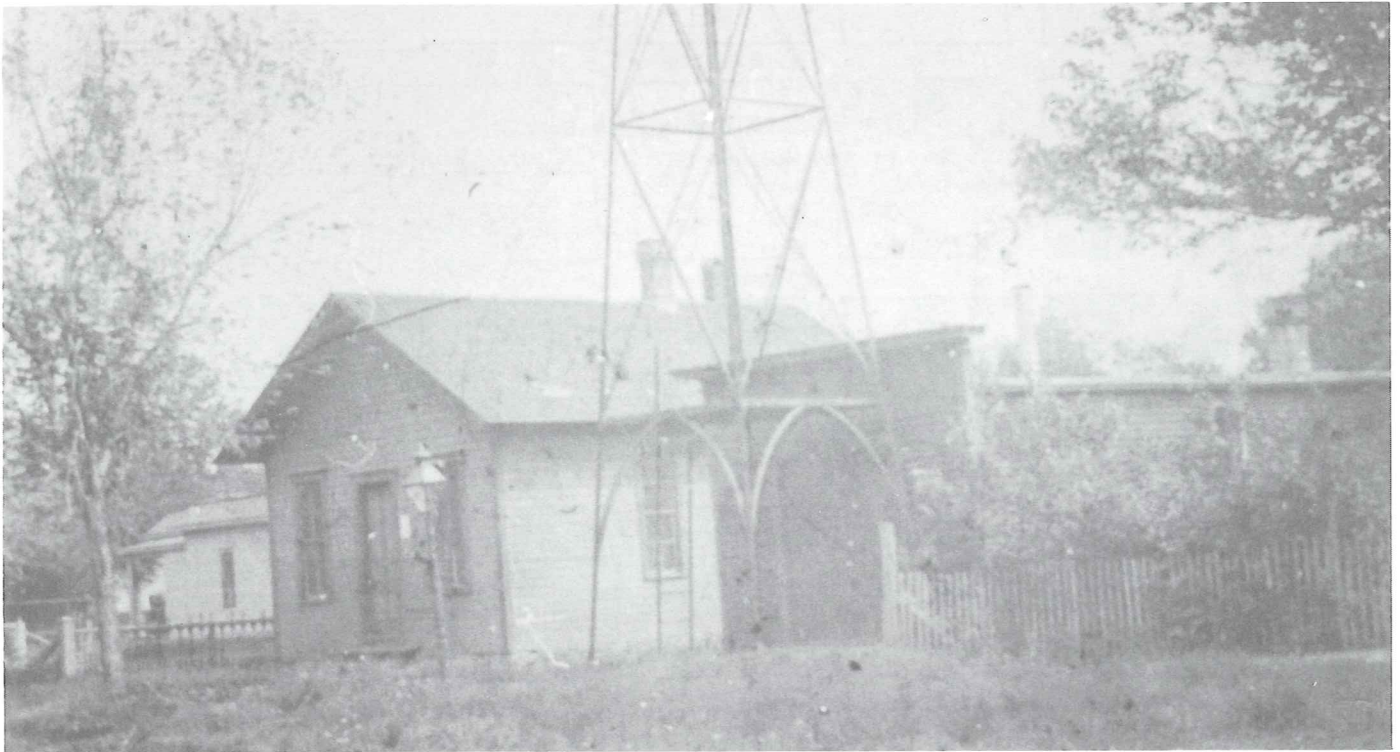
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## THE GREAT FIRE OF 1879

"The pretty little city, Farmington, of Dakota County, was almost literally swept from the face of the earth last Saturday night." *Meeker County Tribune*<sup>21</sup>

John Emery foresaw disaster six years earlier in February 1873, when he wrote, "For the day or night is coming when we shall have fires; and when fires occur here they are likely to be serious. The wooden





*Farmington's first village hall and jail, on the left, stood on the south side of Elm Street between Third and Fourth Streets. On the right is the first fire hall and bell tower erected in 1876. One had to pass underneath the bell tower to gain access to the fire station. The fire hall was used until 1907, when a new station was built, but the 800 pound bell remained in use until 1925.*

structures, on Third and Oak streets especially, are closely packed, and with the high winds that prevail here, at times, would burn like paper boxes."<sup>22</sup>

In the late afternoon of Saturday, November 22, 1879, Martin Niskern, owner of the Niskern Hotel on the corner of Second and Oak Streets, hauled a load of corn stalks from his farm outside of town to his barn behind the hotel. He left the stalks thrown up against the northeast corner of the barn. Later that evening, at half past nine, a hard working switch-engine, a wood burner, was standing near the depot. With the help of a west wind, a spark from the engine's smokestack drifted across Second Street to the dry corn stalks. Within minutes the stalks and barn were on fire.<sup>23</sup>

A wide-awake engineer immediately sounded his whistle and the alarm was given. Most of the townspeople were retiring for the evening. When the fire was located, panic hit. No attempt was made to rescue the animals in the Niskern barn until the heat and smoke were so intense that the townspeople's efforts proved futile. A pair of horses, four cows, several hogs, and a platform wagon carriage were lost to the fire. The dance hall attached to the hotel was brushed by the swirling flames next and the hotel was doomed. The wind forced the fire eastward and the rear of Atz and Saurer's hardware store was enveloped by flames.

The fire company quickly set up its lines of defense. Water buckets were filled from the Griebie pump. Hoses were run from the Thurston pump on Third



*The south side of Oak Street looking west toward the depot from Third Street, was dominated by Marshall's Block when this picture was taken in 1867. Taylor and McLaren's general store occupied the lower level until they sold to C.R. Griebie in 1875. Griebie opened his own general store on the site, and veneered the building with brick in July, 1879. Only four months later, the magnificent cornerstone of Farmington's downtown lay in ruins after the force of the November fire took its toll. In 1880, Griebie built a new building which was owned by a 4th generation Griebie, Mary Griebie Zimmer, when it burned down in December 1972.*



Today many of Farmington's original landmarks are gone but the Fletcher building, which survived the fire of 1879, still stands on the northeast corner of Third and Oak and the Exchange Bank Building, built in 1880, dominates the northwest corner. The Exchange Building, a magnificent example of 19th century Italianate architecture, is one of Farmington's remaining National Register sights.

Street and from the Fluke pump on Oak Street. The wind continued to blow energy into the flames and the inferno mocked the firefighters' determination to stop it as it rushed by.

The fire departments from Minneapolis and St. Paul were quickly telegraphed for assistance. Due to lack of railroad facilities no response came from St. Paul. Minneapolis Fire Chief Winn Brackett had Steam Engine Company No. 1 ready and at the depot within ten minutes of receiving the dispatch. The company, however, was detained too long at the railroad before cars could be procured. Its arrival at one o'clock Sunday morning was too late for material assistance.

It soon became obvious that the buildings on the north side of Oak Street would have to go. Business people rush to their stores. C.M. Dittman took a last look at the interior of the bank and then trusted all to the fire-brick vault and the safe. The fire crackled on, sending flakes of flames over the eastern portion of the village, starting a number of roof fires which were quickly extinguished.

The fire spread rapidly and devoured the Niskern Hotel, H.B. Whittaker's house and shoemaker shop, the hardware store of Atz and Saurer, the Bank of Farmington, Ben Richardson's barber shop, and the Egle Hotel on the corner of Third Street. Next to the Egle Hotel, the fire melted Mrs. Gilbert's home on Third Street.

Nick Everote, the butcher, while struggling to save his house and assist others, forgot a pen of cows, hogs, and sheep in the rear of his building. The flames swept through them and their bleating and bellowing added to the tragic elements of the scene. Fireman Michael W. Niederkorn, determined to stop the fire's progress on Third Street, climbed up on the roof of Everote's butcher shop. Wet blankets and sheets were laid out on the roof and soaked again with water. The roof, with Niederkorn on top of it, collapsed from the weight. Despite the fall, Niederkorn was unhurt, but the fire entered the open roof and the building was consumed. Mrs. William Nixon pumped her well dry stopping the flames from the rear of her home. She and countless other townspeople worked hand-in-hand with the firefighters to stop the fire's path on Third Street.<sup>24</sup>

When the buildings on the north side of Oak Street crumbled and collapsed, the heat became so intense it ignited the buildings on the south side. A seven year old boy, Charles B. Whittier, stood in front of the Knowles Block and watched both sides of Oak Street burn that night. Later, at age 16, he joined the volunteer fire department and served as its chief from 1907-1919.<sup>25</sup> On this night he watched Mrs. Devitt's saloon, George Dille's livery stable, Mrs. Fagar's millinery store, Fretter's restaurant and Winter's barber shop burn to the ground. He also saw Fred Griebie and Samuel Hendryx, Jr., work with great vigor to wet the roof and sides of the large and beautiful Griebie store. The heat drove the men down and they left, confident the brick walls and wet roof would protect against the flames. The heavy wooden



Courtesy, CIGNA Museum and Art Collection

This 1858 Currier & Ives print, "Rushing to the Conflict," captures the intensity of the alarm call for the early firefighters. While relying on church bells and train whistles, the Farmington Hook and Ladder Company of 1873 attempted unsuccessfully to raise money for a fire bell. It took more than three years for the citizens to contribute the necessary support to purchase the 800 pound ringer which was delivered to Farmington in April 1876.

cornice, however, caught fire. The flames melted the third story windows in front and entered the building. The destruction was rapid.

The Knowles Block across the street was shielded with wet blankets and showered with water. Leroy Fluke, the postmaster, ran to his business which housed the post office next to the Knowles Block and removed two kegs of gun powder. The town watched and waited. If the Griebie Block fell into Third Street the whole eastern row of buildings on Oak Street would be destroyed in less than an hour. The beautiful red brick walls of the Griebie building held the flames. When the old wooden sides of the building burned away, the brick veneer weakened and collapsed. Although the 35,000 bricks tumbled inward and deadened the flames, Griebie's loss was total. His foresight, however, helped save the town. The east side of Oak Street was spared. But the fire was not yet finished. The elevator near the depot burst into flames from the sheer heat of the fire on Oak Street. Fifty-four thousand bushels of wheat were burned. Finally, the last pockets of resistance were located. The last fingers of flame were found and crushed. Water buckets were filled and their contents spit on the glowing embers. They hissed and died. It was finished.

The Minneapolis Fire Company finally arrived at one a.m. with hundreds of feet of hose and bathed the black, blistered village with blue-white streams of water forced from their steam fire engine. Farmington's

high water table offered the engine all the water necessary.<sup>26</sup>

## THE TOWN AFTER

A new wooden bank building, hurriedly erected, soon stood proud and alone over its well-preserved vault. It was the first new building in the burnt district, taking only a week to be constructed.

Atz and Saurer moved into the Nixon building. John Fretter moved into the McCarthy building and used it as a residence and boarding house. A temporary shop was erected for H.B. Whittaker. Plans were made for a Benefit Ball for him at Fletcher's Hall on Thursday evening December 4, when an oyster supper was served.

**"That sickening scent from the burnt wheat-pile is about subsided---we hope," wrote Mr. Emery. "It was worse than the burnt hogs."<sup>28</sup>**

The Farmington fire was an eye opener for everyone. County newspapers all over the state held up the fire as a warning to have fire apparatus and water available. The *Cannon Falls Beacon* wrote, "Our neighboring village of Farmington was almost totally destroyed by fire . . . ."

This did not please John Emery, editor of the *Farmington Press*. "[This is the] kind of advertising we do not need," he wrote in the December 3, 1879, issue of the *Press*. "Nothing could be wider from the truth. The fact is that instead of being 'almost totally destroyed,' Farmington was not half destroyed, nor even one-quarter destroyed, nor even one-eighth part destroyed. With the exception of Griebie's building there was no building of much account used up by the fire. Only two stores were burnt out and four of five small houses with a stable, among a nest of traps, and they never would have been cleared out without a fire."

Twenty thousand bushels of wheat, saved from the burned elevator, were sold at an auction to Fletch and Post, a firm in Lake City, for \$6,750. Destined for a brewery somewhere in Chicago, the purchase promised that a lot of whiskey would have a smoky taste the next year. Another 10,000 bushels of a second grade were sold to local farmers; and another 10,000 bushels were sold as "hen fodder" at 15 cents a sack.<sup>27</sup> "That sickening scent from the burnt wheat-pile is about subsided---we hope," wrote Mr. Emery. "It was worse than the burnt hogs."<sup>28</sup>

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## THE VILLAGE SAYS "NO!"

A special election notice appeared in the January 14, 1880, issue of the *Farmington Press*. In response to a petition from several legal voters and property owners, the village trustees authorized the village clerk to call a special meeting of the voters and taxpayers for the purpose of voting for or against authorizing the village to raise a bond for sufficient funds to purchase fire apparatus. A public fire meeting was held on the 28th to discuss the special election scheduled for the next day. Edward Needham stated he had corresponded with the Silsby Manufacture Company of New York and a hand-engine could be obtained for \$250. A manufacturer from St. Louis would furnish an engine for \$600 and 2-inch hose for 50 cents per foot. The whole expense of an engine house, engine, hose, and wells would not exceed \$1000.<sup>29</sup> Mr. E.L. Brackett thought that a tax of ten mills (one mill equals one one thousandth of a dollar) would be needed, as the low rate of valuation on which taxes were assessed. John Thurston moved to vote a tax of ten mills at the polls the next day. The motion was seconded and carried unanimously and the meeting adjourned.

The vote at the polls on the 29th showed that 31 people were willing to be taxed for fire apparatus and 60 were against the proposal. The latter group thought the village should raise the money by licensing more saloons.<sup>30</sup> Four hundred dollars in subscriptions was raised by the members of the Hook and Ladder Company in February 1880 to help purchase adequate fire equipment.<sup>31</sup> The village did not wish to help. Equipment is a firefighter's right arm and the Hook and Ladder Company did not have it. Not wanting to be handicapped, Farmington's Eagle Hook and Ladder Company No. 1 formally disbanded on Wednesday, March 3, 1880.<sup>32</sup>

The village of Farmington would not have another fire company until 1885. During the next five years the village lost its largest flour mill, a grain elevator, a grain mill and hay press, as well as several businesses and homes to fire. It also lost its most valued institution, the high school, to an arsonist in 1884.<sup>33</sup>

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## "THEY DID WHAT THEY WERE TRAINED TO DO"

Although there was no organized fire department from 1880 to 1885, there were firefighters: when the fire bell sounded the alarm, "a crowd" would gather to battle the blaze. Many in this crowd were the former members of the Eagle Hook and Ladder Company.

During the Smith Brothers' feed mill fire on May 14, 1885, the Griebie elevator, which was filled to capacity with uninsured wheat, was threatened. Flames

## New Advertisements.

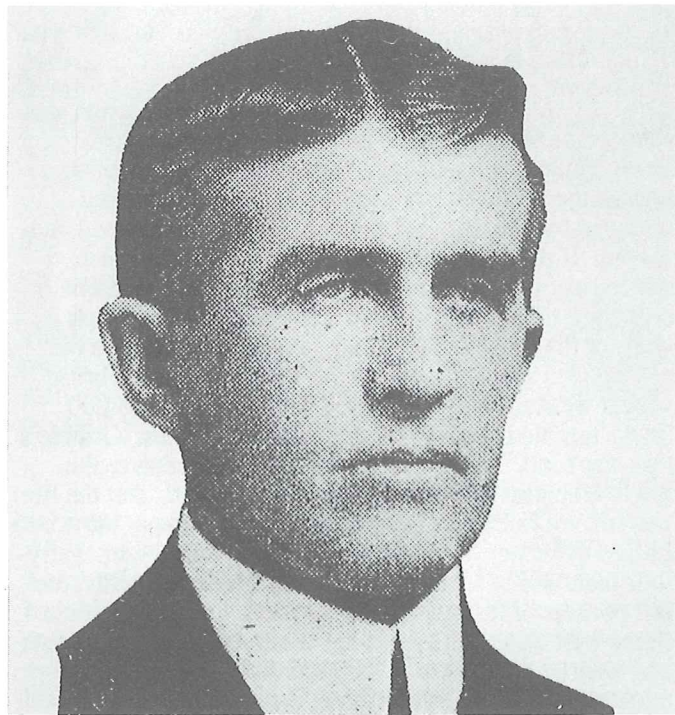
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### VILLAGE OF FARMINGTON

#### SPECIAL ELECTION NOTICE.

Notice is hereby given, that in response to a petition from several legal voters and property owners of the Village of Farmington, the Trustees have authorized and directed the Clerk of said village to call a special meeting of the voters and tax-payers of Farmington, to be held at the Court-house in said village, on the 29th day of January, 1880, at 1 o'clock p.m., for the purpose of voting for or against authorizing the Trustees to raise by a bond on the property of said village, or otherwise, a sufficient sum to purchase fire apparatus for said village,—and an election is hereby called accordingly. The polls will be opened at one o'clock p.m. and close at sundown of the same day. (Dated Jan'y 8, 1880.)  
j14-2w] ROSWELL JUDSON, Clerk.

*Just two days after the Great Fire of 1879, the village of Farmington passed Ordinance Number 20 which outlawed the erection of wooden buildings unless the buildings were enclosed in brick or stone. The wooden bank building which was erected immediately after the fire served as temporary quarters for the bank until the Exchange Bank Building was finished the following year.*



*Charles B. Whittier, who was born in Farmington village in 1873, joined the Cataract Engine Company as a volunteer when he was only 16 years old. He remained active in the company for 32 years, 12 of them spent as chief.*

leaped from the feed mill to the cornice of the elevator and it was thought impossible to save the building. Two former firemen, Edward Needham and W.H. Brownell, came to the scene with several blankets and a ladder. Climbing up the north side of the elevator they mounted the topmost peak of the building and, risking their lives, hung the blankets over the most threatened parts of the elevator. The blankets were soon soaked with water and the building was saved.<sup>34</sup>

"With the number of wooden buildings in Farmington and absolutely nothing in shape of fire protection, the utmost care should be exercised at all times, by all persons, to avoid the possibility of starting a fire," wrote C.P. Carpenter, publisher of the *Dakota County Tribune*.<sup>35</sup>

The men of the disbanded fire company fought every fire during this perilous time in Farmington's history. They did what they were trained to do.

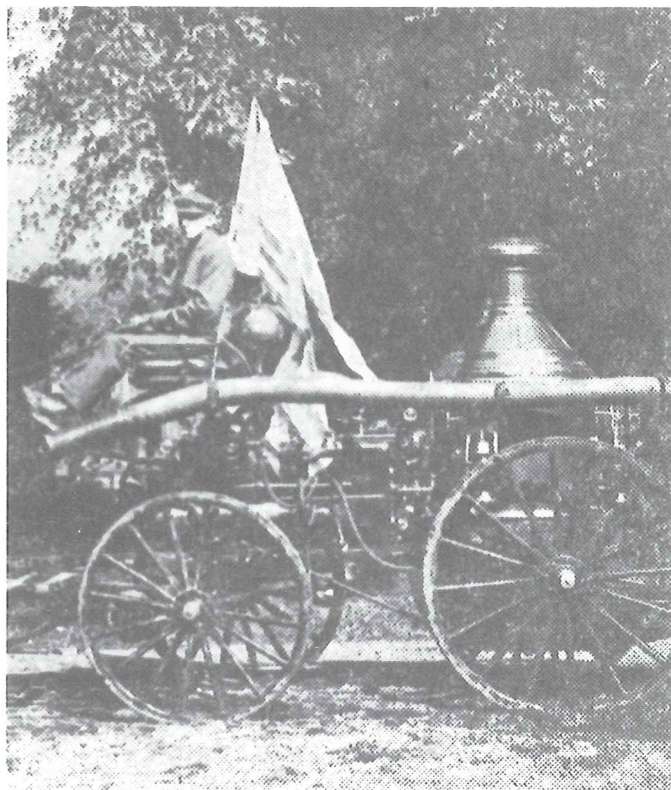
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## THE VILLAGE SAYS "YES!"

On April 7, 1885, the people of Farmington had another opportunity to vote for or against the purchase of fire apparatus. This time the vote was nearly unanimously in favor of the equipment and the trustees ordered a hand-pumped engine and hose cart with 500 feet of hose. After the equipment arrived, a meeting was held on June 18 to organize a fire company. Edward Needham moved that if a fire company was organized it should be under the state law in legal form and that the members should be exempt from poll tax and jury duty. After some heated discussion the motion prevailed. It was moved and carried that the engine company consist of 24 men, the hose company of ten men and that they should not be over 50 nor under 18 years of age. An engine company required discipline and teamwork. The hand-pumped engine also required a fire house and engineers with mechanical skill to keep it in shape. Edward Needham was elected foreman; Michael W. Niederkorn, first assistant; W.H. Brownell, second assistant and treasurer; and George Cook, secretary. The next day people lined the streets to watch the company test the engine which worked with perfect satisfaction, throwing a stream several feet higher than the Meeker elevator through 450 feet of hose.<sup>36</sup>

On Monday evening, June 29, 1885, a second meeting was held and the fire company's constitution and by-laws were adopted. Thomas C. Davis was elected its first fire chief. It was to be called the "Cataract Engine Company No. 1," meaning waterfall. The digging of more firewells was one of the first items of business.

J.S. Haskins received the contract which called for three new firewells having eight feet of water in each, at a cost of \$125 a piece. The fire company tested



By 1885, the voters of Farmington experienced a change of heart and approved the purchase of a hand-pumped engine and 500 feet of hose on the 7th of April. In 1896, this horse-drawn steam pumper replaced the engine which firefighters had pulled manually for the previous eleven years.

the first well with its new engine, pumping for about half an hour and lowering the water only two and a half feet. In seven minutes the water rose to its original level. The wells were a success.<sup>37</sup>

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## "COME OUT! COME OUT!"

On Sunday evening, August 23, 1885, the men and the equipment of the Cataract Engine Company were put to the test for the first time. A fire had started in the cellar of the James Cullen house near the railroad track. Sparks had ignited some scattered hay which had been left when the winter banking was removed. The fire was already making good headway when the alarm was given. The new hosecart was the first to leave the engine house and it went to the new well at the bank corner. The new hand-engine went to the tank house well, north of the depot. When the stream of water began to flow with sufficient force, a number of men were already in the cellar endeavoring to extinguish the flames. It is said that they were called to come out of the cellar but failed to do so. As it is customary to direct the water toward the fire, Nozzleman McCauley turned the stream into the cellar, knocking the men in the cellar down and rolling them across the floor. The water put the fire out, but also put the men out. The fire was quickly extinguished, but the sleepers and the floor boards were badly charred.<sup>38</sup>



Courtesy, CIGNA Museum and Art Collection

This Currier & Ives print, entitled "Always Ready," recalls the era of Farmington's early firefighters. Their original uniforms of 1873 were remarkably similar to the one portrayed in this 1858 print.

trustees placed an order with the W.S. Nott Company of Minneapolis because its samples were the best offered for inspection and the price was the lowest. The new hose consisted of 50-foot sections of rubber-lined cotton. Two new nozzles were also ordered with patent shut-off attachments.<sup>42</sup>

July and August of 1894 brought the return of prairie fires. Fires were burning all over the county, with the wooded area around Lake Marion in Lakeville suffering the worst.

The Hartwig building, one of the oldest in town on Third Street, also suffered from fire in July. The fire department again did excellent work in checking the flames and saving the adjoining buildings.<sup>43</sup>

A week after the Hartwig fire the village board met and discussed at some length the question of how to secure help at the hand-pumped engine in times of fire. It was exhausting work for the firemen to pull and pump the engine for any great length of time.<sup>44</sup> Mr. J.B. Squires, owner and publisher of the *Dakota County Tribune*, wrote on August 2, 1894, "A majority of property owners in the village are always on hand and ready to do, and always do their share and more of the work at the hand-pumped engine, no matter where the fire is located or whose property is in danger; there is another class of property owners who stand idly by with their hands in their pockets, and complacently gaze on the fire fiend while he works destruction; but let their own property become endangered in the slightest degree---oh! then it's different! they will rush up and down the street, tearing their hair and pulling it out by the roots, damning the fire department, damning the town and everybody in it because they won't work at the pump. It was this class of citizens that came in for good brown roast at the hands of the board, and you could hear flesh sizzle as they turned on the gridirons." Several strong, young men were hired off the streets during the Hartwig fire and were paid \$1.25 to work the pump.<sup>45</sup>

## THE FLAMES OF '94

A season of drought began in 1894, ushering in a challenging year for the firefighters. In late January, a large hanging kerosene lamp in Mrs. Stein's confectionery fell to the floor and in a few moments the entire place was in flames. The Cataract Engine Company was promptly on hand and made a gallant fight against the flames, but the dry and flammable condition of the building and contents give the fire such headway that it was impossible to stop. By the quick and energetic action on the part of Nozzelman Brownell the adjoining buildings occupied by Mrs. F.A. Mayer and Marsh and Rooney were slightly scorched, but saved.<sup>39</sup>

At the end of February that year a fire destroyed the train depot. Its origin was unknown. Charles B. Whittier, a 22-year-old-nozzleman, crawled in the office window when he arrived at the scene. His fellow nozzlemen sprayed water on him and he managed to save the station agent's ticket box and essential books. Whittier was not injured.<sup>40</sup> But it was impossible to save the building. Oil had been stored in the freight room and the floor was saturated. After seeing that there was no hope for the depot, the firemen turn their attention to the coal sheds and water tank and saved them.<sup>41</sup>

In May, the village trustees decided to buy 300 more feet of hose for the fire department. The

At the monthly fire meeting in August 1894, Chief Engineer Needham stated the most important matter was to get thoroughly organized. He assigned the men to their positions so that there would be no confusion or clash of authority in times of fire.<sup>46</sup>

The most important officer appointed that evening was fire marshal. Mr. Squires wrote, "There is a village ordinance backed up by a law in the statute books which provides that a person can be called on by the fire marshal or any other proper officer to aid at the pump or in any other capacity, and if such person refuses without good excuse---sickness or inability---he is subject to arrest and a fine of not more than \$20 or imprisonment in the county jail for not more than 30 days or until such fine is paid; all such fines to accrue to the treasury of the company. To fill this important position Mr. B.P. Woodard has been selected, and the choice was a wise one. Hereafter, those able-bodied men at fires who stand around with their hands



*William Nixon established his first business in Farmington as a dealer in harnesses and horse gear in 1865. In 1908 he was operating the Nixon Department Store on Oak Street. By 1911, he had taken over the publication of the Dakota County Tribune and in 1916 he was the owner and operator of the Star Theater.*

in their pockets will have four alternatives---pump, pay a fine, go home, or crawl into a hole out of sight somewhere."<sup>47</sup>

The meeting adjourned until Monday, August 20, 1894, when a special meeting was held for the purpose of practice. Two runs were made that evening. One to the L.P. Dodge well on Fourth and Oak Streets and the other was witnessed by a large crowd by the well in front of the bank on Third and Oak Streets. The first run was from the engine house and water was brought from the Dodge well in two minutes and five seconds. During the second run the Y men got tangled up in some way and were crowded by the engine men. A stream of water, however, was thrown over the roof of the new three story Griebie building. Hoots and hollers and words of encouragement spilled from the crowd.<sup>48</sup>

**let their own property become endangered in the slightest degree---oh! then its different! They will rush up and down the street, tearing their hair and pulling it out by the roots, damning the fire department, damning the town and everybody in it because they won't work at the pump.**

At the September 3, 1894, fire meeting it was moved and carried that the company contribute \$25 to the Hinckley fire sufferers. Fire Chief Thomas Davis circulated a subscription paper. To everyone's amazement he

collected more than \$200 in cash. The money was taken to the cities and given to the proper relief committees.<sup>49</sup>

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## "A WISE ACT"

The hand-pumped engine served the citizens of Farmington faithfully for 11 years. The village board purchased a new steam fire engine on Monday, December 7, 1896, for \$1,800. The fire department contributed \$200 of its own funds toward the purchase of the new engine.

The engine arrived on Monday, December 26, complete with tools, from the Waterous Company in St. Paul. It was tested that day and on Tuesday as well. On each day a stream of water was thrown after ten minutes, the engine having started with cold water in the boiler. The engine threw a stream of water 135 feet through an inch nozzle and 1,000 feet of hose, and 177 feet through 100 feet of hose. Two streams of water were thrown at the same time over the flag pole on the Griebie building. Armed with two worthy engines, the Cataract Engine Company was ready for any fire fight.<sup>50</sup>

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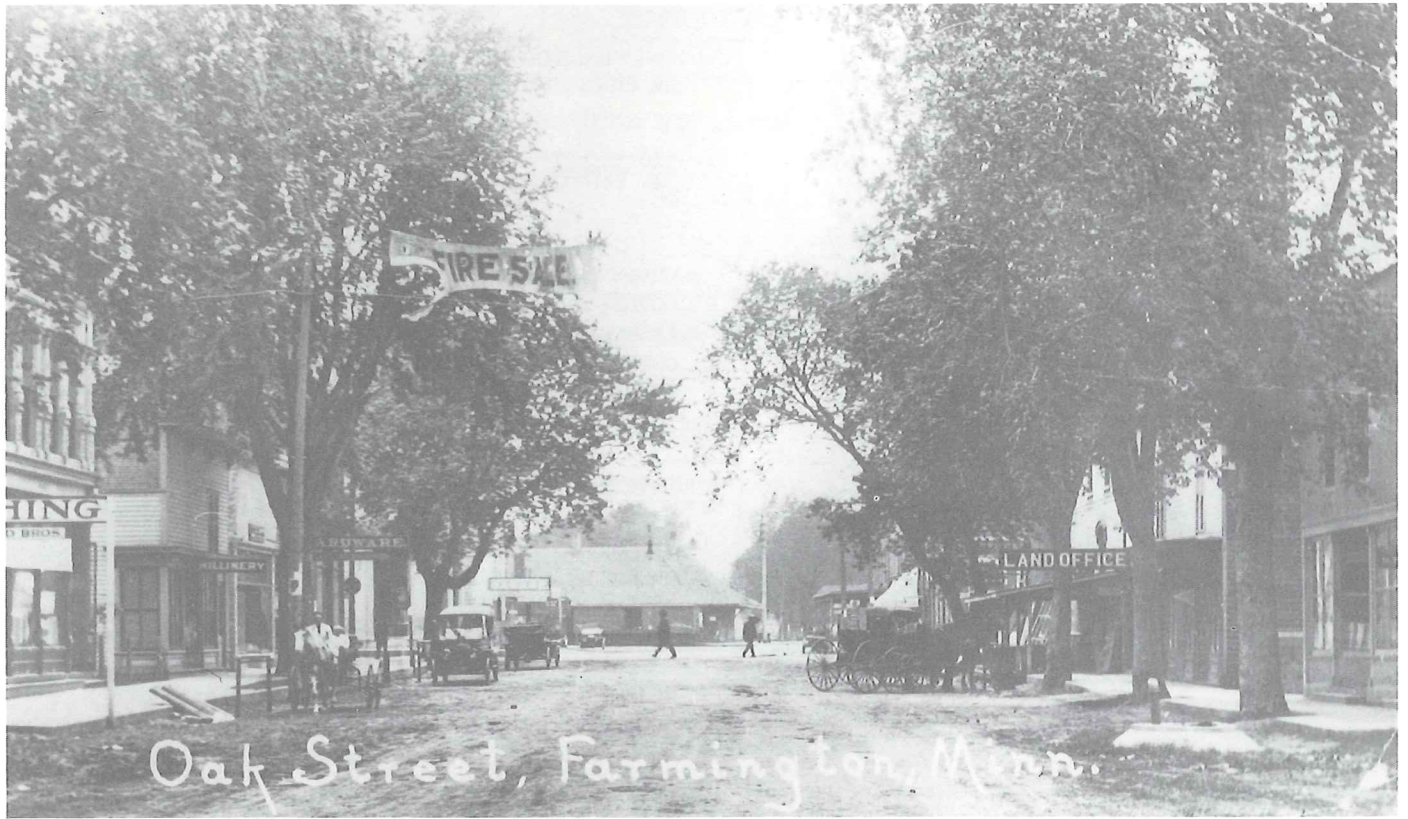
## A NEW ERA

The arrival of the 20th century brought great changes to the fire department. A telephone-fire alarm system was installed in 1908.<sup>51</sup> In the event of a fire, the Star Telephone Company was called. The operator on duty was told the location of the fire and in turn notified the livery stable and fire department. Someone from the fire department rang the bell, summoning the volunteers.

At the March 1, 1909, fire meeting, W.H. Hosmer, Thomas J. Feely and Joseph N. Baltes were appointed by Chief Charles B. Whittier as a committee to draw up the articles of incorporation for a "relief association," later known as the Cataract Relief Association.<sup>52</sup>

The old hand-pumped engine was sold and a new chemical engine with a 60 gallon tank was purchased in 1909 to be used for the first attack on the fires.<sup>53</sup> Fire hydrants were installed in 1911 but did not entirely replace the firewells.

The chemical engine was no stranger to the Nixon Department Store. William Nixon, a Civil War veteran, was one of the original members of the Eagle Hook and Ladder Company and served on its finance committee for many years. His son, Guy, was a member of the Cataract Engine Company. The Nixon Department Store on Oak Street experienced its first fire in 1908 and then one every year from 1912 through 1915.



A familiar Farmington banner proclaiming "Fire Sale" spans the Oak Street roadway in this photo, taken in about 1914. Kulstad Brothers clothing store is identifiable at left, across from the Land Office, and horse drawn buggies joined the city's first automobiles on the wide dirt roads of the community's main square. Also on the left is the Nixon building, home to many varied businesses, which succumbed to fire for the first time in 1908, and then received damage from the flames every year from 1912 through 1915.

The March 8, 1914, fire began at 1:45 Sunday morning when John Stagmeyer saw flames issuing from the rear of the building and the alarm was given. The fire department responded quickly and within minutes the chemical engine had a stream of water playing on the flames. Hydrants were tapped on the corners of Third and Fourth Streets and water was soon brought through two lines of hose from each corner. The steamer was placed at the old fire well in front of the city hall and six streams began to flood the store. Both engines ran non stop for two and a half hours and the fire was extinguished at 4:30 a.m. After the blaze, the water level was checked in the large steel tank in the water tower. It was still full.<sup>54</sup> Fortunately, the village was blessed with an abundance of water. It was needed again on July 15, 1915, when the Nixon Department Store was once more in flames.

an attendant at the hospital who left for the fire station to ring the bell. Marian intended to remain at the switchboard and call the fire station but was driven away by the intense smoke. Mother and daughter escaped to the hall.

The fire company was there in minutes and had four streams of water on the flames, which by this time had spread through the entire south half of the building. The fire originated in the partition between the Standard Laundry and the Sanitary Meat Market and leaped into the second floor of the Sanford Block, occupied by the Sanford & Drew Hospital. The firemen were told at that time that five patients were still in the hospital. Several of the men were hosed down and entered the burning building, shouting their presence as they rushed upstairs to the hospital. The five patients responded, coughing their pleas of help in the suffocating smoke, and were carried to safety.

## THE SANFORD-DREW HOSPITAL FIRE

On Saturday night, June 22, 1917, at 3:15 a.m. the town was awakened by the sound of the fire bell. People rushed to the business district to find the south half of the Sanford Block in spasms of fire. The fire was discovered by Mrs. Rose Woodward, who was spending the night with her daughter, Marian, who had charge of the Star Telephone night service. Mrs. Woodward awoke to find the room full of smoke. She called to Marian to telephone the livery barn. Mrs. Woodward also awakened

Most of the instruments in the hospital were saved, but Dr. A.E. Luhman and Attorney Alfred E. Rietz, who had offices on the second floor of the building, lost everything, as well as the Star Telephone Company's switchboard. Two hydrants were tapped on Third Street and the entire building was drenched. In less than two hours the fire was under control.

At one time, however, it was thought that the whole building would be lost and A. Mathiason and





*The Sanford Hospital, on the right, was built on the corner of Fourth and Oak Streets by Dr. James A. Sanford in 1924. The doctor, who had been a partner in the development of the city's Star Telephone Company in 1902, came to Farmington from Wisconsin in 1909, and established his first hospital on Third Street in 1912. Following the 1917 fire, the first floor was rebuilt and Dr. Sanford moved the hospital to the new location at Fourth and Oak next to the village hall and fire station.*

### A SERENADE IN THE SHADE OF THE ELMS

During the Great Fire of 1879, the Minneapolis Fire Department was telegraphed for assistance. Fire Chief Winn Brackett and the men of Steam Engine Company No. 1 arrived too late to help. The men of the Minneapolis Fire Department found their way to Farmington again 42 years later. This time it would not be to fight fires but to serenade Mr. Brackett, who was retired and living in town.

The Minneapolis firemen arrived in Farmington on Saturday, June 11, 1921. They parked their cars a block from the Brackett home where the former chief was spending the afternoon in quiet study. Silently they moved into the Brackett yard and with a startling suddenness sang "Onward Christian Soldiers." Going to the door to see what it was all about, Mr. Brackett at once recognized some of the men that served with him in the 1870s. He spotted Minneapolis Fire Chief Ringer who, in Brackett's time, was in the fire marshal's office. After a pleasant visit they moved into the shade of the elm trees on Oak Street west of the depot. The firemen sang several more songs, after which Rev. Father Moran gave a short talk welcoming Chief Ringer and his host of firefighters to Farmington. In response, Ringer told some humorous stories and extended a welcome to Farmington's fire department to visit Minneapolis. His final remarks were a warning. "You people of Farmington must not forget to give encouragement to your volunteer fire department and keep it well equipt, or you will wake up some fine morning and find yourself in a catastrophe."<sup>56</sup>



*Dry goods dealer Michael Moes built the Phoenix Hotel on Third Street in the heart of downtown Farmington in 1893. By 1910, the elegant lodging house had become home to Clifford Larson's meat market and several other retail businesses. The building was threatened by fire on a January morning in 1924, but the volunteers of the Cataract Engine Company were successful in saving the downtown landmark.*

W.J. Fletcher moved their entire stocks into the street. Mr. Wintz, owner of the Sanitary Meat Market, had put in nearly \$400 worth of meat the day before the fire. Mr. Krahrmer of the Standard Laundry was late with his washing; the Commercial Hotel has just purchased \$368 worth of new linens and this was being laundered for the first time. The fire had progressed so rapidly that no effort was made to save anything in the laundry or the meat market and the loss was complete. The hospital itself was only in its infancy and was still being built. Only the day before, Alfred Rietz had written an insurance policy and left it lying on his desk. Had he mailed it his loss would have been covered.<sup>55</sup>

## "SOME FINE MORNING"

At one o'clock Friday morning, January 18, 1924, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Klein, owners of the Farmington Cash Store on Third Street woke up suffocating from smoke. Flames broke through the wall separating their bedroom at the rear of the Cash Store from the storeroom between their business and the Collette poolroom. The Kleins rushed into the freezing street wearing only their night clothes. Frantic, barefooted and wearing a thin nightgown, Mrs. Klein ran up the street giving the alarm. Mr. Klein attempted to reach the cash drawer where the receipts of the previous day were kept, only to be prevented by the flames and smoke. Fireman George McCluskey heard the cries of a woman. He ran up

the street and saw the store in flames. He rang the fire bell and telephoned the fire department.

Within half an hour three stores were leveled. Despite the stubborn resistance put up by the fire department and its equipment, five buildings were lost. Knowing it was useless to attempt to save the burning buildings, the firemen, directed by Fire Chief Thomas Feely and Assistant Chief August Sprute, shifted their attack to the Phoenix building which had caught fire. Sure that the Phoenix would burn down, firemen and others began to carry goods from the American Meat Market and the Walter Olson barber shop.

In the face of a stiff south wind the firemen fought desperately, braving the intense cold which caused great icicles to form. Windows shattered from the extreme heat and cold and rained down on the fire fighters. Fireman Raymond Berg was injured by the falling glass, when a piece of glass cut his foot above the ankle, causing a deep gash. He was overcome by smoke and suffered exposure. He was laid up for two days and received eight dollars from the Cataract Relief Association for his loss of work.<sup>57</sup> The efforts of the firemen were rewarded and the Phoenix building was saved.

During the fire, Martin Owinske of the Farmington Cafe kept firemen supplied with hot coffee to enable them to withstand the strain. Fred Griebie, of Griebie's Department Store, provided the firemen with dry gloves.<sup>58</sup>

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## AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION

As early as 1921, the men of the Cataract Engine Company discussed the possibility of purchasing an electric fire siren and a modern fire truck.<sup>59</sup> The old fire bell which had been used for the last 48 years was inadequate.

At the January 22, 1924, fire meeting it was decided to send a letter to the village council recommending that an electric siren be purchased and a local fire marshal appointed to inspect businesses and homes. It was also decided to take funds from the treasury of the Cataract Relief Association to purchase new suction hose and 15 rubber coats, pairs of boots and hats for the "front line men," e.g., the nozzlemen, hook and ladder men and chemical men.<sup>60</sup>

Fire Chief Thomas Feely and Secretary R.G. Shirley spoke to the village council in a special session on February 14, and explained the dire need for a new fire alarm. All the council members supported the idea and the fire department officials were told to obtain prices and submit them to the board at a future date.<sup>61</sup>

The village council appointed Emil Kuchera fire marshal. He wasted no time in inspecting homes and businesses, finding several places with fire hazards. He even inspected the fire department's equipment, with the permission of the department.<sup>62</sup>

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## THE TONGUE-TIED SIREN

Farmington's fire alarm efficiency was brought up to standard on Wednesday, January 28, 1925. A \$400, electric, three horsepower, Eric Siren was purchased on a 30-day trial. It was mounted near the top of the water tower. Now, instead of having to hunt up someone to ring the fire bell in the middle of the night when an alarm was turned in, a telephone operator turned on a switch to sound the alarm, saving precious time.<sup>63</sup>

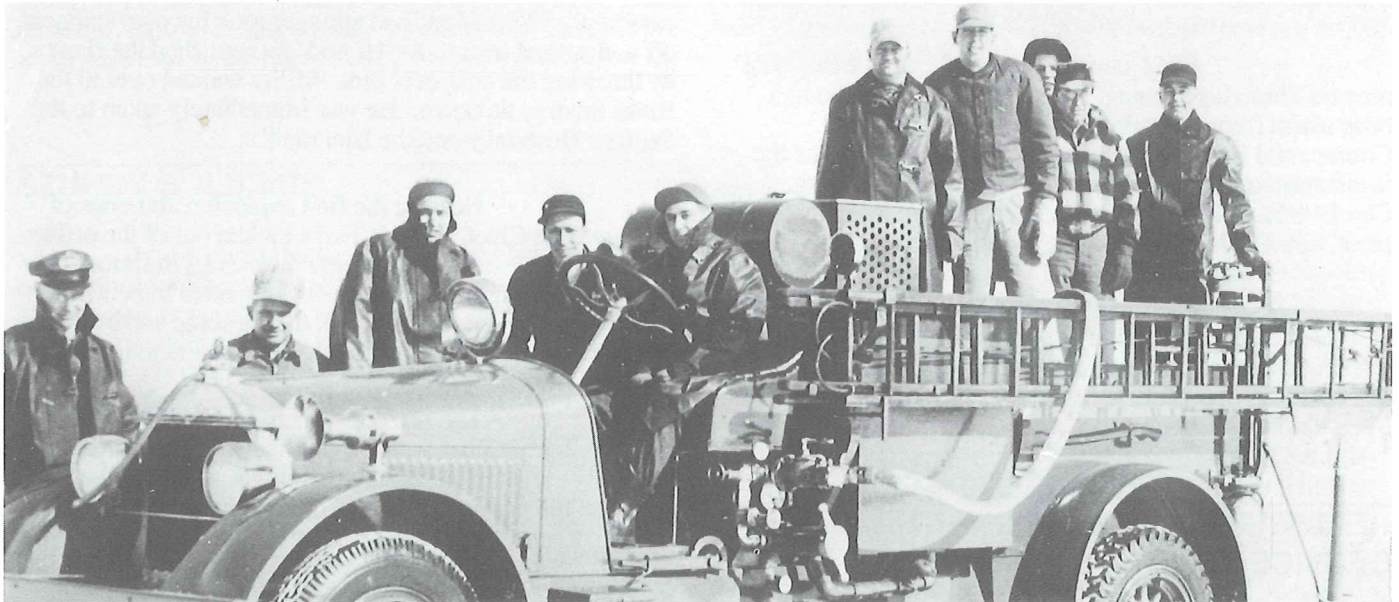
The temporary purchase was made by the village council on the recommendation of the fire department. Bad weather prevented the siren from being tested until February 12. The shriek was heard five miles according to local farmers, but the village and fire officials were not satisfied with the results. The siren was heard better in the country than in some sections of the village. Some believe that the siren was speeded too high, throwing the sound over the village and into the country.<sup>64</sup> Adjustments were made but proved to be unsatisfactory. The siren was returned.

A five horsepower siren was purchased on a trial basis two weeks later. The fire department voted to recommend that the village purchase the new electric siren since it was superior to the old fire bell system.<sup>65</sup>

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## JUNE 18, 1885-JUNE 18, 1926 NEW BEGINNINGS

Discussion of purchasing a fire truck heightened after the electric fire alarm system was in place. Secretary R.G. Shirley was instructed to meet with the village council regarding the purchase of a truck costing approximately \$3,000 in July 1925.<sup>66</sup> Dan McConaghie and John Turek were appointed by Fire Chief Feely on



*In 1926, the Cataract Engine Company was finally authorized to purchase a new Universal pumper truck, one of the finest made at the time. Pictured around the fire truck are the members of the volunteer fire department.*

April 21, 1926, to act as a committee and meet with the village council regularly regarding the purchase of a fire truck. They were "authorized to spend up to and including \$1,800 of the funds in the treasury of the Farmington Firemen's Relief Association for the purchase of such fire truck as the village council and committee may direct."<sup>67</sup>

The fire truck that would cost the fire department a down payment of \$1,800 was demonstrated on Wednesday, May 26, 1926. A number of people turned out to see the engine and pump throw a jet of water over the high water tower. The crowd was impressed.<sup>68</sup>

The mayor, three councilmen, Chief Feely and two firemen went to the cities to purchase the truck on Friday, June 11, 1926, from the W.S. Nott Company in Minneapolis. The truck arrived a week later on June 18, 41 years to the day since the Cataract Engine Company No. 1 was organized.<sup>69</sup> The beautiful new 1926 Universal pumper truck, one of the finest made, was backed into the fire hall and parked next to the old silver steam fire engine. The old engine, which was no longer used, was sold in 1927.

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## IMPROVEMENTS

A new system of keeping the firemen's clothing on the fire truck was inaugurated in June 1928. Precious time was lost when firemen had to run home to get their firefighting clothing. Even for those who kept their equipment at work, having to make an extra trip if a fire happened on the weekend could cost in minutes. Twenty new rubber helmets, coats and pairs of boots were purchased and the firemen were equipped as well as Twin Cities firemen.<sup>70</sup>

Fire Chief Feely staged one of many trial runs on Thursday evening, June 7, 1928. He turned in a false alarm from the railroad depot and said the old Commercial Hotel was on fire. Within seven minutes the firemen had a stream of water playing on the building. Chief Feely called for a pressure test and the truck threw a jet of water over the three story building.<sup>71</sup>

The monthly fire drills, knowledge of their new equipment and of the latest firefighting techniques, as well as their dedication, made the volunteers one of the most proficient fire companies in the state. Their skill was soon tested on a sultry July afternoon.

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## HELL VISITS FARMINGTON---THE CITIES SERVICE FIRE

On Wednesday afternoon July 11, 1928, shortly before two o'clock, Fred Miller, Jr., who was in charge of the Cities Service Bulk Oil Station, was pumping



*Just two years after the arrival of the new fire truck, the fighters of Cataract Engine Company No. 1 faced one of the most serious and tragic fires of the century at the Cities Service Bulk Oil Station. This photograph shows Cities Service Station as it looked in the 1930s. The man is unidentified.*

gasoline from a railroad tank car into one of the bulk tanks on the ground. He filled the bulk tank and went to the pump house to shut off the electric motor which drove the gasoline pump. As he pulled the knife switch, sparks from the switch ignited the gasoline, causing an explosion which threw Miller across the room and set his clothes on fire. He ran from the burning building and was seen by a passerby. The unidentified stranger took his own suit coat off and rushed over to Miller and extinguished the flames by throwing the coat over him. Miller walked over to the Blake lawn to lie down. He was immediately taken to the Sanford Hospital where he later died.

Hearing the first explosion and cries of distress, Fire Chief Thomas Feely looked out of the office of the Feely elevator and saw the bulk tanks in flames. He called the telephone operator, who happened to be Mrs. Fred Miller, Jr. She calmly took the message and switched on the siren. The alarm called the firefighters to the station.

The fire department responded at once and two lines of hose were strung from the hydrant near the Feely elevator. Realizing that it was useless to pour water on the raging gasoline, Chief Feely directed the firemen to play the streams on the Hennessy lumber warehouse a short distance from the bulk tanks. Soon another line of hose was strung from the hydrant on the Brackett corner.

Using boards and their new rubber coats as protection from the terrific heat, the firemen braved the danger of more explosions and advanced to within a short distance from the fire. Exploding barrels of gasoline frequently caused spouts of fire and barrel fragments to fly near the firemen. A barrel top barely missed several nozzlemen.

Fortunately, the safety valves on the three bulk tanks and the railroad car blew off and prevented the larger tanks from exploding. Little geysers of fire were formed from the bulk tanks. Thirty-six thousand gallons of oil and gasoline fed the flames. The ink-black smoke reached high into the air and attracted tourists and sightseers from the Twin Cities, Lakeville, Rosemount, Northfield and Hampton.

When Fred Miller, Sr., arrived at the scene of the fire he saw the oil truck, which Fred, Jr., drove, near the burning tanks. Braving the intense heat and fire he rushed up to the truck and, with the help of others, pushed the truck away from the fire. The front of the truck was in flames. Mr. Miller's hands were burned slightly during the effort.

Chief Feely called the Northfield fire department which greatly aided in checking the spread of the flames. The Northfield department strung hose from the Brackett corner and later, when there was no danger of a water shortage, strung hose from the main well at the fire house on Oak Street. Charles Sauser, chief of the Lakeville fire department, brought more than 1,000 feet of hose to use in case of emergency.

The telegraph lines which hung near the doomed tanks were melted by the fire, cutting off communications from Farmington for more than four hours. At six o'clock that evening the fire was subdued. A heavy rain aided the firemen in extinguishing the flames.

One of the heads of the Minneapolis fire department hurried to Farmington to see if he could be of service but, after looking over the situation, he could offer no suggestions since everything possible had been done to check the fire.<sup>72</sup>

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"For firemen we want young and able-bodied men, with a few older heads to steady them. Caste and occupation should make no difference, if the parties are steady, and will come to time at call..." is the way John Emery put it in 1873. The young and able-bodied did volunteer, and there were more than a few older heads to steady them. Caste and occupation made no difference. The lowly store clerk fought next to the honored mayor; and the mayor was one of the laddermen. The men of Farmington's Volunteer Fire Department knew no peers.

Disciplined and dedicated, they fought fires with blankets and buckets, hooks and ladders, soda and water and acid, and finally with engines that could reach the highest part of the village's tallest buildings. They fought arsonists, inept and careless townspeople and for five years---from 1880 to 1885---they fought alone with no help from the village.

Farmington's Fire Department, the second oldest in the county, will celebrate its 120th anniversary on January 11, 1993.

## ENDNOTES

1. *Farmington Press*, January 9, 1873.
2. *Ibid*, January 16, 1873.
3. *Ibid*, January 30, 1873.
4. *Ibid*, editorial, "Shall We Have a Fire Department!" February 27, 1873. The *Press* was always active in the interests of the town and many of Farmington's public improvements were first suggested and advocated by it. The *Press* was an aggressive newspaper which established a reputation among its counterparts in the state. It was Farmington's second newspaper, founded in the spring of 1870. It was published until June, 1883, when it was sold to F.A. Weld, owing to the declining health of John Emery. After the sale of the press, Emery returned to his native state of Maine.
5. *Ibid*, March 20, 1873.
6. *Dakota County Tribune*, January 1966, quote village records, 1873. Many of Farmington's early records were damaged or destroyed in the Sanford-Drew Hospital fire in 1917. They were kept in the office of Alfred E. Rietz, an attorney and village councilman.
7. *Farmington Press*, April 24, 1873.
8. *Ibid*, July 10, 1873.
9. *Ibid*, September 18, 1873.
10. *Ibid*, August 28, 1873.
11. *Ibid*, September 4, 1873.
12. *Ibid*, February 10, 1876.
13. *Ibid*.
14. *Ibid*, April 10, 1876. The officers in 1876 are R.S. Perkins, foreman; Samuel Herbert, first assistant foreman; L.W. Johnson, second assistant foreman; Charles Griebie, treasurer; H.H. Moore, secretary; H.C. Wing, assistant secretary; Ole Anderson, William Nixon, and William Graves, finance committee; Edward Graves and Charles Herbert, torch boys. According to the May 8, 1876, issue of the *Farmington Press*, keys to the bell tower are to be found with H.H. Moore, secretary; Robert Perkins, foreman; William Graves, finance committee; Samuel Herbert, first assistant foreman; L.W. Johnson, second assistant foreman; and Daniel Wing, assistant secretary.
15. *Ibid*, editorial, "Have We a Fire-bug Among Us?" May 18, 1876.
16. *Ibid*, November 30, 1876.
17. *Ibid*, December 7, 1876.
18. *Ibid*, postscript, "The Fire Fiend at Home!"

19. Ibid, "Improvements." August 1, 1877.
20. Ibid, July 16, 1879.
21. Ibid, quoted December 3, 1879.
22. *Farmington Press*, February 27, 1873.
23. *Hastings Union*, November 26, 1879.
24. Ibid, November 26, 1879.
25. Farmington Fire Department Records, Vol. 1, pp. 25-79.
26. *Farmington Press*, November 26, 1879.
27. Ibid, December 10, 1879.
28. Ibid, December 3, 1879.
29. Ibid, January 28, 1880.
30. Ibid, February 11, 1880.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid, March 10, 1880.
33. *Dakota County Tribune*, June 26, 1884.
34. Ibid, May 21, 1885.
35. Ibid, April 2, 1885. C.P. Carpenter came to Minnesota from Connecticut with his parents in 1855 and was raised in Lebanon and later Eureka townships. He learned the printing trade in 1870 at Spring Valley, Minnesota, in the office of the *Western Progress*. He moved to Farmington in the fall of 1883. Carpenter published Farmington's fifth newspaper, the *Dakota County Tribune*. The first issue appeared on Thursday, March 6, 1884.
36. Ibid, June 25, 1885.
37. Ibid, July 8, 1885.
38. *Dakota County Tribune*, "The First Fire," August 27, 1885.
39. Ibid, February 1, 1894.
40. Ibid, December 20, 1956.
41. Ibid, March 1, 1894.
42. Ibid, May 3, 1894.
43. Ibid, August 2, 1894.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid; "Town Council Meeting."
46. Ibid; "The Fire Meeting," August 9, 1894. The officers and positions are E.Z. Needham, chief engineer; M.W. Niederkorn, foreman; C.O. Wescott, assistant foreman; M. Vorum, second assistant; B.P Woodard, fire marshal; P.H. Feely, treasurer; W.H. Brownell, E. Peters, A. Hartwig, and C.B. Whittier, nozzle men; Dominick Moes, G.W. Deacon, and P.H. Feely, hose men; Gus Dell, J.C. Hamil, and F.A. Rommell, Y men. The other 17 members will work at the hand-engine and in other positions as called on by the chief engineer or fire marshal.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid, August 23, 1894.
49. Ibid, September 6, 1894.
50. Ibid, December 31, 1896.
51. Farmington Fire Department Records, Vol. 1, pp. 27-28, 34.
52. Ibid, Vol. 1, p. 36.
53. Ibid, Vol. 1, p. 37. A mixture of bicarbonate of soda, sulfuric acid, and water create a pressurized gas, carbon dioxide. The liquid is propelled through hoses by its own pressure. Since the chemical solution is 50 per cent heavier than air, it removes the oxygen necessary for fire to burn, thereby smothering it. Farmington's chemical engine greatly aided the firefighter's effort in battling burning tar, oil, and other combustible liquids.
54. *Dakota County Tribune*, March 13, 1914.
55. *Dakota County Tribune*, "Farmington Visited by Fire," June 22, 1917.
56. Ibid, June 17, 1921.
57. Farmington Fire Department Records, Vol. 1, p. 112.
58. *Dakota County Tribune*, January 25, 1924.
59. FFD Records, Vol. 1, p. 89.
60. Ibid, Vol. 1, p. 112.
61. *Dakota County Tribune*, February 22, 1924.
62. FFD Records, Vol. 1, p. 119.
63. *Dakota County Tribune*, January 30, 1925.
64. Ibid, February 13, 1925.
65. Ibid, February 27, 1925; FFD Records, Vol. 1, p. 120.
66. FFD Records, Vol. 1, p. 122.
67. FFD Records, Vol. 1, p. 125.
68. *Dakota County Tribune*, May 28, 1926.
69. Ibid, June 18, 1926.
70. *Dakota County Tribune*, June 15, 1928.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid, July 13, 1928.

Facing page: The minutes of the Farmington Volunteer Fire Department from April 3, 1899, list the names of all the members of Cataract Engine Company No. 1.

Back cover: This Currier and Ives print from 1866, The Metropolitan System, honors the early volunteers who risked their lives to fight the flames. Courtesy, CIGNA Museum and Art Collection.

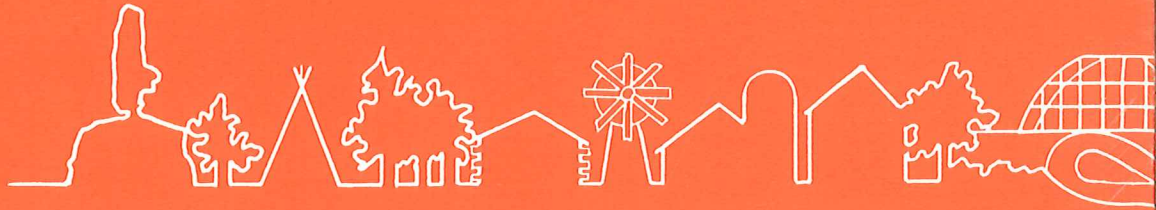
Harmington Minn 1899

April 3

The Catarack Engine Co No 1  
held their monthly meeting  
April 3. 99

There was no further Buisness on  
hand so we took list of members  
of those that belong to the fire men  
wich were as follows

Chief	B. O. Avescott	L. Larson
	B. P. Woodard	Aug Sprute
	P. H. Feely	A. Hartwig
	Wm H Brownell	H. J. Smith
	F. Rommel	J. J. Grebie
	D. Mose	J. C. Hammel
	Jra. Cable	T. W. Burton
	B. A. Ferris	Chas. Willier
	C. Lewis	Jack Kneeland
Soc	Geo Bebold	M. Arnt
	A. Matties former	E. J. Reedham
	M. Fredericks	M. Porrum
	J. Wisebich	L. Porrum
	M. Haley	C. Record
	Luy. Nixon	W. M. Dodge
	John Feely	Jim. Brownell
	W. Hoffman	Stev. Rooney
	Frank Dimer	Mert. Mc New
	Tom. Davis	Bid. Roots
	E. Westmont	L. Hosmer
	N. Bonablood	A. Record
	A. Dimond	L. Liske
	J. Biskle	D. Michel
	Dan Bramberie	Carl Hunter



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