

ST. PAUL FIRE
A HISTORY

1856 - 1994

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IN MEMORIAM
RICHARD L. HEATH
1931 - 1998

RICHARD L. "DICK" HEATH passed away March 5, 1998. He was the author of MILL CITY FIREFIGHTERS - The First Hundred Years, published in 1981, and this book, ST. PAUL FIRE - A HISTORY, 1856 - 1994.

Dick formerly was a professor of history at Ohio State University in the 1960's. He was a member of the City of Minneapolis Planning Department for 27 years. He served on the Minneapolis Fire Department Safety Committee, was a member of the former Minneapolis Fire Reserve, and a charter member of the Firefighters Memorial Museum.

Dick was also the unofficial historian of the Minneapolis Fire Department, having been a fire buff since early childhood, as were his father Donald and his brother Willard. Dick was a member of the former Box 35 Club of Minneapolis and a charter member of the Extra Alarm Association of the Twin Cities, founded in 1974. Dick had several articles published in Fire Engineering Magazine, and in Minnesota History, all dealing with various aspects of the fire service. Dick also wrote a column, "Historic Minneapolis Fires - A Continuing Chronology" for the club newsletter, The Extra Alarmer, and a historical column for The Deluge, the monthly newsletter of Minneapolis Firefighters Local 82, IAFF. He spent many hours since retiring from the City of Minneapolis researching and writing the manuscript for this book.

We will fondly remember how he often shared his vivid recollections of the lumber yard, warehouse and wooden grain elevator fires of years past. His memory of the smallest detail of events at or surrounding fires long since forgotten by others will never be equalled.

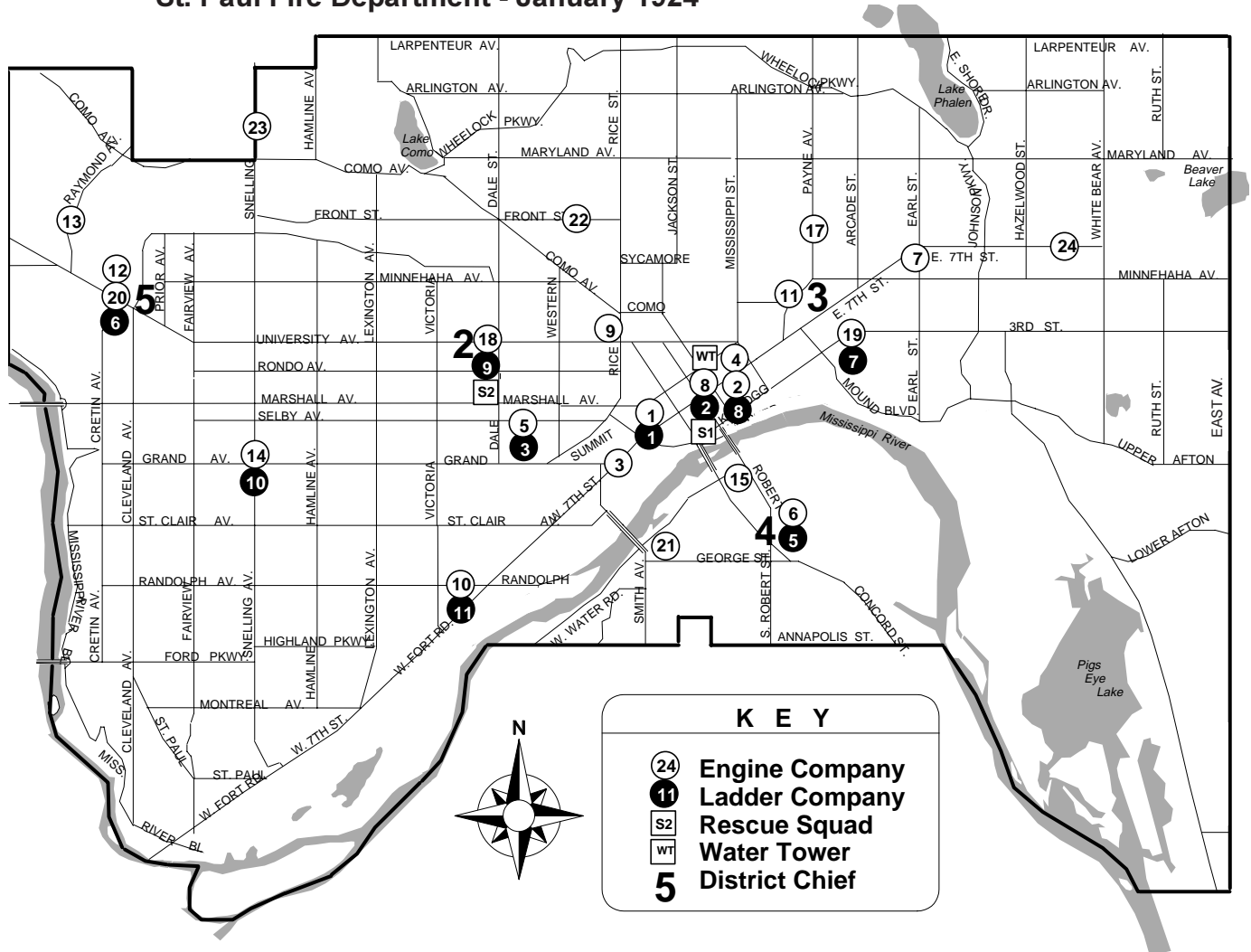
Dick unfortunately passed away before being able to see this text come to its final completion. We can only hope we have done justice to his fine words by bringing them to life with the photographs and annotations in this book.

Dick's friendship, and his interest and efforts to preserve and record the history of the fire service will be forever missed by us all.

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St. Paul Fire Department - January 1924



Station	Address	Built	Eng	Lad	Sqd	Other
1	9th and Main Street	1887	1	1		
2	Wacouta between 6th and 7th	1922	2-4	8		
3	Ramsey and Leech	1872	3			
5	Selby and Mackubin	1882	5	3		
6	Delos and Clinton	1884	6	5		Chief 4
7	Ross and Earl	1885	7			
8	8th and Minnesota	1885	8	2	1	"WT, *"
9	Edmund and Marion	1885	9			
10	Randolph and Bay	1885	10	11		
11	Beaumont and Bedford	1890	11			Chief 3
13	Hampden and Raymond	1895	13			
14	Snelling and Ashland	1910	14	10		
15	Livingston and Fairfield	1901	15			
17	Payne and York	1886	17			
18	University and St. Albans	1908	18	9	2	Chief 2
19	Maple and Conway	1888	19	7		
20	University and Vandalia	1920	20-12	6		Chief 5
21	Ohio and Baker	1911	21			
22	Front and Matilda	1887	22			
23	Asbury and Taylor	1887	23			
24	East 7th Street and Flandrau	1918	24			

Sqd - Rescue Squad, WT- Water Tower, * - Chief and Assistant Chief

Chapter 7

MARKING TIME - NEW QUARTERS

1924 - 1934

The decade of the 1920s brought continued growth to St. Paul. An outwardly prosperous national and regional economy fostered industrial, commercial, and particularly, downtown office development. The city's population grew faster than in the previous decade, adding 37,000 residents to reach a total of 271,606 in 1930. Widespread automobile ownership opened many tracts beyond the reach of transit lines to residential development, filling in blocks and lots between lines near the city center as well as outlying subdivisions.

Although the city's 1887 boundaries still encompassed large tracts of vacant land in its southeast and southwest sections (nearly half the city's area), apartment construction sheltered a growing proportion of the city's population as downtown office employment attracted young, single, transit-dependent residents from a multi-state region. Completion of a new hydro-electric power dam on the Mississippi River in 1917 and a large, nearby automobile assembly plant in 1924 spurred growth in the Highland Park district. Downtown, high-rise office structures created a new skyline, topped by the

31-story First National Bank, one 18-story, three 16-story, and eight 10 to 15-story buildings. Three miles west of downtown, Montgomery-Ward built a retail and mail order complex so large that special firefighting procedures had to be spelled out for it.



Chief of Department 1924-1934
Owen C. Dunn.

St. Paul Pioneer Press

Municipal government in St. Paul and other cities reflected a national temper no longer imbued with Progressive ideals of reform and public activism. The post-World War I "return to normalcy" celebrated the public benefits of private economic prosperity, and restraint by governments said to govern best by governing least. The reaction had its dark overtones, from the excesses of the post-war "Red Scare" and the weakening of organized labor to rampant racism and ethnic intolerance as bad as in all the sorry record

of post-Civil War America. National prohibition seemed to foster more crime and social disorder than social benefit. Industrial prosperity masked a deepening agricultural depression throughout the decade, declining basic investment, over-production, wasteful mergers, and speculative excess that would culminate in the great Crash of 1929.

In St. Paul as in most other cities, the retreat from public reform and activism meant also declining investment in municipal services. The expensive technological revolution in services of the 1910s and early 1920s (culminating in St. Paul with major improvements in the supply and purity of water in 1924) seemed to leave little more to be accomplished. Voters welcomed a respite from tax increases, supporting candidates who promised a frugal, caretaker government content to maintain existing levels of service. Little thought was given to the inevitable deterioration of municipal infrastructure or the need to invest in the city's long-term future. City planning, a new discipline and function that prospered in the Progressive era, found meager political support for its visionary plans as municipalities concentrated on day-to-day, market-oriented regulatory controls such as zoning. Toward the end of the decade, St. Paul citizens would initiate a remarkable exception to these trends, but for most of these years, municipal services, including the fire department, marked time.

A conservative, caretaker government in St. Paul meant one under increasing control by Richard T. O'Connor's Democratic organization. After its setback in 1920, the organization gained new strength from a growing alignment with labor interests that added supporters to the traditionally strong Democratic voter base in St. Paul. Mayor A.E. Nelson won reelection in 1924. He appointed James M. Clancy, a labor candidate and commissioner since 1918, as Public Safety Commissioner. Clancy at once replaced Chief Niles with former Assistant Chief Owen C. Dunn. Oscar

Lander, a captain with 26 years on the department, became assistant chief.

Clancy and his police department would achieve notoriety over the next 10 years for their unspoken policy of allowing criminals safe haven in St. Paul in return for their promise to commit crimes elsewhere. The practice had deeper roots in St. Paul government. Known as the "O'Connor system", it dated from John O'Connor's terms as police chief. The policy had little effect on the fire department, to which

Clancy paid scant attention. In 1925, he secured City approval to appoint a Deputy Public Safety Commissioner, former firefighter and City license inspector Harry T. O'Connell, who relieved Clancy of direct administrative responsibility for the firefighting force. O'Connell, deeply involved in labor politics, was Local 21's secretary-treasurer and had been the



The Craig Oil Co. fire of May 19, 1924 (described in the previous chapter) at Morrison and Eaton Sts.

Minnesota Historical Society

union's first president after serving as the Protective Association president during its campaign for two-platoons. The fire department remained for a decade close to the City's ruling political factions, enjoying an unusual continuity in command and some improvements in firefighter benefits within budgets severely limited by City frugality and city charter spending limits.

The choice of Owen Dunn for chief was popular with firefighters. Fifty-four years old and a 32-year veteran of the fire department, he was a "fireman's fireman". He had joined the department soon after moving to St. Paul from Wisconsin in late 1891. Promoted to lieutenant of Engine 8 in 1906 and Captain of Ladder 8 in 1913, he became a district chief

through the civil service process in 1918 and assistant chief in 1920. He was (appropriately for his fireman's image) a state checkers champion and handball enthusiast, as well as an active member of the Knights of Columbus and Loyal Order of Moose. A bachelor, he lived and breathed firefighting. Although he maintained an address at his sister's house, he spent most of his time as chief on duty, maintaining a one-room apartment at headquarters and responding to almost every working fire. His administrative style had little place for policy or organizational initiatives: he would run the fire department by the book as a traditional firefighting force.

As a charter member of Local 21, backed up by a deputy public safety commissioner close to City elected officials, Chief Dunn could also be expected to keep the interests of firefighters foremost. Among his first acts as chief in 1924 was to grant firefighters one day (i.e., one shift) off every two weeks for a 78-hour week. In 1925, Dunn secured City approval for new promotional lines and grades in the firefighting force. Lieutenants, who performed the same duties as captains on opposite shifts with less pay, were reclassified as captains in January, 1925, and the lieutenant's position was eliminated. Motor pumper drivers became engineers, other drivers, chauffeurs. The position of assistant engineer (stoker) was deleted as no longer needed. The single classification of firefighter replaced separate pipemen and laddermen. Firefighters could take the examination for captain only after four years of service. Candidates for district chief had to have at least 15 years of service, four of them as captain. Modest annual wage increases for all grades, which had halted after 1920, resumed. At the same time, firefighters received five more days of vacation in 1927 for a total of 20 days per year.

In other respects, Dunn was less successful in securing needed fire department improvements. He started his term with a department budget of \$870,000, the smallest in some years. A \$45,500 increase in 1925 was largely absorbed by new pay grades. From then on, despite a steady increase in the city's assessed values, the fire department budget

stalled at a figure insufficient to provide pay raises after 1926, to add companies or apparatus, or even to maintain company strength. The total force dropped by 10 men to 461 in 1925, to 454 in 1926, back to 461 in 1927, then down again to 452 in 1928. Average company manning fell to four to six men per engine company, five to seven per ladder company, well below underwriter standards.

New companies and apparatus were also needed. Motorization had occurred in a hasty, sometimes stop-gap manner. The first Waterous motor pumpers proved unreliable for long-term service. Three engine companies ran with hose wagons rather than pumpers, and one ran with a chemical engine. The five tractorized steam fire engines were not only less efficient, but had boilers and pumps from 16 to 40 years old; although periodically rebuilt, they could not be expected to last much longer. The department had no reserve pumpers or ladder trucks, forcing a company to run with a hose wagon or go out of service when its rig needed repair. New, auto-oriented subdivisions in Highland Park and on the city's northern and eastern borders lay beyond easy reach of even motor apparatus.

The 1925 budget permitted purchase of only one large pumper for downtown service. A lease-purchase arrangement was used to secure another pumper for reserve use and a booster and hose rig to replace the chemical engine at Station 24. From then on, no new apparatus was purchased for six years. Chief Dunn and his master mechanic regularly requested additional pumpers to replace hose wagons and the five steam fire engines, added ladder trucks to provide a reserve rig and replace Ladder 8, new squad wagons, and a foamite rig to fight oil fires. Just as regularly, they were turned down in the City budget process. The repair shop struggled in its cramped quarters to keep older rigs running, and to replace the clumsy hard rubber tires found on many rigs with balloon tires. Two of the steamers, at Engines 2 and 12, had their response districts limited to their immediate vicinity, remaining in quarters on most alarms to maintain coverage of their high-hazard districts, but three others remained as active as the motor

pumpers. By 1930, St. Paul was among the few cities in the country to have steamers still in first-line service.

Inspectors of the National Board of Fire Underwriters visited St. Paul again in 1925. They gave high marks to Chief Dunn, poor scores to the fire department. In addition to its undermanned companies and obsolete apparatus, the inspectors found its fire alarm system little improved since the sharp criticisms of their last visit. Stations were poorly located to cover new outlying development. Chief Dunn used their recommendations to convince the City to purchase two new fire station sites. The first, acquired in 1925 at Otto and Underwood (present Highland Parkway and Snelling) would protect the area around the new Ford assembly plant. The other, purchased in 1926 at Payne and Hawthorne Avenues, would permit moving Engine 17 further north. No funds were provided, however, for construction of new stations or for companies to man them. Coverage of developing areas in the southwest quadrant of the city and ladder response to the far east side also remained inadequate.

Chief Dunn had to be content with marginal improvements that placed little burden on City budgets. In 1926, he organized an Arson Squad, based on methods pioneered in Detroit. The next year, he secured authority to appoint two additional district chiefs to cover downtown, relieving the assistant chief of day-to-day responsibility for companies in the district. His efforts to secure a drill tower and classroom for training, however, found no City support in successive annual budget reviews. In their absence, Dunn did little to improve training, with two notable exceptions. In 1927, he began "service ratings" for firefighters, scoring them on their efficiency. In 1929, Dunn secured Red Cross assistance in training 99 firefighters in first aid, 34 of them to the advanced level. From this modest start dates the fire department's role in providing emergency medical services, now a primary departmental function. By 1930, the department numbered 177 medical emergencies among its record 4,279 runs.

Dunn also acquiesced in the continuing trend toward using telephones as the preferred method for calling additional companies to a fire. Although telegraph keys in boxes were still occasionally used to strike a 2-11 or 4-11, most extra alarms were now verbal or telegraphic "special calls" for a response specified by the chief in command at a fire: for example, two more engines and a truck, or four more engines, or whatever the chief needed. The change paralleled the wide use of telephones by the public for initial alarms (only one in 18 alarms now came from alarm boxes), but also reflected growing obsolescence in the telegraph system, which by 1929 required telephone follow-up to all stations on box alarms to assure that gong signals had been received. Chief Dunn proposed telephones in alarm boxes for fire department use, but this failed to survive the City's budget scrutiny. He also had little success in following up on underwriter recommendations for a new alarm headquarters in a separate, fireproof building.

Another trend of the late 1920s cast no credit on the fire department, its officers, and the municipal administration. Black firefighters, a proud component of the firefighting force since 1885, came under increasing racist pressure that steadily diminished their numbers on the department. The process is not well documented, but it probably involved personal harassment, more vindictive application of the rule book, and increasingly biased selection standards in recruiting and testing. Additional black firefighters had been recruited to man Engine 22 when it replaced Supply Hose 5 in 1912, and to provide two-platoons to maintain the segregated company in 1918. When Engine 22 received a motor hose wagon in 1923, the crew was larger than needed for the rig. The black firefighters were moved as a unit to Engine 9, where they manned a new motor pumper. By 1927, however, their numbers had diminished to less than a full pumper crew. The hose wagon at Engine 22 was moved to Engine 9, whose black crew came to expect collective harassment such as grubby, all-night details on dump and peat bog fires out of their district.

Despite its shortcomings, the fire department maintained a good firefighting record against major commercial and industrial



The all black crew in front of an Ahrens-Fox at Station 9, circa 1924-27.

block storage yard of baled waste paper, giving a special alarm response of firefighters a long afternoon and night of work trying to douse the flaming heaps of bales. Smoldering fire burrowing deep in the paper piles broke out again on April 13 at 12:38 AM, this time sweeping into a large, one-story frame storage shed and destroying it despite the efforts of firefighters summoned on two special alarms. Yet another Midway blaze on June 4, 1926, burned out the top floor and roof of the LaSalle Company, wholesale druggist, at 2218 University Avenue. The smoky 7:11 AM fire, punctuated by minor explosions, took five hours to control and caused high loss.

A far more threatening blaze, the largest of the decade, broke out at 5:47 PM on January 17, 1927, in the United States Bedding Company on

StPFD

blazes. A 6 PM fire on February 26, 1925, swept through the large-area, one-and-one-half story St. Paul Foundry at Como Avenue and Mackubin Street. A 4-11 response held flames to the plant at the cost of cold work in sub-zero weather and one fire captain injured by falling debris. A few hours later, at 1:45 AM on February 27, companies arriving at the Kendrick Block at 27 East 7th Street found the old, four-story structure fully involved. They rescued several persons from upper floors as the building belched smoke, then erupted in flames. Ten engines, four trucks, the two squads, and the water tower set up heavy streams, covered exposures on each side, and protected nearby roofs against showers of sparks carried on a strong northwest wind. The building burned to a collapsing shell in less than an hour.

Two fires in April, 1925, demonstrated a new hazard in the Midway district that would give St. Paul firefighters some of their worst fires over the next three decades. The Waldorf Paper Company plant, built on the former site of the Northern Insulating Company at Wabash and Vandalia, processed waste paper into new paper and cardboard. At 11:43 AM on April 1, flames swept across its quarter-



The Kendrick Block fire of February 27, 1925. Ladder 2's 1916 Seagrave/American LaFrance aerial is in front of the building.

St. Paul Pioneer Press

Minnehaha between Arundel and Western avenues. The plant occupied a huge, two-story brick structure a block-and-a-half long and 200-feet deep. Flames starting in machinery and fueled by lint, cotton scraps, and a very heavy fire load spread so rapidly that within five minutes of the first alarm the bedding company was totally involved. The blaze soon spread into the equally hazardous Northwood



New Station 17 opened in 1930 on the s.e. corner of Payne Ave. and Hawthorne. It is shown here in the 1960's

Steve Skaar

Sounding Board Company in the west end of the structure. A strong northwest wind blew flames horizontally across Minnehaha to set fire to 14 house fronts, and spread sparks that set roof fires in 50 dwellings and a church spire over a four-block area downwind.

A 4-11 and special calls brought 10 engines, four trucks, two squads, two hose wagons, a chemical engine, and off-shift crews that doused all exposure fires and prevented a general conflagration, but loss totaled \$359,750, worst since the Cold Storage warehouse fire of 1900. While all companies still worked on the blaze, a 7:28 PM basement fire at 25 East 6th Street required a special alarm, to which some recalled off-shift firefighters at downtown stations had to respond on foot in the absence of

reserve apparatus. The department answered a total of 39 alarms in a 24-hour period, the busiest day yet recorded.

Arson was suspected on June 27, 1927, when two fires broke out simultaneously in the Midwest Chemical Company at 2290 Wycliff and the Phoenix Chair Company, a block-and-a-half away at Wycliff and Bradford. Flames from both fires spread to a cooperage plant on Wycliff and a sawdust and shavings warehouse at 2343 Hampden. Three special calls after the 5:01 AM first alarm, each for four engines and a ladder truck, brought 15 engines, four trucks, and two squads to fight flames over a two-block area as all four plants (one two-story brick and three one-story frame structures) burned to the ground.

Another spectacular blaze in 1927 destroyed the "A" mill of the St. Paul Milling Company, located on the river at the foot of Chestnut Street. When firefighters arrived on a 6:58 PM alarm on September 25, the five-story frame, 150-foot-long structure spouted flames from its roof and all floors. The flour mill burned to the ground in an hour and a half as companies responding on several special calls successfully protected an adjacent one-story warehouse and a grain elevator. On December 4, 1927, during a howling blizzard, a hot, smoky blaze swept a two-story wing of the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company plant at Forest and Fauquier. Firefighters responding on the first alarm at 3:05 PM and on the three special calls that followed worked until 7:30 PM before the blaze was controlled. Such fires helped drive the year's loss to a new record of \$1,476,575. Another high loss resulted from a generator explosion at 2:19 PM on January 3, 1928, at the High Bridge plant of the Northern States Power Company. The ensuing fire was quickly controlled by a special-alarm response of firefighters, but downtown power was cut off for several hours.

Lawrence Hodgson returned to the mayor's

office in 1926. The ubiquitous editor, lobbyist, and perennial political candidate (who in later years would write a civic-gossip column for the St. Paul Dispatch under his nickname of “Larry Ho”) represented a Democratic organization more interested in maintaining its political advantage through a comfortable status quo than in municipal progress. Among his first acts was to halt further bond issues for public improvements in the name of economy. A referendum in September, 1927, to force bonding for a number of public projects (including a new public safety headquarters building) failed by a large margin. When a low voter turnout re-elected Hodgson in 1928, a Pioneer Press editorial sighed that the voters had “... expressed their will that the almost neutral hand of government he has given the city be continued. Mayor Hodgson has made a practice of attempting little and risking nothing. Normalcy and drift are still popular policies in American government.”

Already underway, however, was a surprising grass-roots effort to develop and promote a remarkably ambitious program of long-range public improvements for St. Paul. It originated with civic, commercial and neighborhood groups largely outside the political process. In early December 1927, 27 such organizations formed the United Improvement Council, charged with formulating a five-year improvement plan and project priorities. The Council held innumerable meetings and public hearings, interviewing a wide variety of civic interests as well as City departments. By August 2, 1928, it reconciled the work of its many committees and approved a report to the commissioners of the City and Ramsey County for presentation on August 7.

The report proposed no less than \$15,577,000 of capital improvements (scaled down from \$26,000,000 of initial project requests), covering everything from deferred maintenance and replacement of obsolete facilities to economic development and city beau-

tification. The City would be asked to issue \$7,577,000 in bonds, the County, \$8,000,000. The United Improvement Council proposed six million dollars for streets, including completion of work already started on Kellogg Boulevard downtown, construction of Johnson Parkway, Shepard Road, Warner Road, Wheelock Parkway, and South Lexington Boulevard, and improvements to University Avenue, 3rd



Station 5 (shown here in the 1980's) at the s.w. corner of Ashland Ave. and Victoria St. housed Engine 5 and Ladder 3 when it opened in 1930 on the former site of Chemical 6. The two companies moved from their former quarters at Selby Ave. and Makubin St.

Steve Skaar

Street, and East and West 7th streets. One-and-one-quarter million dollars were earmarked for school construction, \$875,000 for parks and playgrounds, and \$500,000 for airport improvements. Four million dollars would build a new St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Court House. Other funds would include improvements to the river terminal, an enlarged Civic Auditorium, a new public works storehouse and supply yard, sewer improvements, and upgrading of selected commercial intersections.

The Fire Department was slated to get the lion's share of public safety investment: \$850,000 for four new fire stations, a new public safety building to house fire and police headquarters as well as Station 8, and a completely

new fire and police telegraph system. There is no evidence that Chief Dunn played a significant role with the United Improvement Council, but he had obviously presented fire department needs to it effectively. Underwriter concerns with station location and the fire alarm system, undoubtedly transmitted by Dunn, clearly influenced the Council's recommendations. Although the program by no means met all fire department needs, it promised more improvements than most cities enjoyed in an era of municipal parsimony.

The United Improvement Council requested a November 1928, referendum on the City bond issue and asked Ramsey County commissioners and their legislative delegation to seek authority for the County bonds in the 1929 state legislature. It then began a major voter educational campaign, sending speakers to any citizen group that invited them. By November 1928, the association had enrolled no less than 52 civic organizations in support of its plan, which offered benefits wide enough to attract almost every interest. Parent-teacher associations, for example, supported the proposed new schools, while organized labor enthusiastically endorsed public works projects providing so many added jobs. Political officials could not resist the popular enthusiasm developed by the United Improvement Council. Mayor Hodgson and several commissioners became advocates for the bond issues. A November 6, 1928, referendum passed the City bond issue by a very large margin of 18,765 to 5,796. Approval of Ramsey County bonds by the state legislature followed early the next year.



Station 7 on Ross just west of Earl St. opened in 1930. A small police precinct station was added on the west side of the station.

St. Paul Pioneer Press

The City wasted little time in starting work on the program. It approved sale of its bonds in April 1929, and soon began construction on the four new fire stations and public safety building. Work was speeded by prior City ownership of the four station sites. One at Payne and Hawthorne avenues, purchased in 1926, would move Engine 17 further north to reach new development more easily. Another ac-

quired in 1925 at Snelling and Otto (now Highland Parkway) would protect Highland Park and the new Ford assembly plant. The City still owned the site of Engine 16's old house at Ashland Avenue and Victoria Street; it would permit a new station for Engine 5 and Ladder 3 west of their old station. Demolition and replacement of

Station 7 at Ross and Earl streets with a larger station for Engine 7 and Ladder 7 would place Ladder 7 further east. The ladder's old house at Maple and Conway would be closed, and Engine 19 transferred from it to the new Highland Park house. All four of the new stations opened between August and November, 1930. They substantially improved fire department coverage of growing residential areas near the city's limits.

The new Public Safety Building occupied a full half block on 10th Street between Minnesota and Robert. An imposing, classic-style, three-story stone structure, it housed Engine 8, Ladder 2, Squad 1, the Water Tower, Chief, Assistant Chief, and 1st and 4th District Chiefs in a large, seven-bay station on the corner of 10th and Minnesota. The second floor held the station dormitory, fire alarm headquarters, fire department offices, and living quarters for Chief Dunn. The third floor included a large

classroom for training. The Robert Street side of the structure held the headquarters, garage, and detention center of the Police Department. The Public Health Department also shared the building. All departments occupied their new quarters on December 1, 1930.

Three days later, the new fire and police telegraph system went in operation. It was a standard Gamewell manual system with capacity for 50 circuits, 30 to alarm boxes, 10 each for primary and secondary circuits to fire stations. It functioned much as the old system but greatly increased reliability with more circuits, new equipment, and new batteries. The system finally restored two independent means of telegraphic communication with fire stations: a primary circuit to station bells and punch registers, and a secondary circuit to large station gongs. New telephone switchboards also permitted calling stations individually, by group, or all simultaneously. Location of alarm headquarters in the new, fireproof Public Safety Building eased underwriter concerns about its safety from conflagration.

Gamewell also provided 380 new street boxes, enough to replace 280 obsolete boxes and increase total boxes to 439 over the next few years. Box alarms came in through headquarters relay boards to bells and punch registers, then were retransmitted to stations by manual transmitters backed up by telegraph keys. Alarm procedures were much as before. Box alarms were transmitted twice on station registers, then twice on gongs. Multiple alarms

were also sounded twice on primary and secondary circuits. "Still" alarms (received by telephone) were transmitted by telephone to all stations after two strokes on the primary circuit, followed by two rounds of the box nearest the alarm's location on the secondary gongs, then codes on the primary tappers for the companies responding. A special call for more companies was dispatched by telephone, preceded by two strokes on both the primary and secondary circuits.



The new Public Safety Building at 101 E. 10th Street opened in 1930. It housed Station 8 as well as Fire and Police Headquarters. The western half of the building (shown here) is Station 8.

Jack Mersereau

New response cards provided five alarms to commercial, industrial, and institutional hazards, four alarms in residential areas (a 4-11 now drew an additional assignment rather than a combined second and 3rd alarm response). Still and box alarms drew the same assignment of three engines, two trucks, and a squad in high hazard areas, two engines, a truck, and a squad for residential districts. Two operators manned fire alarm headquarters at all times.

The fire department accomplished yet one more major improvement independent of the City bond issue. In 1929, it completed refitting of all its fire hose with couplings using national standard screw threads. A measure long advocated by the National Board of Fire Underwriters to facilitate cooperative work among different fire departments, it allowed Minneapolis companies, for example, to lay hose from St. Paul engines without adapters and visa-versa. Hydrant and suction hose threads, however, remained unique to St. Paul, requiring Minneapolis engines to use adapters to hook up. Replacement of St. Paul hose

couplings was accomplished entirely by St. Paul fire department personnel.

Total improvements completed and underway were enough to win St. Paul first place in the National Chamber of Commerce 1929 Inter-Chamber Fire Waste Contest. National Board of Fire Underwriter inspectors, who returned in the summer of 1930, must also have been impressed with such an ambitious effort to respond to their concerns. They made no



The only pumper purchased in 1931 was this American LaFrance 1000gpm triple combination rig shown in this delivery photo lettered for Engine 7. It was actually placed in service as Engine 4.

recommendations for additional or relocated companies. The inspectors were less impressed with the state of St. Paul's fire apparatus. Two steamers failed their pumping tests. The five steamers in service accounted for 41 per cent of total apparatus time in the repair shops. Underwriters wanted the City to replace them at once, as well as the three hose wagons in service as engine companies and an obsolete, 26-year-old aerial truck at Ladder 8.

With City budgets already feeling the effect of the depression, however, Chief Dunn got just one new pumper in 1931. When an accident wrecked Squad 1 in 1932, the shops assembled a replacement squad using a new chassis with body work and the chemical tank from the wrecked 1912 rig. The next year, the repair shop similarly put together a pumper by placing a new Waterous pump and the hose body and chemical tank from a worn-out 1913 hose wagon on a new chassis. The new pumpers replaced the steamers at Engines 8 and 1,

but steamers still ran from Engines 2, 12, and 15.

The underwriters also severely faulted fire department training. By 1932, Dunn had firefighters attending classes twice a month on equipment handling and first aid, with company officers attending additional sessions on firefighting methods. In the absence of a drill tower and full-time training staff, however, skill levels still fell short of modern standards.

This showed up in firefighting tactics. For its first attack lines St. Paul still relied on heavy 2-1/2 inch hoses that were hard to handle for interior firefighting and wasteful of water.

Underwriters also criticized the department's lack of heavy stream equipment. The numerous turret nozzles mounted on horse-drawn hose wagons in the early 1900s had not been reinstalled on motor rigs, leaving only the water tower and its deck gun, a turret on Hose 8, and three old "siamese" deluge sets in service. St. Paul firefighters attacked most major fires with 2-1/2 inch hand lines at close quarters, often up ladders to

Matt Lee

heavily involved upper floors, a hazardous and not always effective tactic. Progress here was confined to turrets placed on the new squad and on a reserve hose wagon: Chief Dunn was a traditional firefighter, cautious about innovation.

He was also careful of his men. Through most of the 1920s, the fire department enjoyed an unusual respite from fatalities in the line of duty. From 1921 to 1932, only one death occurred: on April 10, 1927, Firefighter George Brown of Engine 22, working on the second floor of the blazing Ramsey County Preventorium outside the city, was caught by a sudden roof collapse. He leaped to the ground but had already suffered fatal injuries from burns. Three fatalities in 1932 and 1933, however, showed that firefighters risked their lives on every alarm, no matter how large or small the fire. Firefighter Patrick Flaherty fell from the roof of a burning house at Rose and Weide on March 9, 1932, and died on March 20 from in-

juries complicated by pneumonia. Firefighter Louis Literski died on December 17, 1932, from injuries suffered in a fall from the tillerman's seat of Ladder 3 as it slewed around the corner of Victoria and Ridgewood on the way to a fire. Firefighter Joe Foley of Engine 14 died February 10, 1933, after he fell from a roof at a blaze at 1430 Sherburne Avenue.

Hard, dangerous work also confronted firefighters at major fires, although the increasing effect of better building laws, fireproof construction, and automatic sprinklers downtown reduced their numbers. Clearance of the entire south side of 3rd Street to make way for Kellogg Boulevard also eliminated the rows of old warehouses that had seen so many fires over the years. Total alarms continued to rise to a record 4,279 in 1930, but fire losses began to drop off. Hazards in outlying areas, however, remained high, particularly in the Midway industrial district.

A 1:28 AM blaze on January 23, 1929, completely destroyed the three-story plant of the LaSalle Products wholesale drug company (the same one damaged in a 1926 fire). Nine engines and three trucks fought the smoky fire for over 10 hours in 15-below temperatures. An even longer fight in sub-zero weather occurred four days later. Companies responding on a 9:52 AM alarm found heavy fire in the basement of "Old Commission Row", a block-long, three-story row of warehouses containing seven firms at 282-300 East 6th Street. Flames spread throughout the basement in an hour, then began to work into upper floors, eventually breaking through the roof. Firefighters summoned on special alarms and an off-shift recall set up heavy streams that did not finally extinguish the blaze until midnight.



The ice covered ruins of the LaSalle Products fire on January 23, 1929 at 2218 University Ave.

Minnesota Historical Society

The "Commission Row" fire on January 27, 1929 involved a group of 3 story warehouses. This interesting photo shows the old and new. A steamer is visible pumping along side an Ahrens-Fox piston pumper. St. Paul still used steam pumps into the 30's, one of the last cities to do so.

StPF/D/Robert Koetz





Another interesting shot of the "Commission Row" fire with a steam pumper in the foreground and Water Tower 1 playing a stream onto the roof of the buildings. The steamers certainly contributed to the smoke at the scene.

St. Paul Pioneer Press

Another stubborn blaze in six-degree weather broke out at 11 AM on February 9, 1931, in the Anthony apartments at 689-723 Laurel Avenue. Flames starting in a sub-basement near the center of the four-story apartment row appeared knocked down several times, only to break out elsewhere in the building as they burrowed through walls and floors. A 2-11, several special calls, and at 12:30 PM, recall of the entire off-shift brought 13 engines, four ladder trucks, and the two squads to the scene. By the time the fire was controlled at 3 PM, the building had been gutted.

On September 20, 1931, during a thunderstorm, at 5:20 PM a flash of lightning, clap of thunder, then a violent explosion rocked firefighters at Station 20. They turned out to find a block-long, one-story warehouse at Hampden Avenue and Wabash Street totally involved, with flames spreading across Wabash to a second, similar warehouse. The blazing warehouses, full of lumber, shavings, and sawdust, sent up storms of sparks that soon set threatening fires on the cupola of a nearby grain elevator and the roof of a creamery at 2250 Territorial Road, several blocks away. Chief Dunn summoned 31 of the city's 35 companies to control the near-conflagration by late evening.

The burst of civic energy, public employment, and fire department improvement represented by the 1929 bond issue obscured for a time the dark economic clouds that gathered by the end of the year. The stock market crash of October, 1929, did not alone trigger the Great Depression, but most dramatically signaled the country's rapid descent into the worst economic crisis of its history. Unemployment, plant shutdowns, bank failures, and collapsing wages and agricultural prices grew steadily worse as the depression spread worldwide. The numbers of persons in dire need rapidly exceeded the capacity of local public and private relief agencies. Bread lines, soup kitchens, and "Hooverville" shanty towns of homeless unemployed sprang up in every American city.

Although St. Paul's diversified economy initially responded less drastically to the depression than did heavy industry towns, population growth slowed by more than one-half. New commercial and industrial construction simply ceased. Many older, marginal structures went vacant. Property tax returns fell as real estate values plummeted and taxpayers defaulted. City expenditures for public relief skyrocketed. By 1934, City finances were in disarray, with a \$1,570,000 deficit in current expenses that was still growing. At the same time, the city's civic fabric was strained by growing lawlessness. The "O'Connor" system had broken down: increasing crime was highlighted by well-publicized kidnappings, and a spectacular chase of arch-criminal John Dillinger from his St. Paul hideout.

The mounting fiscal crisis slowly eroded fire department budgets. Although firemen got an added day off for a 72-hour week in 1930, an authorized increase of 10 men in 1931 was canceled out by lay-offs within a few months. From a high of \$947,151 in 1931, expenditures fell to less than \$800,000 in 1935. Five more men were dropped in 1932 and firefighters took a substantial (10 per cent) pay cut of \$15 per month. Five more layoffs followed in 1933, and

seven more in 1934. Worried that manning problems would endanger their 72-hour week, firefighters backed a city charter amendment effective in January, 1934, confirming their right to “one-day-rest-in-seven”, which together with the 1934 budget cut forced Engines 2 and 12 out of service. Company strength dropped to five men on just five companies, four on all other engines and trucks, and three on hose and squad companies. Even so, the City cut firefighter wages another \$20 per month (15 per cent) in 1934, and held back 14.5 per cent of all paychecks for the first six months of the year because of lagging tax receipts, cutting pay to its lowest figure in 16 years.

Fire department response to the mounting fiscal crisis could not have been helped by political turmoil that affected its leadership. Commissioner of Public Safety James M. Clancy left his post in 1930 to make an unsuccessful bid for mayor. Veteran commissioner George Sudheimer took his place and brought in a new Deputy Public Safety Commissioner, Fred Siegel, sending Harry T. O’Connell (a close ally of Clancy) back to the fire department ranks as an engineer. Assistant Chief Oscar Langer also returned to the ranks as captain, replaced by William J. Sudeith, a captain with 21 years experience on the department.

Two years later, however, newly elected Mayor William Mahoney headed a slate of labor-backed candidates that won five of the six commissioner posts. James Clancy, defeated for commissioner by a narrow margin, contested the results, as did other unsuccessful candidates amidst charges of vote-count irregularities. The charges were eventually dropped in return for a deal: veteran commissioner John H. McDonald retained his seat on the commission and assumed the post of Public Safety Commissioner, in return for appointment of Clancy’s supporters to the new admin-



The Superior Refining Company fire of August 14, 1932 at Eaton and Morrison (in same area as the Craig Oil fire in 1924) caused a BLEVE. The term would not come into common firefighting use until many years later.

Minnesota Historical Society

istration. Thomas G. O’Connell became McDonald’s deputy, and Harry T. O’Connell (former Deputy Public Safety Commissioner, and Clancy protege) became Assistant Fire Chief in place of Sudeith, who went back to the ranks as captain. The effect of political and perhaps familial connections was all too evident. Harry O’Connell had never held a fire department rank higher than engineer, but Dunn (himself a staunch union member) was apparently content to draw on his administrative and political experience while Dunn handled what he saw as the more important duty of fighting fires.

He had ample opportunity to exercise his firefighting skills. A blaze at 7:29 PM on January 9, 1932, at 19 West 9th Street trapped 15 persons in a second floor restaurant above a blazing service garage and furniture store. All were rescued by a 4-11 response of firefighters. One of the most spectacular, threatening fires of the era broke out at 1:25 PM on August 14, 1932, in the Superior Refining Company plant and bulk storage facility at Eaton and Morrison streets on the west side. Flames involved a one-story shed crammed with barrels of gasoline and oil. Twelve minutes after firemen arrived, a large storage tank containing 60,000 gallons of gasoline exploded in an enormous "BLEVE" (Boiling Liquid Expanding Vapor Explosion). One firefighter, caught in a pool of flaming gasoline, suffered severe burns; two others were injured by a flailing hose line when they dropped it to flee the blast. Assistant Chief O'Connell led a crew into the fire area five times at great risk to shut down valves to

other threatened tanks. At 2:00 PM, another BLEVE sent up a huge fireball that set fire to nearby dwellings and four boxcars loaded with grease and oil. Firefighters, still without the foam equipment they had so long requested, concentrated on cooling eight remaining gasoline tanks and other exposures with a dozen big streams. They contained the fire in four hours but did not finally extinguish flames until 16 hours later.

A difficult high-fire problem faced companies responding to a 10:51 AM alarm on September 11, 1933. Flames involved wooden conveyor galleries running across the top of concrete grain tanks 120-feet high at the Farmers National Grain Corporation Elevator, Upper Levee and Mill Street. Firefighters responding on two special calls worked several hours to hoist their hose lines far above the street while the water tower cooled down flames and other streams quelled nearby spark fires.

Sparks posed a yet greater problem on April 15, 1934, when fire destroyed St. Stanislaus Church at Yankee (near 7th) and Western avenues. The 50-year-old church erupted in flames soon after companies arrived on an 11:31 AM alarm. Within half an hour, 25 mile-per-hour winds scattered flaming brands onto rooftops over six blocks, setting fire to 27 houses and barns on Yankee, Goodhue, Banfil, and Ann streets. Six special calls from 11:36 AM to 12:30 PM brought 14 engine, six ladder, and two squad companies that narrowly prevented a sweeping conflagration through the densely built blocks. Collapse of the church steeple and front walls buried Ladder 1 in debris.

As the economic depression deepened, neither City government nor fire

The St. Stanislaus Church fire on April 15, 1934 nearly caused a conflagration.

Minnesota Historical Society



department administration appeared able to resolve the budget crisis. Local politics reflected the public dissatisfaction and activism that had brought the liberal (some said radical) Farmer-Labor Party to power in state government in 1930. William Mahoney drew on Farmer-Labor backing in his bid for re-election in 1934, ignoring mounting fiscal problems while he sought municipal ownership of electric power utilities at the cost of major additional debt. Voters in 1934 were far more interested in cleaning up underworld racketeering in St. Paul. Labor-backed incumbents faced mayoral aspirant Mark Gehan and a slate of “independent” commissioner candidates that included H.E. Warren, campaigning specifically for Public Safety Commissioner on a police reform platform. In an election with the largest voter turnout yet recorded, Gehan and three of the “independents”, including Warren, won. As contested election results again de

layed assignment of commissioner posts, Chief Dunn’s tenure, always labor supported, appeared uncertain.

A week after the election, Chief Dunn entered the hospital with an intestinal disorder. He did not survive an operation on May 4, 1934. His death at age 65 ended a 42-year career as a firefighter, 10 of those years as chief. Under his leadership, the fire department successfully battled some of the city’s most threatening fires and made visible progress with its new stations and fire alarm system, but showed few other improvements in equipment or methods. Dunn’s traditional approach and indifference to either politics or innovation left the department vulnerable to the drastic budget strictures of the depression years. His lasting legacy was a tradition of hard firefighting, led by an old-time, no-nonsense smoke eater whose one purpose in life was to fight fires.



The 1933 Luerne 750gpm triple combination pumper is shown here as Engine 3 getting ready to return to quarters with a full load of frozen wet hose. The StPF D shops used the hose body is from the former 1913 American LaFrance Hose and Chemical and the Luerne chassis to construct the rig.

StPF D