

History of the Worthington Fire Department

When the old timers in Worthington think of their Fire Department, they remember the original Fire Chief, Mr. Jim Wagner, who served as Fire chief from 1906 until 1929. He was a barber, and occupied a small two-story frame building, located just south of where the Home Market is now located. Many times, he had to leave customers in their chairs, faces covered with lather, to respond to a fire.

The original fire equipment included a hand drawn chemical cart, consisting of two 40-gallon chemical tanks containing water with sodium bicarbonate in solution with a small amount of sulfuric acid which could be mixed into the solution. Chemical action of the acid with the solution developed carbon dioxide and the pressure of this gas forced the water out through one inch rubber covered hose. These two chemical tanks were mounted on a high two-wheeled car, which was rather top heavy and had to be pulled to a fire. It was of somewhat meager value, due to its limited capacity, even though chemical recharges permitted the tanks to be filled and used more than once at a fire.

The principal piece of equipment in the early days was a small four-wheeled cart, pulled by hand, and consisting of a hand-operated water pump. Handles in a horizontal position on two sides of the cart permitted about five men to grasp each handle and move it up and down, delivering water through a 2 ½ " hose carried on the cart with extra hose being pulled to the fire on two high-wheeled hose reels. The source of water for the pump consisted of the wells and cisterns which were found at the various homes in the village.

This meager fire equipment functioned better than might be imagined for the 545 people who lived in the village, according to the 1910 census. In the case of fire, it was reported by telephone to the telephone operator, who called some of the 15 men on the fire department; and a fire bell located on a low tower in the business section of town was sounded by one of the firemen, which alerted all firemen, as well as practically all residents. In early times, most all residents, both men and women, responded, as there was plenty of work for the volunteers to help remove the furnishings of the home that was on fire.

The Fire Chief, Mr. Wagner, known to everyone as Jim, and his fifteen firemen, were really public servants, serving without pay, but doing a commendable job, day or night, with equipment which was back-breaking to operate, and in scant supply.

Fire protection was improved with the installation of a waterworks system in 1912. The water supply came from two wells on the school property, with each pump of very limited capacity, operated by a natural gas engine. An elevated tank (still in place) of 50,000 gallons capacity was installed on a 100' tower and 21 hydrants were placed on 4" and 6" water lines.

About ten years after the waterworks were installed, a motorized piece of fire apparatus was purchased by donations from persons residing both inside and outside Worthington. This fire truck consisted of a Model T Ford one-ton chassis, including a 250 gallon per minute pump, and two 35 gallon chemical tanks, fire hose and two ladders. Firemen operated this equipment successfully, responding to fires both inside and outside the village, since contributions for the purchase of the truck came, in part, from people residing outside the village limits. The truck was underpowered for the weight it carried, and had difficulty negotiating the hills in the area. Water could be pumped from wells and cisterns, as well as from hydrants in the village. In these days, a serious fire in the village occurred at least every three years, in addition to the usual number of limited losses in dwellings.

The village was growing rapidly from 545 persons shown in the 1910 census, to 705 in the 1920 census and to 1,239, as shown in the 1930 census. The fire protection improved as the population increased, and in 1931, a new fire truck was purchased, which had a 500 gallon-per minute pump, a 150 gallon booster water tank, extension ladders and the usual other auxiliary equipment. A township volunteer fire department was organized, which held regular drills and was paid for calls after the new truck was put into service. The truck was housed in an addition to the Town Hall on E. Granville Rd., and the older Ford fire truck was kept in an addition in the mercantile area, and used by the Village Fire Department, functioning as a reserve unit. About this time, the old, manually operated fire bell was replaced by a fire siren, which was mounted 50 feet above ground, on the water tower and which could be sounded from the telephone exchange.

The 1940 census of 1,575 showed the population still growing, and, by 1950, the census found 2,141 persons in the village. The Fire Department continued to expand to meet the needs of the town, and in 1944, another fire truck was purchased with a 500 gallon water booster tank with the other usual auxiliary equipment. This gave the village two good triple combination fire trucks for the Sharon Township Fire Department, and the small Worthington Fire Department, which had served as a reserve unit, was abandoned, along with the faithful old Ford fire truck.

In 1950, a new modern fire-resistive fire station was erected on N. High St., just north of the public square, to house the equipment, and a section of the station was designed as a home, to accommodate the man and wife who answer the telephone when a fire call is received, and sound the fire siren. Telephones also are provided in the homes of three firemen to receive fire calls. The township firemen have taken the state course in firemanship, drill regularly and respond promptly, day and night, to fires and other emergency calls. Arrangements have been made through a mutual aid plan in Franklin County for fire departments to help each other in emergencies. Sharon Township can receive help from Westerville, Dublin and Columbus if an emergency requires additional men and equipment.

Worthington, through annexation of Colonial Hills and the development of other areas, has continued its expansion until it is now considered a city and has an estimated population of 8,657. Fire Department equipment now consists of two triple combination trucks, one quintuple combination with 65 foot aerial ladder and a fire squad with another squad car on order. There are now 17 regular firemen and six reserve firemen with two of the firemen on duty 5 ½ days during the daylight hours and fire squad duty, primarily. All fire equipment is provided with two-way radio, and radios are in the engine house, tuned to Franklin County radio frequency for all fire department broadcasts.

This brief history covering 54 years of fire department growth in Worthington shows that while the population has increased almost 16 times, the protection has kept pace with the needs of the residents, whose motto "There's Worth in Worthington" also may apply to their fire department.

Theron H. Wright

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