

Chapter Seven

FIGHTING A RELENTLESS FOE

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

That ominous cry ringing in the night--or even during the day--struck a blood-chilling note for Monroe residents throughout the earlier settlement days.

The vulnerable village was without an adequate water supply, except on Spring Square. Buildings in those founding years were wooden structures for the most part, and even the later brick edifices had their inner framing of timbers which became tinder dry in the fall and winter months.

Until the late 1850s, there was no organization of firefighters to rush to the scene to cope with the flames. Nor, was there any pumper apparatus until late in 1860 when the first "engine" appeared.

Clamoring alarms were answered by villagers who worked with might and main, and not much else, to curb the blazes. They used bucket "brigades" to pass along water from whatever source might be available. When there was no water, villagers turned their attention to nearby houses and buildings, beating out smaller blazes set off by fiery sparks in order to prevent the flames from spreading into a general conflagration.

These sturdy volunteers risked injury and possible death for one apprehensive reason. They knew that any fire which got out of hand could bring disaster, possibly to the whole town.

What caused those blazes? Why did they break out with such devastating regularity in Monroe, and also in other pioneer towns, during those early

decades?

The easiest way to resolve those questions is to remember that wood-burning stoves (coal did not appear until later) were stoked to nearly red-hot temperatures with the arrival of colder and colder weather. Even cook stoves and fireplaces were kept burning throughout the night hours so they could be revived from embers in the morning.

When soot-laden chimneys burned out, they usually sent up showers of sparks which fell on nearby wood shingle roofs (later banned by village regulations).

After 20 or so years of use, most wooden structures had dried to the point where almost any spark or ember could set off explosive combustion.

There was no electricity, so there could be no short circuits to explain the fires. Nor, was there any gas. Those excuses did not make their appearance in Monroe until the later 1880s. There were, of course, candles and oil lamps, although the latter did not become widely used until the 1860s when the coal oil (kerosene) supplies began arriving here.

Nevertheless, fires did flare with frightening frequency, some of them blamed on lightning. And, with little water to quench them, once the flames started they usually devoured structures completely. Quite often, they burned their way into adjoining buildings until halted by a shift of wind or the valiant efforts of volunteers.

Here are a few "Monroe Sentinel" reports and editorial comments on serious conflagrations in the mid 1850s before any official fire department began to take shape (dates shown are those of the paper's editions):

March 26, 1855--Fire damages the C. Righter dwelling and the Sentinel calls for action on starting a fire department. A meeting is planned for April 2 to discuss the project. Editors Stout and Tenney volunteer to join "Hook and Ladder Co. No. 1."

Nov. 21, 1855--Fire starting in frigid night weather at D.E. Corson's harness shop destroys three buildings on the Square and damages two others. Burned are the Eilert & Dodge drugstore, Ared White's building, occupied by the Musser & Chambers harness shop, and Corson's place. Damaged: Mordecai Kelly's building, occupied by Ben Chenoweth, and Rood's drugstore.

The editors commented: "Citizens turned out readily...and worked well and hard, with few exceptions. These exceptions will always be found around a fire, and we noticed a few with hands firmly planted in their pockets, looking with stoic indifference upon the efforts made to put it out, as though it were some magnificent tableaux gotten up for their special entertainment."

Dec. 17, 1856--Fire destroys James Pollard's Excelsior saloon. Citizen volunteers keep the blaze from spreading to houses in the vicinity. Flames were battled in bitter cold with more than 12 inches of packed snow on the ground from two storms.

Jan. 27, 1857--Fire in the Courthouse office of Justice of Peace James Moss does serious damage and threatens records stored in other office. (Item already noted in a previous chapter.)

And, so it went, year after year. Some of the fires were of minor significance, destroying a small cabin or shed. Others, especially in the Square vicinity, threatened widespread havoc before being extinguished by energetic volunteers possessed with sufficient luck and plenty of zeal.

Finally, after the village was incorporated in 1858, one of the first acts of the trustees' initial meeting was to authorize formation of the "German Hook and Ladder Company."

Members of this firefighter group, with its Teutonic designation, included John Linder, Conrad Ott, J. A. Gleissner, Henry Schneider, Joseph Felber and 30 others. They probably were chosen for past vigorous services as volunteers, plus the fact that they were disciplined gymnasts in the

original "Turner" society.

Most of the following accounts of Monroe's progress toward a regular, trained and efficient fire department come from the fine historical records kept by today's Fire Chief Josef Benkert and also from comprehensive information published in the 1884 "History of Green County."

No written record exists, however, on activities of that German Hook and Ladder Company after it was authorized in April, 1858. Nor, do the "Sentinel" files offer any further data about that company's functions in fighting fires.

Historian Benkert reports that formal organization of the "official" fire company, as reported in December, 1859, by the "Sentinel," was the outgrowth of a frame house fire in the present Junior High School block. The late veteran Monroe department member, Fred Lanz, told the story this way:

"The men of the village tried to put out the blaze, asking storekeepers who sold pails to give them a sufficient number to form a bucket line between the (town) spring and the blazing house. The storekeepers did so, and the fire was gotten under control."

After that fire, Lanz recalled, a volunteer company was formed and a frame building erected on the northwest corner of Spring Square. Benkert's record adds this report:

"The early equipment consisted of two dozen leather buckets, homemade ladders and poles with hooks fastened on the ends. These all were placed in a light wagon which was hand drawn. When a fire broke out, one man was stationed at the firehouse with a hand bell, which he rang. Four men were sent out, one to each corner of the (Public) Square, each with a horn on which he blew a blast and hollered 'Fire.' The villagers knew from the noise there was a fire."

That hand bell and the horns still are in possession of the Monroe Fire

Department. Meetings are called to order by ringing the bell.

The new fire company either included, or was in addition to, the German hook and ladder outfit authorized in 1858. Its first indicated name was "Cataract Co. No. 1 (Engine)" although it had neither engine nor capacity for producing any "cataract" beyond furious outpouring of physical and noisy energy.

Town trustees ruled that the village bell would be rung to summon firemen who were in command of John Hattery as foreman. Apparently, the hand bell and horn method was substituted later. A ball was scheduled for February 22, 1860, to raise funds for an engine (hand-powered).

Pending acquisition of an engine, the company seems to have changed its name to "Hook and Ladder Company No. 1"--or, that might have meant the German group actually continued to function. In any case, a benefit ball in that new name was held May 1, 1860, at the first Turner Hall (replaced in 1868 by a larger structure).

However or whatever it may have been called, the new fire company accepted delivery in November, 1860, on an engine from L. Button & Son of Philadelphia. At this time, Norman Churchill succeeded John Hattery as foreman. Either for reasons of thrift, penury or the obvious approach of the Civil War era, the village refused to pay for the apparatus.

The village board also may have been miffed because the fire company secretary had placed the order for the engine himself, instead of going through the trustees.

That first rocker rail pumper was used only two or three times. Because village funds were still blocked in 1865, it had to be returned to the Button firm. The disappointed fire company went back to the bucket brigade operation.

Chief Benkert's history quotes the late E. N. Churchill, longtime de-

partment member, as authority for the report that his father, Norman, purchased another engine for the company from the Button firm in 1869. Churchill, foreman of the firefighters, paid his own expenses for the Philadelphia trip and financed the engine cost, plus freight outlay, from his own pocket.

Norman Churchill finally was repaid by the village board when the Monroe Volunteer Fire Department was organized February 23, 1870. He then was officially elected "chief engineer." (Today's Chief Benkert is a great grandson of Churchill.)

Edward Ruegger took over the "chief" duties in 1877 and 1878. He was succeeded in 1879 by J. S. Harper who served many years with distinction. When the first steam engine was purchased in 1883 from the American LaFrance firm of Elmira, N.Y., Harper's name was inscribed on the commemorative plate. The Churchill pumper was retired and now is in a Boston museum.

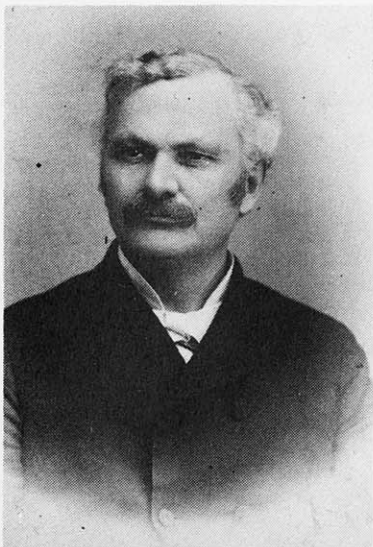
The following year, in March, 1884, Washington Hill was given the contract for a new engine house to cost \$3,000. A brick two-story edifice with hose and bell tower, it was located on the northwest corner of Spring Square, site of the original frame fire house. This landmark, which also served many years as Monroe's police station and City Hall, was razed in 1967 after the fire department, police station and city offices were moved to the new City Building on 18th Avenue.

When firemen moved in 1884 into their new brick engine house, the department consisted of two companies: Engine Company No. 1, and the Hook and Ladder Company No. 1. Many years later, a small second fire station, a frame building, was located on 14th Avenue near the 17th Street Smoky Row district along the railroad.

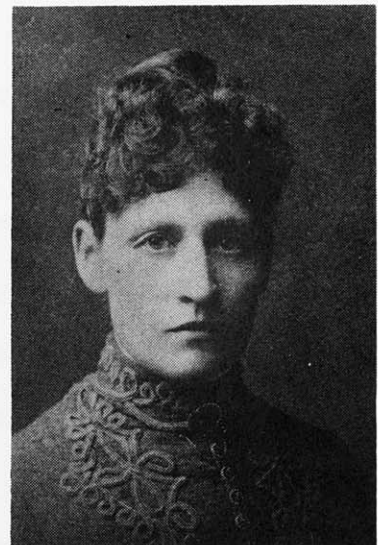
Harking back to 1870, the first fire of record after the department acquired its engine indicated that, even with a pumper unit, the lack of available water supplies remained the principal problem.



OLD HIGH SCHOOL BUILDING - This imposing three-story structure was built after fire, in January, 1871, destroyed old Center School. The building was used for high and grade school purposes until the "new" high school (at the Junior High addition site) was ready in 1905. In 1915, this building was razed to make way for Lincoln School, destroyed by fire in 1973. (Green County Historical Society Photo)



PROF. NATHAN C. TWINING
Headed Schools in
1870s - 1880s



EMMA VAN WAGENEN
Beloved 45 Year Teacher

Jacob Steinman's barn (possibly located at the southwest corner of 14th Street and 21st Avenue) caught fire May 17, 1870. Firemen responded to the alarm but upon bringing the engine to the site, they found "no water to be had." So, all they could do was to use hooks and buckets of sand to keep flames from spreading.

In a much more disturbing disaster, the Center schoolhouse (at the former Lincoln site) burned January 19, 1871. No water in sufficient quantity was found in the neighborhood and the fairly new building was destroyed.

A heavy loss of \$22,000 was reported in the fire October 18, 1871, when Treat & Durst's Block burned on the northwest corner of the Square. Firemen labored four hours, after quickly using up the meager water supplies nearby, and managed to protect nearby buildings.

Major reserves of water for fighting fires continued to be limited to a large cistern at the Courthouse and the Spring Square reservoir. This situation was not materially improved until after the privately-owned city waterworks system was completed in 1889.

Following is a list of a few fires of record occurring in the 1870s (a more complete roster appears in the 1884 "History of Green County"):

On September 15, 1871, A.J. High's dwelling just off the south side of the Square caught fire. The engine was located at the Courthouse cistern but the department's hose was too short. The house was destroyed.

Firemen were called to the American House, southwest corner of the Square, at 2 a.m. February 10, 1872. They used two cisterns to pump water on the flames and saved part of the old former courthouse building in a four-hour battle.

On the 25th of the same month, the house owned by Mrs. Magdalene Buehler (north side of 10th Street between 13th and 14th Avenues) caught fire, bringing out the firemen at 1 a.m. Again, there was no water nearby and flames

spread to the adjoining Ferdinand Shriner house on the 13th Avenue corner. Both houses burned to the ground--and were replaced with the dwellings still located on the sites.

The biggest fire of 1872 occurred June 22 at the Monroe Manufacturing Co. buildings, northwest corner of 12th Street and 17th Avenue (present site of the Lanz metal shops). Once more, water was a problem although the plant adjoined Spring Square. Firemen, however, saved valuable machinery and sections of the buildings. They also prevented flames from spreading to the Square's south side. Loss was \$35,000.

Anton Miller's furniture factory on 12th Street was saved from destruction March 6, 1873, by the department which turned out in full force.

Lack of water caused firemen to turn back en route to answering an alarm September 12, 1873, to Robert B. Allensworth's residence in the east part of town. The house, presumably, was lost.

A half hour after midnight December 27, 1873, firemen were called to the Jacob Hefty Brewery (now Huber's). Intensely cold weather prevented them from using more than one stream of water. Folklore has it that the fire-fighters also used "green beer" to control the flames. They won their battle after a seven-hour ordeal. Loss was \$12,000.

The Rood & Co. mill near Smoky Row was destroyed by fire June 29, 1877, due to the usual water problem. Firemen did save the mill's lumber and nearby buildings.

On May 22, 1879, firemen had to battle what was the biggest conflagration they had ever faced. Starting at 11 p.m. in the Empire Block on the Square's southeast corner, the blaze swept northward up the east side. Seven buildings were consumed before flames were halted by the south brick wall of the Whitney Block (Waffle Shop site).

A graphic account of the fire battle was carried in the "Sentinel"

edition of May 28. For the first time, the weekly paper did a complete and interesting cleanup account of the disaster, adding to it in the following week's edition.

The editor commented: "Young ladies and older ones distinguished themselves by doing more efficient and perservering work than any of the able-bodied men (spectators) who were too selfish to work.

"A good steam engine with plenty of good hose could have saved enough property on this occasion to have paid for itself. It is a hard thing to get the average man to work on the brakes (pumper rocker rails), and it is a killing business trying to pump water uphill through 600 feet of hose hour after hour."

This 1879 disaster probably helped expedite city action leading to purchase in 1883 of the LaFrance steam engine, as well as more lengths of hose. Water supply worries also prompted city officials to urge the digging of large cisterns at homes beyond reach of the downtown reservoirs. Cisterns, of course, also were used for householders' rainwater needs but their main value was in providing a special insurance against destruction.

Many wells also were being drilled at residential properties but these were costly due to hard rock which had to be penetrated.

Another major fire, January 14, 1899, again threatened the Square's east side when the Fitzgibbons Bros. Carriage Works on 18th Avenue was destroyed by flames. The firm considered moving to Galena but later decided Monroe was a better location and erected a new building on the site.

Some of the later and more recent fires which belong in any historical record include the following:

Firemen battled in subzero temperatures January 3, 1914, but could save only a shell of the four-story former Miller Mfg. Co. wagon and buggy works at the northeast corner of 9th Street and 16th Avenue (Holiday station site).

The Karlen & May auto garage in the building lost 30 vehicles. The Ryan residence, north of the garage, was destroyed and the Kohli Printing Co. to the east seriously damaged. Freeport firemen were called for standby help.

An earlier costly fire September 6, 1912, had leveled the Wm. A. Becker store, as well as its lumber and feed buildings, at the southeast corner of 12th Street and 17th Avenue. The afternoon blaze destroyed the Becker structures in 30 flaming minutes.

A fire November 22, 1928, which swept the Gottlieb Burkhalter home, southeast corner of 15th Street and 22nd Avenue, claimed the life of Miss Lizzie Burkhalter, 44, an invalid, who died of smoke suffocation and burns. Firemen and others tried for 90 minutes to revive the victim after she was carried to the August Prien home.

A most spectacular early morning blaze February 2, 1929, destroyed the Marty & Roderick Chevrolet garage in the 1200-block of 16th Avenue. Firemen were able to keep flames from other buildings, including the former Planing Mill and adjoining lumberyard.

Loss was put at \$100,000 December 17, 1930, when a night fire swept the Charles H. Buehler garage in the 1700-block of 12th Street. Thrity autos, including two Shriner Bros. hearses, were destroyed.

The fire which probably "played" to the biggest audience on record up to that time destroyed historic Turner Hall early on September 8, 1936. Flames starting in the attic chased a dance crowd from the first floor and "persuaded" patrons in the downstairs bar to leave. A heavy rain which began falling just before the fire broke out aided firemen and saved nearby structures.

On June 3, 1938, fire in the former Fitzgibbons carriage factory building at 10th Street and 18th Avenue resulted in loss of about \$10,000. Fears were held for a time that flames might spread to the Deaconess Hospital

across the street.

Fire October 8, 1942, which caused considerable damage to the White Block (Drapery House site), was blamed on an ice machine short circuit at A.H. Schneider's pool hall.

The Center Market at 1128 17th Avenue was destroyed in an early morning fire November 16, 1942, which swept the century-old structure.

The Fitzgibbons building at 18th Avenue and 10th Street was destroyed August 28, 1948, in the third fire at that old carriage works site in 49 years. The blaze started in the third-floor warehouse of the Swiss Colony and Wisconsin Fritos Co. Scores of volunteers helped firemen save autos from the Dearth Dodge-Plymouth agency and much of the Kane & Stauffacher farm implement firm's parts inventory.

On May 29, 1958, the Bruni-Miller Co. store and offices in the 1900-block of 12th Street were destroyed by flames which started around midnight and continued to burn until 6:30 a.m. Browntown firemen were called to aid the Monroe department when it looked for a time as if the blaze might spread. The adjoining shop area was saved.

When the April 11, 1965, Palm Sunday tornado ravaged the west side of town, the Department responded instantly. Firemen opened up traffic routes through felled trees and downed power lines, and were joined by the Civil Defense units in bringing out the injured. Firemen also stood by that day and the next guarding against potential outbreak of blazes in wrecked structures.

That same year, on November 10, an alarm to the Swiss Colony Inn on the Square's west side was received at 6:30 a.m. Flames from grease in a fryer had spread in minutes throughout the rear of the building. Firemen rescued second-floor occupants and brought the fire under control in four hours with new techniques, saving adjoining buildings. Browntown, Argyle and Brodhead

fire units were called in under the new mutual aid program.

The fire September 5, 1973, which ravaged Lincoln School was first reported to police by Stanley Roen at 3:22 a.m. Forty-four department members responded but were unable to prevent widespread interior damage. Lightning, which had struck the school the previous morning, was reported by Deputy Fire Marshal Frank Roberts to have started a slow burning, smoldering blaze in an area behind false walls.

The foregoing are only the high spots of the brilliant record compiled by Monroe Fire Department's more than a century of meeting all demands and challenges with courage and efficiency in time of disaster, real and potential.

It is a record achieved through dedicated service by its members. It could only have been accomplished with loyalty, splendid and constant training, high discipline and the inspired leadership of its various chiefs and their assistants over the years.

In sharp contrast to the diffident attitude of those early village fathers, who turned a deaf ear to pleas for equipment funds in the 1860s, today's department commands the highest respect and confidence of City Council members and a grateful community.

Because of that wholehearted support, the Monroe Volunteer Fire Department today proudly possesses eight pieces of the best modern equipment, including a 100-foot aerial ladder truck, and has one more high capacity pumper on order. The department also has kept its now retired 1928 Pirsche pumper, the first custom fire engine with cab in the nation, for parades, and even possible emergency use.

Because of this modern equipment, coupled with an unquestioned record of outstanding performance, the department ranks today as one of the finest--if, indeed, not the finest--volunteer (or paid) firefighting organizations in Wisconsin and its neighboring states.

The greatest testimonial to that status is found in the fact that Monroe Fire Department has been host since 1960 for the Southern Wisconsin, Northern Illinois Firemen's Association fire school programs at the county fair-grounds.

Intensive two-day training sessions are carried out at the school under general direction of Monroe fire leaders and department members. Those programs vary from year to year, with continuous upgrading as to new methods and techniques.

We can be certain those hundreds of visiting firemen come here for one principal reason--they know Monroe will guarantee outstanding fire school programs because its volunteer department has spent 118 years striving to be the best.



REBUILT EAST SIDE OF SQUARE AFTER 1879 DISASTER - Fire on the night of May 22, 1879, destroyed seven buildings, from the Square's southeast corner, north to the Whitney Block (three-story structure at left of center, now the Waffle Shop site) which stopped the flames. It was the village's worst fire up to that time. Volunteer firemen had to work their old rocker brake hand pumper for many weary hours, bringing water up to the fire from Spring Square through 600 feet of hose lines. The ravaged buildings, some of flimsy wood construction, were replaced by handsome brick structures with fine ornamental masonry arched windows. The Village Board placed a ban, after the fire, on building frame structures on the Square and in its vicinity. (Green County Historical Society Collection)