

Memories of Stoughton Fire Department

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Introduction

I am proud to have served Stoughton as a volunteer fireman. As the oldest living member of the department, I am writing my memories of the early years of our fire department. I hope all who read these pages will enjoy sharing my memories.

Fire Whistles and Sirens

In the early days the telephone operators would blow the fire whistle after telephones became a common household item. If there was a fire, people would pick up the phone, call the operator to let her know that there was a fire and where it was located. She would then blow the city whistle. There were four switches for the city siren; two located inside city hall, one with the telephone operators and one at Stoughton State Bank. Chief Dow had the switch in his bank. He would blow the whistle each day at 12 noon using his own watch as the official time.

Before the city siren was used, there was a fire bell on top of city hall. There was a long chain that ran down the side of the building. On the end of the chain was a big handle and when pulled, put the bell in motion. Chief Dow would not let the city fire siren blow on VJ Day because of possible confusion where some may have thought there was a real fire. He did let the firemen ring that old fire bell. I believe that was the last time that that bell was rung. I wish I knew what happened to the old fire bell.

The city of Stoughton used to have one water works pumping station that pumped water to the water tower to control water pressure. As a back up, they had a steam engine that was used to pump water if the electric power was off. This steam engine had a whistle. They blew this whistle when there was a fire. There was a full time operator at the pumping station who would blow the whistle once if the fire was in ward 1, twice if in ward 2, three times in ward 3, and four times if in ward 4. If the fire was in the rural areas, they did not blow this whistle so everyone would then know that the fire was out of town somewhere. This whistle was in addition to the city siren.

Mutual Aid

A handshake between the chiefs and mayors of Stoughton and Edgerton created a mutual aide agreement. This was established many years before such things were even thought of. This mutual aid agreement remains as one of the oldest in the State.

Stoughton also had mutual aid agreements with Deerfield, Cottage Grove, Oregon, Edgerton, and Sun Prairie We fought the Madison butter fire on a mutual aid call from Madison. Stoughton was the first department to be called outside the city of Madison along with Sun Prairie and Cottage Grove. The three mutual aid chiefs made a recommendation to the Madison command on how to help put out this kind of fire. The recommendation was based on our experience fighting rural barn fires. The Madison command listened to the suggestions, but did not immediately act on these ideas. Stoughton did receive a letter from the Madison Mayor thanking us.

Trucks



Before the acquisition of the modern pumper trucks, Stoughton had a chemical truck. It had a small tank that contained a mixture of water and soda. The truck also carried a container of acid. This acid was dumped into the water tank when the truck arrived at a fire. Once the process was started, there was no stopping it. The entire tank had to be dispelled. There were hoses that ran from the truck to the base of the fire. Back at the station the truck was again prepared with this mixture for the next fire. This was similar to today's soda acid fire extinguishers only on a much larger basis.

I have kept the specifications for the old Kisel truck and the truck with the Pirsch equipment. Early on the Stoughton Wagon Works made fire trucks. One of those early trucks is now in the Stoughton Historical Society Museum and was donated by the Stoughton Fire Department.

The city bought a 1935 Diamond T with Pirsch Equipment for a city truck. This had a 100-Gallon tank. In 1936 they bought a Chevrolet truck with Pirsch equipment and a 200-gallon water or booster tank for rural fires. At that time only one truck went to a fire. It was either the city truck or the country truck. Firemen that did not get to the station in time drove their own cars to the fire. Firemen also drove their own cars during the days when only one truck would go to a fire. Eventually, the city bought signs that bolted to the front bumper on the firemen's cars so that they could get close to the fire and not be stopped by traffic officers. Later, these signs were replaced by a red light that was about 8" and blinked that identified firemen responding to an alarm. In the rural area where there were no hydrants, a bucket brigade was formed with farmers and bystanders to keep the 200-gallon booster tank filled. I was not in the department until 1942, but I generally got to the rural fires and had the job of dumping the pails and milk cans of water into the booster tank. I would take the pail, dump it into the tank and pass it on to the other side of the truck so they could go and fill it again. Chief Dow would always let me ride home on the truck.



In 1942 when I joined the department, the 1935 Diamond T with Peter Pirsch equipment had a 100-gallon booster tank that pumped 500 gallons per minute. The 1936 Chevrolet Chassis with Pirsch equipment pumped 350-gallons per minute with a 200-gallon booster tank. In 1940, through the Office of the United States Civil Defense, the department obtained a trailer pump manufactured by Chrysler Corporation. This was a government trailer that carried a pump that put out 500 gallons of water per minute. We used a city utility truck to pull the trailer. Since this was during WW II, the government gave the trailer pump to the city. We received quite a bit of training from the government during the war on fighting incendiary fires to plane crash fires. Members of the Madison Fire Department gave most of the training. We had no smoke masks but were given felt and leather nosepieces with an elastic band around the head. At this time we were also issued rubber coats with cloth lining, knee boots that were not lined and no helmets. The caps were made of the same material as the coats.

People from Utica brought water to parts of Pleasant Springs in horse watering tanks. They had a special well and pump for fires. In 1948 Stoughton purchased the American LaFrance. This truck had a 400-gallon booster tank. It was shipped from the factory in Elmira, New York in a boxcar to Madison. We had to get it out of the side door of the boxcar. Captain Arne Larvick of the Madison Fire Department coached us on how to get the truck maneuvered out of the rail car door. Ward Hanson drove it to Stoughton from Madison. Upon arrival, we found that it was too tall to fit through the doors of the fire department. City Hall had to remodel the doors to accommodate our new truck. In 1951 we got a 1000-gallon tanker with a power take off pump. This was still before bunker clothes and I remember lying on top of the hoses close together throwing coats over us to keep warm while driving to fires. We rode in the wind and cold outside unlike our counterparts of today. On the 1935 and 1936 trucks there were no enclosures, only a windshield, so even the drivers were in the open. From this time forward, equipment developed rapidly and became better and better for everyone involved.

Our first rescue unit was an old hearse. We traded this in on an old Chevrolet panel truck formerly owned by the Stoughton Police Department. The next truck was similar to a vehicle used as a service truck for plumber's etc. It had all kinds of built in shelving units. We used these shelves to store the jaws-of-life, portable exhaust fans, ropes, etc. The next rescue truck we purchased in 1986. We spent more time on the specifications for this truck than the city did on the design for the Public Safety Building. Marty Lamers, Dick Dvorak, and Odean Teigan spent many hours working on the design and followed the construction very carefully to insure that everything that we had considered was included. We took many trips to that factory.

In 1960 we purchased an International Chassis with Pirsch equipment on a Pumper and a Ford Tanker. We purchased a grass rig in 1971 and another new grass rig in 1988. In 1969 we purchased our first snorkel. This truck cost \$67,000. We could have sold it at the factory for many thousands more than we paid due to the fact that other cities were waiting and wanted to buy ours and make us wait. This truck had a 75' boom. It took many hours on Sunday morning training sessions so that members could become proficient at using it. We practiced in a parking lot on Division and Jefferson by the old waterworks plant. We drew water out of the river to test the hoses. Dan Bradley took his mother (Bob Bradley's grandmother) up in the boom during one of the practices. During open houses at the fire department, we took citizens up in the boom. They were given a pretty good view of Stoughton.

In 1972 we obtained the Darley combination engine and tanker. Before it had even been tested by the fire insurance underwriters, we received a call and took it out for its first fire run. We purchased a Chevrolet tanker #6 from Columbus in 1976 for a very good price. Price isn't always a good reason to purchase. We had lots of trouble with this truck. Chevrolet engine #3 was purchased in 1980. We could have sold this one at the factory too. It was short, compact, and was able to get around tight corners which would have been useful in bigger cities.

GMC tanker truck #5 was delivered in July of 1992. This was the last vehicle purchased while I was chief. We got a good deal on this one because I let the manufacturing company use it as a demonstrator before being delivered to Stoughton. The van used as a transport and command vehicle was purchased with dance funds and was given to the city by the fire department. We bought it from the US government as government surplus. We had two non firetruck vehicles; a boat for water rescue and a hazardous materials trailer that carries compounds used to fight chemical fires and to clean up chemical spills.

Fire Station

There was generally two paid full time firemen for many years. The first two I remember were Charles Bacon and Al Peterson. The full time firemen always drove and operated the trucks at fires. While on duty, they slept in the room now used by the assistant treasurer. The beds were by the windows in the northeast corner and the stairs to the truck room were in the southeast corner. They used cloth curtains around the beds. The old truck room is now used by the building inspector and city planner.

In the old station, extra hoses were kept in what was called the hose cupboard. The doors of this cupboard used to be covered by cartoons and pin-up girl calendars. Chief Overland had all of these removed before we hosted a party for all departments that had helped us fight the Mobil Oil fire. Chief Sawyer revamped the hose tower so that we only had to pull the hose up 25 feet instead of 50 feet. The hose tower was used to dry hoses that were used at fires. We some times had to put electric fans at the bottom of the tower to help the hoses dry.

In the old station, the truck doors were swinging doors that met in the middle. They did not fit together very well, so old hose was cut and tacked onto the doors at the bottom and middle to keep out the cold. It was pretty tough to get these doors closed because the rubber on the bottom rubbed on the floor. This engine room was often mighty cold but was always above 32 degrees.

After the clerk and treasurer were moved into the fire department room, the department was given a small room for beds east of the present clerk and by the stairs going down to the engine room (now the building inspectors office) There were no windows or vents in this room. The department was eventually given a meeting room in the basement; originally known as the G.A.R. room. There was a kitchen attached and the men thought that this was great.

Firemen and People Stories

There used to be a mill on the corner of 4th and East South Streets. On the day that this mill burned to the ground fireman Saxe Hoverson Jr. was at the fire even though it was his wedding day. The fire took so much time that Saxe didn't have time to go home to change his clothes before his wedding. He walked down the isle with wet pants from the knees down, wet shoes, and clothes that smelled of smoke.

Al Eliason, as young kid, also hung around the fire department. Many times he was rewarded with a ride home on the fire truck. He became a Methodist Pastor. One time while he was back visiting Stoughton there was a fire and Al followed us to the site. After the fire was over, he was offered and accepted a ride home on the truck. The department had just taken in a new member who worked as a plumber. Al thought that the department could use a minister rather than a plumber! I am sure that the language he heard on that truck prompted that comment.

One year at the southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois fire convention in Monroe, a couple of bold and slightly inebriated Stoughton firemen challenged the winner of the day's water fight to try to beat the Stoughton firemen. We were not prepared with clothes for this kind of activity so we borrowed clothes from Monroe and had to change under tarps covering the truck. We were using 2 ½ inch hoses and needed nine men. We had to borrow a Captain from the Madison Fire Department named Jack Boyle, since we only had 8 men at that point. We gave them a good fight, but in the end, we lost. During a water fight a cable is stretched from one end of a city block to the other end of the block

with a metal tank or ball in the middle. One team stands at one end and the other at the opposite end. Each team had 2 ½" fire hoses with nozzles attached. Teams would aim the spraying water at that suspended ball, and the winner was the team who succeeded in getting the ball to go to the opposite end of the wire.

I appointed Reverend David Hant as our chaplain in 1979. Stoughton was the 2nd city in Dane County to have a chaplain. Reverend Handt responds to fires and if needed can council and console any victims at the site. He will also be there to help with housing and personal needs. One of the first calls that he responded to involved a person suffering with aids who committed suicide by setting his mobile home on fire. Reverend Handt was there to console and help the mother of the victim as well as other family members.

At monthly firemen's meetings a roll call of the fires that had occurred that month was taken. If you had not responded to the fire, you had to give a reason for missing the fire. It had to be a legitimate reason such as you were sick, at a funeral, or something like that. It was unacceptable to just decide not to come. This was the practice when I joined the fire department. I think it was during Chief Ing Johnson's tenure as chief that initiated the practice of signing in when we returned to the station after a fire.

Harold Chose, of Chose's A&W, was Stoughton's first Honorary Firemen. Every fire that took any amount of time or was difficult you would find Harold there. He would bring gallons of root beer, orange soda, and bar-b-ques. He would never take any compensation but just wanted to show his appreciation for the efforts of those volunteers. He was one of the best volunteers ever. He became a regular at fire meetings, parties, and card games.

One of my finest nights in the department was the night a party was thrown to honor Rick Scheel for saving the life of a man who had been electrocuted at the F.S. Feed Mill. It demonstrated our excellent training for the fire department and training by the EMT.

Stoughton was not the first department to have a female fire fighter, but our first female joined the department while I was chief. She is still the only female in our department. Over the years I have watched her develop into a fine and valuable member of our team. I remember one specific instance where having a female member was very helpful. There was a gas leak by the Methodist Church. We had to evacuate the area. One elderly lady was sick in bed and her husband would not leave her. When he found out that we had a female fire fighter he asked if she would be the one to help his wife then he would also evacuate the area. She stayed in the house with the couple and helped the husband comfort his wife. She was there to help her get moved if the situation became critical.

I joined the fire department on July 5, 1942 and served under four chiefs before being chief myself. For the record, I would like to talk about those four chiefs and let someone else talk about me.

Chief Giles Dow (1917-3/16/49): I have mentioned Chief Giles Dow many times in these memoirs. Many kids back then had idols such as Babe Ruth or The Dean Brothers. My idol was Chief Dow. He was probably the most outstanding chief that has served Stoughton. He served more than 32 years; more than any other chief. He started our fireman's retirement fund, which was the only one in the state for volunteer firemen for many years. How he acquired 2% of the State Inspection money to start this fund, I don't know. At that time the volunteer fireman were paid \$75.00 per year which was the pay that I remember for approximately the first four or five years that I was in the department. Just as a comparison, at that time those serving on the police force were paid \$75.00 per month. Firemen also paid 1% of their annual pay into the retirement fund. There wasn't much to pay out in the retirement to start. During the depression, under Mayor Siggelkow, part of the pension fund was used to meet city needs. During that time the welfare roles were very large and needed help. Finally under Mayor Felland, we got the council to pay back to the fund at a rate of \$1000.00 per year. I don't remember what the total loan to the city amounted to, but I know it was at least \$10,000. The fund got no interest from the city, but it sure helped the city at that time. Chief Dow was President of the Stoughton State Bank and Stoughton Light and Fuel Co. (the forerunner of W.P.L.). During the depression days, times were tough. Since he was in charge of the bank, and rules were a lot more relaxed than they are today, Chief Dow would give small loans to his men who needed them. He collected repayment at payday which was at the end of the year. He never charged a penny of interest on those small loans to firemen. I also remember the first year that social security went into effect. Chief Dow had a meeting on New Years Eve to pay us so that we would not have to take social security out of our checks for that year. He was very conservative and ran the department with no interference from the mayor or council. He was highly regarded as a leader of the city. Chief Dow was known as a staunch Republican. I remember at one meeting we framed him while running a straw poll for the upcoming election. We all voted and there was a total of 23 Democratic votes and only one Republican. There were lots of laughs over that one. Chief Dow also demonstrated a lot of character. After a difficult fire at the Kroger store, Chief Dow needed a thirst quencher. He went into the burned out store and grabbed a large bottle of orange soda. He could not get the top of so he smashed the bottle on a counter breaking off the top, took a drink and cut his lip. We were all watching and he just continued on as if nothing had happened. After fire meetings everyone played cards. Chief Dow always used his badge as the first ante. If he did not win it back, the holder at the end of the evening always returned it. Chief Dow ruled the department with an iron hand and had the devotion of the entire department. I remember when one member tried to cross the chief, there was another member right there to take up the fight to protect him. Chief Dow passed away in 1952.

Chief Ed Overland (3/17/49-3/1/60). Ed was like an Abe Lincoln type of person. He changed the department so that other people could offer their ideas as opposed to running the department as a singular leader. He worked very closely with the fire and police commission. He started the family party and ladies night activities. Some of today's firemen remember those family picnics that were held in the East Side Park. At the time they were sons of former firemen (Dick Kittleson and Bob Bradley). Those picnics created lasting memories. Dick, Bob, and my daughter Barbara have been known to talk

about truck rides on the American LaFrance, dixie cups from Johnson's Dairy eaten with wooden spoons, water fights, and learning how to dance at the fireman's balls.

Chief Ing Johnson (3/1/60-10/1/66). Chief Johnson was a very capable chief. He could do any job in the department from being the nozzle man, to truck and pump operator, to commander. He pushed the city for more equipment. You had to be rough and ready to work in his department, and it was evident who were the favorites under his command. After a particularly long and difficult grass fire, Chief Johnson came back to the department to find an old city street department horse drawn water wagon inside the station. We think this was a practical joke by Salty Hougan and his milk haulers who had helped fight the fire by bringing water in his milk truck (Salty would often respond to fire calls and offered to haul water in his trucks before the days when we had tankers). Chief Johnson was very ill during the time of the Schultz Brothers fire. It was very difficult for him to miss this fire. It was shortly after this fire that Chief Johnson passed away.

Chief Bob Sawyer (10/1/66-5/14/72). Chief Sawyer was a very confident man and a good decision-maker. He was excellent at repairing and maintaining our equipment. He was a mechanic by trade. He was very stern, but showed great compassion if someone was in need. He involved his assistant chiefs in all matters and often took them into his confidence. However, he never hesitated to put you in your place and to let you know exactly who was chief. Chief Sawyer lived ½ block from the fire station so he would run to the station when there was a fire call. By the time the rest of us arrived at the station, he had evaluated the call and had determined which trucks should respond. Chief Sawyer was a very organized leader. I remember the Stoughton Truck Body fire where we had a mutual aid call from seven different departments. Chief Sawyer with authority, calmly directed the entire team so that everyone knew exactly what their responsibilities were.

Chiefs Overland, Johnson, and Sawyer were ill during the last part of their tenures as chief. It was difficult for all members of the department when the chiefs had to relinquish their commands to their assistants due to their inability to handle the duties required fighting fires. With two chiefs serving only 6 years before passing away, you can imagine what my wife thought about me taking over. It was a thought, but my desire to serve the department as chief was a life long dream, and I accepted the position. I was lucky enough to serve 20 years as chief, retire, and now am enjoying writing all of my memories.

Fireman's Ball, Fund Raisers, and Picnics

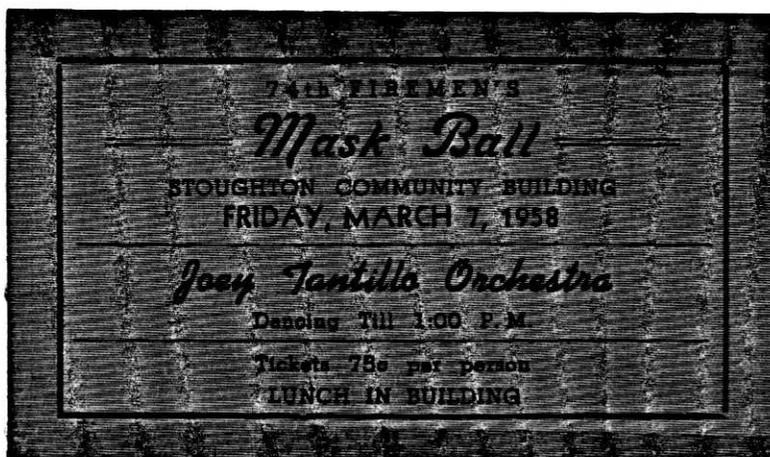
One of the early fundraisers had the firemen hiring a carnival called Snaps Great Shows from Joplin Missouri. They set up their rides in Mandt Park. They even had a sideshow with strip tease girls named "Alabama" and "Arkansas". Some local people complained to the local police about them. Chief of Police Skaalen did not drive a car. He was known to have bad feet, but after several complaints one night, he walked down to meet with Fire Chief Dow. Chief Dow told him not to worry as one of the firemen was a part time policeman and he would have him take care of "the girls". Chief Dow offered the foot weary Police Chief a ride home that was gladly accepted. Needless to say, "the

show went on". I attended this function before I joined the department, but Chief Dow would not let me into the sideshows.

Another fundraiser was the bingo parties that took place during the late 1930's and early 1940's. These parties were held in the firemen's room. Folding partitions opened the whole south half of the building at that time. After the bingo games were completed, a brunch would be served to everyone. The games were played for money. A portion of the money was kept by the department and a portion was used as prize money.

The fireman's dance and masked ball was originally held in the old armory building near the footbridge. In the early days, this was a very big night for a man by the name of "Dad Lynch" who had been crippled fighting a fire for the city. "Dad Lynch" had a tavern outside of fire limits (he was given special privileges due to the fact that he became crippled in service to the city) in a small building on part of the land now owned by St. Vincent DePaul. He was kept very busy on this evening. There was no alcohol served at the fireman's dances so the dance attendees would take frequent trips to "Dad Lynch's" tavern for a little thirst quencher. The armory became a garment factory in the 1940's so the dance was moved. At one point there was no place in Stoughton to hold the dance and for one year, it was held in Cambridge. That year Chief Dow displayed his gentlemanly concern and offered a ride home to a young lady who was at the dance and found herself without a ride back to Stoughton. When he arrived home, he thought it best that he tell his wife what he had just done. She was very stern when she told him that he ought to be careful since some girls "like that" didn't always wear undergarments! For some reason he told everyone in the department that story. Needless to say there were lots of chuckles on Chief Dow over that one. After the Cambridge dance, the event moved into the Community building, which was controlled by the school district. Again, there was no alcohol served at the dance, but we all seemed to have consumed enough outside of the building. I can remember spending several early morning hours picking up litter, bottles etc. to make sure the area was clean before the kids came to school.

Since this was originally a masquerade ball, there were many interesting costumed entries every year. These folks came from all around the county. We all remember one entry in particular. We called her "#9". She was dressed as a harem dancer and caused lots of talk among the audience, firemen, and the firemen's wives.



In the old days several groups of 3 or 4 firemen would take posters advertising the dance all around the county. Sometimes they would even go to neighboring counties. They would post them in bars, restaurants, and other fire departments and anywhere the business owners would allow the firemen to hang them. Often these trips turned into great adventures and lots of good fun. One time one group came back to town very late and decided to take one of the fire trucks out for a drive. They REALLY got into hot water with Chief Dow.

I remember one dance at the community building where Chief Dow accidentally dropped a large sum of money in the wastebasket. Department Treasurer Larry Lynch looked all over to find the shortage. He was lucky enough to happen to look in the wastebasket to find the lost cash.

Often times the money raised from these fundraisers was used to help firemen in need. For example, I remember one time during the depression when one of our members was in the hospital during Thanksgiving. The department furnished an entire dinner for his family. Another example of how this money was spent was buying clothes for the firemen when theirs was ruined while fighting a fire. Remember, there were no bunker clothes at that time so they all fought fires in their street clothes.

Another fundraiser was hosting wrestling matches by area semi-pro wrestlers. These were held in the high school gym. Our present mayor (Bob Barnett) remembers these well. He went to them with his dad who was also a fireman.

Stoughton and Edgerton used to have joint picnics near Stebensville Dam. New members of either department generally got thrown in the river as an initiation. One year Stoughton would cook and furnish food while Edgerton would furnish drinks, cigars, cigarettes, and desert. The next year they would switch. The mayors of both towns were honored guests and were expected to furnish a bottle of booze or a case of beer. In the early years, neither town provided fire protection on that day. Under Chief Overland policy changed and some department members were required to stay at home in case there was a fire. For the most part Chief Overland would stay home himself and ask for 4 or 5 volunteers to stay with him.

Memorable Fires

On January 30, 1936 at midnight, the temperature was 30 degrees below zero. There was a fire at Halverson and Ford Funeral Home, which is now the Masonic Lodge. Because of the cold, everything turned to ice including the hoses. They had to be tied to the truck and pulled back to the fire station so that they could thaw. There were no bunker clothes then. They opened the basement of Norness' Restaurant for food and drinks. It was a very tough fire to fight. A couple of the firemen had pneumonia after this fire. One fellow passed away and the family said the funeral home fire was the cause of his death.

My first call as a member of the department was a drowning at Lake Kegonsa at Hwy AB near McFarland. On arrival at the scene, we found that neighbors had pulled a small boy out of the water and laid him on the pier. I was really affected by this call. I remember getting home and looking at my supper of fried eggs and toast and not being able to eat any of it.

In January of 1945 there was a major barn fire on the Nelson farm, which is now part of the State Park. It was 20 degrees below zero at noon and we were fighting the fire in street clothes. We put the 1936 Chevrolet on the ice of the lake. We drilled a hole in the ice and pumped water on the fire. Mr. and Mrs. Nelson fed us bread and eggs in shifts while we fought to put the fire out.

On March 31, 1946 the Skaalen Home on County N burned to the ground. It was one time that Chief Dow let both trucks come to a rural fire. It was a Sunday and most of the residents were in chapel so there were no serious injuries. In July of that same year the American Tobacco Warehouse at the corner of South and Academy burned (Stoughton Trailers built a new building on this location).



I remember being called to another drowning at the old swimming place on the river by the water department. I can still see the lifeless blue snowsuit belonging to Peter Nelson (son of the founder of Nelson Industries) lying on the ground. We did what we could to try to revive the boy until Dr. Keenan, who was a neighbor to the boy, came and took over. Unfortunately, all of our efforts were not successful.

Barber's Tavern and Dance Hall burned to the ground on an early Sunday morning in the middle to late 1940's. Fire trucks pumped water out of the lake and we rerouted traffic on highway 51 since we had hoses drawn across the road from the lake.

First Lutheran Church burned on 10/22/44. This fire along with the Mobil tank farm fire were the two biggest fires I remember in the early days of my tenure with the department (both occurred under Chief Overland). It was a typical Sunday fall morning on October 22, 1944 and it was during pheasant hunting season. I was 21 years old at the time. My good friend, Ward Hanson, and I decided that we would not go to church that morning but pheasant hunt instead. We went out and hunted the fence lines near the west edge of town. At that time, there were very few houses north of Clyde Street. By noon, we both had one pheasant so we decided to have lunch and take a rest. Whoever woke up first was to call the other and decide if we should go hunting again in the afternoon. We were on the phone talking to each other when the fire siren sounded. That put an end to the hunting.

I quickly responded to the alarm and learned that First Lutheran Church was on fire. At the church, I went inside from the Sixth Street entrance with Chief Dow and fireman Joe Pliner, also a First Lutheran member. We climbed the steps to the balcony and saw fire in the ceiling and wall by the organ. There seemed to be some sort of explosion and part of a wall by the stairs to the balcony collapsed. Chief Dow ordered us down and out of the church. I called Ward and told him we needed help and he came immediately and helped the department that day.

Alfred Peterson, our truck driver at the time, was operating the truck at the corner of Sixth and Jefferson Streets. His home at 608 East Main Street caught fire from embers blown from the church fire. He could not leave his pumping operation to go to his own home to help.

Chief Dow had called for help from Edgerton and they arrived just in time to take care of the roof fire on the Peterson home. Mr. Peterson was also a member of our church. At that time, Chief Dow sent me and several non-firemen to the King Edward Tobacco warehouse which was also on fire. The warehouse was located on the present site of the Stoughton Trailers – across the railroad tracks on the south side of Main Street. The roof of the building was on fire. I took one of the two fire trucks we had at the time and we tried to get the fire out. We ran out of water, but just by luck, the Madison Fire Department came and finished the job at King Edwards.

I got our 1935 Diamond-T fire truck back to the church just after the steeple fell. By approximately 3 PM the entire church was burning. At that time all we could do was to protect surrounding properties. The parish house located next door to the church, was of particular interest to me as it was the Erick Olson home. My mother was the eighth child of the Erick Olsons. I am sure that the direction of the wind had a lot to do with saving the parish house.

It was a long, hard day for the firemen and it was especially hard for those of us who were members of First Lutheran Church. There were many memories of events that had taken place in that great building.

Chief Dow sent us home late in the evening, but we were called back at about midnight when the flames became large again. At this time we left a hose in place so that if the fire threatened again, it was there us use. In the confusion, we lost a nozzle off our booster hose. It was later found and is now in a collection of old fire equipment in Columbus, Wisconsin.

The remodeled kitchen was on the lower level and at the far south end of the building. It remained intact until about 6 AM the next day when a new blaze destroyed most of it. We cooled down the area of the basement where the vault was located so that it could be entered and examined. Its contents were found to be intact and safe.

Sundays, after the fire, church services were held in the Badger Theater. Communion services were held in our sister congregation's church, Our Saviors Church. Our pulpit, which was saved, was kept at Our Saviors. We had great leadership during this time and I believe we came out of our loss stronger than ever. I am the only living member of the fire department that was in the department at the time of this fire. It will be in my memory forever.

Photos of the Mobil Bulk Plant Fire



Probably the most dangerous fire that I remember was the Mobil Bulk Plant fire (June 19, 1952). This made news in Milwaukee and Chicago. The State Fire Marshal came and worked with local Chief Overland. Madison Captain Emerson led the Stoughton firemen into flames to try and get it under control. On the first attempt we had to back out and then went in again with two extra hose lines. This time we got it under control. All chemicals needed to fight petroleum product fires were used up in a hurry. Dane County Police brought more chemicals from Madison to supplement our supply. Chief Overland got local excavators to dig ditches and holding ponds to contain water and gas runoff. At one time a safety valve on a tank that was not on fire blew off with a big bang. This made everyone at the scene scatter. Part of the battle was to keep the tanks that were not on fire cool so that they would not ignite. The smoke from the fire could be seen twenty miles away. Acting Chief of Police Christopher got all department members and other volunteers to control street traffic for several blocks surrounding the fire. It was estimated that the big tank that was burning held approximately 15,000 gallons. The start of this fire was caused by a welder who was repairing the pump house. We were very lucky that there were no major injuries during this fire, only minor bumps and exhaustion. Mobil Oil Company hosted a party for everyone who was involved in that blaze. Our good friend Harold Chose brought root-beer and orange soda to the party. It was known to some that Harold had added an ingredient to the orange soda....Vodka! Chief Overland was never the wiser!

It took about 36 hours to battle the Schultz Brothers fire, September 24, 1966, which also burned the old First National Bank building. There were many apartments and offices in the bank building (about 7 residential apartments and 7 or 8 offices on the upper floors of the building). Mrs. Walter Wicks mother, who resided in one of the apartments, had to be carried out of the building. Seven departments were called to help. It took 24 hours to contain this fire. The cause was never determined, but it was known that it started in Schultz Brothers basement. The city had just rebuilt the water main in this area so we had lots of water. However, we also pumped water out of the river on Washington Street.

One of the buildings at Anderson's Hatchery burned on the night of the Demo Derby at the Stoughton Fair. They had to hold up the derby until we had this fire out. Mayor Cooper was on the fair board and he called me to say to be sure that the fire was out but to get to the fair as soon as possible. The derby could not be held without fire protection on site.

At the Rosa's Tavern fire on Lake Kegonsa we took approximately 8 minutes to get the fire secure. We had been notified that there was a person inside. After a search, the body of a woman was found buried under rags and drapes. A fellow by the name of Al Hegge and another man were indicted on murder charges and arson. These two men were members of a national motorcycle gang. I testified in court during the murder trial. I remember being very uneasy as I testified under the glare of these to unsavory characters. They were eventually convicted of the crimes. We got the Dunn Town Chairman to condemn the building because of the amount of damage so that it was eventually demolished. This was probably the most publicized fire in recent times due to the murder. After we got the flames under control, we were doing a search of the building

and found a room that was full of guns of various kinds. I ordered no firemen to go into this room and called out the window of the building to turn the search of this room over to Dane County Officer Zeigler.

Stoughton Country Club burned on Easter Morning in 1954. You could see the flames by Dvorak Chevrolet (now Gunderson's Funeral Home). The old clubhouse was a large building with many beautiful wood beams on the main floor which contained a dining room, kitchen, and attached porch. Downstairs was a bar, shower and locker rooms, and the pro's quarters. At this time there were few people who lived in this area. There was no way that we could save this building because it was in total flames by the time we got there.

There was a large grass fire that extended from Collins Rd to Highway N south. I called Edgerton and Oregon for help on this one. This encompassed many acres and probably covered the largest area of any grass fire in my memory.

Fighting a Grass Fire (Notice...no bunker clothes!)



There was to be a controlled burn conducted by an instructor at the state vocational school at the Lund farm. This was the land that had been purchased by the school district. Someone started a second fire in another building on the farm. Because there were two fires and because it was a windy day, the fires got out of control. We called for mutual aid from Oregon. The fire was so hot that our International Truck was damaged by the flames.

The old Gamble Store (The Next Generation) fire started in an apartment over the store. We had to evacuate the apartments over the stores on both sides of the Gamble Store. This fire also used a lot of water from the newly revamped water main in the business district which enabled us to contain the fire to one building. The upgraded water mains were completed during the time that Mr. Ed Malinowski was in charge of the water department. We should all be grateful for his foresight. Ex-police chief (then detective) Grady helped investigate this fire. It was determined that careless use of smoking materials at a party had caused this fire.

On a Saturday morning we fought a fire in the high school chemistry department. This was an extremely hot fire to fight inside since there was no way to ventilate. We considered cutting a hole in the roof, but because of the hard work by our fireman we got the fire out before having to take this action. The steel support beams were warped and twisted showing how hot that this fire was.

There were many farm fires. These were always tough fires to fight and gave the owners many and difficult losses. Several examples include the home and barn fire on the Gunsolas farm on a Labor Day, Seamon Moe's barn and shed, and the barn and tobacco shed on the Alme farm.

The fire at the Hotel Kegonsa was caused by smoking in bed. This caused the loss of life for Mrs. Loraine Larson. Red Benschop and I got the information on this fire from our fire radios and stopped at the hotel on the way to fire department. We were able to get to her room and pulled her out of the burning room but it was too late to save her life.

Probably the greatest tragedy that I experienced was not at a fire, but an accident on Main Street and the railroad tracks. The fire department was called to transport victims to the hospital. There was to be a wrestling tournament in Stoughton. Ten members of the Whitewater wrestling squad were arriving in Stoughton in two cars. A train hit their cars. Five people died and five lived. Ward Hanson who was with the Stoughton Police Department at that time took charge of this gruesome scene. Lt. Hanson decided which of the victims were living and which victims we should cover with blankets. After his determination, we would transport those who could be helped to the hospital. It was a very gruesome scene due to the massive injuries experienced by these people. There were many pictures taken of this accident that show all of the details. It is still hard for me to look at these photos.

I remember an incident where a sailboat was caught on high tension wires at Lake Kegonsa. Four people were badly burned. We transported two to Stoughton Hospital

where we were met by the mediflight helicopter which transported them to the UW Burn Center. We are lucky to have fine medical facilities in Stoughton and also lucky to be near the University of Wisconsin Hospital.

Final Thoughts

Under Mayor Pfundheller 2% of our pension budget was diverted to use for other legal fire department uses. This was done because the interest on the pension was enough to continue fund growth. I hope that if this fund ever gets in need that the administration in power at that time will have the foresight to put this 2% back in the retirement investment fund.

I have many pictures and lots of memorabilia about the Stoughton Fire Department. I want S.F.D. to have these. After me, my family will have their pick and then they will turn the rest of these materials over to Fireman Captain Marty Lamers. Marty's Dad and I were good friends and worked together as well. Marty worked for me in my Mobil Station and I got him interested in the fire department. I know he will take care of all of these things and will in turn make sure that they stay with the fire department.

My last major fire as chief was at the old Gunnelson Implement Co. I saw retired assistant chief Dan Bradley at the fire and thought that soon I too would be the retired chief. The chance to be a fireman for 50 years, assistant chief for 6 years and chief for 20 years, was a dream come true. I loved the department and because of it made many friends in Dane County. Through my involvement in the State of Wisconsin Fire Chief's Association I have friends all over the State. I do not miss some of the mundane aspects of running the department, but when that alarm goes off, I wish that I were 30 years younger so that I could respond. Anyone should be proud to say that they are a volunteer fire person. What would we do without them?

Orser J Fortor
12/20/2000