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Blue Earth County Historian

Blue Earth County Historical Society Quarterly Newsletter
Fall 1998

The Little Engine That Couldn't — Quit

By Janet Goff

The Beginning of Chemical #1

In 1915 the fire department issued a call for bids for a "Light Motor Car chassis to be delivered to the Fire Department of the City of Mankato." The vehicle was to be of standard make and equipment throughout, capable of "at all times and without undue strain, carrying a load equal in weight to that of body, top, windshield, etc., ordinarily furnished and five full grown men, and an occasional overload of an additional man. And capable of performing with such a load, as to hill climbing, response to brakes, spring action, etc., in an entirely satisfactory manner." The chassis was to include everything found on a car *with the exception of body, windshield, and top*. Specifications were spelled out as to tires, speedometer ("Of reliable model, with maximum speed hand and reset lever"), bumper, clock, horn, tools, lights (including one nickel plated searchlight with eight-inch reflector and 21-candle power bulb ..handle, and swivel bracket...together with wire and switch, but should not be mounted"). All bright parts were to be heavily nickel plated. The paint was preferred to be merely the priming coat.

The vehicle, ordered by Clements Auto, was a 1916 Buick Touring Car chassis, and was delivered to the fire department early in 1916. The engine had overhead valves, exposed rocker arms, push rods, and valve

springs. When the hood was up, people could watch the parts move and hear the clickety-clack of the valve tappets. The firemen of Central Station then took it upon themselves to build the rest of the vehicle to suit their needs. The vehicle was mentioned in Fire Chief Phillip C. Leas' annual report to the City of Mankato on April 10, 1916. The 6-cylinder chassis cost \$945; materials for building the new car were \$152.18. The Chief wrote in his narrative, "The Buick car chassis and materials were purchased, and from it was constructed a chemical truck, by the men of the Central Station. The old tank off what was known as Chemical 1 was used, and also much equipment that had been in service for years, thus supplying the city with a neat, serviceable car, at about half the price of one that could be purchased ready made."

Unfortunately, no other records from the time can be found about the specifics of this sizable project. A 1975 *Mankato Free Press* article about the truck quotes Fire Chief Ray Erlandson saying, "This was very fancy in its day." An artistic fireman, the article continues, hand-painted the truck and applied gold leaf decorations to it. Nor were any 1915-16 records found about the truck's official completion, other than its use in a fire report on April 19, 1916. There was

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obvious talent and pride in the original building of the vehicle as evidenced by the resplendent decorations, the craftsmanship of the wooden parts, and the high quality of materials used. This skill, care, and pride was uncovered as the restoration of the truck began.

Some of the equipment originally placed on the truck in 1916 included: "1 heavy blanket, 1 pr. 3/4 boots—good, 1 pr. short boots - fair, 3 rubber coats, 2 canvas coats, mittens, 1 alarm box key, 2 screwdrivers, rim wheel, hub wrench, alligator wrench, rope - 50 ft. 3/8", 75 ft. 5/8", ladders - 20 ft. extension, 12 ft. roof; chemical supplies: 1 tank wrench, nozzle tip, 2 acid receptacles, 1 soda bag, 2 chemical hose spanners, 1 bag salt; 1 chimney cleaner with chain, 2 axes, 1 wall pick, 1 shovel, 1 fork, 5 swabs..."

The manual force of the fire department at the time Chemical #1 was built consisted of one chief engineer, first assistant engineer and second assistant engineer, seven paid men, and 80 volunteers. Their discipline was described by Fire Chief Leas as good, with no complaints received as to the conduct of the men. "They have tried to be courteous and helpful to all, and do their work faithfully and in an efficient manner."

Chemical #1's Contribution

Detailed records were made of every fire call in Mankato since 1860. The fire reports at the time Chemical #1 was put into service always included the date and time of the call, how the department was notified, the departure time, the address and nature of the fire, the owner of the building, the total time spent at the fire, the miles traveled, the maximum speed traveled, the vehicle(s) used, and, when appropriate, the length of hose laid and amounts of chemical used. April 19, 1915 was the first mention of the

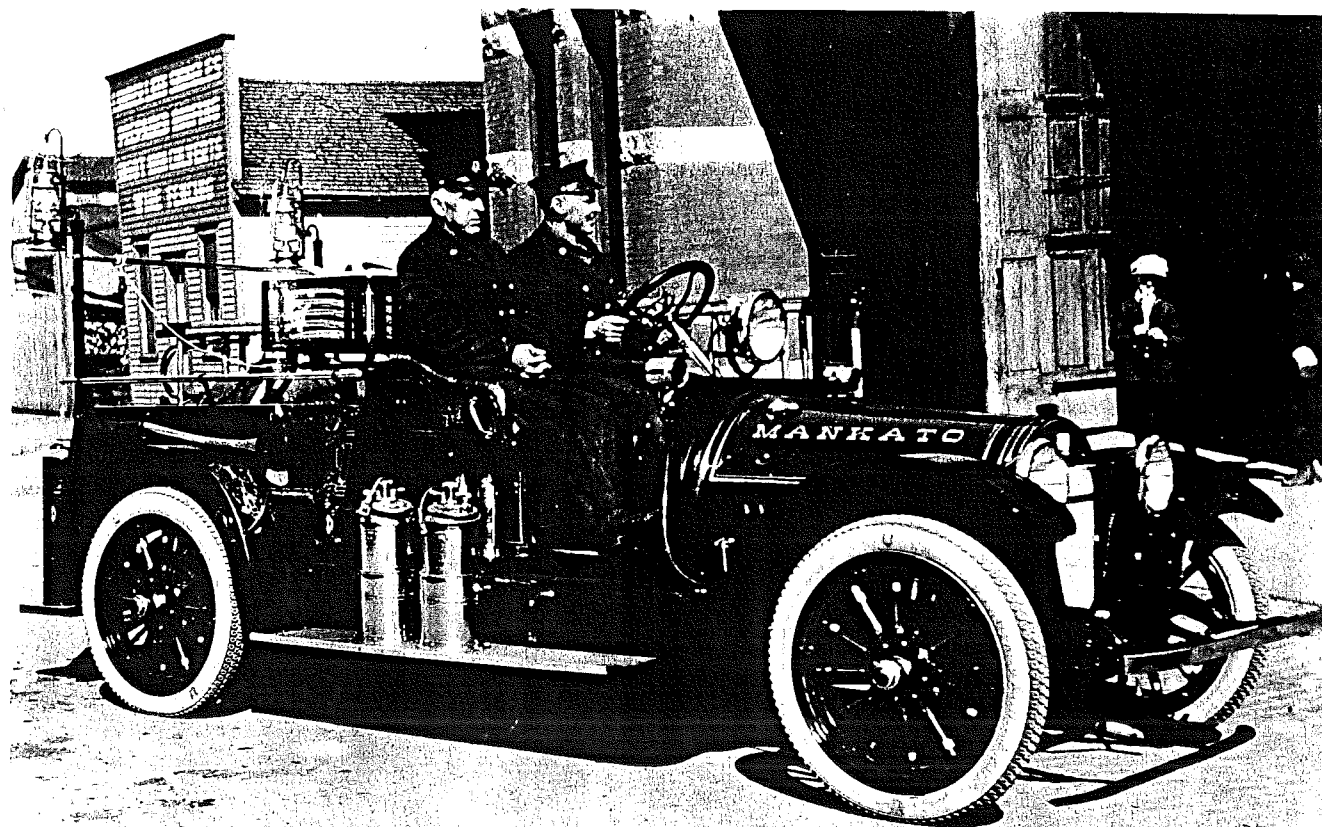
use of Chemical #1. Its maximum speed was 33 miles per hour as it traveled to a home on S. Second St. in response to a chimney fire that afternoon. Chemical #1 was used 61 times in its first year of use. Another example from fire reports: "Jan 9 (1917) Time 3-20 A.M. Tel call to 322 N. Sixth St. two story frame dwelling owned and occupied by Mrs. Julea Wochter small fire in basement, damage slight, cause unknown, time out 1 H. Traveled 1 2/10 miles Max. speede [sic] 25 miles per hour. Chemical #1 Hose #2 300 ft. hose 50 Gal. chemical"

Chemical #1 was used for a total of 1,469 fire calls between 1916 and 1948. Its heaviest use was in 1923, when it was used on 160 calls, 93 percent of the total number of calls that year. In 1931 its use declined sharply, from 59 calls in 1930 to only 7 in 1931. The explanation for this can be found in Fire Chief Ben E. Bangerter's annual report of April 1, 1931. "A new piece of apparatus was added to the equipment of the Department during the year. It is known as Squad No. 5, and is manned by a company whose personnel formerly operated as Chemical No. 1, which it has replaced in routine service. This new rig was built by the Central Station firemen upon a new truck chassis purchased by the City, and the new equipment for it was purchased by the Mankato Fire Department Relief Association."

Down But Not Out

During the 1940s, Chemical #1 was used on only 1 percent of the fire calls. In 1948, it was given to the Blue Earth County Historical Society (BECHS), though no formal agreement was signed. The vehicle was displayed at Sibley Park until the flood of 1965, at which time it went to the basement of the carriage house behind the

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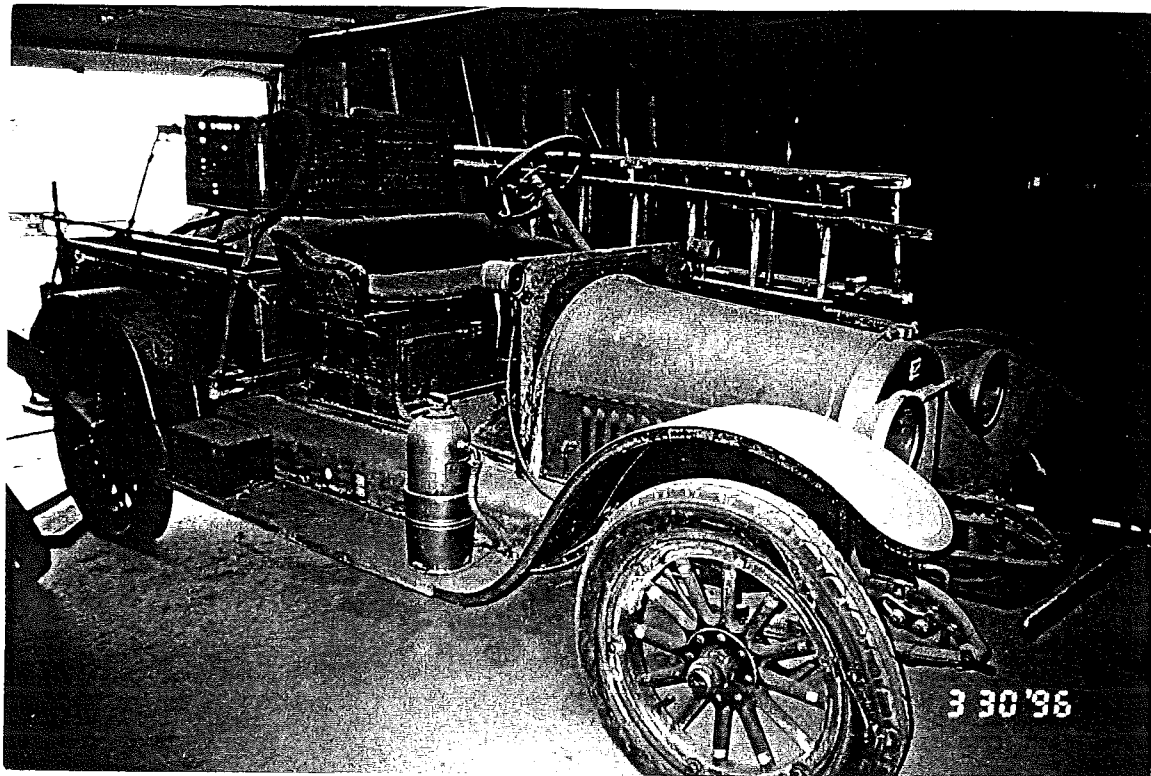
The original fire engine in the early 1900s.

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R.D. Hubbard House at 606 South Broad Street, there being no suitable space to display it at the time. The front end was hoisted to the basement ceiling of the carriage house to immobilize the vehicle. In 1968, a severe rainfall washed through the carriage house, causing the floor above to cave in on the fire truck. The fire department cleaned the vehicle and pumped up the pneumatic tires put on the truck in 1930 (which held air), but there was not enough time or money to suitably restore it, so the truck was placed in storage again, this time in the old Sears Farm Store. In 1975 the truck was officially given (again)

to the Blue Earth County Historical Society by the Mankato City Council. When the carriage house was reconstructed in its present location in 1976, BECHS hoped to eventually display the truck there along with other antique vehicles, but lacked the resources to restore it. Apparently the truck was stored in various municipal and/or county buildings until the son of BECHS members, Fred and Betty Cords, rediscovered it in a county building near Rapidan, with lumber stored on top. Cords obtained permission to move the truck to their home and later moved it to a building between Mankato and Lake Crystal on

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The fire truck awaits restoration in 1996.

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Highway 60. The truck remained unrestored, and in February of 1996, the historical society was asked to move it from the rural Lake Crystal location. Board members were delighted to find the truck to still be nearly complete. As discussion ensued about its future, a donor came forward who wished to have the truck restored for the historical society under the conditions that the restoration be done professionally and that the donor remain anonymous. When it was to be transported to its restoration site, the tires, which were now over sixty years old and in shreds, still held air long enough to allow the truck to be rolled into an enclosed trailer.

Restoration Begins—But First...

In the Fall of 1996, the fire truck began complete restoration at Odyssey

Restoration, Inc. at Spring Lake Park, Minnesota. Tom Rasmussen, Odyssey owner, has remained dedicated to producing an authentic restoration. "The fire engine represents an exciting opportunity to do what we love best—research history and recreate it to original splendor."

Restoration began with thorough research. This was Rasmussen's first fire engine restoration project, which made it all the more challenging. Historical records of the Mankato Fire Department, which are now part of the BECHS archives, were extremely helpful. Examples of documentation — which were significant for restoration — were the original specifications for bid, hand written

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equipment lists, and descriptions of the only other motorized vehicle owned by the fire department at the time, a 1913 American LaFrance triple combination motor car. Rasmussen quickly became a member of the Buick Club of America as well as the Society for the Preservation and Appreciation of Antique Motorized Fire Apparatus in America. He found experts in Pennsylvania and Michigan who were knowledgeable about specifics of fire trucks of this era, such as gold leafing techniques. He studied books such as *The American Fire Engine* by Hans Halberstadt. Rasmussen was able to deduce through research just what had been on the truck originally, partly because the truck came to him 90 percent complete.

The search began for missing pieces, such as the radiator cap, the Buick-Waltham 8-day wind-up clock on the dashboard, two Dietz Fireking kerosene lanterns which hung on poles on the back of the truck, and the original siren. Original gold leafing patterns which were still visible were studied and compared with what would have been on other fire trucks of similar vintage, especially the 1913 American LaFrance already owned by the fire department at the time. Rasmussen believes the American LaFrance' Corinthian design patterns were used as models by the gold leaf artist who so expertly decorated Chemical #1 in 1916. Rasmussen and his crew searched for areas of original paint color on the truck, such as under the bell. They made extensive photo documentation of every part of the vehicle. The entire restoration plan was virtually complete before the vehicle was ever disassembled.

Disassembly

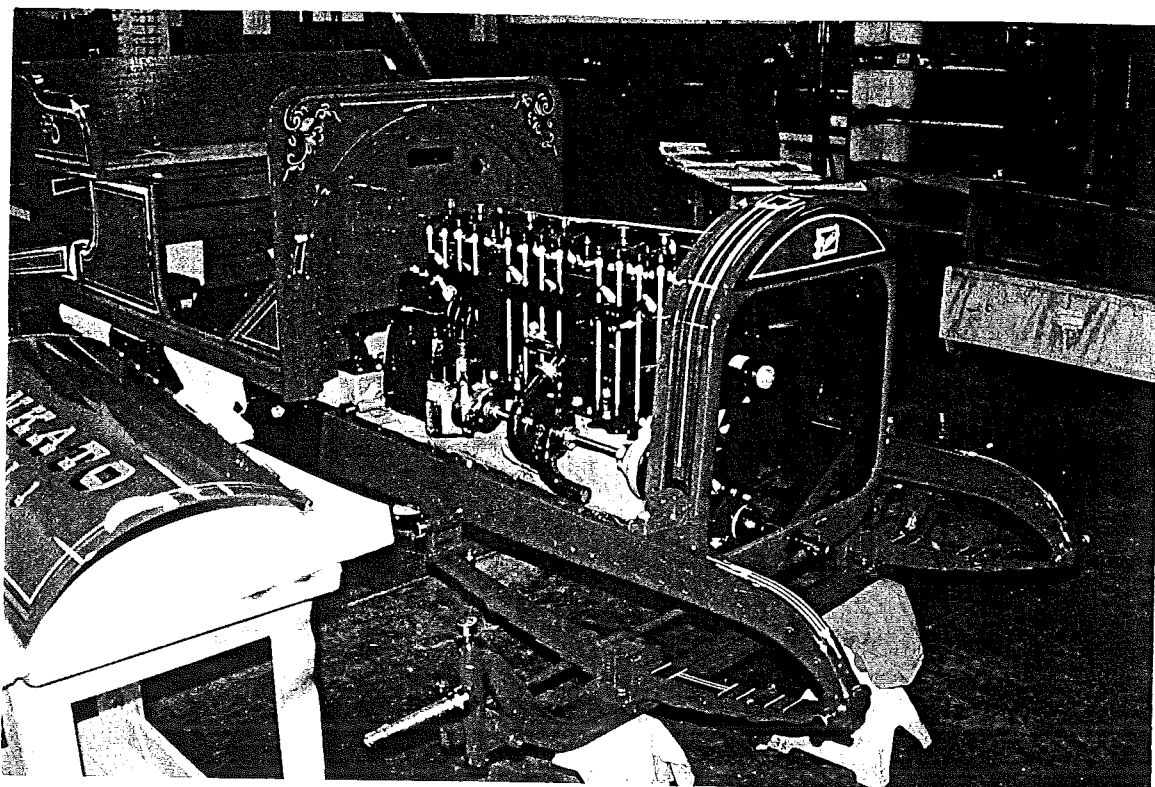
Disassembly was a painstaking process of

further photo documentation, research, and organization. Every part was accounted for, down to each nut and bolt. Paint was stripped, rust removed, diagraming was done as needed, and decisions were made as to replating, repair, reconstruction, cleaning, etc. Authenticity was always first in the mind of the restoration team as the project progressed.

Many fascinating discoveries were made along the way. While the truck had only 3,300 miles on the odometer, accounting for the minimal wear on the chassis, the engine showed a lot of wear. Rasmussen believes this is because the truck sat idling hour after hour while a fire was fought. The crankcase, engine and differential still had flood water in them, but amazingly the engine still turned over. When dismantling the truck, Rasmussen was able to see the area where the original black paint was still on the frame because the firemen in 1916 had not been able to reach there with their brushes when painting the frame red. The radiator shell was originally painted, and later was nickel plated. It still had dents from a minor accident. The ladders were in excellent condition and Rasmussen built new end brackets. Another discovery was that the firewall had had three different heights to accommodate windshields over the years.

The radiator was incorrect, and contributed to a poor fit of the hood. On November 22, 1997, BECHS members Bert Burns and Harley Goff found a 1916 Buick radiator shell and cap at rural veterinarian William Herberg's farm near St. Peter. Rasmussen reported November 26 that "the new radiator turns out to save us some grief on the hood fit. The hood fit has been a nightmare as it appears that the Fire Department never really achieved a good

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The fire truck's engine.

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fit." As work progressed, monthly reports were sent to the historical society. These included detailed descriptions of the work. Categories included, but were not limited to: engine, metal repair, bodywork, paint prep, body hardware, research and documentation, woodwork, plating, wheels, chassis, auxiliary systems, and electrical systems.

Reassembly

As each piece was restored, the team gave all parts a test fit. At the same time, a twin cities area sign painter, John Parkes, was busy recreating the original decorations on the truck. These were extensive and would need to be just right for authenticity. After consulting with experts in Detroit, Mich., he made test designs on brass and iron to observe how various paints and

techniques interacted chemically. When a successful process was developed, the work began. Two books of gold leaf were needed for the truck. Parkes was able to see the original patterns clearly enough to duplicate them precisely. Once the gold was applied, Parkes used a special substance called asphaltum to add dimension to the design. Pin striping was applied in three different colors to further accent the designs. Finally, coats of clear lacquer were applied to protect the designs, resulting in a shiny, showy quality. Parkes calls Chemical #1, "a great example of a fire truck that comes out looking the way it really looked." He points out that major fire truck companies had their own artists and their own styles of gold leafing. The companies were very competitive.

At the time of this writing, the crew at Odyssey Restoration is busily completing

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the final reassembly of the fire truck. Old photos of the truck with its crew are always nearby and add life to the truck for the restoration team. Each day little old Chemical #1 gets closer to completing the full circle to its former glory.

The Heart of it All

For Rasmussen, this restoration project included the opportunity to understand and appreciate the original builders. "When you restore a vehicle you get to know the personalities of the men who put it together. We've gotten to know the fire fighters of Mankato in 1916. They knew their needs. They had plenty of talent available: blacksmiths, woodworking, metalworking, even gold leafing. There was a sense of pride in that time period, especially in a firehouse. This is why it survived. The [fire truck] they bought they didn't keep, but they held on to the one they built."

See for Yourself

The restored Chemical #1 will be unveiled for its first showing on Sunday October 4, 2:00 p.m. at Mankato Fire Station #1 during the annual open house for the City of Mankato Fire Department. The open house marks the kick-off for Fire Prevention Month and the public is invited to visit the station and see existing fire equipment. This is traditionally a fun and educational day. The Blue Earth County Historical Society is proud to share Chemical #1 for this event.

Chemical #1 will be taken to Hershey, Pa., October 9-11 for judging in the Antique Automobile Club of America annual meet. It will be stored over the winter, hopefully at a location where it can be viewed. BECHS has begun plans for a county-wide display



The fire truck being restored.

of early fire fighting equipment to be housed in the carriage house of the R.D. Hubbard House at 606 South Broad Street, where Chemical #1 will no doubt be a star attraction.

Sources: Blue Earth County Historical Society Archives; Mankato Fire Dept. annual reports, log books, ledgers, records of minutes, notes and articles by Ray Erlandson, Marcus Erlandson, and Ben Bangerter, miscellaneous documents, *Mankato Free Press* June 17, 1974, Feb. 5, 1975 and August 1894.

Engine!-Engine!. Second quarter 1982.
KEYC-TV, Robert Redding, reporter. Aug. 20, 1998.
Personal interviews with Tom Rasmussen, John Parkes and Harley Goff.

A history of some county fire departments

Good Thunder

On Nov. 30, 1896, a meeting of the citizens of Good Thunder was called to order. The purpose of the meeting was to organize a fire department for the protection of the property of the village from the devastating effects of fire. The department was divided into the following: Hook and Ladder Co., Hose Company No. 1 and Hose Company No. 2.

The Feb. 2, 1897 edition of the *Good Thunder Herald* reported since the establishment of the water works system and organization of a fire department, the village was re-rated and fire insurance rates were greatly reduced.

Station No. 1 was located on the corner of Front and Main streets. Two hose carts and other equipment deemed necessary was purchased. A Fireman's Dance was held in order to provide money to buy uniforms. By 1898, the department was holding fire drills once a week.

In 1900, the first major fire was reported. With two streams of water, the fire at the H. Kroeger house was extinguished in minutes. Total loss was estimated at \$100.

In 1902, a bell was purchased at a cost of \$66.50 plus \$9 freight. The money for the bell was raised by selling subscriptions. In 1923, the Chemical Engine Co. was formed and a chemical truck was purchased. In the 1930s, the station moved to Station No. 2, where Rod's Bar is now located.

The first fire truck (as we know them today) was purchased from Forstner Fire Apparatus Co. in Madelia in 1941. In 1959, a new pumper was purchased from the Forstner Fire Apparatus Co., and the International Pumper is still in service

today.

In 1965, Fire Station No. 3 was built, and the first tanker was purchased.

Station No. 4 was built in September 1995, at a cost of \$400,000.

— *information provided by Arlen Ostermann, Fire Chief, Good Thunder Fire Department*

Lake Crystal and Amboy

The Lake Crystal Fire Department was established in 1885 as Hose Company No. 1, and the Amboy Fire Department was established in 1887.

Mankato

Mankato's fire department began in 1860 when a group of men in the community formed Hook and Ladder Company No. 1. Soon other volunteer fire companies formed as well, each with their own equipment. At one time there were five separate volunteer companies, each with equipment located strategically throughout the city at substations. Even after the city built its first fire station in 1898-99, there were still volunteer substations operating around town.

At one time there were 98 volunteer firemen. In 1896, the first pay for services went to two drivers who would care for the horses and drive the team for \$5 a month.

Early volunteer fire companies raised their own funds by putting on events such as the Firemen's Ball. They also paid dues each year. Beginning in 1898, the City of Mankato bought all equipment and horses.

— *Information compiled by Janet Goff*

Infamous county fires wreaked havoc

Fire has the power to devastate and destroy. Before the advent of modern fire-fighting technology, most people were powerless to watch as fires of the past destroyed homes, businesses, even parts of entire towns. Let's take a look back into some of the more memorable fires in Blue Earth County's history.

Madison Lake

Madison Lake was home to many devastating fires, including ones in 1910, 1911, and 1974.

On Dec. 23, 1910, the *Mankato Free Press* reported that Madison Lake suffered "the most disastrous loss in its history," as fire wiped out two business blocks, including the People's State Bank block, Allyn Bros. store, the post office, and three saloons. Eleven buildings in all were burned. The Allyn Bros. store alone included three stores — the hardware store, the general store and the furniture store.

Less than a year later, in August 1911, Madison Lake again was the victim of a fierce fire.

According to the Aug. 21, 1911, edition of the *Mankato Free Press*, the fire was discovered on a Sunday afternoon in a large barn owned by James Mapes. Six horses were rescued, but much other equipment was destroyed. A chicken house was also burned, resulting in the death of 200 hens and young chickens. Mr. Mapes suffered a loss of \$2,500.

The Lake House Hotel may have survived the fire of 1910, but a fire in 1974 destroyed the building, which had been scheduled for demolition.

The hotel, which had most recently been called the Silver Bell Inn, was destroyed on

Sunday, March 10, 1974.

Arson was suspected in the case, a feeling echoed by the Blue Earth County Sheriff's Department, the state fire marshal and Wayne Will, the assistant fire chief at Madison Lake, according to the March 11, 1974 edition of the *Mankato Free Press*.

The fire was kept under control, but was allowed to burn through because of the future scheduled demolition. Prior to the blaze, windows had been smashed out and other damage been done.

Good Thunder

Good Thunder also had its share of devastating fires.

In March of 1897, the cheese factory owned by August Sohre was destroyed. The loss was estimated at \$2,000. The fire department was summoned, but by then the fire was beyond control.

It was quite an event for the town, as reported in the March 18, 1897 edition of *The Good Thunder Herald*: "The cry of fire in a small town is always a grand sigh, and men, women and children, aroused from their midnight slumbers, all participated in the tumultuous scene."

In September 1908, a fire wiped out the Good Thunder Flouring Mill. The fire had evidently started in the basement floor, but by the time the flames were discovered, it had eaten through the grinding floor above, according to the Sept. 10, 1908 edition of the *Good Thunder Herald*.

In March 1960, Good Thunder suffered a disastrous fire when the buildings occupied by Marlow's Grocery Store and the building formerly occupied by the Home bakery were destroyed.

Society News

There's a new person in the office! Kandi Demaray has agreed to be the Acting Manager of the Blue Earth County Historical Society until a permanent replacement is found for Anita Baerg-Vatndal, who resigned as director. The staff and Board of Directors wish to congratulate Anita, Steve and Jacob on the upcoming addition to their family; and thank Anita for her hard work and contributions to BECHS.

Wish List

BECHS is in need of several items. If you would like to donate any of these items or make a donation toward the purchase of them, contact BECHS: Tan 4-drawer legal-size file cabinet (two desperately needed for archives); hand-held vacuum cleaner; scissors, 3x5 inch index cards; 3" or 4" black 3-ring binders; and adult and child-size mannequins for the gallery.

The following people have donated artifacts, photographs and archival materials to the museum in recent months:

Marie and Herb Arnold, Ruth Schellberg, Anita Baerg-Vatndal, Dan and Ruby Edwards, Mary K. Dotson, Phyllis Fall, Nina Runck, Susan Denzel, Earl Swain estate, Ronnie Burton, Mary Dooley, Maxine Palm, T.H. Dahl, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Mary Jo Erickson, Al Lagen, Jane Petrie, Harley Goff, Jo Schultz, Jane Tarjeson, Alma Severson, Millie Nisja, Edith Hopman, Win Grundmeier and Orv Jensen.

Monetary Donations:

Joanne Bierbauer De Witt, Mrs. Mary C. Koehler, Ora Ohlenkamp, Glenn Bartsch, Orv and Mary Jensen, Ogden Confer,

George and Dena Fischer, Shelby Township, Town of Cambria, L.G. La Favor, Dave and Doris Boyce, Medo Township, Mapleton Townships, Dr. Joseph Dobie, Tim Dobie, PEO Chapter, Patricia Borgmeier, Donald and Suzanne Brady, F.B. Clements Foundation, John L. Thro, and Paul and Joan Phillips.

Memorials

Hugh and Annette Miller from Elsie Jean Austin

New Or Renewing Members in Aug., Sept.

Steve and Anita Baerg-Vatndal, Ruth Van Lanen, Norma Hansen, Robert Neumiller, Ted Zwart, Mavis Day Wieland, Alma Severson, Harold Habien Jr., Robert Zelin, Edith Hopman, Jane Baird, Mike Frederick, Mary Borrett, Beth and Jim Zimmer, John Rezmerski.

Around the County

The following farms were recognized in 1998 as Century Farms. The year the farm was first owned by the family is indicated in parentheses:

Darlene Doedding and Cornelia (Doedding) Ingham, Good Thunder (1883)
Cletus A. and Valeria Frederick, Madison Lake (1863)

Terry and Carleen Proehl, Mapleton (1897)

Raymond and Marilyn Schneeberger, Amboy (1891)

Darwin J. and Berneda C. Ward, Mapleton (1897)

Thanks to all who stopped and checked

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out our display at the Blue Earth County Fair. Special thanks to the following volunteers for helping make it a success:

Dave Boyce, Kandi Demaray, Mike Daly, Pat Francis, Anita Baerg-Vatndal, Steve Vatndal, Edith Hopman, Alma Severson, Jane Baird, Jeff Walker, Jerry Keenan, Delilah Keenan, Elaine Anderson, Evelyn Mikkelson, Bill Ries, Marge Ries, Carol and Gary Oney, Lona Falenczykowski, Dolly Blomquist, Jo and Bob Schultz, John Rezmerski, and Mary McGrew.

The Heritage Dinner honoring the Hodapp family was held Sept. 17. Philip Hodapp came to this country in 1854 and homesteaded on the site of the present Mankato Golf Course. He was followed by his brothers Joseph, John and Wendelin. Joseph owned and operated a sawmill in Mankato Township. Wendelin owned Hodapp Drug in Mankato. Ninety-six people attended the dinner and much interest was shown in the family tree and pictures exhibited. Each person attending received a booklet on the Hodapp family and was invited to tour the Hubbard House. Thanks to the following committee members who helped make this a success: Frank Hodapp, Jo-an Lavitschke, Jean Lundquist, Mary McGrew, Carol Oney, John Rezmerski, Jo Schultz and Jane Tarjeson.

New in the Archives:

Blue Earth County Federal Census Records 1860, 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920 (on microfilm); Blue Earth County State Census Records 1865, 1875, 1885, 1895, 1905 (on microfilm); ALL the county newspapers on microfilm ranging from 1857 to 1997; 1890 Schedule Enumerating Veterans and Widows of Union Veterans of Civil War (on

microfilm); immigration and passenger lists from Bremen, southwest Germany, Wuerttemberg, Norway and the Czech region; various geneology books.

Shopping for that hard to please person? Check out The Museum Store for local history books and unique toys.

Upcoming events!

October 4

Mankato Fire Department Open House
Fire Station No. 1 on Madison Avenue
1 to 4 p.m.
View the fully restored 1916 Buick Fire Truck
no charge

October 13

Jesse James Family Saga
Program and dinner at Point Pleasant,
Madison Lake
Call 345-5566 for more details

October 12-14

Let's Be Like Bert Bus Tour
tour of southeastern Minnesota
Call 345-5566 for more details

December 7-8

A Hubbard Family Christmas
at the R.D. Hubbard House
Make this event a holiday tradition!

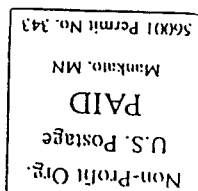
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