

The Fairmont Fire Department – 100+ Years Ago

Fire departments are essential and vital to the safety and well being of every community, whether they are manned by volunteers or full-time firefighters. Many of the fire departments in Martin County were formed in the 1800s and have evolved into what they are today.

According to documentation in the Pioneer Museum, *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Fairmont Fire Department* date back to its organization in 1878 with the By-Laws being adopted in 1895.

The fire department at that time was said to be comprised of a diverse group of local residents that included the rich and the poor as well as the laborer and the capitalist. Within the organization, however, there appeared to be some turmoil as there was considerable rivalry for what was then considered to be the important positions within the department; those being foreman, first and second assistant foreman, and several other positions deemed significant by the members.

The Fairmont Fire Brigade, synonymous with fire department, considered itself to be a democratic organization made up of individuals from all walks of life. However, there were conflicting anecdotal remarks indicating that it may well have been somewhat exclusive as many potential candidates were rejected. Interestingly, the meeting minutes seemed to reflect a great deal of time devoted to whether or not to accept certain applications in as well as time spent on determining whether or not to expel or suspend some of its current members of that era.

The collection of money from the membership was also apparently no easy task. At one of their meetings in the early years of its existence, a committee of three was appointed to contact a certain “unnamed” individual in an attempt to collect the money he owed the company, apparently unpaid dues. However, as of the date of that account, the individual in question remained “unnamed” because of the fact that this gentleman had become “an honorable resident of Fairmont” and the item in question might be construed as an unfavorable reflection on his character. He apparently went from somewhat of a “deadbeat” of to an “honorable” citizen.

Perhaps the most prominent figure in those formative years of the department was Chief Harry Serle. He was born in India in 1855 and educated in England. At the age of twelve, he began an active career at sea. In 1876, he came to America and settled in Decorah, Iowa. A year later, he joined the English Colony in Fairmont.

Serle spent his first year in Martin County driving a stage from Fairmont to Winnebago. He then worked a year in railroading and also farmed in Martin County up until 1883. Later, he started an ice business which developed into a monopoly in Fairmont for some 30 years.

Perhaps best known his public service, Serle was instrumental in organizing the first fire department in Fairmont. It was said that due to his public spiritedness and energy, he developed the department into one of the most efficient in the state for towns of its size at that time. He served as the Chief of Fairmont's Fire Department which in those early years consisted of 49 regular members, a team and combination wagon with a 35 gallon chemical tank, 1,200 feet of hose, a Seagrave hook and ladder truck, and normal water pressure of 80 pounds with the potential of 175 pounds when necessary. The state Firemen's Convention was held in Fairmont in 1914, very likely due to his efforts on the local fire department.

He also served as Mayor of Fairmont for a term of two years, a city councilman for ten years, and was a voluntary deputy game warden.

The Fairmont Fire Brigade posted its by-laws in the June 19, 1914, edition of the *Martin County Sentinel*. Some of the more interesting excerpts from this report refer to dues, and especially fines. The following are several examples provided in that account:

- The foreman, first and second assistants, secretary, and treasurer would be fined \$1.00 for neglecting any of their duties.
- The truck keeper would be fined \$1.00 for neglecting to keep it in good order.
- Absences from a fire would result in a \$0.25 fine.
- Absences from the annual review would be a \$1.00 fine.
- Disobeying an order would be a \$1.00 fine.
- Speaking disrespectfully would be a \$0.50 fine.
- Losing a key to the truck house would result in a \$1.00 fine.
- Incapable of performing duties at a meeting or at a fire as a result of "too free use of ardent spirits" would result in a fine of \$0.50 for the first offense, \$1.00 for the second, and expulsion for the third time.
- Excuses for late payment of fines and absences from fires would be heard at the regular monthly meetings.

The annual firemen's ball was considered an important event; however, the financial return was minimal at best. One such occasion in that era netted the sum of \$3.50 which promptly disappeared and was unaccounted for in the treasury of the department.

Since the Fairmont Fire Department was originally organized in the 1800s, the methods, training, and fire equipment has changed dramatically. Fortunately, the evolution of fire

prevention and suppression provides a much safer environment for today's citizens than what was available back in the 1800s. However, as with anything, there had to be a starting point from which to advance. It's always interesting to view the origin of an organization and compare that to how it has progressed up to its present state. The members of the 1800s fire brigade would undoubtedly be in awe of the training, capabilities, and resources of our modern fire departments and fire fighters.

For more information, or to become a member, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

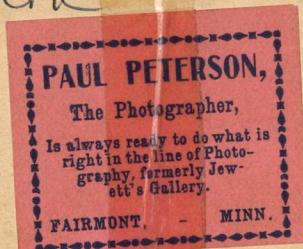


44.

~~40 Academy~~
Fairmont Fire Department

1. Visselman 2. Crissinger 3. Henry Fritz 4. Gene Rendel 5. George Andermann
 6. 7. Fred Meyer 8. J Hartjen 9. E. Meyer 10. 11 Wm LaRoe
 12. Fred Grewe 13. E. Haertel 14. Wm Weber 15. Ernest Meyer
 16. Wm Klopp 17. 18. George Wiebe 19. Ralph Cross

on left edge - Harry Serle



1900

Front of
Greethurst Studio

MARTIN COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
304 E. BLUE EARTH AVE.
FAIRMONT, MINN.

17cc # 2090

PF # 823



Top Row. ^{I think} Mr Schendel. Ace Pickley. Doug Tanner
watt Milbert. Geo. Hyde. Mr Schendel. Ace Pickley. Doug Tanner
Geo. Palmer. Fred Linstead. Geo. Cory. Mr Fornholt.
Eli Pratt. Harry Barker. Mr Rademar.

seated.

Geo. Palmer. Fred Linstead. Geo. Cory. Mr Fornholt.
Geo. Palmer. Fred Linstead. Geo. Cory. Mr Fornholt.





**CONSTITUTION
AND
BY-LAWS**

**Fairmont
Fire Department**

Organized 1878

Adopted April 20, 1895

FAIRMONT, MINNESOTA