



Occasional Papers in Local History

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The Early History of Organized Firefighting in Oswego

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Little White School Museum

In 1898, the Village of Oswego purchased a bell to summon the members of the newly formed fire brigade when an emergency occurred. Today, this historic old bell is a monument to the dedicated service of several generations of Oswego firefighters.

Until Oswego built a municipal water system there was no pressurized water system for a fire brigade to use to fight fires. But in the April 1893 village elections, building a modern pressurized water system for the village became a major campaign issue, with all candidates publicly supporting building a municipal water system.

With the political will already there, the move to build a municipal water supply got a boost on July 18, 1893 when the landmark Oswego Congregational Church was destroyed by fire. Community discussion on building a waterworks so that fires could be fought and for the use of residences and businesses became more serious. On Dec. 5, 1894, the *Kendall County Record's* Oswego correspondent, Lorenzo Rank, reported: "An important council meeting was held Monday evening, made so by the opening of the sealed bids for the building of the water-works not including the mains. The bids ran from \$3,000 to \$3,598. The Chicago Bridge and Iron Company being the lowest bidder."

On April 24, 1895 Rank reported that: "The building of the new waterworks was commenced Monday without being accompanied by any special ceremonies. It should have been delayed a few days longer; being it is a work of great importance, all risks should be avoided including that of commencing it on a waning moon. Three days later would have brought it in on the new the moon. The contract for the mason work was taken by Frank Swanson."

By June, work on drilling the municipal well on a triangular lot at Washington and Van Buren streets had begun, as had construction of an elevated water tower. Then on July 3, Rank reported: "The water works tower and tank are a grand success even should they prove a failure for what intended; the adornment they give to the place would be more than sufficient for what they have cost. They are visible from all directions being 112 feet tall from the sole of the foot to the top of the vanes, the loftiest thing that Oswego has. While the Congregational people built a very fine church, on the steeple of it they were very moderate. The new well was walled up by Frank Swanson; in order to do the work a pump throwing an eight-inch stream of water



In 1895, Oswego's first municipal water system was completed. The heart of the system was the elevated tank, built by Chicago Bridge & Iron, on a triangular lot at Washington and Van Buren streets. As soon as the new system was in operation, the village purchased equipment for a municipal fire company.

was kept going constantly for three days and three nights; it pumped dry pretty much all the wells of the neighborhood. The well contains now ten feet of water. The engine is expected to be set up Tuesday. The job is nicely done, and the gang of men that did it are very clever fellows and got along with our folks splendidly.”

The Oswego Fire Company

With the well and tower in place, village officials quickly acted to obtain equipment for a new Oswego firefighting company. On July 17, Rank reported that: “The village authorities have bought a hose and cart for protection against fire.”

But in the same issue, with fire equipment still on the way, Rank was forced to report that the new company, still organizing, had to call on outside help when yet another major blaze struck Oswego. According to Rank: “Wayne’s Elevator burned Tuesday afternoon, July 16. Origin of fire not definitely known. It was pretty much filled with grain, mostly oats. The waterworks did splendidly after having been supplied from Aurora by the [CB&]Q railroad company with hose; the hose for the works here are bought but not yet received. Our folks are enthusiastic over it; the water was pumped faster than one stream could exhaust it.”

But by late July, the hose cart and hose had been

received, and were given a test run. According to Rank, writing in the July 31, *Kendall County Record*: “The hose and cart for the waterworks have been received and a trial given them Monday in putting out the fire of the still burning coal pile of the elevator.”

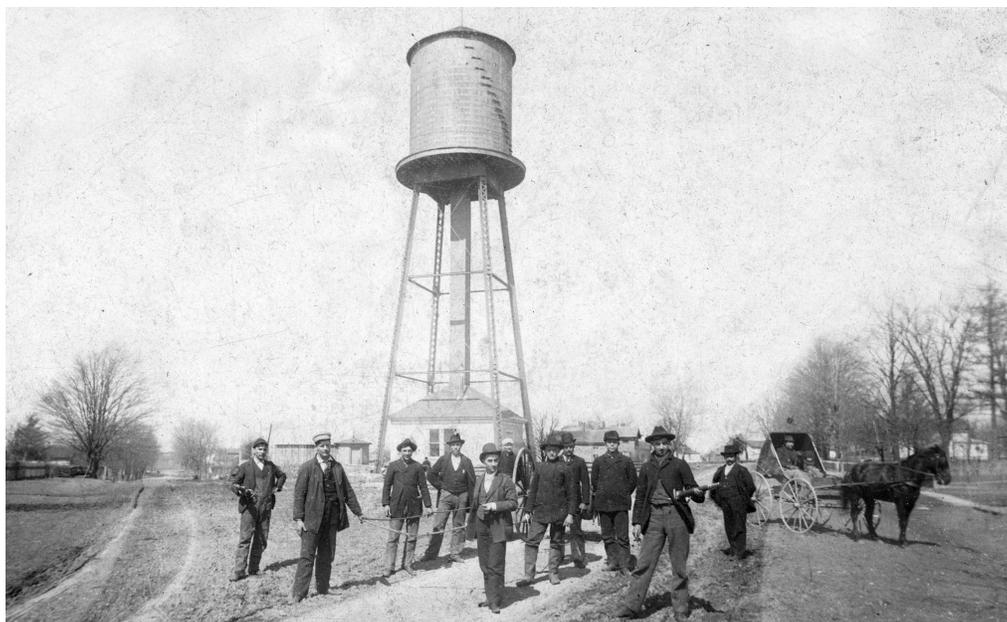
Efforts to organize the personnel for a new fire company were also moving forward. Rank reported in the Aug. 14 *Record* that: “The [Oswego Village] council at its Monday evening meeting accepted the fire company that offered itself for service, and which is made up of the following members: Ernest Troll, Charles M. Jarvis, Harly S. Richards, Orville L. Wormley, Clarence A. Barnard, Clarence C. Hopkins, G.J. Burkhart, F. Burghart, Lew R. Inman, Charles S. Smith, J. Albert Schmidt, Frank Swanson, Henry D. Hebert, Frank R. Nichols, George E. Troll, Joseph C. Varner, A. Wallace, J.W. Carney, R. Will Richards, Sidney Cooney. They are all good boys full of confidence.”

The next week, according to the *Record*: “At a meeting of the fire company, held one evening, over which Frank Nichols presided and Ernest Troll was secretary, Orville Wormley was elected fire marshal, Joe Varner first; and Clarence Hopkins second assistants. Saturday afternoon the company went through a drill practice and the move they got on themselves was satisfactory.” The fire company held their meetings on

the second floor of what is now known as the old township hall on Washington Street just west of Main Street, Oswego.

In the June 16, 1897 *Record*, Rank noted that an addition designed to house the hose cart was to be built onto the Washington Street municipal building: “The main business at the council meeting Monday evening was the building of a hose house, the same is to be joined to the council building and that the firemen be more under the regulation of the council than they were heretofore.”

Rank added on July 27: “The



Members of Oswego’s new fire company pose with their hose cart in 1895. The photo was taken before the company’s members purchased their uniforms in August 1897.

fire department was reorganized the other evening by making some amendments to its rules and the election of new officers. The company now consists of 17 members and the officers are George M. Croushorn, president; Clint Jackson vice president; Gustavus H. Voss, secretary; Scott Cutter, treasurer; John Varner, marshal; Ezekiel Davis, assistant marshal; Charles Rieger, captain.”

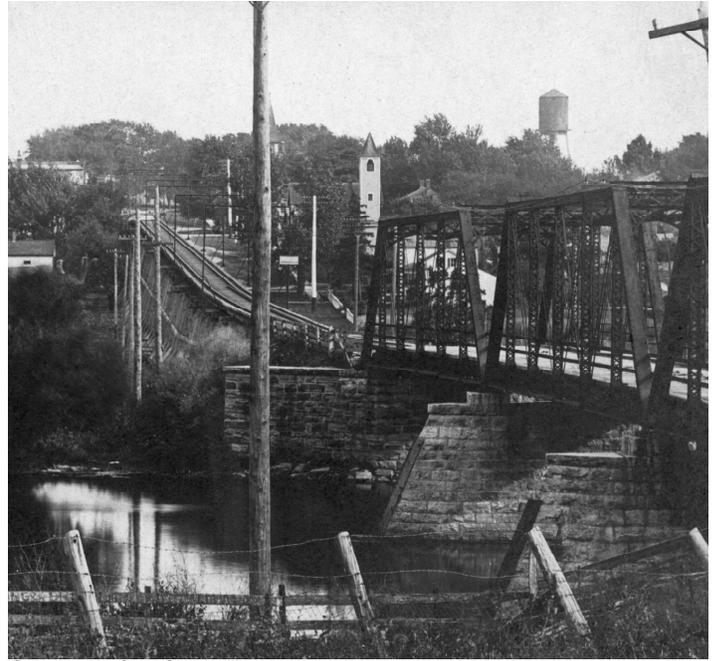
In August, the newly reorganized company fought their first blaze: “Fire! Fire! was the cry early Friday morning; it was at the residence of R.R. Smith, where the boy undertook to help make the fire in the kitchen stove burn by pouring kerosene on it, followed by the usual explosion of the can. By the cries the boy, whose clothes were on fire, Smith, who had run out doors returned and took the boy out and put him into the creek which runs by the house. A portion of the firemen were promptly on hand and quick to work and soon had the fire extinguished—some of those not there didn’t like it that they were not waked up and a chance given in having a hand of putting out the first fire of the company’s regime. The boy was considerably burned about the legs, the building more or less damaged and some of the furniture destroyed, which, however, was replaced by other given to the family by neighbors.”

It wasn’t all training and work, however. On Sept. 1, Rank reported that: “A dozen of the firemen donned their new uniforms and went to Sandwich to attend a tournament there the other day. They expressed great delight for the good time experienced and the courteous treatment received.”

Village officials, appreciative of the job the new fire company was doing, especially after quickly dousing two fires that blazed up nearly simultaneously in downtown Oswego in September, rewarded them with additional equipment. On Nov. 10, Rank noted that: “The fire department has been supplied with an additional section of 250 feet of hose.”

Oswego’s fire bell

But while the fire company had equipment and an enthusiastic group of firefighters, they still had no general community alarm system. That changed in May 1898 when Rank reported that village officials had set the wheels in motion to purchase a fire bell for the company.



Oswego’s first fire bell was purchased in 1898. A tower was added to the Oswego municipal building on Washington Street both to house the bell and to use as a hose-drying tower.

The decision was made to hang the new bell in a combined bell and hose tower to be added to the municipal building. On June 8, 1898, Rank reported Oswego Village Board took a variety of action at their last meeting: “Bills allowed, sidewalks ordered to be built, water donated for street sprinkling, the building of tower and hanging of fire bell referred to committee and much talk as to what should be done were the transactions of the [village] council meeting Monday.

The village wasted no time, and Rank reported two weeks later that “The bell tower is nearly completed, which will make another ornament to the village. In an Aurora paper it was reported to be 60 feet high, but don’t you believe that.”

On July 6, the new fire bell got its first use as the community’s fire warning system: “The new fire alarm bell was brought into use for the first time about 8:30 Saturday night when Malcolm’s barn was on fire. The hose cart was hustled there in hurry but the fire had too much of a start to be put out.”

The bell hung in the tower at the municipal hall for more than two decades. After the village built a new combined waterworks management building and fire station at 113 South Main in the village’s downtown, the fire bell was moved to the roof of the building where it was hung in a small bell tower.



The Oswego fire bell was moved from the hose tower at the old municipal building to a small tower on the roof of the Oswego Village Hall, probably in the 1920s, as soon as the village hall building was completed. The small tower on the village hall roof was the bell's home until 1958 when it was removed and sent to the new Oswego Fire Station for eventual use as a firefighters' memorial.

Eventually, the bell was superseded by a new fire siren that called the Oswego Fire Protection District's volunteers to fight fires. The bell, however, continued to hang in its small tower atop the 113 South Main building, which had since become the Oswego Village Hall.

In 1953, work began on a new Oswego fire station on the west side of Main Street just south of Jackson Street. The new station was finished early in 1954 and

included a modern fire siren atop its roof.

By 1958, the old Oswego fire bell's tower had deteriorated, and firefighters decided it would be fitting to move the bell to the new Main Street fire station, where it could become part of a firefighters' memorial.

At the July 10, Oswego Village Board meeting, the *Oswego Ledger* reported that: "Board member Don Pinnow reported that the old fire bell that hung on top of the village hall for a good number of years has been removed and is now in storage in the Oswego Fire Barn. Plans are for the

firemen to mount the bell as a historical marker."

The venerable old fire bell became part of the familiar historical marker in front of Oswego Fire Station One, where it was located for more than 50 years before being removed to the new Oswego Station One opened in 2009.

The old fire bell is a direct link with the days when Oswego's first fire company was formed to protect the lives and property of area residents.



The Oswego fire bell, purchased by the village in 1898, hung in the brick memorial at the far left in this 2009 photo until operations were moved from the old fire station to the new Oswego Fire Station One in late 2009.