

## The Fire Alarm System Village of Depew, New York

Early in 1895 the Village Board of Trustees considered the matter of a suitable fire alarm system. Special arrangements were made between the village and the Union Car Shops by which the factory would blow its whistle to denote a fire in the village.

The village was divided into four sections, northeast, northwest, southeast and southwest. A series of long blasts would denote the section of the village in which the fire was located. It was not a very efficient manner of locating a fire but was practical at the time.

The following were the signals to be blown.

- Between the D.L.& W. and Erie railroads and east of the Gould Works, one long and two short blasts.
- South of the Erie Railroad and West of Transit Road, one long and 3 short blasts.
- Northwest section, 1 long and 5 short blasts.
- Northeast section, 1 long and 6 short blasts.

On February 13, 1897 Chief Keller of the fire department was notified by the Union Car Shops (American Car Shops) that they would no longer blow their whistles for fires because it caused their men to stop working, causing confusion, trouble and annoyance. The company stipulated that they would furnish steam to operate and blow any whistle that the village may purchase, without cost.

Fire started in the attic of Mrs. Wahler's boarding house, on Ellicott Place, about eight o'clock of the morning of July 14, 1897 and had gained much headway before being discovered. The hose company from the New York Central Shops responded quickly to the alarm and extinguished the flames, but not before considerable damage had been done to the house and household goods. The general alarm brought every Depew Company to the scene, but their services were not required.

This fire only more emphatically demonstrated the fact that Depew badly needed a modern and intelligible system of fire alarms.

On September 21, 1898 the Secretary of the Council of the Fire Department submitted to the Board of Trustees a resolution adopted at a meeting of the Council in which the Board of Trustees were petitioned to arrange a system of communicating fire alarms throughout the village. This resolution was referred to the Fire and Water committee.

In August 1900, the Depew Herald reported that on account of the closing of the Union Car Works, the Village Trustees have arranged with the Gould Coupler Company to have fire alarms sounded by their whistle hereafter.

The sounding of alarms for fire continued to be a hit and miss affair as on January 16, 1902 the alarm whistle at the American Car & Foundry Company sounded an alarm and it was found to be for a blaze at McHugh's Hotel on Sawyer Avenue.

July 30, 1900 a motion was made by the village board ordering the Fire and Water Committee to secure a fire alarm or signal, in case of fire in the village, with the Gould Coupler Company. This was followed up at the next board meeting on August 6<sup>th</sup> when the Purchasing Committee was empowered to purchase a fire whistle, the same as is used

now at the American Car Shops and that it be placed on the Gould Coupler Works and that Case Company of Buffalo does the work of fitting. At the following meeting, Trustee Percy Malone stated that the American Car Shops would blow their whistle as previously had been done and that it could be done at a savings of \$75 to the village.

Assistant Chief Henry Wehner of the Depew Fire Department stated that it would be difficult to hear the whistle located at the American Car under certain wind conditions and that better results could be expected if the whistle were located at the Gould Coupler Company. The matter was tabled.

On December 23, 1901 E.B. Rowley, a local insurance man addressed the Board of Trustees stating that a definite contract should be made in regard to the giving of alarms for fire, this was again referred to the Fire and Water committee.

At the January 20, 1902 meeting it was moved by Trustee Martin Kieffer and seconded by Trustee Michael Fitzgerald that the Purchasing Committee be instructed to purchase a whistle for fire alarm purposes and that it be located at the Gould Coupler Shop after the subject was brought forth by Village President Edward Byron.

In the later part of February the new whistle was to be installed at the Gould Coupler Works and tested. The fire department and citizens were advised to ignore some extra whistles unless the old whistle of the American Car Company is blown. That will continue to give the alarm, as usual, until the new one is in order.

The fire whistle was purchased from the W.A. Case Company for the sum of \$39.52 and installed, however in May it was reported that the fire whistle failed to give satisfactory results.

On June 5, 1902 the following appeared in the Depew Herald:

### **NOTICE**

Owing to the fact that the bill against the village for the fire whistle is still dissatisfied, as are some of the citizens, I wish to announce that next Saturday afternoon, June 7<sup>th</sup>, I will blow the same for the practice of the Gould Hose Company and immediately afterward I should like the members of the Village Board of Trustees to report to me if they are still dissatisfied and perhaps some suitable adjustment can be made either on the whistle or W.A. Case.

J.N. Oswald, Chief Engineer Gould Power House

The bill was eventually paid but the system was still not entirely satisfactory.

At the February 2, 1903 meeting, the Purchasing committee was instructed to ascertain the cost of installing a municipal fire alarm system. Star Electric Company of Binghamton provided a cost estimate of \$1,600 and Robertson Electric Company of Buffalo estimated the cost at \$2,000.

During the election held on March 17, 1903 a proposition was presented to the people asking that the Village Board be empowered to spend \$2,000 for an adequate fire alarm system. The voters approved the proposition.

In May 1903 Chief John H. Wagner of the Depew Fire Department ordered that the fire alarm whistle to be blown on Saturday evening, May 16<sup>th</sup>, at seven o'clock.

The different signals will all be blown, but if one signal should be repeated three times in succession it will mean an actual fire.

The Village Board then began to study the matter of a fire alarm system thoroughly. Systems used in North Tonawanda, Tonawanda, Lockport and Niagara Falls were inspected and studied by the Board.

On September 8, 1903 Village Attorney S.J. O'Hart presented and read a set of specifications for a fire alarm system. A motion was made and seconded to advertise for bids for the construction of a fire alarm system with bids to be received on September 21<sup>st</sup>.

Star Electric Company of Binghamton objected to the specifications and asked for the bids to be re-advertised but was denied by the Board.

At the regular meeting of the Board on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, President Martin Kieffer stated that it was in order for the Board to take some action in regard to the proposed fire alarm system.

The committee of the whole recommended the adoption of a resolution, which awarded the proposal of the Gamewell Fire Alarm System for five miles of insulated wire as specified, also including ten \$75.00 alarm boxes, one punch register with a brass gong attachment, bank of gravity batteries and switchboard, all as specified in their proposal No. 1, at \$1,632.50 upon condition that if the village is delayed in obtaining rights to occupy poles or in making pole construction, no claim shall be made for damage or extras against Depew Village or its officers, and said company shall not work beyond getting supplies ready, until directed by this Board.

A motion as made and seconded that the President and Village Clerk were directed to enter into and execute an agreement with the Utica Fire Alarm and Telegraph Company for furnishing and construction of the proposed fire alarm system.

In the mean time, the Village Clerk was directed to obtain proper permits from the Telegraph and Telephone Companies to string the fire alarm wires on their poles. The Purchasing Committee was empowered to purchase the necessary number of poles required for the installation of the proposed system and to make any other necessary arrangements or details. The President was empowered to include storage batteries instead of gravity batteries if found to be practical.

J.N. Oswald who had also submitted a bid proposal had his check returned at this meeting.

Attorney S.J. O'Hart reported that he and President Martin Kieffer had met with Mr. Gould in regard to the supplying of storage batteries for the fire alarm system and that Mr. Gould had offered to allow the village to use space in their plant for the installation of the batteries and switchboard.

Following the report of the attorney a resolution was adopted which authorized the President and Clerk to enter into contract with the Gould Coupler Company or Gould Storage Battery Company, to provide for supplying the Depew fire alarm system with electric energy, and also to provide for the blowing of the fire alarm whistle in case an alarm shall be sent in over the system.

At this time the President and Clerk were directed to also sign an agreement with the railroad companies in regard to the passing over their roads with the wires for the fire alarm system.

On December 11, 1903, a special meeting of the Village board was held for the purpose of locating the fire alarm boxes.

The resolution, which was adopted at this meeting stated that in the institution of the permanent fire alarm system of the Village of Depew, it is expedient that the territorial extent of the village be divided into districts, and that the fire alarm boxes be systematically arranged and numbered. The following alarm districts were established.

- District No.1---All that part of Depew Village lying south of the railway of the Lehigh Valley Railroad, east of Transit Road and north of the railway of the Erie Railroad and west of the east line of the Depew Village.
- District No.2---All that part of the Depew Village lying south of the railway of the Erie Railroad, east of Transit Road, north of the south line of said village and west of the east line of the Depew Village.
- District No.3---All that part of Depew Village lying south of the railway of the Lehigh Valley Railroad, west of Transit Road, north of the south line of said village and east of the west line of the Depew Village.
- District No.4---All that part of Depew Village lying south of the north line of Depew Village, west of the east line of farm lot1, section 10, township 11, range 6 of the Holland Land Companies survey, north of the railway of the Lehigh Valley railroad and east of the west line of the Depew Village.
- District No. 5---All that part of the Depew Village lying south of the north line of said village, east of the east line of farm lot1, section 10, township 11, range 6 of the Holland Land Company survey, north of the railway of the Lehigh Valley railroad and west of the east line of Depew Village.

The public fire alarm boxes were to be installed in the permanent fire alarm system decimally for each of the respective districts and that each fire alarm box was to be installed numbered and located as follows:

District No. 1

Box 19, located on the southeast corner of Sawyer Avenue and Penora Street.

Box 18, located on the southwest corner of Laverack Avenue and Sanilac Street.

District No. 2

Box 29, located at the west corner of the junction Gould Avenue and Suffield.

Box 28, located at the southwest corner of Broadway and Penora Street.

Box 27, located on the southwest corner of Broadway and Kieffer Avenue.

Box 26, located on the west point of the junction of Westfield and Terrace.

District No. 3

Box 37, located opposite the end of South Bryant, north of Broadway.

District No. 4

Box 46, located on the north side of Ellicott Road at corner of West Second Street.

Box 45, located at the southeast corner of Transit Road and Eliot Avenue.

District No. 5

Box 55, located at the northwest corner of Olmstead Avenue and Morgan Street.

Box 54, located on Ellicott Place midway between Olmstead Ave and Ellicott Road.

As construction on the new fire alarm system began, Street Superintendent Edward Byron reported that Superintendent Mooney of the Buffalo & Depew Railway Co., had ordered the fire alarm wires taken down from their poles on Olmstead Avenue. Mr.

Byron asked permission to set up two additional poles on Olmstead Avenue in order to relocate Box 55 in District 5 to the south side of Olmstead Avenue opposite Morgan Avenue and to relocate Box 46 from the north side of Ellicott Road and West 2<sup>nd</sup> Street to the south side of Ellicott Road opposite West Second Street.

In the May 5, 1904 edition of the Depew Herald, it was reported that Mr. A.H. Palmer, Superintendent of Construction for the Utica Fire Alarm and Telegraph Company, assisted by Superintendent Edward Byron of the Streets Department and a force of men, have been very busy for several days putting the alarm boxes in position. It was expected that the entire system would be completed and in working order by the end of the week. Some changes had to be made in the locations of boxes since the work was begun.

Superintendent Palmer invited the Village Trustees and a few others to witness the testing of the alarm system on Monday afternoon, May 23<sup>rd</sup>.

The batteries, bells, etc., were located in the Gould Coupler Company's engine room, with which all the boxes were connected. President Kieffer and the Trustees assembled there about two o'clock; and Superintendent Byron was started out to go the rounds of the different boxes and send in the alarm. Mr. Byron proceeded on his journey, and the bell soon told where he was, and all in succession came in without a hitch. So far the alarm system was working beautifully and all present were well pleased with the results.

The wires and boxes were yet to be inspected and reported on before the Trustees would accept the system. Mr. Henry B. Martin was appointed inspector of the system on Monday May 16<sup>th</sup> and would probably be reporting to the Village Board at the next meeting.

A change order was approved in late June notifying Utica Fire Alarm Telegraph Co. to install a whistle opening apparatus in connection with the fire alarm system. On July 18<sup>th</sup> Mr. Eichmeyer, President of the Utica Fire Alarm Telegraph Co. reported that the whistle opening apparatus would be ready in a few days as he was in town supervising the installation of same and repairing the boxes which were burned out by the recent electric storm. Henry C. Martin, fire alarm inspector for the village, reported that the condition of the system being installed was satisfactory.

A change in the box location for alarm box No.45, moving the box to the corner of Harvard Avenue and Transit from the previous approved location at Eliot Street and Transit Road. A special number, Code Signal No. 17, was assigned to the Gould Coupler Co., and placed inside their works, without a public box, which (No. 17) can only be given from their shop in case of fire there.

With the fire alarm districts now established, the Village Board set up the response procedure for alarms of fire by the Depew Fire Department along with the Board of Wardens at the July 25, 1904 meeting of the Board of Trustees.

Upon an alarm from districts numbered one, two or three, the Aetna Hose Company, Cayuga Hose Company and Depew Hook & Ladder Co. No. 1 were to respond until a general alarm was sounded.

Upon an alarm from districts numbered four or five, Depew Hose Co. No. 1, Central Hose Co. No. 4 and Depew Hook & Ladder Co. No. 1 were to respond until a general alarm was sounded.

A general alarm for all companies to respond was to be given by a code of three blasts, repeated three times, thus: - - - - - . For fire out, two long blasts of the whistle, thus: ----- ----- . For a test signal from boxes, four touches of the key, thus: \* \* \* .

When an alarm for fire is sent in, the whistle will first blow a long blast giving the alarm of fire, then will blow the number of the box where the alarm comes from, the district No. will not be blown separately, but the district will be known by the first figure of the box number as follows: all box numbers beginning with the figure 1 are in the first district; all beginning with the number 2 in the second district and so forth.

All of this was to be readily understood by noticing the box numbers as given in the respective districts.

The following instructions to send in an alarm of fire were printed in the Depew Herald so that the citizens would know how to react in the event of a fire.

*To send in an alarm of fire*, break the glass with anything in hand, turn the key to the right, open the door (this exposes a brass lever), pull down the lever its full length, once, and let go. This starts the automatic whistle blowing at the Gould Shop, and it will continue to blow until the engineer comes who will then blow the number of the box.

At the same time the Board of Trustees passed a resolution offering a reward of twenty-five dollars (\$25.00), to any person who shall furnish evidence sufficient to arrest and convict any person who shall willfully give a false alarm of fire over the permanent fire alarm system of the Village of Depew.

Fire Inspector Henry C. Martin also reported that the fire alarm system was in a condition to be accepted by the village. And a motion was made and seconded, to accept and approve and place the system in commission.

With the new fire alarm system now operational, it was hoped that the Village of Depew would get lower fire insurance rates.

The Village Clerk was also authorized and directed to certify to the Gould Coupler Company that all codes were properly arranged for execution. The Chief Engineer of the Depew Fire Department was also notified of same and authorized and directed to execute the permanent fire alarm system, pursuant to the codes, and directions of the Village Board. The Gould Coupler Company was to be paid the sum of \$16.67 monthly for the fire alarm services provided.

Henry C. Martin, pursuant to the terms of his agreement, was to make a report of his inspections, made monthly, and after each storm or lightning, to the president of the Village of Depew. The Village President was also authorized to cause any reasonable repairs of the permanent fire alarm system that may appear to be made necessary, from the report of the inspector.

In September 1904 Village Clerk J.C. Glade was offering fire alarm cards to all householders in the village at no cost.

On November 21, 1904, a petition was received from F.J. Wendel, Secretary of the Board of Wardens of the Depew Fire Department requesting that the five fire companies in the village be provided with maps showing the location of fire hydrants, fire alarm boxes and the boundaries of the fire alarm districts. The petition was received and filed.

At the same meeting, Attorney S.J. O'Hart reported that Mr. Gould of the Gould Coupler Company had suggested the advisability of testing the fire alarm whistles once each week, preferably on Monday evenings. The Chief Engineer of the fire department

was ordered to test the system each Monday at 7 P.M. by blowing the fire out signal, of two long blasts. The Gould Coupler Company was also authorized to carry into effect this provision of testing in the event no test signal is sent in from some fire alarm box, for one minute past seven of each Monday night.

At the same time the Purchasing Committee was instructed to purchase two punch registers and one four inch gong and to install one punch register in the Gould Avenue fire house and one in the Ellicott Road fire house. The gong was to be installed in Mr. Wendel's house, as the apparatus of the Cayuga Hose Co. was stored in Wendel's Blacksmith Shop since the firehouse for the Cayuga's was not yet built.

On June 19, 1905, the village board authorized the installation of a fire gong in the residence of Fire Chief John C. Carlson.

On November 9, 1906 Village President Martin Kieffer reported that the fire alarm system was in bad shape. Tree limbs were interfering with the wires and required trimming as they were causing the insulation to be worn off in many places. Some alarm boxes were completely burned out. Linemen were to be hired to make the needed repairs.

In 1908, Fire Chief John Carlson reported that the fire alarm boxes needed to be painted and also said that the fire whistle at the Gould Coupler was too low and recommended that it be raised about twelve feet in order that it may be heard better. The Fire and Water committee was instructed to look into the matter.

At the following meeting Chief Carlson recommended that the work of raising the fire alarm whistle be done by the Gould Coupler Company, as they would be able to do the work with greater economy than it could be done otherwise. He also reported that the Board of Fire Wardens recommended that a fire alarm box be installed nearer to the Polish School (SS. Peter & Paul) at Burlington Avenue.

At the June 9, 1908 meeting of the Village Board, fire alarm inspector Carlson presented a petition in which he asked for an increase of salary from \$100 to \$144 per year.

Mr. Carlson addressed the board in reference to his request, stating that on account of the large amount of time needed to take care of the fire alarm system he thought he should receive more compensation. The matter was referred to the committee of the whole for consideration.

Fire Alarm Inspector John Carlson reported to the Village Board that there have been several false alarms sent in by someone who has a key to the fire alarm system or knows how to work the system. The Fire & Water Committee met with Mr. Carlson to see what could be done in stopping the parties from sending in false alarms.

In May 1911 the Village Electrician was directed to wire up the firehouses of Cayuga Hose Co. and Central Hose Co. No. 4 for electric lights.

The Village Board authorized Fire Chief Carlson to purchase necessary equipment to run fire alarm wires into the new Gould Avenue firehouse.

Fire Chief Carlson reported that the fire wardens were not in favor of the plan of using the telephone for the purpose of notifying the water company to increase the water pressure in case of fire, but that they were in favor of the plan of placing in a signal box and gong.

Many residents were puzzled because of the fire alarm signal being sounded at 6:45 Monday evening; and again at 12:25 Tuesday morning.

Upon interrogation of Chief Carlson it was determined that on Monday night March 31, 1913, the high winds caused what was known as a "swinging break". This caused the register to punch a number similar to that of Box 18. The engineer thinking that it was 7:00 o'clock and time for the test whistle to blow, instead of 6:45, blew the whistle according to the number received on the tape. The number blown at 7:00 o'clock was the regular test signal. A broken wire on Broadway caused the cause of the whistle blowing at 12:25 on Tuesday morning.

The June 3, 1915 edition of the Depew Herald reported that a Mr. Lawrence Daw, Engineer of the New York State Association of Fire Underwriters and Inspectors of Fire Alarms and Mr. Wood Assistant inspector in conjunction with Village President Gibbs, Trustee Rowley and Fire Chief Dalton, made an inspection of the Depew Fire Alarm System last Tuesday with the view of ascertaining the condition of the system and devising the means of bringing it up to date. After making the detailed inspection filed a report to the Village Board in which he stated that the system was in very satisfactory condition and numerous changes were recommended by the engineer, who offered his services in the supervision and inspection of the work, if desired.

Fire Chief Arthur R. Dalton ordered that beginning Tuesday, September 21, 1915 and continuing until further notice that the weekly Fire Alarm Test would take place at 7:00 P.M., Tuesday instead of Monday. The alarm system continues to be tested weekly on the same day and time as established in 1915.

On September 29, 1915 at 12:15 in the afternoon a false alarm of fire was given from box 47. Chief of Police Mehl made inquiries and found that two colored men and a white man had been seen meddling with the box.

They were chased down the D. L. & W. tracks and caught at the Lehigh water tank. The prisoners were brought before Judge Higgins. Two of the men were found guilty of turning in a false alarm and were given ten days in the penitentiary. Their partner was given a suspended sentence and ordered out of town.

Chief Mehl gave warning that in the future any one caught tampering with the fire alarm boxes would be prosecuted and given the full limit of the law.

Apparently Police Chief Mehl was really concerned with the idea of chasing down those who might be inclined to turn in false alarms of fire.

The Village of Depew had a standing reward of \$25.00 for anyone giving information leading to the arrest and conviction of anyone turning in a false alarm of fire. When a false alarm was turned in early October, Elmer E. Wright gave information to Chief Mehl leading to the arrest of the offender.

Mr. Wright presented a claim for the \$25.00 to the village board and received an order for \$25.00 as reward money, the first time that the reward has been paid in the village.

Fire Chief Arthur R. Dalton issued an order that the Aetna Hose Company, Cayuga Hose Company and Hook & Ladder Co. No. 1 would respond to the newly installed fire alarm box number 25, which was installed at the Southeast corner of Transit Road and Gould Avenue.

This was followed a week later by the installation of box number 15 at Calumet and St. James Streets with the same two companies to respond on a first alarm basis.

The American Car & Foundry Company was the first private entity granted permission to tie into the village alarm system under the supervision of the Village Electrician in February 1922.

In September of 1915 box number 55 at the corner of Olmstead and Morgan was changed to box 52 on account of changes being made in the fire alarm system.

By the end of 1922 the alarm system was expanded to 20 alarm boxes from the original number of 11.

The fire alarm system was used as a means of communication in the early days of the fire department as there was no other means of communications available to the fire chief so that he could give them orders while in a response mode. Since the early alarm boxes were equipped with a telegraph key the alarm system could be used as a means of communications.

In case a General Alarm of Fire has been sounded immediately after a Box Number has been sounded, and the Signal "Fire Out" is sounded, before the companies responding on general alarm have reached the fire, these companies responding to the general alarm would immediately return to their respective fire houses.

The call for a general alarm was three long blasts or 3-3-3 and the fire out signal was two blasts.

Many of the people of the village thought a large fire was in progress in the vicinity of Main Street on a Tuesday evening in early June of 1923 when a number of alarms were sounded from that section of the village, and all those who tuned up their Lizzies and other means of rapid conveyance found the firemen of the various village fire companies apparently standing at Main and Penora streets awaiting for something to develop.

"What's the big idea?" was the question heard from all sides.

Well you see that a change in responding of fire companies to alarms of fire, which have been under consideration by Fire Chief Carlson and other fire department officials for some time, was successfully tried out. This change was dictated by the fact that the entire fire department had been motorized.

At the first alarm from a box except those specially designated, two Hose Companies and the Hook & Ladder Co., responds.

In case another Hose Co. is needed at the point from which this alarm was sent, a second alarm from the alarm box nearest to the box from which the first alarm was received is sounded, to which such as has been designated responds.

There being five fire companies in the village, this second alarm calls four companies, leaving one company still in reserve to answer a 3-3-3, which answers as a general alarm or an alarm to any other section of the village.

For the information of all concerned following is a copy of the new running card, which was adopted at the next meeting of the Fire Department Council.

Village of Depew, Department of Fire, company responding table.

**Number First Alarm Box Number**

**Hose Co. No. 1**

16, 17, 45, 46, 47, 48, 52, 53, 54, 56.

**Aetna Hose Company**

15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 37, 56.

**Cayuga Hose Co.**

15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 37.

**Central Hose Co. No. 4**

45, 46, 47, 48, 53, 54, 56.

**Hook & Ladder Co. No.1**

All Boxes.

**Second Alarm in District Before Fire Out Signal Blown**

**Hose Co. No. 1**

18, 19, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 37.

**Cayuga Hose Co.**

45, 46, 47, 48, 52, 53, 54, 56.

**Hook & Ladder Co. No. 1**

AS DIRECTED BY CHIEF OR ACTING CHIEF.

**3-3-3 Alarm all Companies respond to Box Number Blown.**

In April 1924 the matter of a new fire alarm box to be placed in the vicinity of the B&D Power House off George Urban Boulevard was referred to the fire and water committee.

In September 1926, Village Electrician Russell Loudenslager announced that within the next several weeks, three new fire alarm boxes would be installed on the village fire alarm system.

Box No. 35 installed on Transit Road about 500 feet north of Zurbrick Road as the nearest box to this area was at Kieffer Avenue and Broadway. Box No. 34 was to be installed at Terrace and River Street and the third box, No. 43, was to be installed at the corner of Lincoln and Olmstead Avenue filling in a void in this area.

New alarm cards were then printed with the new locations and instructions on how to properly sound an alarm for fire were distributed to the citizens of the village.

Depew Fire Chief Henry Young on May 3, 1928 announced that in order to give an alarm of fire directly to the Gould Coupler Company, who would then sound the alarm, all persons telephoning a fire to the Gould Coupler Office would have to give their name, telephone number and box number to be blown. If this information were not given, the fire signal would not be sounded.

By early in 1932 the members of Cayuga Hose Co. were trying to convince the village board of the need for a siren to be installed in the southwest section of the village. There were times that due to wind conditions or perhaps low steam pressure at the Gould Coupler plant the fire whistle could not be heard.

On an early Sunday evening, an alarm of fire was sounded and the whistle was unusually weak. A number of the members of Cayuga Hose Company happened to be in the firehouse playing cards and received an alarm over the ticker and were able to respond quickly, just another argument in favor of a siren in their end of the village.

In June 1932 the Fire Underwriters were in the village for several days testing fire alarm boxes and other fire fighting equipment in an endeavor to give Depew a new rating and possibly a lower fire insurance rate.

They examined Box No. 15 and found that it had been shorted, presumably during an electric storm, which occurred the previous evening.

Testing Box No. 18 at Laverack and Sanilac and Box No. 19 at Main and Penora Streets, these likewise were out of order because of a short in Box 15 on the same line.

Box 15 was repaired in the presence of the Underwriters and the other two were on later tests reported to have functioned properly.

A master fire alarm box was installed in the Depew Police Headquarters, which allowed the police dispatcher to activate the fire alarm system in the event that a citizen called into headquarters reporting a fire. The master box contained wheels for each alarm box in the system. When the dispatcher received the call, he would determine the closest alarm box to the fire location, insert the proper wheel and the fire alarm system was activated.

A disastrous fire during the worst winter gale of the season, struck Depew late Friday evening January 19, 1940. Box 26 was turned in at Police Headquarters and the Aetna, Hook & Ladder and members of the Cayuga Hose Co. living near enough the fire siren to hear the alarm responded.

Practically no firemen west of Transit Road, including Chief Adam Jastremski responded because they did not hear the alarm, and the entire west end of the village was ignorant of the fire until neighbors began talking about it in the morning. The high velocity of the wind and the high-pitched tone of the fire siren were together blamed for this difficulty.

A second alarm was turned in and both Hose Co. No. 1 and Central Hose Co. No. 4 responded. Still the siren was not audible to the west side of the village.

After the end of World War II came growth in the Village of Depew as new subdivisions began to develop in the Pfeil Section of the village followed by the expansion off of French Road, West of Transit Road, which was developed by Howard Builders. This required the fire alarm system to be expanded to accommodate the growth.

In 1953 the Depew Fire Department entered into an agreement with the County of Erie becoming a part of the fire radio mutual aid network with the county holding the license for the radio frequencies used in the radio system. Assistant Chief Edward Tetnowski signed the agreement on behalf of the Depew Fire Department.

In December 1954, now Fire Chief Edward Tetnowski reported that a radio receiver would be installed in each of Depew's four fire stations that would be controlled by the Emergency Control Center established in the Lancaster Town Police Headquarters. For any mutual aid calls, the requesting fire department would notify the Lancaster Control Center and request mutual aid from a given department. The dispatcher at the Control Center would activate the radio receivers located in the fire stations and simultaneously activate the local fire alarm system via radio, which included the fire horn and all of the sirens in the system. The signal for a mutual aid call was 4-4-4.

The December 6, 1962 report of the fire protection facilities in the Village of Depew by the New York Fire Insurance organization was the impetus to a major change in the operations of the Depew Fire Department and including the fire alarm system.

The inspection was a comprehensive review of the Water Supply, Fire Department, Fire Alarm, Police Department, Fire Prevention, Building Department and Structural Conditions within the Village of Depew.

Following the inspection of the fire alarm system the report made recommendations for the Administration, Circuits and Power Supply, Alarm Boxes, Radio and Telephone Service as they relate to the operation of the Fire Alarm/ Electrical Department.

**Under Administration**, a card index of boxes, recording for each: its number, location, make, date of installation, characteristics of design and operation, whether or not there is an indicating light, and any damages or repairs made to a box, including painting. Records showing all daily, weekly and monthly tests, and all troubles in, and repairs to the system. Plans and records of all alarm apparatus and wiring.

**Circuits and Power Supply.** A secondary source of power should be provided for the outside sounding devices. Apparatus on which alarm reception and transmission depends should be housed in a building providing maximum protection against interruption from fire or other casualties. Alarm instruments in buildings not under municipal control should be installed on circuits operated by relays on box circuits. The entire system should be maintained in accordance with National Board of Fire Underwriters Pamphlet No. 73 entitled "Standards for Municipal Fire Alarm Systems".

**Alarm Boxes.** Additional Boxes should be installed immediately to provide one visible from within 500 feet of every building in high value mercantile and industrial districts, and every school, hospital, nursing home and buildings of public assembly.

In residential districts it is considered good practice to install boxes at intervals of about 1,600 feet along main thoroughfares, and as needed on side streets to provide a box available within 800 to 1,000 feet travel distance of all buildings. Boxes should be located on street corners wherever possible.

**Radio.** Satisfactory.

**Telephone Service.** Arrangements have been provided for receipt of telephone alarms and alerting firemen.

It was noted that the fire alarm system would be re-inspected and graded upon completion of an improvement program, which the Village Board under Mayor John Domino had undertaken.

The New York Fire Insurance Rating Organization carried out a re-evaluation of the fire defenses of the Village of Depew in August and September 1965. In a letter to Mayor John Domino, Howard W. Rowley, Division Engineer wrote, "We wish to commend the Village for the excellent degree of progress that has been made in the field of fire protection during the past two years. Future progress along the lines recommended will further tend to decrease the community Key Rate."

In the re-evaluation of the fire alarm system, it was found to be generally satisfactory but again called for the installation of additional street boxes as recommended in the 1962 report.

Following the report of the underwriters, the daily test of the alarm system was initiated on November 06, 1962, with the air horn sounding every day at 7 P.M.

In July of 1963 a new panel board, the heart of the alarm system, was installed at the Dresser Plant and later in September 1964 moved to the new North Side Fire Station and put in service.

It is interesting to note that in 1961 there were 3,936 blasts blown on the fire alarm air horn and in 1962 the number increased to 4,496 which was an indication of the increased use of the alarm system calling the fire department into service.

On September 1, 1965 Richard Brandenburger, Jr. was appointed as the new Village Electrician and he would serve in this capacity for some 26 years until his retirement in 1991. Brandenburger had previously worked under Village Electrician Norm Sharick for a number of years.

As the village continued to grow and expand so did the work of the Electrical Department. New alarm equipment had to be installed, new alarm wire had to be strung for the new fire alarm boxes in the new neighborhoods and new sirens had to be added as the village grew and fire department members moved into these new areas of the village.

In 1965 a new police master control panel was installed in the police headquarters since many alarms were called directly into police headquarters.

In 1966 four and one-half miles of new alarm wire was strung into the area of the village called the Barnabas Section, which was just beginning to grow.

It was also during this period that many of the schools in the village had their internal fire alarm systems wired into the village fire alarm system with the Alys Drive School being the first school in the village to do so.

Many of the local industry also began to tie in their systems as well

In July of 1968 another one and three-quarter miles of alarm wire was added to the system and by 1970 an additional one and one-half miles of wire was added.

Over the next several years much of the overhead alarm wire was being replaced as the wire deteriorated from age and began to cause problems.

To accommodate all of this new work the Village of Depew acquired an aerial device for the use of the Electrical Department in 1971.

With the acquisition of the former St. Augustine's School for use as a new village hall and police headquarters, the fire alarm equipment had to be transferred from the old village hall on Terrace Boulevard. This move also meant the acquisition of new and updated equipment.

The Electrical Department crew continued on a program of re-wiring the oldest sections of the alarm system so that there would be a minimal interruption of the alarm system due to line failures and to maintain an a-one system in order to satisfy the New York State Board of Fire Underwriters.

In 1978 in the Depew Fire Department News Column written by Fire Department Secretary John "Jack" Ott, Ott wrote that the fire alarm system is an essential part of the fire protection for the Village of Depew.

A key part of any fire department, taken for granted by many people, is the fire alarm system. No fire department can be effective and count itself as being modern unless it has a fire alarm system that is constantly up dating itself.

In Depew, we have a group of former and present volunteer firemen who are competent and well qualified to run our fire alarm system. Although being a volunteer fireman or an exempt volunteer fireman is not a qualification on running the fire alarm system it is an added asset.

Being able to develop and maintain a modern fire alarm system requires an electrical background of many years experience. The village through the years has always employed competent people to maintain the system, however, in the early days of the village the job was a political plum with the men being changed constantly as the politics of the village changed. It was not until the 1960's when this was changed.

Richard Brandenburger, who has been the village electrician for many years, is currently responsible for the fire alarm system in Depew, having served as an assistant for a number of years under Norman Sharick. Rich is an exempt fireman with Depew Hose Co. No. 1, having served several offices during his active service.

He has been employed at the New York State Electric & Gas Company for over 25 years and his background with that company, plus the numerous seminars and schools attended, helps to keep our alarm system in top-notch working order.

The members of Brandenburger's staff include Wilbur Sharick, Fran O'Lear, and Andy LaBert, all fully capable and experienced personnel.

Keeping the fire alarm system operational and functioning is the main function of the electrical department but over the years additional duties have been added to their function including day-to-day maintenance of the electrical systems in all of the village buildings.

Today the system is certainly more complicated than it was years ago when the only way to send in an alarm for fire was to pull a street box. An alarm of fire can be called into the dispatch of the Depew Police headquarters where the dispatcher can key the alarm system after verifying the location of the incident from the caller. The dispatcher can then directly speak to the responding units over a two-way radio system providing additional information as it becomes available.

On September 21, 1981, the Depew Village Board under then Mayor Roger Paluszak proposed the construction of a fire alarm and electrical headquarters building to be constructed adjacent to the North Side Fire Station on Brewster Street to house the six member electrical department and an emergency communications center. The board authorized a \$75,000 bond resolution to build and equip the facility pending a permissive referendum

The one-story brick front block building would give the village electricians their first central location ever.

The six part-time employees are now scattered around the village, with a cramped workshop and storeroom in a garage behind the Depew Police Department, fire alarm system operated out of the North Side Fire Station and a small storeroom in a reconverted room at Firemen's park.

"That's something we've been looking for for years, to get everything in one spot so we can operate out of there," said Head Electrician Richard Brandenburger of the proposed headquarters.

The facility was designed to house a fire alarm headquarters, which could be used as a communications room in the event of a disaster.

It would be set up to maintain communications throughout the village in addition to monitoring the village's six pumping stations for high water and malfunctions. A radio base station in the communications room would provide a link with the Depew Police Department and the Department of Public Works.

A 10 kw generator, which has a 100-amp capability, has already been obtained to provide emergency power for both the alarm center and the North Side Fire Station. The fire station at that time did not have any source of emergency power.

Plans for the building included a headquarters/ communications room, workshop, storeroom and a two-truck bay.

In addition to housing the fire alarm system, the headquarters room would also control the village's six fire sirens.

The ability to monitor the siren system would control a problem, which the village has faced for some time when the sirens are sometimes set off during severe lightning storms. The sirens must now be shut down on an individual basis manually which does take a lot of time and could cause the sirens to burn out, too some residents living near the fire siren locations learned that they could shut off the sirens as they can be annoying.

About six miles of cable has already been strung over the years to control the sirens and to monitor the pump stations.

The garage area would house the department's fire alarm bucket truck, which is used to maintain the fire alarm system and lights on the various village properties. The second bay would house a van or pick-up truck, which is planned to be purchased at a later time.

Construction was scheduled to begin in the last week of October and the contractor was hopeful that the building would be completely enclosed prior to the bad weather setting.

In order to cut the cost of construction, the staff of the electrical department would do the plumbing, heating and electrical work on the facility.

The building would also include windows salvaged during the renovation work at the former St. Augustine's Convent for the Depew Police Department.

With the closing of the Dresser Transportation Equipment Division, which was formerly the Gould Coupler Plant, a vital part of the fire alarm system was shut down. This facility had housed a steam whistle and later an air horn which was used to signal an alarm of fire to the Depew Fire Department for about ninety years.

At the Depew Village Board meeting on June 3, 1986, the board authorized Mayor Arthur Domino to sign an agreement between the Village of Depew and the Dresser Industrial Park, which would allow a fire horn to be re-located on the industrial complex's property.

The village's fire horn had been housed at Dresser's facilities until last year when the plant was shut down.

Village Electrician Richard Brandenburger said now that the agreement has been signed, the village would go ahead with its plans to construct a small building on the Dresser property near Transit Road to house the fire horn.

William Irr, who has leased the complex from Dresser, has agreed to allow such a building to be constructed.

Brandenburger said the plans for such a building have already been drawn up and call for it to be about 16 feet high.

"We will hire a contractor to build the structure, but the village will complete the rest of the project," he said. We hope to have the concrete slab poured next week." The project should be completed within four to six weeks.

“We have reconditioned the fire horn and everything is set to go,” he said. “With the new facility, the horn will be situated about 40 feet lower than it used to be, so it will be even more effective than before.”

The village’s fire chiefs and Board of Wardens had sent a letter to the village board in March, asking for the horn to be reactivated as soon as possible.

In the letter, the firemen said they were inconvenienced by the horn being disconnected because they felt it was a vital part of the village fire alarm system.

The steam whistle, which was first installed in 1915, was converted to be blown by air in the early 1950’s, however this did not give very satisfactory service and was replaced by the air driven horn in the 1960’s.

The horn is an enunciating device, which decodes the message it receives from a fire alarm box, thus aiding firemen in determining the location of an alarm of fire.

Depew firefighters also stated the fire horn made it possible to distinguish the Village of Depew system from neighboring siren systems.

With the retirement of Village Electrician Richard Brandenburger in 1991, Wilbur Sharick, a long time helper in the department was appointed to the position. Wilbur Sharick had served in the department under his father for a number of years and through the entire tenure of Rich Brandenburger so that he was more than qualified to serve in the capacity.

Following the retirement of Wilbur Sharick, George DelConte, III was named as the Village Electrician and continues in that capacity in 2007.

Today the Village of Depew Fire Alarm System has grown from a one man, part time operation and a system with 11 fire alarm boxes in the system to a department with four part time staff and a system which contains 130 street alarm boxes, master boxes and “Phantom Boxes”, designated as a box that is not in service but the code for a given location may be transmitted by the police dispatcher.

Arthur J. Domino  
Village Historian

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