

DeWitt Fire Department History

The DeWitt Fire Department was organized in the early 1900's as a Bucket Brigade. Each member had to provide his own bucket. Long time fire chief Glen "Dutch" Halterman started his volunteer firefighting career as a charter member of the bucket brigade at age 15 (he joined with his father Pete, and other businessmen in 1916).

In 1919 the department purchased a push-cart type chemical wagon. By mixing two chemicals together, pressure was created that would push a small stream of water out of a hose for fighting fire. Its capability was limited by the amount of chemicals available as well as water supply, but it was a considerable improvement over buckets. This chemical wagon was housed at the "Woodruff" building on South Bridge St. in the winter, as it was heated and the town hall on East Main St. in the summer months. In the years between 1919 and 1926 a second chemical wagon was acquired and housed with the first.

DeWitt's first fire truck was purchased in 1926. At that time, the department was reorganized as the DeWitt Rural Fire Department. Subscribers agreed to pay \$25 each for one membership. When the number of subscribers reached 130 (or \$3250.00 was collected) the organizer, a Mr. C.F. White, delivered to the new department a 1926 Chevrolet truck equipped with a four-tank, 140-gallon fire apparatus. Pressure for water movement was still by chemicals on this rig. The cost of the fire truck was \$2950.00 and the remaining \$300.00 was turned over to the department for purchase of needed equipment. According to an old article in the Lansing State Journal, the 1926 truck was housed at no charge in the Chevrolet Garage where presumably it was purchased. If the truck was used for nonmembers of the Rural Fire Dept. they were charged \$75. The 1926 truck was a vast improvement over the wagon types that preceded it, but still limited in output. Long time fireman Art Newman once said that he "could pee a stream of about equal proportion"!

In the 1990's, that 1926 Chevy truck showed up for the Ox-Roast parade. It had apparently ended up in the hands of a local family, the Badgleys, and had sat abandoned for many years. At some point, members of the Badgley family restored the truck to its original appearance albeit without the fire apparatus. Current firemen at the time, were very surprised as none knew of its continued existence.

At some point, probably in the 1930's or 1940's, a tanker or "water-wagon" was acquired by the combined fire departments. The earliest water-wagon remembered by anyone alive today, consisted of a 300-gallon tank on a small truck, likely something the volunteers assembled themselves.

In 1937 DeWitt Township entered into an agreement with the Village of DeWitt for fire protection. The township purchased a 1937 Ford fire truck equipped with an engine

driven pump, an onboard 300-gallon water tank, a ladder and room for additional equipment and personnel. The new truck along with the 1926 truck, were to be housed in the village where enough of a population existed to support volunteers to man them. Beginning then there were effectively two departments, the DeWitt Township Dept. and the Village of DeWitt Dept. Volunteers were designated as either township firemen or village firemen. In theory they were sort of separate but in reality the men responded as needed to either township or village fires.

This arrangement existed until 1965 when the DeWitt Township officials created their own department, separating from the then City of DeWitt. The township thought that it could provide fire protection to at least part of its population more effectively and economically by having its own department. A fire building was constructed on Wieland Rd., equipment purchased, and volunteers organized. The city continued to provide contractual fire protection to the part of DeWitt Township north of Clark Rd. and to most of Olive and Riley Townships and part of Watertown Township. This arrangement with DeWitt Township continued into the 1980's but the boundaries were changed several times, often causing confusion for dispatchers as to which department currently covered a particular location. There was considerable rivalry between the two departments during this time. Long-time city chief Art Newman maintained that the city department could get a fully manned pumper to the corner of State Rd. and US-27, the heart of DeWitt Township, in the middle of the night, minutes before the township could! Needless to say, each department's volunteers had their own opinion as to effectiveness!

A 1952 Ford fire truck, equipped with a John Bean "High Pressure" pump as well as a "volume pump" was purchased in that year, probably replacing the 1926 Chevrolet. The "Volume" pump was state-of-the-art for fire trucks at that time, capable of pumping large volumes of water over long periods of time for fighting fires where an adequate water source was present. Large municipalities that had water systems could provide that water, but small communities like DeWitt and rural areas did not. Pumping out of streams or ponds could sometimes be effective but water supply was usually limited to what the pumper and water wagon could bring to the scene. The new John Bean "High-Pressure" pump seemed to offer a way to extend that limited water supply. If operated correctly, the high pressure produced by that system "atomized" the water creating a fog while only requiring a water flow of 6-8 gallons per minute. The volume system required at least 50-150 GPM. The "fog" produced by the H.P. system was demonstrated to be capable of extinguishing a confined space "room and contents" fire by smothering it with very little water required. The H.P. system was considered to be a great advantage to rural departments. DeWitt's department continued to use it well into the 1980's, having successively purchased replacement pumper trucks equipped with High Pressure systems. In 1964 a new Ford/Bean pumper was purchased, in 1977 a new Duplex/Bean pumper and in 1988 a Spartan/Bean pumper. In the late 80's or early 90's, the then Chief, Brent Newman, took a new position on water management for firefighting. Modern fire science dictated that "X" amount of fire required "X" amount

of water to extinguish it, and the quicker that amount could be delivered the quicker the fire would be out. After that, new DeWitt fire trucks were not equipped with "High-Pressure" pumps.

In the years of 1937 – 1957 the fire trucks and equipment were kept in a garage that was a part of Dutch Halterman's barbershop on the east side of S. Bridge St. There was a Civil Defense Air Raid Watch Tower on top of the old station. This tower was manned 24-7 by community residents through the Korean War. They would have to call civil defense and notify them of every plane they saw. Lloyd Ballard told of the building of the Air Raid watch tower by his father, and helping him.

In 1957, a new fire station was erected and occupied across the road on the west side of S. Bridge St. This new building provided ample space for the department's trucks and equipment as well as some office space for village staff. This new fire station served the department's needs well for twenty years or so.

By the 1970's the "new" station was becoming cramped. The volunteer firemen had constructed a "spec" house that was sold and provided funds to purchase a 1968 Chevrolet pickup. This pickup was donated to the city in exchange for ownership of the by-now retired 1937 Ford. The "37" at this time was used only for ceremonies. (Whether or not that exchange of ownership was ever completed is still vague). The new pickup is equipped with wildfire fighting capability and needed space in the station. At around the same time the department had acquired an army surplus jeep, equipped for fighting wildfires, and a Dodge utility truck, both from the Michigan DNR. A wall had been removed from an office space and the jeep had been stuffed in there. The Chevy pickup and the Dodge utility truck sat side-by-side in what had been the entry hallway. The station had already housed two pumpers, the 1952 and a 1964 Ford, and a 1952 Army surplus International truck with a 2600-gallon water tank, which had replaced the old 500-gallon water wagon.

In 1988, a new fire building was constructed at 911 W. Main St. This new facility provided ample space for all the equipment already on hand as well as additional equipment needed. It also provides office and meeting space, a small kitchen, storage and parking for volunteer responders and "ramp space" in front for staging emergency vehicles. In the same year, 1988, the department purchased the above mentioned 1988 Spartan/Bean pumper, the last one equipped with "High-Pressure". That truck was too large to fit into the 1957 station and arrived just as the new station was ready.

In 1976, five members of the department, Brent Newman, Jerry Cole, Carroll Snyder, Doug Twiss and Keith Nabbefeld attended a nearly year-long EMT school on their own time. After graduating as new EMTs, they, with the help of the rest of the department had constructed a plywood box to contain and transport needed medical equipment. That box was mounted at the rear of the bed of the 1968 pickup. With the additional room made available in the new station, a 1979 Pierce mini/pumper/rescue truck was purchased, and the 1968 reverted to just wildfires. At about that time, the department

purchased its first "Jaws of Life" rescue tool which was housed in the new Rescue truck. The first Jaws relied on a portable power plant which was not ideal. More focus was placed on "rescue" of all types in the fire service by then and the DeWitt department purchased a 2001 Freightliner Heavy Rescue truck. That truck had some water and foam pumping capability as well as space for an improved Jaws of Life and other hydraulic tools and a much better onboard power plant to operate those tools. It had cutting, bracing, lighting, chocking, lifting, and tearing equipment as well. This truck became the first truck out on all auto accidents and most other rescue calls. The department had obtained an old Light and Air truck by then from Grand Ledge. It had basic lighting equipment for lighting night operations and rudimentary capability for refilling Scott air pack tanks used by firemen. A new Light and Air truck was purchased vastly improving the light and air capabilities. The new 1988 station had plenty of room to house the two pumpers, the 2600-gallon tanker, the heavy rescue truck, the EMT mini pumper, the 1968 Chevy wildfire pickup and another wildfire pickup obtained from the city DPW, the light and air truck and the old DNR jeep, as well as the ceremonial 1937 Ford, still leaving a bay open for vehicle maintenance and washing.

The contractual arrangement for fire protection between the city and Olive, Riley and Watertown Townships had always had rough spots. Over the years the officials in each of those townships had occasionally argued about the formula used to determine how much each township was to pay the city. Naturally, each at one time or another thought they were paying too much. In the late 1990's, Watertown Township decided to join Eagle Township in forming the new Looking Glass Fire Dept. In 2001 a new fire authority was formed including the City, Olive and Riley Townships. This new arrangement gave the two townships ownership of the fire equipment and a share of the management of the department. Each of the three entities had two representatives on the authority board.

This new Fire Authority began to change the personality of the fire department. The "business" of the department, purchasing, budgeting etc, was now being handled by the board. The firemen were still paid-on call volunteers answering the same emergency calls, but now the Board began to involve itself in day-to-day operations. Many of the volunteers felt that the Board members, none of who had any fire department experience, were trying to manage the activities of the department as a business and had no grasp of the idea that the men were volunteers, not employees. A rift began to develop between the volunteers and board, especially between the Officers and the Board.

Around 2009 the authority decided to build a substation of the department in Olive Township. That substation was completed in 2009 and an old tanker and the older of the two pumper trucks were moved there. That station benefited Olive Township residents who lived within five miles of it by slightly lowering their cost of homeowner's insurance, but at the expense of the rest of the citizens in the three municipalities. Many of the department's volunteers disagreed with the decision to build Station Two.

as it became known. They contended that since no new volunteers had been identified and signed up, and in fact, a population that could provide new volunteers from near the new station did not exist in that rural area, the new substation would provide no additional fire and EMS protections to anyone. The "rift" between the volunteers and the Board continued to grow, but now the DeWitt Area Emergency Services Authority, as it was known, consisted of a main station in the city and a second station in Olive Township. A third station, a substation in Riley was being discussed.

In 2013, the Board forced the resignation of Robin Ballard who had been a member of the department for over thirty years and Chief of the department for eighteen years. This forced resignation resulted in seven more of the volunteers, many of them the most senior members of the department, resigning in support of Chief Ballard. This resignation of about one third of the members may have signaled a change in the character of the fire department in DeWitt. DeWitt Area Emergency Services Authority still exists and provides fire and EMS services to the residents of the City and Olive and Riley townships, but maybe without some of that sense of a small community "bucket brigade" spirit.

Major Fires

There have been several major fires in DeWitt since the formation of the first "Bucket Brigade" in 1915. In 1928, the DeWitt Methodist Church burned to the ground. Little information could be found describing that fire.

The most notable occurred in October of 1930, when Joes Tavern, known originally as "The Clinton House" on the southwest corner of Bridge and Main burned to the ground. A young DeWitt banker, Ralph Woodruff, returning to his DeWitt home shortly before midnight, discovered the fire. He aroused the town by ringing the town fire bell. Progress was being made toward extinguishing the blaze when the wind increased and caused the three grocery stores across the street to the north to catch fire. Eventually the Brooks Drug Store on the southeast corner also was engulfed. When it was all over the next morning, the only building left standing on the four corners was the grocery and dry-goods store of M.E. Townes on the northeast corner. In all eight buildings had been destroyed, the most prominent being the hotel where the fire had originated. The Clinton House as it had been known when it was built by David Scott in 1842 was for decades one of the most significant buildings in the central part of the young state, serving as a stopping point for travelers going from Detroit to Grand Rapids across mostly wilderness at that time. It had been a very popular entertainment venue for people from far and wide across mid-Michigan hosting banquets and dances in its expansive third floor ballroom. The hotel had hosted many prominent guests over its long history including many governors and legislators. The building had not been used as a hotel for many years but still housed several businesses on the main floor. It had

recently been acquired by Donald V. Whipp of Lansing and it was said that Whipp was negotiating with Henry Ford to move it to Ford's Greenfield Village.

On December 2, 1936 the old DeWitt High School was discovered ablaze around eight o'clock in the evening. Firemen and townspeople battled the fire first entering the basement of the structure. When the fire reached the coal bin efforts to extinguish it became futile. A new addition had recently been added to the old structure including a gymnasium. Steel fire doors between the old and new parts of the building prevented the fire from damaging the new addition but the old part of the school was completely destroyed. Until the building could be reconstructed, classes were held in many locations around town including the grange hall, which today is Scoopy Doo's Ice cream parlor. In an article in the State Journal the next day, it was mentioned that Percy Carris, a 42 year old member of the fire department was critically injured battling the blaze. He had suffered a heart attack caused by over-exertion and was in critical condition in a Lansing hospital. Mr. Carris must have made a good recovery, because he was the well-known druggist in the drug store he owned on South Bridge St. well into the 1960s.

In the early morning of Saturday, May 21, 1955 the grain elevator owned by Virgil Zeeb, and located in the northeast area of the village, just south of the cemetery was destroyed by fire. The fire was discovered by Frank Richmond, a member of the DeWitt Volunteer Fire Department. By the time the firemen arrived on scene, Chief Dutch Halterman said there was nothing that could be done to save the structure. Instead, efforts were concentrated on protecting the high tension power lines just across the street and the residences also located there, including Frank Richmond's house. Also threatened were large gasoline and fuel oil tanks of the bulk station operated by Leonard Hiatt, located just north of the elevator. The lost was estimated at \$35,000.00. A considerable sum at that time.

In each of these major fires, passersby on US-27 and residents in north Lansing said they could see the flames. In each case, fire departments from St. Johns, Wacousta, Bath, Lansing and other area departments were called to assist. In all three a pumper truck from Lansing was set up at the Looking Glass River and pumped up the hill to supply the vast amount of water needed to protect exposures around the fires and eventually extinguish them. In each case though, there was a considerable delay in setting up that water supply and firemen ran out of water many times in the early stages of attacking the blazes.

In about 1962, a large two story building occupied in part as Jerry's Bar, located at the northwest corner of Franklin and East Main was totally destroyed after an explosion of undetermined origin started it ablaze. That building too had been a part of DeWitt's streetscape for a long time housing various businesses throughout the years. DeWitt Fire Department's 1937 Ford fire truck, rarely used by then, was said to have pumped water to the fire for over 24 continuous hours.

In 1963, while the DeWitt Township was still located in the village, Heights Auto Parts on US-27 north of Sheridan Rd was destroyed by fire in a daytime conflagration.

Fire Chiefs

The earliest known Chief of the DeWitt Fire Department was Frank Todd. An article in the Lansing State Journal from 1920 noted his resignation and the appointment of William Kraas. Following Kraas, the position was held by Don Brinkerhoff and George Mann and possibly other who's names could have been lost over time. Glenn "Dutch" Halterman served for over 50 years as a fireman and for a long part of that time in the 1950s and 1960s as Chief. He was succeeded by his son-in-law Arthur Newman, who too served as Chief for many years. Mr. Newman took a hiatus for a couple of years and Louis Nabbefeld was appointed as chief. Newman returned to the department and once again became chief for many more years. Art Newman was succeeded as chief by Doug Twiss and then by Newman's son Brent Newman and then by Brent Newman's son-in-law Robin Ballard. The family succession of Glenn "Dutch" Halterman, his son-in-law Art Newman, Art's son Brent Newman and Brent's son-in-law Robin Ballard covered a period of over 60 years where someone in that family was Chief of the DeWitt Fire Department. After the forced resignation of Ballard in 2013, Bob Farnum was chief for a couple of years and then Joe Spagnuolo was appointed and serves as chief as of this writing.

Innovation

DeWitt's Fire Department has always been a leader in fire service in Clinton County. They probably were the first in the county to have dedicated grass fire units. Fireman Art Newman and local resident Willie Walter both had army surplus jeeps. They rigged up small water tanks in them with a pressure system to force water through a hose to fight wildfires. This was in the days when you could do logical things without all the concerns for "liability" that seem to govern our lives today. Neither jeep was an official part of the department but they filled a need in the community. That kind of logic characterized life in small communities in those days.

The department obtained and operated an Inhalator, which was a rescue breathing device used for heart attack victims. This Inhalator was the first in the county and used for many years in the 50's and 60's. Inhalator runs were made by members of the fire department and by just about anyone else who happened to be available when an emergency occurred.

The DeWitt Fire Department was the first in the county to acquire collapsible folding water tanks to help in supplying water for fighting fires.

DeWitt was first in the county to have trained certified EMT's, those individuals having volunteered their time for all that training to serve a need in the community. DeWitt had the first Rescue Truck, the first Jaws of Life and were first to adopt the Incident Command System. Positive Pressure Ventilation and the use of Jet Syphon's to pump water out of lakes, ponds and streams are fire science techniques first adopted in Clinton County.

Other notable points of interest:

- DeWitt City Fire Department pioneered training in the County: Ice and Water Rescue, Helped start and man Haz-Mat Team, Helped start the Clinton County Fire Chiefs Association.
- In the 50s and 60s the "37" pumper was used to spray for mosquitos at a small charge to raise money for the department.
- In the 60s and 70s the firemen would build and maintain an ice skating rink at Riverfront Park.
- Another fund raising activity, for a small fee, was to fill swimming pools with the department tanker.
- In the 80s, the department started an annual tradition of holding a pancake breakfast which still continues today.
- An important service provided by the firemen is the "clean up" of the city's streets following the annual Ox Roast.

10-30-2018

Compiled By
Brent Newman
Brian Zeeb