

**HISTORY  
OF THE  
NORWICH TOWNSHIP  
FIRE DEPARTMENT**

compiled by

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THANKS TO

RETIREED CHIEF ROBERT MORRIS  
RETIREED ASSISTANT CHIEF JOHN KESLER, JR.  
RETIREED LIEUTENANT EDWIN FOX

For Sharing Their Memories

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## **BUCKET BRIGADE**

The fighting of fires, until the 1940's, was an unorganized volunteer project. There was no equipment except the "bucket brigade". When a fire broke out, the church bell would be rung and the neighbors would phone each other. All able-bodied persons who had been contacted would arrive at the scene with ladders, buckets and anything else they thought they might need. They would attempt to bring the fire under control, not always very successfully. Members of the brigade did not have the benefit of training or personal protection equipment, other than a handkerchief over the mouth. When the O'Hara Pool Room burned, bucket brigaders narrowly escaped as the building collapsed. On some occasions, during large fires, the Upper Arlington Fire Department was called to help.

On February 3, 1928, there was a public meeting at the Merchants and Farmers Bank, now Bank One, for the purpose of hearing plans to form a fire-fighting company for Hilliard and the surrounding community. They had a fire equipment salesperson at the meeting to talk about what was available, but nothing definite came from this meeting.

About 1940, in another attempt to start a fire department, there were several meetings held in the council chambers in the basement of the Methodist Church on the corner of Norwich and Main Streets. Nothing specific matured from these meetings attended by Sam Foster, Chief of the Upper Arlington Fire Department; Harry Sutphen, fire equipment salesman; the Hilliard village solicitor, businessmen and several community minded citizens. The population of the village was 510 at that time.

## THE BEGINNING

In 1941, under the leadership of Chester High and many other public spirited citizens, another movement was launched to organize a volunteer fire department. This time things would gel, but not without some controversy. There were those that said a fire department would not work in Hilliard. Some just did not want change. Even with this opposition, a charter was drawn and adopted April 1, 1942.

The Hilliards Volunteer Fire Department met in the Latham Building on Main Street, at no cost, now occupied by a gun store. The rest of 1942 and 1943 was needed for organizing, drilling and purchasing equipment so that the department could be termed operational. Chester High started out with about 12 men and as interest was created, expanded to 25 men. Chet High was elected Chief and John Russell, Assistant Chief. There was a chief of engines, a chief of hose and a chief of ladders. Each chief had three or four men serving under him. At this time, the only equipment the department had were buckets, an axe and a length of 2 1/2 inch fire hose that someone picked up from the Columbus Fire Department. Training consisted of Civil Defense Fire Fighting. By taking this training, they were able to get a trailer mount engine and pump, hose, shovels, axes, bars, ladders, and buckets.

The Village of Hilliard was installing a water system in 1942. The Village was loaned a 1937 Chevrolet, traded in to Alder Chevrolet by Paul Morris, for work installing water lines. After installing the water lines this truck was returned to Alder Chevrolet. The Fire Department bought this truck for one dollar. A front end mounted pump was obtained from Civil Defense. The mechanical part of this truck was rebuilt and the pump was mounted on the front. The assembling of this truck was done by Ed Fox in Alder's Garage, located on the west side of Main Street between Norwich and Center. This was the first front mounted pump in the area. Most other departments had midship pumpers.

A used fire truck body was purchased from Newark and mounted on the 1937 Chevrolet chassis. It was mounted on the truck in place of the flatbed and it began to look like a real fire truck. Gus Finner, the blacksmith, had a shop on the corner of Norwich and the alley, where the lawnmower store loading door is now located. He made all the irons to fasten the body to the fire truck.

The village water plant was completed in 1942, which made a few hydrants available for fire fighting. In the Township, water was obtained from dug wells, cisterns, cattle watering tanks and some ponds and creeks. On Main Street there were two dug wells. These wells are still there, but are covered.

In 1943, a water tank was built by Schoedingers. It was ordered by Russells grain company and donated by them. This 300 gallon tank was mounted on the truck and hoses loaded on top of it, the same as today's trucks. A problem was encountered in

pipng the tank to the pump. Marble Cliff Quarry was the only place the needed connections could be found. They donated them to us. When the fire fighting training was completed with Captain Henry of the Columbus Fire Department as instructor, then the men were ready to test the pump and learn to operate it.

Norwich Township Trustees purchased land on the south side of Norwich Street between Main and Wayne in 1943. A small two bay building was built by Norwich Township. It had room for the truck and trailer plus a toilet and shower. The cost of the building was \$999.99. The Trustees paid for the hinged barn type doors from their own pockets. Earl Pfaltzgraf was the builder.

On November 29, 1943, an ordinance was passed to create, establish, and regulate a Volunteer Fire Department for the Village of Hilliard in conjunction with Norwich and Brown Townships. When the Fire Department was originally instituted the Village of Hilliard, Norwich and Brown Townships signed an agreement dividing the expenses among them: Brown Township 25% of the cost, Hilliard 25%, and Norwich Township 50%. To do this, they had to set up a fire board made up of the Fire Chief, Chairman of Norwich and Brown Township Trustees and President of the Hilliard Village Council. Harry Huggett, who was at this time the clerk of Brown Township, was elected secretary of the fire board. During this period between 1942 and 1943 the men were paid \$1.00 per year, which they returned to the trustees.

## **THE FIRE DEPARTMENT IS ACTIVATED**

Finally, early in 1944, the department became operational. The first official meeting of the Hilliards Volunteer Fire Department (28 members) was February 2, 1944. At this meeting, Chester High was selected Chief by a vote of the members with the approval of the Village Council and the Township Trustees. This group of volunteers made the first fire run on February 10, 1944. This run was to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Gaymon Wright on Leap Road, located on the west side between Cemetery and Davidson Roads south of the railroad tracks. And in March, 1944, the first fire house was completed.

The first alarm was a church bell. Then two fire phones were obtained. When a call came in, the people on the two fire phones would each call three people, then these three would each call three people and so on until everyone was called. Later, more phones were added and a siren was loaned to the department from Civil Defense. The phones were still used, but when the fire calls came in, the person nearest the fire station ran over and turned the siren on and wrote the address of the alarm on the blackboard inside the building. Men working in different places would hear the siren and come to the fire station to see where the alarm was and then respond.

In April of 1944, Chief High was transferred to another territory and Robert H. Morris was confirmed as Chief in July. Chief Morris resigned in January, 1946 due to the responsibilities of his fulltime job. The next Chief, Harold P. Michel, who served until 1966, saw many changes and improvements.

In 1946, a movement was initiated to buy a new fire truck but due to the state statute whereby a political sub-division was prohibited from purchasing fire equipment on time, it was necessary to form a private company to purchase this equipment. After it was purchased by the company, it was leased to the Village of Hilliard, which in turn, contracted with the Norwich and Brown Township Trustees for fire protection. This company was composed of the President of the Village Council, Chairmen of the Norwich and Brown Township Trustees and the Fire Chief. Later the state statute was amended to permit purchase of fire equipment and this company was disbanded. In 1944, 1945, and 1946, the men were paid \$25 per run. The money was divided equally among the men who made the run.

In need of better equipment, a new truck was purchased from Harry Sutphen and Associates in 1947. The truck was complete with pump, 800 gallon tank, portable water pump, portable light plant, etc. This truck was built by American Fire Apparatus Company of Battle Creek, Michigan and put in service in 1949. This was still in use in the middle 1960's.

By 1949, the need for an emergency squad was recognized and a movement was initiated by the Hilliard Chamber of Commerce to solicit funds within the school district to purchase the same. The response was really above expectations. An emergency truck

and inhalator were obtained. It was a 1947 Ford, 1/2 ton panel truck. The fire department members built cabinets, drawers, shelves, and so forth. The first squad run was made in April, 1950, and the emergency squad was officially dedicated on October 31, 1950. This truck was still in use in the 1960's as a fire squad truck.

In 1950, a twenty thousand dollar bond issue was passed by the voters to build an addition onto the original two bay station. The cost to the property owners at this time was 50 cents a year. The two new bays, office and kitchen were occupied in June 1951, and continued to be used until 1981 and was paid off about 1966. All of the finish work was done by the fire fighters.

In 1953, a new Reo 1500 gallon tanker with a 500 gallon per minute pump was purchased through matching funds from Civil Defense. In 1956, the need was seen for a new emergency squad. It was purchased from Alder Chevrolet. When it was— put into service, the other squad was made into a grass fighter.

In March of 1957, Norwich Township assumed control of the fire department and contracted for fire protection with Brown Township. Hilliard was not able to pick up their one-fourth of the bills. On assuming control, Norwich Township employed two full time men giving around-the-clock protection to the community: Fire Chief, Harold Michel and Assistant Chief, William Carl.

Up until January 1, 1960 the department was operated entirely from the General Revenue Funds of the township. Because of the great increase in the number of calls, the Trustees, in 1959, saw the need for further expansion of the department, and so placed on the November 3, 1959 ballot, a fire levy which was well approved by the voters. This levy was for 1.5 mill for the operation of the department. On January 1st, 1960, two more full time firemen were employed: Lt. Charles Lewis and Lt. John Kesler Jr. On January 1, 1962, Edwin Fox became the fifth full time fireman.

In 1960, the department purchased from it's own funds, at a cost of \$3000, a Plectron Alerting System whereby firemen are summoned for an emergency. It consisted of a tone generator and thirty receivers. They were the first department in Central Ohio to own such a system. The money for this project was raised by sponsoring the annual Halloween Carnival, fish fries and the sale of auto and drivers licenses.

In 1961, a Chevrolet station wagon was purchased to be used as the Chief's car and as a second emergency squad. In 1962, a bid was let to Sutphen Fire Equipment for a 750 gallon per minute front mount pump. It had a 1000 gallon water tank, hose, ladder, and hand tools. This truck was put in service in May of that same year.

In 1962, there were thirty volunteers in the department. They were paid for their services on a point system. A house or barn fire counted for one hour on duty and three points and then one point for each additional hour. A grass or auto fire counted one point for one hour and one point for each additional hour. Each man signed a report at the fire house after each run. The value of a point was determined by adding

together the number of points earned by all the firemen, dividing this figure by the number of runs made in a year, and multiplying by \$50. This amount of money was then multiplied by the number of points each individual had earned to determine his pay for the year. Starting in 1965, the part time men were paid \$100.00 per run, which was divided among those making the run.

In 1964, the name of the department was officially changed from Hilliards Fire Department to Norwich Township Fire Department.

In 1965, a new panel truck was purchased from Winders Chevrolet which was then taken to Gertenslager Corporation in Wooster, Ohio for conversion to an emergency squad. In 1966, a grass fighter was built by Sutphen Fire Equipment on a three quarter ton four wheel drive GMC. It had a 200 gallon tank with a motor and pump mounted on the body with the control mounted on the left side. In 1974, the pump was mounted on the front of the truck. The motor and pump on the rear of the body was removed and in its place was mounted a 6000 watt generator for lights, portable pumps, jacks and electric cord extensions. This truck was used for rescues such as auto accidents, grass fighting or could be used as an extra pumper at the hydrant.

In 1965, the department needed to expand so land was purchased on Hilliard Rome Road for a new station. This would position a fire house on each side of the railroad tracks that divided Hilliard. The building started in 1966 and finished in 1967. Fire House number 2 was occupied August 2, 1967 and was formally dedicated August 21, 1967.

In 1966, Assistant Fire Chief William Carl was promoted to the position of Chief. He had started his fire fighting career in 1938 as a volunteer in the Dublin Fire Department. When he moved to Hilliard he became a charter member of the Hilliards Volunteer Fire Department.

In 1967, a bid was let to Sutphen Fire Equipment for a 750 gallon per minute front-mount pump with a thousand gallon water tank, hose, ladder, and all hand tools. This was the department's first truck with an automatic transmission. In 1968, a new emergency squad was purchased from International of Springfield, Ohio. The 1956 squad and 1947 panel truck were sold at auction.

In 1971, a new piece of apparatus was purchased from Sutphen Fire Equipment. An 85 foot aerial tower with midship pump, 400 gallon water tank, hose, full complement of ladders, rescue equipment and self contained air masks. In 1972, a new emergency squad was purchased from Horton Company. This squad was equipped with all life saving equipment except heart equipment.

In 1973 a drive was started by Chief Carl to raise money to buy heart equipment for one squad. Money was raised from donations, McDonald days, bake sales, and walkathons. Enough money was raised to purchase two complete sets of heart equipment, enough to equip both squads. In 1973, a need was seen for a more modern engine. Sutphen Fire Equipment was awarded the contract. A diesel powered engine with automatic



transmission, 800 gallon tank, 1500 gallon per minute midship pump, hose, ladders, and hand tools, was to be delivered in 12 months. Due to strikes, it was delivered June 10, 1975. In the meantime, we had traded in a 1947 Chevrolet pumper and the 1953 Reo tanker. They were sold and the buyers came to the station and drove them away. That left us without two pumpers and 2500 gallons of water for two years.

In 1974, a new emergency squad was purchased from the Horton Company. The International squad was traded in to Horton. A 2.1 mill levy was passed by the voters in May 1974.

November 1976, a 1.0 mill levy was approved and in December of the same year Chief Carl retired.

Charles Lewis, who had been Assistant Chief and with the department since October, 1956, was promoted to Chief in January, 1977. Late in 1977, the Trustees decided that a fire prevention officer was needed. Richard Pooler was hired in March, 1978 to start a Fire Prevention Bureau and set up a regular fire safety inspection program in the community.

During 1978, it was determined that more manpower was needed and money to pay for it. In November 1978, a 1.9 mill levy was passed.

In January 1979, six more fulltime fire fighters were added. This brought daily staffing to six fire fighters per day, three at each station.

By 1980, more room was needed for the fire department. It was decided to build a new fire house after finding that it would cost less than remodeling the station on Norwich Street. Now that there was a railroad underpass on Cemetery Road at Norwich Street, a station on each side of the tracks was no longer a necessity. Manpower and equipment could be consolidated.

On March 9, 1981 a contract was signed with McKnight Development Company to build a new fire house on the Franklin County Fairgrounds. The new fire station was dedicated October 31, 1981. Finish work and counters in the radio room and kitchen was done by the fire fighters. The two old stations were sold and so no additional taxes were needed for the new facility.

A new Medic vehicle was purchased from the Horton Company and delivered August 24, 1982 at a cost of \$27,979.50.

In February, a 1983 four wheel drive Chevrolet pick up was bought to replace the 1965 grass fighter. The new vehicle was equipped with a slide in water tank and pump. This removable assembly was built by Fire fighter Don Weaston.

Chief Lewis retired March 31, 1983 and Lieutenant Richard Ellwanger became Chief April 1st of the same year.

A new engine was purchased from the Sutphen Corporation on April 2, 1984 at a cost of \$147,353. Engine 80 replaced the 1961 Sutphen pumper. This new engine came with a 1,500 gallon per minute pump, electric generator and 2,000 feet of hose.

In 1984, Sutphen Corporation won the bid for another new engine. Engine 82 was delivered in 1985 and is a virtual twin to Engine 80. Engine 82 cost \$147,353 and replaced a 1967 pumper.

During the early 80's tremendous growth was taking place in and around Hilliard. Areas of Columbus near Hilliard in what had been Norwich Township demanded better fire protection. The closest Columbus fire station was on Fisher Road. Columbus requested a mutual aid contract with Norwich, in answer to the request, the trustees stated that the Franklin County Commissioners granted Columbus' request to annex over half of Norwich Township over a period of time, taking half of the tax duplicate. The Trustees reminded Columbus that the annexation required raising Norwich taxes through voter approval. All of this was approved by the County Commissioners on the stipulation that Columbus would provide fire and police protection to the area annexed. Now Columbus comes and asks us to furnish fire and emergency protection, the trustees continued. The Trustees explained, " We hope and pray that nothing will happen in The Glen, either fire or emergency that would cause heartbreak for some of the residents there, but we feel this is on the shoulders of the County Commissioners who just keep giving township land away, without regard for the consequences." Norwich Trustees offered to meet with Columbus officials with hopes of working out a solution.

The Norwich Township Trustees sent a letter to Columbus saying, "We believe there is a solution that will benefit both departments. Norwich extends to the City of Columbus and its fire department an invitation to house some of your equipment and personnel in our fire station. We believe this can reduce your response time to the Glen subdivision and other areas of Columbus in the Northwest area, as well as provide additional assistance to both departments on an as needed basis." Monday August 8, 1986 Columbus Engine 30 was on duty at the Norwich Township Fire Station and would remain until Station 30 was completed, August 1988.

During 1986, it was decided that a larger meeting room and more offices were needed at the fire house. In October, an addition was completed giving more office space and a spacious meeting room.

Growth in the area and increasing emergency runs necessitated more staff. January 1, 1987 three more fire fighters were added, bringing the staffing to eight per day. At the same time a day time dispatcher was added. This freed a fire fighter from the radio to make runs.

July 1, 1987 Franklin County converted all emergency telephone numbers to 9-1-1. This new system enabled the 9-1-1 operator to see the name and address of the call's origination. This is a fine tool to trace malicious false alarms and to cut out confusion as to which emergency number to call.

In December 1987, the 1971 aerial truck was replaced. The new truck from Sutphen Corporation cost \$405,137. It has a 1,500 gallon per minute pump, 90+ foot tower with bucket, exhaust fans and a full complement of ground ladders.

Commercial growth in the area was so great that a single inspector could no longer do an adequate job. In July 1988, Fire Fighter William Midgley was assigned to the fire prevention bureau as a second inspector. A 4.0 mill levy was to be placed on the November 1988 ballot. Due to a clerical error at the auditors office, it appeared on the ballot as a 0.4 mill levy. The Trustees asked the voters to defeat this levy and it failed. In May 1989, the 4.0 mill levy was approved by the voters.

Calls for assistance continued to increase and the fire fighters answering the telephone and radio were also needed to make emergency runs. After reviewing several options, the most economical and efficient solution was to contract with Hilliard Police. In December 1989, Hilliard Police Department assumed the responsibility of answering— the fire phone, dispatching equipment and radio communications.

Another fire fighter was added to each unit in January, 1990, staffing 9 per day.

Attempting to keep pace with the growth in the area, still another fire fighter was added to each unit in July, 1991. This currently brings staffing to ten fire fighters per day. A far cry from the all volunteer force of the '40s and '50s. Of course, the department makes 2,200 more runs per year now.

The Norwich Township Fire Department currently serves a residential population of 23,826 covering 39.2 square miles. The department's rolling inventory includes: 1975 Sutphen Engine, 1984 Sutphen Engine, 1985 Sutphen Engine, 1987 Sutphen Aerial Tower, 1983 Grassfighter, 1990 Horton Medic, 1988 Horton Squad, 1979 Horton Squad and four staff vehicles. Currently the Fire Department has 35 full time employees and 12 volunteers, operating with a 1.875 million dollar budget and an effective tax rate of 6.4 mills.

## **THE FIRE HOUSE DOGS**

And what is a fire house without a fire dog? About 1957, the first dog was acquired -- a Dalmatian. He was given the name Captain Dammit. He soon became an important member of the fire-fighting staff.

Captain Dammit, Jr. was acquired in 1967. He was a proud and handsome Dalmatian who considered himself one of the men. He kept constant guard over Fire House No. 1, permitting no strangers around. He was ever alert for duty when Engine No. 84, the 1962 Ford pumper, set out for a fire run. Oddly enough, that was the only truck he ever rode in, and once inside he did not budge until the run was completed. Each morning he would make visits to homes in the neighborhood for handouts. He liked children and in turn the children had a great esteem for him - after all he got to ride in the fire truck. After his death on May 6, 1977, the department soon acquired another Dalmatian which was named Captain Dammit III.

Captain Dammit III soon filled the collar of his predecessors adopting Engine 87, the 1975 Sutphen, as his truck. He seldom missed a fire run but when he did, the returning fire fighters would find something torn up. This Captain also made the rounds of neighborhood homes and added a local bar to his haunts. On several occasions fire fighters received a call from Oties to bring "the Captain" home.

By 1986, the department was getting too busy to properly care for a four legged fire fighter. In January, Captain Dammit III retired to the country on a farm.

Station 2, on Rome Hilliard Road, was home to Sparky starting in 1972. Sparky was not a full blooded Dalmatian and she did not ride on the fire trucks. She was a faithful companion for the fire fighters and kept a close watch over her station. Sparky was proud to be a member of the department and would regularly share her catches, from near-by fields, with the guys. She served faithfully for fifteen years.

## TRAIN WRECKS

In 1952, the biggest and most spectacular fire in the history of the department took place. This incident occurred on the railroad tracks between Main Street and Cemetery Road West of Norwich Street. Johnny Jones, Columbus Dispatch feature writer, described it in this way:

"Hilliard burst into the national news spotlight. It became a veritable war zone after 7:45 o'clock Wednesday evening, January 2, when two Pennsylvania freight trains, including gasoline tank cars and a car of 20 millimeter shells, sideswiped each other. The freak train wreck occurred when a reel of cable in one of the 23 cars broke thru the floor and became entangled in the wheels. The wreck exploded a gasoline tank nearly opposite the Farm Bureau Grain Elevator. The car containing the ammunition, caught fire and shells exploded for hours. Four men were injured. The steel car prevented the ammunition from causing any damage in the village. The sound was like that of a gigantic corn popper as the explosions occurred in the car. Volunteer fire departments, numbering 20, as far away as Delaware brought the fire under control while wind and snow hampered firemen. A little Korea was the way some of the old-timers referred to the scene. Good discipline and leadership were maintained throughout and Hilliard citizens remained calm. Many provided coffee and sandwiches. It proves defense organization is needed in all communities. Hilliard is a lucky city and will long remember the bursts of shells and flashes of fire."

This story was also told by Lowell Thomas' evening news report on national CBS -- so large a wreck it was. Traffic over the Gill Street (now Cemetery Road) crossing was not possible for almost thirty-six hours. By the time the fire was out, 3 fire fighters from aiding departments had been critically injured, 284 men had put in 3,316 man hours over 2 days using 16 pumpers, 6 tankers, 5 rescue squads and 5 foam trucks. Eleven separate fire departments were involved including a foam crash truck from the U.S. Navy. Over 17,000 feet of fire hose were laid during the battle and damages set at \$683,000.

Three years later at about noon on Friday, April 15, 1955, another train wreck occurred which required the attention of the fire department. As a ninety car freight train was going through town from Chicago to Columbus, an overheated axle on the 36th car broke, causing 27 cars (refrigerator, box and a tanker of animal fat) to be derailed. Twenty-six of the wrecked cars were lying in an area normally taken up by six upright freight cars. Another skidded 150 feet and stopped at the corner of Wayne and Center Streets. Much of the contents of the wrecked cars were salvaged. Federal Meat Inspectors were soon on the scene, directing operations and taking the frozen meat and produce to refrigerated warehouses. Some of the meat was bought by local people who cut it up and processed it for their freezers. Train service was detoured for twenty hours. No one was injured but damages were expected to be at least \$150,000. The crash tore up more than 400 feet of track, knocked down power and telephone lines along the track and smashed several parked cars.