

Fire protection was non-existent for most of the history of our area. Wild fires burned all across the entire peninsula of Michigan because of dry conditions. In the Fall of 1871 there was a drought over much of the Great Lakes. Debris from logging and land clearing was tender-dry. Wells went dry, crops failed, streams shrank. On October 8 a great wildfire struck the town of Peshtigo, Wisconsin killing 1300 people and the fire spread to Michigan. Yes, believe it or not. It burned over 1,100,000 acres. Another fire destroyed Chicago. Additional fires across the state resulted in at least 200 deaths. Ten years later another fire struck the area between Saginaw Bay and Lake Huron which was completely devastated. The fire burned for over a month. Over 2 million acres were burned and hundreds of families lost everything. Farmers reported that the skies were dark with smoke for several days. In the pioneer days if a candle or oil lamp or spark from a cooking fire caught the hay in the barn on fire. There was no 911, and no roads worth the name for a long time for a firetruck to come on. So all a pioneer could do is throw water on the fire from a bucket or retrieve a few valuables before they got burned. But as the farms got smaller and a village formed the people recognized a need for a fire department. See page 135



The Warren Volunteer Fire Dept was organized April 4, 1926. Soon it secured a Model T chassis and equipped it for firefighting. Later a second Model T was equipped with chemicals. On May 21, 1926 the Center Line Fire Department was organized by order of the Village Commission. George Theut was appointed as the first Chief of the Fire Department. He had to then recruit and train volunteers. At first there was no equipment other than buckets, rakes smothering bags like wetted burlap sacs, no equipment to transport chemicals or water or to pump water. If a farmer saw smoke in the sky he could grab a bucket, rake and ride as fast as he could to the fire site. Because barns had lots of hay and straw once a small fire started unless put out immediately everything burnable was lost along with any livestock that could not escape or be led out. All houses were made of wood with no smoke detectors and no fire extinguishers. Most fires could be put out quickly while small in the first minute or so. After that all was lost. Even after these early fire departments were formed many buildings burned to ashes before volunteer firemen could get there. Many people did not have phones at all and there was often no operator on duty at night. If the designated fire person was out of hearing distance to his phone it was just not answered. Often the first notice of a fire was the smoke in the sky. And of course there were no fire hydrants for water so what little chemicals and water the truck could carry was often what could be used until a well found to tap into and most wells were well secured against anyone getting into it.



Center Line was more populated and Warren more rural resulting in Center Line getting more equipment and men in place sooner. Unlike Out East where private fire companies would fight each other for the job of putting out a fire, often while the fire burned on destroying property, here both departments often helped each other. We called it mutual aid. There may have been some equipment owned by private businesses such as a large wheeled pressurized chemical tank that could be easily used to put out a fire.

The village of Center Line bought a new 1926 750 Gallon Per Minute American LaFrance Pumper. The chief recruited and taught 18 volunteers. The Center Line Fire Department was the Only Fire Department in Warren Township and it was their responsibility to protect the entire 36 square mile area. Theut had no station to keep the truck so it went in his garage. It served from 1926 to 1957. Mayor David and Kathy Hanselman got it back for us and Friends of the fire truck and volunteers got it restored.

