



Berkley History & Museum Happenings

December 2023



This photo appeared in the December 14, 1923, edition of The Berkley Tribune. It shows officers (L to R) Frank Johnson, Chief Allen McCabe, and Guy Wheaton. The photo's caption states, "A speedy motorcycle makes the Berkley police a force to be reckoned with."



Stop by the Berkley Historical Museum in January to see our display on the Churches of Berkley. You can participate by adding to the display. Bring in church photographs which we will scan and return

Berkley's Early Police & Fire Departments

by Don Callihan

The Police Department

When Berkley's Village Commission had its first official meeting on October 12, 1923, the village had nothing: no place to meet, no money, no ordinances, and no employees. Prior to that first meeting, the village president prepared a list of committees, composed primarily of the six elected commissioners, whose functions would include hiring people, drafting ordinances, levying taxes, leasing office space and purchasing equipment. One of the first functions was to select a bank for the village's financial transactions. This was followed by borrowing money against future tax receipts to pay prospective employees and purchase supplies and equipment.

High on the priority list was the establishment of a police department. At a special meeting less than a week later, Berkley appointed its first police officer, Allen McCabe. McCabe was a known entity as he was a member of the commission charged with creating a village charter and an Oakland County deputy sheriff. Two weeks later, McCabe was appointed chief of police. In announcing his appointment, The Berkley Tribune reported that "he has been outfitted with the regulation police uniform, revolver and handcuffs." "Private stills will be put out of business, speeders reprimanded and punished, and law and order in general strictly enforced."

The village had no police station, so McCabe was temporarily moved into the Royal Oak Township voting booth on the southwest corner of Monnier (Coolidge) and Oakwood (12-Mile). The village now had a policeman,

continued on page 2

In This Issue

- The Early Police Department
- The Early Fire Department
- Join the Berkley Historical Committee
- The Museum Corner Sign-Up

Berkley's Early Police & Fire Departments - continued from page 1

but the only way to summon him was to physically go and get him or find him patrolling the village. There was no telephone service in Berkley until late December. Two of the first phones installed were for the police department, one at the voting booth and one at McCabe's home.

In early November, the village commission appointed the department's second police officer, Frank L. Johnson. They also provided McCabe with a new Henderson motorcycle with a sidecar. In early December, a third officer, Guy Wheaton, was appointed, and the fledgling department was now at full strength.

In February of 1924, the village established a town hall near the corner of 12-Mile and Monnier (Coolidge) in two leased storefronts on the southeast corner, facing 12-Mile. A third storefront, the one right on the corner, was occupied by Hughes Bros. Realty. With an official location established, Chief McCabe was able to move out of the township voting booth across Monnier and have a real office.

In February of 1924, Chief McCabe made good on his statement that "private stills will be put out of business." Enlisting the help of Ferndale Police Chief George Smith and Oakland County Undersheriff Frank Schramm, simultaneous raids were conducted at three separate "blind pigs" located in Berkley homes. In all, 15 officers participated in the raids. First-rate stills and barrels of mash were confiscated at two locations, and 50 gallons of wine were seized at the third.

One of 1924's more interesting police reports happened the week of November 9. Police were summoned to the lunchroom/bus station on the southwest corner of 12-Mile and Royal by the lunchroom's proprietor, Mrs. T. Bowman. Mrs. Bowman reported that three men had come into the lunchroom, ordered sandwiches, played the piano and played the slot machines. When she entered the kitchen, one of the men quietly closed the kitchen door while the other two hauled the two slot machines out to a waiting car. When she came out of the kitchen and saw that the slot machines were missing, she quickly ran outside in time to see their vehicle turning west onto 12-Mile. She immediately called the Berkley police, who went in their direction but did not spot the get-away vehicle she described. A few days later, a similar crime was committed in the 13-Mile/Woodward vicinity. The thieves were caught in Ferndale and taken to the Oakland County Jail in Pontiac. Berkley Police Chief McCabe took Mrs. Bowman to Pontiac, where she identified the men as the ones who had robbed her. While the men initially denied their involvement, the ringleader finally confessed.

A question that arises when reading this account is: Were slot machines legal in 1924? The answer is that they were not. The United States banned slot machines in 1902. However, to get around the law, some machines paid out in candy and chewing gum instead of cash. We can only assume that Mrs. Bowman's machines were of this type.

A major development in Berkley's growing police force occurred in September of 1925 when Chief of Police Allen McCabe tendered his resignation. Frank Irons, who had only been on the force for fifteen months, was appointed interim chief for a 90-day probationary period. When his probation was up, he was confirmed as permanent chief of police. He was 25 years old at the time and was the youngest police chief in Michigan. Irons had an illustrious career, 40 years as police chief in Berkley and 17 years as Oakland County Sheriff. It was a fitting honor that Berkley's city council, in October of 1990, decided to name the new headquarters for the police and fire departments the Frank W. Irons Public Safety Building.

The Fire Department

Even before Berkley had a fire department, Police Chief Allen McCabe was charged with rudimentary fire protection for the community. In January 1924, the village purchased 24 3-gallon fire chemical tanks. The original idea was to divide the village into 24 fire districts and place an extinguisher with a volunteer in each district. A list of those with extinguishers was to be printed in The Berkley Tribune. However, there is no evidence that this ever happened. It is surmised that these extinguishers were initially kept at the township voting booth – temporary police headquarters - until the first firehouse was constructed.

The "fire chemical tank" fire extinguisher was a 3-gallon container filled with a solution of baking soda (sodium bicarbonate) dissolved in water. Suspended above the solution was a small container of sulfuric acid. When the extinguisher was inverted, the acid mixed with the baking soda solution, causing a chemical reaction that pressurized the container and allowed the solution to be sprayed on a fire from a distance. Fire extinguishers of this type were discontinued in 1969.

Berkley's fire department got its official start on March 20, 1924, when Chief of Police Allen McCabe was authorized to organize a volunteer fire department. At a special meeting on Saturday, March 29, Village President C. Arthur Dunton was called upon to address the crowd. He explained the need for a good fire department in Berkley, and to demonstrate his leadership, he joined the volunteer department. Ironically, a few days later, on Thursday, April 3, Dunton's house on the southwest corner of Woodward and Catalpa caught fire. The home was extensively damaged despite the efforts of Chief Allen McCabe, volunteer fireman Victor Hess, and the Royal Oak Fire Department. Shortly after the fire, it was revealed that the home had been recently leased to a catering company that planned to open a high-class inn at the site. Less than three months later, Dunton's home was rebuilt and enlarged, and on June 17, 1924, Dunton and his partner Paul J. Weyer opened the Northwood Inn, a restaurant that became a Berkley landmark until its closing in the spring of 1975.

While there was now a volunteer fire department, there was no equipment other than the fire extinguishers. To address this situation the village ordered an American LaFrance combination chemical hose wagon in late March of 1924.

continued on page 3

Berkley's Early Police & Fire Departments - continued from page 2

The \$4000 chemical hose wagon was a motorized vehicle with a 1-inch hose on a reel connected to a tank containing a baking soda solution. When sulfuric acid was introduced into the tank, the chemical reaction caused the tank to pressurize, and because of the high pressure produced, the solution could be sprayed from a greater distance. Initially, the baking soda solution was thought to be more effective in putting out a fire because it was a foamy water mixture, but it was eventually concluded that a pumper that could draw an unlimited supply of water from a hydrant was more effective.

The commission apparently heard about the increased effectiveness of pumpers as they canceled the first order and ordered a combination pumper and chemical wagon from American LaFrance at a cost of \$12,500. This unit still had a chemical tank that could be used upon initial arrival at a fire, but it also had an engine-driven pump that could deliver higher volumes of water if a reliable water source was available.

With a fire truck on order, the village purchased a 20' X 40' portable building manufactured by American Steel Building Corporation for use as a firehouse. A building of this type could be assembled in a few days and even disassembled and relocated. The lot behind the village offices was designated for the new firehouse.

Berkley's new fire truck arrived in July of 1924. However, it had a rather auspicious first run. A fire was reported in the vicinity of the Berkley School but was actually near Angell School. When firemen and the new truck arrived at the correct location, the fire was not put out because the solution in the chemical tank was quickly used up, and an adequate water source was not available. Water mains and fire hydrants were in the planning stages.

The method used to summon volunteer firemen also added to the delay. When a fire was reported, a siren sounded that could be heard all over the city. Volunteer firemen reported to the firehouse and drove the fire truck to the fire's location. If a fireman was always stationed at the firehouse, the fire truck could be dispatched directly to the fire, and thus arrive sooner.

This was accomplished on August 6, 1924, when the Berkley Fire Department was officially organized. Allen McCabe, the chief of police, also became the fire chief. Elmer Flechsig was appointed engineer, and Roy Hartwick, who transferred from the police department, was appointed assistant engineer. Either Flechsig or Hartwick would always be on duty. A telephone extension was installed in the fire hall and connected to a large gong so that fire calls could be answered day or night.

Since few people in the village had telephones, it was still difficult to summon the police and fire departments. Recognizing this, the Village Commission invested in a Gamewell police signaling system with a firecall. The system, consisting of 12 call boxes at various locations in the village and receiving equipment at the fire hall, became operational in the spring of 1925. The Gamewell system greatly improved the response times of both departments.

As noted earlier, Allen McCabe, who was police chief and fire chief, submitted his resignation in September 1925,



Berkley's 1926 Fire Truck on Harvard Avenue in 1947

Elmer Flechsig was named fire chief.

With the Gamewell system operational, a fully functioning fire truck, fire hydrants throughout much of the village, three full-time firemen, and a cadre of volunteers, things were going well for the village's fire department. Then, on the afternoon of June 1, 1926, the fire hall and its contents, consisting of the fire truck, the Gamewell system, and two police motorcycles, were destroyed by fire.

The Village Commission met that night and made the necessary moves to ensure fire protection and get an investigation underway. A new fire truck was ordered immediately, and Royal Oak agreed to provide fire coverage. The fire truck must have been in

stock as, two days after the fire, American LaFrance delivered the new truck. Not wanting the truck outdoors, the Village rented a garage at the rear of the Carlson-Dantzer garage (present-day maintenance building for Roseland Park Cemetery behind the fence on Coolidge) for a fire hall. The fire truck was an American LaFrance Type 75 Combination Pumper and Chemical Wagon (see photo above). The investigating committee was composed of the state fire marshal, Police Chief Frank Irons, and Village Commissioner J. Howard Wendorph (also the Police and Fire Commissioner).

A special meeting of the village commission was called for July 13, 1926, to read the resulting report. The report stated that Elmer Flechsig, the fire chief, had entered the building, hung an empty 5-gallon can on the gasoline barrel's faucet and opened the faucet to fill the can. Since the gasoline barrel was nearly empty, the gasoline was flowing very slowly. Flechsig walked outside for a moment, believing he had adequate time before the gas can was full. Seeing Flechsig, police chief Frank Irons called him over to look at his car. The distraction caused Flechsig to forget about the gas can until his attention was called to the burning fire hall. The report surmised that the gasoline can overflowed while Flechsig was outside and that approximately 2 ½ gallons of gasoline ran across the room toward the floor drain near the building's heating stove. When the fumes from the spill encountered the fire in the heating stove, they ignited and engulfed the building. The report concluded that Flechsig was negligent and responsible for the fire.

continued on page 4

Berkley's Early Police & Fire Departments - continued from page 3

After the report was read, Flechsig asked for a hearing on the spot to determine if he was negligent, and the village commission agreed to his request. Commissioner Wendorph, one of the report's authors, recused himself from the hearing.

Witnesses were sworn in and testified. One of the last people to testify was Mrs. Allen McCabe, the wife of Berkley's former police and fire chief. Mrs. McCabe testified that "she had seen smoke coming from the ventilators of the building an hour before the fire but did not immediately report her finding because she thought the ventilators were chimneys." The commissioners left the room for a period and returned with a verdict that read, ". . . from the evidence submitted, we cannot place the responsibility for the fire upon Fire Chief Elmer Flechsig."

On July 14, 1926, The Daily Tribune reported that ". . . when Commissioner Oliver Swords read the verdict, the crowd cheered for several minutes."

Although exonerated, Flechsig and Police and Fire Commissioner J. Howard Wendorph had a difficult relationship because of Wendorph's conclusion that Flechsig was negligent. Flechsig was vocal about their differences, and on October 30, 1926, Wendorph suspended Flechsig indefinitely for insubordination, malicious statements, and slandering a public official with undue cause. On November 4, the village commission agreed with the suspension but set a hearing for November 8, 1926.

When Flechsig appeared at the hearing, he tendered his resignation before the hearing began. Although supported by several commissioners, the commission voted 4 to 2 to accept Flechsig's resignation.

The Daily Tribune reported on November 9 that "President James G. Randolph said that Flechsig had told him early in the evening that he hoped the commission would accept his resignation because of a discordant condition which would naturally follow in the event he was acquitted of all charges. This Flechsig told Randolph would not be in the best interest of the village." Flechsig's request that the commission accept his resignation may have been responsible for some of the "yes" votes.

Visit Us

Berkley Historical Museum
3338 Coolidge Highway
Berkley, MI 48072
248-658-3335
museum@berkleymich.net

Hours: Wed: 10 AM till 1 PM
Sun: 2 PM till 4 PM

Group tours by appointment.

Visit us on the web at
www.berkleyhistory.org

Facebook: Berkley Historical Museum

Instagram:
[@berkleyhistoricalmuseum](https://www.instagram.com/berkleyhistoricalmuseum)

Twitter: [@BerkleyMuseum](https://twitter.com/BerkleyMuseum)

The Museum Corner Editor:
Don Callihan

Get the Newsletter

If you wish to receive *The Museum Corner* each time that it is published, please put your name and email address in the body of an email and enter the phrase "The Museum Corner" in the subject line. Send the email to: museum@berkleymich.net

Make a Donation

If you have artifacts or historical photos that you wish to donate, stop by the museum or email: museum@berkleymich.net. Items should be clean and in restorable condition.

Become a Member

Do you enjoy history and/or the preservation of historical artifacts? If so, we have a place for you on the Berkley Historical Committee. We are an official committee of the City of Berkley dedicated to preserving and promoting its history. We educate and engage the public in our efforts through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum. If you wish to become an active member of this committee, send an email to museum@berkleymich.net indicating your interest, or call 248-658-3335 and leave a message.

Photo and Text Credits

All photos are from the Museum's collection. Historical information was primarily sourced from minutes of Village meetings, The Daily Tribune, originally in Royal Oak, Michigan and The Detroit Free Press, Detroit, Michigan

The mission of the Berkley Historical Committee is to preserve and promote the history of the City of Berkley, Michigan, and to engage the public through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum.