

# The Re-ECHO

St. Louis Park

A Newsletter for the members of the St. Louis Park Historical Society

## Fire Chief Omar McGary

Omar McGary was St. Louis Park's third Fire Chief. He held that position from 1969 until he retired in 1979. During his tenure, the fire department changed from a group of men sitting around playing cards to a organization of professionals, dedicated to the fire safety of St. Louis Park.

The first St. Louis Park Fire Department was formed in 1916 by fourteen volunteers but it was not until 1930 that the village purchased the first pumper. Joe Williams was appointed Chief and Superintendent of the Water Department. The department operated out of a former tavern located at 36th and Brunswick (across the street from what is now Jorvig Park). This building could house only one truck, and at various times was also the Police Station and Village Clerk's Office. In 1938, a new fire and police station was built on what is now the Minnesota Rubber parking lot on 37th St. between Alabama and Woodale.

As the population of St. Louis Park increased the fire department grew and the volunteers were replaced by paid firemen. When the Home Rule charter was adopted in 1954 there were sixteen paid firemen. A new north side station was built on Louisiana Avenue in 1963. In 1966, a new south side station was built at the present location on Woodale Avenue to replace the one on 37th St. After graduating from St. Louis Park High School in 1933, Omar McGary spent most of his early years working

at Jennings Tavern. Without previous experience, he joined the department in 1946 and was added to the paid group of firemen in 1948.

In 1955, Pete Williams, Joe's son, succeeded Joe as Chief of the Department. When Pete retired in 1969, Omar McGary was professionally qualified to take over as Chief. He was appointed Acting Chief and in 1971 he officially became the third chief of the department.

Chief McGary was very dedicated. He attended seminars around the country, learning how other fire departments were run. He brought these ideas back to St. Louis Park and used them to improve his department. He fought hard for budget money for new equipment and training. His fire department gained national recognition and he received many calls about his systems and opinions.

Safety became a very important issue. On October 8, 1971, two of St. Louis Park's firemen lost their lives fighting a fire at the Pizza House at 4532 Excelsior Blvd. They thought the fire was under control and safe enough to enter the building. They were unaware there was a false ceiling and it collapsed on the two men. So this would not happen again, Chief McGary initiated a rigid inspection system. Firefighters no longer sat around the fire station waiting for a fire.

They now spent their time on drills, cleaning their equipment or on building inspections. Every business or commercial building in St. Louis Park was inspected on a periodic basis not only for safety hazards but also for construction details.

Chief McGary developed a system that was adopted by many other departments around the country and eventually patented by one of them. A card file with all the pertinent details

The Re-ECHO is published quarterly by the St. Louis park Historical Society and is edited by Robert C. Reiss. Its purpose is to acquaint the members, volunteers and friends on how the activities, programs and resources of the Society are used to preserve the history of St. Louis Park. The name was inspired by the ECHO newspaper published by and for the students of the St. Louis Park High School since 1917.  
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## Omar McGary

of every commercial building in St. Louis Park was kept in the cab of the fire trucks and could be studied on the way to a fire. When they got to the fire the firefighters were aware of construction details, hydrant locations and other information.

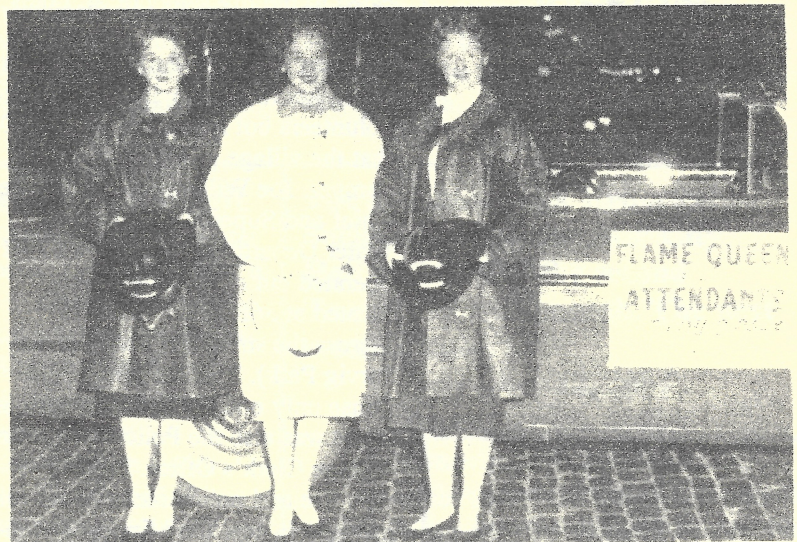
And Chief McGary was tough. Many of the locomotives passing though St. Louis Park had faulty spark arrestors that caused fires. The railroads ignored the Chief's requests to correct the problems. He even tried to charge them for putting out the fires. Finally, he had a train stopped and would not let it pass through the Park until the spark arrestors were repaired. The Chief was no longer ignored.

On May 11, 1977, the St. Louis Park Fire Department fought the worst fire in the City's history. The two Burdick

Grain Company elevators at Highway 7 and Glenhurst Avenue burned to the ground. Police and firemen from the entire metropolitan area assisted in the containment. The entire area was evacuated and a command post established. A dust explosion killed one of the City's firefighters. The caliber and training of the professionals working under Chief McGary was tested and proved highly effective.

Today, the St. Louis Park Fire Department consists of 24 professional full time fire fighters. In addition, there are 23 paid-on-call trained fire fighters. Luke Stemmer is the seventh Chief and the fourth since Chief McGary retired. After a nationwide search for each of these four men, three were found in the St. Louis Park Fire Department and promoted. A credit to the personnel, training and reputation begun by Chief McGary.

## Fire Queens



Who are these 1955 Fire Queens?

## Beehives and Stone Structures

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) is planning the construction of a six lane freeway from Cedar Lake Road south to 36th Street on the Highway 100 corridor. An informational meeting was held on July 16, 2002 between the St. Louis Park Historical Society, MnDOT and the City's Public Works Department to determine the impact on the beehive and stone structures located on two sites in St. Louis Park in this corridor. One is located in the SE quadrant of Highway 100 and Highway 7 and the other along

Highway 7 north of Minnetonka Blvd. No funds for this construction are planned until 2008 and there is concern that the structures will be lost before any plans for saving them are implemented. The two sites had not been maintained and there was a danger that they appeared to be abandoned. MnDOT agreed to resume maintenance.

These two sites are on the National Register of Historic sites and are subject to historical advantages/limitations and possibly financial opportunities.

## Stone Structures

MnDOT's current plans do not include any change to the park and structures in the SE quadrant. It is outside the area of future construction. Since this site is also directly south of the Hennepin County's Southwest Corridor Trail which runs from Minneapolis to the western suburbs it could remain intact and Hennipen County or St. Louis Park incorporate it as part of the existing trail system. There is already evidence that the trail users have been using this park as a rest stop.

The site on Minnetonka Blvd. will be lost to the highway construction. The structures in the park will have to be moved to other locations to be saved.

Potential permanent locations are Wolfe or Jovig Park. Another possible location for the structures might be along a needed trail connection between the Southwest Corridor Trail and the Cedar Lake Trail. This trail would probably be build in connection with the new freeway so an interim spot might have to be found for them to be saved.

The discussions at this meeting were positive and resulted in long and short range suggestions for the preservation of these historic sites. Several civic organizations has expressed an interest in this project. The St. Louis Park Historical Society will continue to monitor MnDOT's plans.

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## Brookside Time Line

Jeanne Anderson is the researcher and editor of the St. Louis Park history web site called the Brookside Time Line. Its new web address is:

[www.Jeanneanderson.com](http://www.Jeanneanderson.com).

For her research, Jeanne badly needs

old St. Louis Park phone books. If you have these to share, please contact her or the St. Louis Park Historical Society.

Jeanne can be reached at:

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## St. Louis Park Street Names

Ever wonder how Park streets were named? St. Louis Park streets were named in an ordinance passed in August 1933. Before that, street names were pretty much of a mess. "Bedlam" is what Carroll Hurd called it when he pushed for the appointment of a committee to work on new street names for the thoroughfares of the Park.

Prior to the adoption of this ordinance, there were five separate Summit Avenues, which had a way of confusing delivery men and visitors.

There was no continuity to street names...no plan to help a groping visitor find his destination. Streets were interrupted by swamps, railroads and other obstacles. With the new street naming ordinance, Glenhurst, Joppa, Kipling and others continued on after being interrupted.

Streets originally were named by people who lived on them...after wives, children, sweethearts etc. Beloved ladies, immortalized by Hazel, Romona, Fern, and Fayette all passed into oblivion with the ordinance. Fortunately, so did names such as J, I, and M. Borrowed names such as Quincy,

Pleasant, Logan, Irving, Garfield and Groveland went into the scrap heap. Some strange and wonderful names such as Pudwana, Wildrose and Arcadia went down the drain as well. Vera Cruz (stolen from Robbinsdale) was also stricken from the map.

The 1933 street naming committee included the Mayor, Kleve J. Flakne, Carrol Hurd and Edward Ludwig. Mr. Hurd did most of the work.

It was a "Herculean task" taking several months. From the outset, the committee decided that street names should be alphabetical and arranged in a sequence that was easily memorized. The first alphabet starting from France Ave. was already in existence. Some streets had counterparts in the area south of Excelsior Boulevard and the names were applied to the same nothern streets. Ottawa, Raleigh and Salem had been named previously. Webster, Xenwood and Yosemite were added. Quentin Ave. in the first alphabet replaced Quincy as the committee members discarded all names similar to Minneapolis and St. Paul streets. Wisdom of this foresight was evidenced when the Park

## Street Names

Post Office became part of the Minneapolis system. Thus, Quentin Ave. residents escaped waiting for days while their mail was delivered and redelivered

from Quincy Ave. N.E. in Minneapolis. The second alphabet was planned to bear names of states and Canadian Provinces. That is how "Brunswick" sneaked into the lineup. "E" proved to be a stumbling block....no State began with that letter, so Edgewood was improvised.

The third alphabet was designated as historic or patriotic, so names, such as Cavell, Boone, Independence and Decatur were used. Edith Cavell was a historic nurse during the first World War. All kids know about Dan'l Boone and Decatur probably was taken from Fort Decatur. Hillsboro in the third alphabet was previously named so planners left it as it was. The last street in the village was Jordan or County Road #18 (now MN Hwy 169).

They next began lining up the East-West streets with Minneapolis in an

orderly sequence of numbered streets running from W.15th and W.16th on the northern limits to W.44th St. on the south.

There were also little tag end streets to be named. Broadway was changed to Walker which along with Hamilton and Goodrich honored Park's founding fathers. Names of several short streets near the south border of the village were not changed because parts of them were also in Edina. Therefore, streets as Natchez, Monterey, Mackey, Brook and Coolidge.

The confusion and lack of system caused by haphazard designations made by early pioneers was erased with one large ordinance by citizens with imagination who found appropriate labels for the village streets.

Jake Werner, one time Mayor of St. Louis Park, observed, "We really didn't need street names in the early days, everybody knew everybody".

This article is based upon an article that appeared in the St. Louis Park Dispatch, date unknown.

### **A Great Holiday Gift**

The book, "Something in the Water" is a history of St. Louis Park prior to 1945. It is available from the St. Louis Park Historical Society for \$18.00 plus \$2.00 for handling.

Send your name and address to:

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**The St. Louis Park Historical Society meets at the SLP City Hall at 7:00 PM the second Tuesday of each month. The next meeting dates are:**

**November 12, 2002**

**December 10, 2002**

**January 14, 2003**

**February 11, 2003**

**You are invited to attend.**

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