

Short History of the Norridgewock Fire Department

by Doug Farrin, Retired NFD Assistant Fire Chief (1977-1988)

along with much information and thanks to Elizabeth Miller on April 15, 1992.

The first permanent settlers in the Town of Norridgewock came in 1772 and the first firefighting was done by everyone. Early settlers had to keep leather pails, wooden buckets, containers for sand, axes, spades, and shovels ready at all times. Woods and grass fires were fought chiefly by chopping trees, plowing breaks, digging and throwing dirt, and by setting back fires. House fires, when possible were fought by bucket brigades. To fight roof fires the early settlers would take rugs, carpets, and blankets, soak them with water and spread them on the roof.

As the town grew and the Southside developed industries, the Town's people began to consider some sort of fire protection. They had storage places around the town for buckets, shovels, and axes. Much of this equipment was stored in barns of the volunteers. They built brick water cisterns (tanks) in selected locations. The first known Firehouse in town was located west of the railroad tracks and just up from the Watts block on Main Street.

By 1900, the town had learned to use some chemicals in their hand pumper. They purchased \$16.12 worth of chemicals that year and appropriated \$50.00 for the Fire Department. In 1901, the town raised \$1,000.00 to purchase a Racine Fire Engine for \$850.00 and to have a sled built to carry equipment. Dr. Walter Brown was engaged to house and care for the engine. In 1902, records show that after a fire, men were paid \$1.50 per night to stand "Watch". It was also customary to have fireman stand "Watch" on the 3rd and 4th of July. By 1905, the town appropriation rose \$500.

On the night of April 7, 1909, the entire Watts Block burned. This block contained several stores. After many disastrous fires along Main Street and other areas in town, a group of citizens met on November 23, 1911 and formed a fire company. Thirty-four men joined. They elected officers and considered a constitution and by-laws. William Brackett was elected as the first Fire Chief of Norridgewock. This marked the first formally organized Fire Department. Today this group is known as the Norridgewock Fireman's Association.

In 1916, work was started on a new Firehouse. It was located on the south side of Main Street next to Oosoola Stream. The fire house had a second floor with a hall and kitchen. From 1920 until the 1930's, William Soule of the Fire Department checked all the chimneys in the village. This cut down on the chimney fires in the village. Around 1922, the purchase of "Fireman's Suits" are on the record. By 1924, the Fire Department was well housed, well equipped, and well organized.

On May 16, 1924, the Firehouse caught fire in the basement destroying all of the tons firefighting equipment. The fire spread up Main Street and all of the buildings on the south side of Main Street from the stream to the railroad tracks were destroyed, except for the building next to the tracks. Dynamite was used to blow up buildings to prevent further spreading of the fire.

Following this loss, the Town and Fire Department had to start all over with a \$15,000.00 over drawn account and no Firehouse or equipment. They bought an old pumper from Brighton Village Corporation for \$10.00. In 1925, they bought a D.E. McCann triple combination pump, chemical, and hose wagon. A new on story brick Fire Station with a hose drying tower was built on the same site. This was the home of the Norridgewock Volunteer Fire Department for the next thirty-five years.

From 1927 on, the Fire Chief was to receive a salary of \$100.00 a year and each man was to receive \$.75 per call and \$.75 per hour for each hour served. "Watchers" were to receive \$4.00 per night. The Firemen were not covered by Workman's Compensation. However the town did appropriate money several years to aid a fireman injured in a fire. In 1936, money was raised to buy a new firetruck, with a payment of \$2,300.00 per year until paid.

In 1960 with the volunteer labor and mostly donated materials, a new Fire Station was built across the street, which is our present Fire Station. This Fire Station is now too small and plans are underway for a new Station. It will be located at the corner of Route 2 and the Wilder Hill Road.

The Norridgewock Fire Department has had many dedicated volunteer Firefighters in the last 200 years. One good example is Captain Herbert (Herb) Libby. Herb joined the Department as a teenager in the early fifties. Herb has attended more fires and rescues than any other Firefighter in the history of Norridgewock. Herb is still an active Firefighter.

The Norridgewock Fire department presently consists of twenty-three men led by Chief David Jones. The Department personnel is well trained in the art of firefighting and rescue. The town voters have always supported the needs of the Fire Department and have maintained a well-equipped department. For engines, the Department has a 1989 Ford pumper, 1980 Maxin Pumper, 1969 Dodge pumper, 1952 Dodge 4x4 (used for grass and woods fires), and a 1935 Maxin (used for show). The Department also has a rescue boat.

UPDATE: December 21, 2015

Since this writing, the NFD has moved into their very own new Fire Station located at 22 Upper Main Street. Changes were made and the new location was moved to the Upper Main Street instead. The apparatuses now is a 2006 3,000 gallon International Pumper / Tanker, 2003 Dodge 4x4 utility truck (extrication tools along with used for woods/grass fires), 1996 1,000 gallon pumper, and still have the 1989 Ford 1,000 gallon pumper. Rescue 14' aluminum boat and a ATV four wheeler. And yes, the 1935 Maxin is still seen in parades. A roster of 20 personnel support the Department. And unfortunately we lost our longest serving Firefighter, Captain Herb Libby on December 11, 2009.