

Time Tracs

By Jim Ingram

Major fires in the Village of Lake Orion through the years and the fire department that fought them....

1862-In that year nearly all of the business section was destroyed by fire. The destruction was so complete that the village charter was repealed in 1863. The rebuilding of the business section was slow, but mostly completed by 1869 and the village was reincorporated.

1874-The block on the north side of Flint between Broadway and Lapeer Streets was destroyed by fire. Today, it would be from the Masonic Temple building west to Lapeer Street. It was rebuilt and the charter was preserved.

1894-All the buildings on the east side of Broadway south of Bradford's Funeral Parlor (two story frame building which now houses a beauty parlor) including the building on the southeast corner of Front and Broadway (now Lucky's Market) were destroyed.

1902-The west side of Broadway between Flint and Front Streets, except the hotel (now Verwood Apartments) and the building on the southwest corner of Broadway and Flint (now Ed's Broadway Gifts) was destroyed by fire.

This included the Predmore Building which at that time was two stories and of wood construction. It was rebuilt the next year as a one story building of brick construction. This replacing of wood construction with brick became common after the 1874 fire.

It led to buildings that were sounder and much more fire resistant than the flimsy wood structures that preceded them. This same Predmore Building in 2004 housed the Sagebrush Cantina Restaurant/Bar and the three storefronts to the south of that.

1901-The Emmon's Grist Mill was destroyed by fire. It was located just south of the current Moongate Restaurant. That same year John Winter and Dr. Lay purchased the water rights and constructed Orion's first power plant on that site providing electricity for the resort and the village.

They sold to Detroit Edison in 1912 and the current building was constructed on that site.

1910-Fire destroyed the east side of Broadway. The first three buildings south of Flint Street up to the old Wagon Wheel Tavern building, which now houses Steve Auger Architects, were destroyed.

In 1910, it included the Commercial Hotel on the corner, Henry Kessell's Men's Clothing and Close's Barbershop.

1936-1955-On the Fourth of July weekend in 1936, the dance pavilion on Park Island burned to the ground in the afternoon.

Bill O'Brien said that it burned so fast that the band didn't even get their instruments out. It was said that the fire was so hot that the pennies in the basement slot machines melted and ran out in little streams onto the ground. The pavilion was rebuilt

and it continued to attract major bands into the 1940s.

In the summer of 1955, tragedy struck again on Park Island. Stid Schaar's two story bar on the shore of the island burned to the ground early on a Sunday morning.

The flames from the old building lit up the entire east part of the lake. It was never rebuilt and thus ended Park Island's days as an entertainment center.

1962-The Roll-Orion skating rink was totally destroyed by fire. This building had been the Riggles Rink built in the 1920s on the shore of Buckhorn Lake.

When M-24 was widened in 1956, the building was moved to the east side of M-24, opposite Buckhorn Lake and used for roller skating and dances. The fire department was barely able to keep the fire from spreading the adjacent Dairy Queen and Standard Oil Station.

1964-The Masonic Temple was severely damaged by fire and the two businesses below it, Gaylord's Real Estate and Burde's Variety Store, suffered extensive smoke and water damage.

This building on the northwest corner of Broadway/Flint Streets was built in 1881 by John and Andrew Belles to house their general store and for roller skating and dances on the second floor. It was the sturdy brick construction and the poured cement second floor that saved the building.

Now that we have surveyed the damage that fires have caused in the village, let's take a look at how these fires were fought over the years.

During the years, 1838-1859, much of the village business section was built along Flint Street and Broadway, then known as Market Street. It culminated in 1859 with the Needham Hemingway plat of the Village of Orion being charted as a government unit.

Most of these early buildings were of flimsy wood construction and very susceptible to fire damage. When you couple this with the primitive means of fighting fires at that time, it's little wonder that the business section of Orion was completely destroyed by fire in 1862.

The major means of dealing with building fires in the 1860s was the bucket brigade. A line of townspeople would form from the lake or creek and pass pails of water from that source to the scene of the fire.

In the 1880s, the village did purchase a "new fangled" hydraulic squirt ram, the engine being worked by hand with citizens taking turns during a fire. Water still had to be pumped several blocks from either the lake or Paint Creek.

In 1890, a well for fire protection was sunk on Flint Street, just east of the Flint/Broadway intersection, 27 feet deep, the water standing within nine feet



Fire Department in 1930

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