

CITIZENS LEAGUE REPORT

No. 44

**City of Minneapolis
Fire Department
Handling 6-alarm Fires**

May 1955

REPORT BY SUB-COMMITTEE ON FIRE PROTECTION
ON HANDLING MAY 6 FIVE ALARM FIRE IN MINNEAPOLIS

The conflagration of Friday, May 6 gave the Minneapolis Fire Department one of its most severe tests and presents several items of interest in relation to last year's report of the Public Safety Committee on Fire Protection. High winds, inflammable construction, the peak of rush hour traffic and an incredibly hot and fast developing fire, combined to bring about one of the most critical situations in the city's history, and it appears that the Fire Department performed a minor miracle to control it within two hours, and confine major damage to a single block.

The fire originated in an unoccupied four-story warehouse at 217 North 3rd Street. It had attained great headway when discovered. Before the building could be ventilated the pent-up fire gases ignited in a great wave of flame that enveloped Ladder 1, ignited adjoining buildings and cars in parking lots. The 40-mile-an-hour wind pushed the heat wave down 3rd Street, igniting the adjoining six-story Nott Building from the third story to the roof, the front of the Lee Building across 3rd Street and the top floor windows of the Fur-tex Building across 2nd Avenue. Radiated heat ignited the rear of the Duncan Building and the Sandberg Casket Company on 3rd Avenue North. Sparks and flying brands were spread broadcast over the loop starting fires on roofs and penthouses, some of which attained serious proportions.

The high command of the department immediately realized the danger of a sweeping conflagration. Five alarms in quick succession plus numerous special calls brought 14 engines, 6 ladders, 5 hose wagons, 2 boosters and 1 rescue squad, Civil Defense Fire and Rescue Reserve, Hennepin County Rescue Squad and other auxiliary services were alerted. The key line of defense was a battery of heavy streams forming a water curtain along 2nd Avenue North. This broke up the main wave of heat, extinguished fires across 2nd Avenue and helped to keep down flying sparks. As other companies arrived they were detailed to cover roofs and spot fires to leeward, to attack the fires across 3rd Street and on 3rd Avenue and to cool the main fire by attacking from windward. The whole operation was a classic in fire-fighting strategy, and that such a plan could be formulated and carried out in time to control the fire indicates leadership, organization and training of a high order.

The strengths and weaknesses of the department, as stated in last year's report by the Public Safety Committee of the Citizens' League were sharply highlighted by this fire. On the credit side were: an able and energetic high command, unusually large and powerful pumpers and amounts of heavy stream equipment (mounted "turret nozzles" and portable "deluge sets"). These permitted the rapid setting up of the water curtain, deluging threatened buildings and attacking a fire too hot to be approached by ordinary means. It is probable that few cities could have matched the speed and power of this operation.

The most notable weakness shown was the inadequate number of companies. Two working fires unconnected with the main fire and innumerable calls for spark fires over the entire loop almost emptied the city's fire stations. St. Paul was asked for aid, (by agreement) and responded generously with four engines, 1 ladder and a chief; all that they dared to send with the dangerous weather conditions there prevailing. The entire off-shift of the Minneapolis Department was recalled, and by 6:30 p.m., seven or eight reserve engines were in service. The dispatchers in the alarm office showed skill and recourse in handling the companies at their disposal, but in spite of their best efforts there were periods when only two or three companies were in service in the entire city and large areas notably south of Lake Street and on the East Side were completely unprotected.

Under these conditions, a mutual aid agreement between city and suburbs as suggested in the League report would have been of the utmost value. Never was its need so plainly shown and its lack so keenly felt. Under a mutual aid scheme, ten suburban engines would have been immediately available to fill in at vacant Minneapolis stations, and several more would have been ready to respond to major fires from their home stations. The critical situation described above would not have occurred. Incidentally, most of the suburban engines would have had shorter runs than the St. Paul companies. The suburban companies could have been used to protect outlying areas (see appended schedule) while the St. Paul and Minneapolis reserve units could be concentrated in the loop. It should be noted, also that even with ten engines in the city, there would be no critical shortage in the suburban areas, where over thirty companies would still remain in service.

After this narrow escape from disaster it seems imperative that no more time should be lost in starting discussions to implement a city-suburban mutual aid plan. This could also provide for the first company on the scene fighting a fire until the proper company showed up regardless of which side of a boundary street the fire was on. It would appear that first proposals along this line might properly originate with the Public Safety Committee of the City Council, and be directed to the Metropolitan Area Fire Chief's Association, the Southwest Fire League and the North Suburban Mutual Aid Association and it also seems the clear duty of the Council to do so.

Suggested Mutual Aid Assignment

Suburban Unit	Minneapolis Station	Location
Columbia Heights	15	Johnson St. & 27th Ave. N.E.
Brooklyn Center	20	Lyndale & 41st Ave. North
Robbinsdale	2	Main St. & 13th Ave. N.E.
Crystal	14	James & 33rd Ave. North
Golden Valley	16	James & 5th Ave. North
St. Louis Park	8	Blaisdell Ave. & 28th Street
Hopkins	8	Blaisdell Ave. & 28th Street
Edina	28	Upton Ave. So. & 43rd Street
Bloomington	27	Nicollet and 46th Street
Richfield	13	Cedar and 42nd Street

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Approved by the Public Safety Committee and Board of Directors
of the Citizens League of Minneapolis and Hennepin County.

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