

George Karges

George Karges was Waterloo's fire chief back in the time when the fire hall shared quarters with the town jail. The arrangement meant that Karges and his fellow firemen spent many nights on duty being serenaded by the "locked-up drunks" and their boozy songs.



Karges, who was chief for thirty years starting in 1910, oversaw many technological changes during his leadership of the Waterloo brigade. When he first volunteered, hand-drawn fire fighting equipment was used. Horse-drawn equipment soon followed and then in 1928 a motorized vehicle was purchased for \$13,000.

During his early years as chief, Karges recalled that the first crew to arrive at a fire was paid \$5 and the second on the scene received \$3.

The local fire department of Karges' era, had evolved from a mid-nineteenth century group of pioneers who set up in the lower floor of an early municipal building on Albert Street. The building, known as Das Spritzhaus, was built in 1857 and housed a hand pump, leather buckets and a hose. "It was indeed a big moment as 20 or 30 volunteers grabbed the long rope attached to the 'engine' and raced along the bumpy streets to a fire. Bells clanged and the fire chief shouted orders through a trumpet."

During these very early years it is written that the first person to carry two gallons of water to the scene of a fire received a \$1 premium. In 1885, the town purchased a steam-powered fire engine called the Bismark and four years later, a new horse-drawn truck replaced the Bismark.

Karges volunteered for the first time in 1904 but stayed only a few months before moving to Stratford. He returned to Waterloo in 1906, rejoining the fire department and was soon appointed chief.

During his time as chief, by-laws of the Waterloo Fire Department reveal that members who were late or absent from monthly meetings were fined 25 cents and those late for a fire were fined 50 cents.

Karges was married with three sons and attended St. Louis Roman Catholic Church. When he retired in 1940 he was an honorary life member of the Dominion Fire Chiefs Association. He was also a member of the Holy Name Society and the League of the Sacred Heart. Karges died at his home on Water (now Dorset) Street in 1948 at the age of sixty-six. Mrs. Karges continued to live in the home through 1960.

Photo courtesy of the Waterloo Public Library