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# Hotel fire showed inadequacies of town's early fire department

## Remember When:



A view of Winter Park's past courtesy of the Winter Park Historical Association and the Winter Park Library.

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Paramedic Firefighter

It was morning, like any other morning, late in the summer of 1902. However, this day would be scarred by the specter of fire that would raise its unseemly head.

The Seminole Hotel on the shore of Lake Osceola was a magnificent structure. Built entirely of wood, it was 300 feet long. It towered over the town of Winter Park with its four stories. Its 200 rooms were lavishly furnished. The hour was 3 a.m. on Sept. 18, 1902. Living nearby, De Bacheler was roused from bed by a noise he soon discovered was the roar of fire. It was coming from the kitchen of the Seminole Hotel. The alarm was raised, "The Seminole Hotel is burning."

The fire department at that time was in its infancy, only 1½ years old. The town did not own any fire apparatus and the people watched in awe the spectacle before them. The crowd stood by for nearly an hour before they realized the valuables

within the building needed to be saved. Then, remembering the contents brought to mind the caretaker. He must still be inside. He was found sleeping soundly in his bed. When questioned about the hotel's fire-fighting equipment, he didn't know how to use it.

An urgent telephone message was sent to the Orlando Fire Department, which sent its hook-and-ladder wagon. Upon its arrival, the building was fully involved in flames. The help was useless. The great hotel lay in death throes.

The lots adjacent to the hotel were piling up with salvaged contents from the hotel. Aiding in this effort was a young black man who worked for E.H. Brewer, owner of "The Palms," now a national historic landmark. Suddenly an explosion occurred at the north end of the building causing this young salvager to be buried under a great wall of fire. His lifeless body was found later in the day. At approximately 7 a.m. the last of the Seminole's great wooden structure fell and a magnificent chapter in the history of Winter Park closed. The cause of the fire was never determined.

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On March 12, 1900, the Fire Protection Committee had met at the office of Dr. Henkel in what was to become the founding moments of the Winter Park Fire Department. At this time the town had only fire buckets, a few ladders and six chemical fire extinguishers. In 1912, the town purchased two hose carts, its first real fire-fighting equipment.

In August 1912, Winter Park voted to install a water works system. This would be the biggest boost for the fire safety of the town to date — still in effect today.

At the beginning of the next year on Jan. 14, 1913, the Winter Park Fire Department had its first fire chief, G.N. Denning. In 1916, the town bought its first motorized piece of fire equipment, a Ford chemical engine (see photo). The price of \$1,276.30 was great; however, in the light of saving lives and property it was minimal.

From its inauspicious beginning in the back room of a physician's office to the ultra-modern department of today, capable of responding to any emergency, Winter Park has come a long way in protection of its citizens and their property from the ravages of fire.



Pictured at the corner of Park Ave. and Welborne is the first motorized piece of fire apparatus, purchased in 1916 by the Winter Park Fire Department. Grouped around the Ford Chemical Engine are members of the fire department: W.D. Taylor (left), owner of Taylor's Drugstore; in front seat, Dick Batchelor and Leland Chubb; Ronald Barze with ax and helmet; Dr. Howard Verigan, dentist, with hose; Ed Favor, standing right, and Ralph Lucian, standing in rear of truck.