

On a bitter winter night in 1914, several young Shenandoah men of the Polish origin, watched in awe and envy as the Shenandoah Fire Companies, one motorized apparatus and the rest horse drawn vehicles, swept up or down Main Street, in answer to a fire alarm.

One of the group - no one remembers just who - said, "gee, fellows, let's be volunteer firemen, let's join a company and help others as these men are doing."

All agreed it was a good idea, so the proper application forms were submitted to a fire company in the borough. Although the young men were qualified mentally and physically, hard workers, willing to give their all for the fire company of their choice, they were denied membership.

It is hard to realize this in the year of 2015. Especially in Shenandoah with its many ethnic groups all working together, that these young men, who later fought overseas under the flag of their country, were denied membership, simply and purely because they were of Polish extraction. But they were.

Several days later these individuals with their other friends of Polish origin, were bemoaning their fate in a South Main Street tavern. A tavern, incidentally, located in the Polish section of Shenandoah, but owned and operated by an Irishman, Pat Maher who was a friend to all men, regardless of national origin, religion, class of work or standing in the community.

After listening to his friends describe the shabby treatment they received for several hours the Irishmen said, "Well, boys, why don't you stop talking about it and do something - form your own fire company."

The idea caught on like fire and spread throughout the Polish section of the community. After several informal meetings were held at St. Stanislaus Parochial School, The Polish American Fire Company was born and received its charter on May 13, 1915, thanks to the efforts, assistance and guidance of Rev. L.A. Stachowicz who was pastor of St. Stanislaus R.C. Church and Edward J. Burke who was an officer of the Phoenix Fire Co.

The charter was granted by the Court of Common Pleas for the County of Schuylkill, Pennsylvania, on the 13th day of May 1915. The newly formed fire company continued to meet in St. Stanislaus Parochial School and in December 1915, the members voted to rent or purchase a suitable building, but the action was held in abeyance because of a threatened coal strike.

On January 26, 1916, the company moved its quarters to the Muldoon property at 10 North West Street, where firefighting equipment was borrowed from the Phoenix Fire Co., including a hose cart drawn by hand. In the latter part of 1916, the Company again moved its quarters to 229-231 South Main Street (Ceresota Building) and the company remained there for the next 4 to 5 years. Members loaned the company money to purchase a new American LaFrance Fire Engine (Old Bertha).

After many fund raising projects to pay the members, the company, turned their thoughts and efforts to a permanent building of their own and it was unanimously voted to borrow \$50,000 for this purpose. The construction of this building began in 1921 and one year later the company

headquarters was moved to the new location 115-117 West Centre Street, where we are at the present time.

From that time and up to the year 1946, it was a struggle to raise money to pay on the interest and mortgage; the company was hindered by Coal Strikes, the Great Depression and World War II. It was really an effort and sacrifice on the part of the members to keep the company afloat during the 1920's, 1930's and the early 1940's.

The first mortgage was held by the Citizen's National Bank of Shenandoah, Pa. and by 1933 we still owed ten thousand dollars. In March 1933, the Federal Government closed all banks. Our region was in the mist of the Great Depression and it was very rough to raise money. But through the efforts of a member of the company who made a few trips to Washington, D.C. we were successful in getting the mortgage reduced to six thousand dollars. This was then backed by John J. Miller of Shenandoah until it was down to four thousand dollars. The mortgage was then picked up by the Shenandoah Firemen's Relief Association at a reduced rate of interest. The last mortgage was paid off in 1946 and we were cleared of all debts.

On July 3, 1946, the company held a memorable banquet, highlighted by the burning of the mortgage, thanking all members who carried the banner of the Polish-American Fire Company, for realizing a dream – a home which they can call their own, a beautiful Colonial style building, free of all encumbrances.

After World War II and after the Vietnam War our membership increased considerably and the fire company really started to move forward. An active membership sponsored many fund raising projects to raise funds to purchase new uniforms in 1948 and 1977. The company took part in many parades and was considered one of the best marching units in the state. Many best appearing trophies are on display in the Social Room and Meeting Room from Schuylkill County and the Six County Associations. Also hundreds of dollars were won at Four County and State Conventions.

Many fundraising projects followed after this, but the most successful ones were the block parties or bazaars which were held annually beginning in the early 1950's and discontinued in 1960, and restarted in 1976 and are still going strong.

In 1965, a six day Golden Jubilee Celebration celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the fire company was held. It started on Wednesday, September 1st to Monday, Labor Day, September 6th. The following events were held: concert alongside the firehouse, member's picnic, firemen's marching units parade, High Mass at St. Casimir's Church and a banquet, area fire apparatus parade and an open house.

In 1966, the Fire Company was in the foreground of the Shenandoah Centennial with many members serving on committees and numerous members volunteered to work for the various fundraising events for the Centennial. The largest fundraiser was the Shenandoah Fire Department Block Party which was held to fund the Six County Firemen's Association Convention and Parade.

The Six County parade was the largest parade held during the Centennial week. We also had the largest and most active Brothers of the Brush Chapter in the town. It was active well into the 1990's when the Brush dissolved.

The outside of the original building was remodeled in 1975. In 1976 a Schuylkill-Carbon Area Manpower (SCAM) team completely remodeled the interior of the original building in time for the Bi-Centennial Celebration of the United States. The fire company was immensely involved with the raising of funds for the Shenandoah's Celebration of the Bi-Centennial and participating in the numerous events.

In 1970 a special building fund raffle was started and held annually until 1981. The money from the raffle and bazaars was used to finance the addition to the existing building. The ground breaking was held in late April 1979. Twenty members donated their building trade skills to complete the interior of the building thus saving the company thousands of dollars. The mortgage was burnt on Saturday October 10, 1981 at the Twentieth Annual Awards Banquet.

In August 1982 visions of a new fire truck came to light when Shenandoah Borough Council agreed to pay forty-five thousand dollars towards the purchase of a new 1984 Hahn 1000 GPM pumper to replace the 1954 Seagraves 750 GPM pumper . The truck was delivered in March 1984. The truck housing was held on Saturday September 15, 1984 which was one of the company's most memorable affairs in years. The company was able to secure a State New Fire Apparatus ten year 1% loan in March 1984. It was paid it off by the annual bazaars and the 80-20 Raffle tickets in March 1994.

In 1990 we sponsored the Thirty-Six Annual Schuylkill County Firefighters Convention and Parade in mid-August. This was the kick-off of our Seventy-Fifth Anniversary celebration of the founding of the fire company. The following events were held the from August 26th to September 2nd : Sunday - Seventy-Fifth Anniversary High Mass at St. Casimir's Church and Awards Banquet music by the Paramounts Band at St. Casimir's Hall; Monday - Membership Family Night with Magicians, Clowns, Accordion music and open house at the firehouse; Tuesday - 50's and 60's night at the Damato Post American Legion music by Denny Hardock Band; Wednesday - Keystone String Band Concert along the fire house and open house to the public; Thursday - Polka Night with music by the Happy Stefan Polka Band along the fire house; Friday - Member's Stag Picnic at Union Township Fire Company Grove at Pattersonville; Saturday - Surrounding communities Firefighters Appreciation Day with a DJ and Sunday - The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Banquet music by The Polka Family at St. Casimir's Hall.

In 1992 the company bought a refurbished 1978 Hammerly Ford 1500 Gallon Tanker from Eastern Salisbury Fire Department, Salisbury Township, Lehigh County, Pa. it was in service from 1992 to 2007.

The fire company over the years from 2003 to the present received many Pennsylvania and Federal grants for new SCBA and thirty complete sets of Globe PPE also for the renovation of the buildings which included a new roof, replacement windows, insulated garage doors and exhaust removal system for the fire apparatus. Due to the rigorous demands of the Active

Firefighters these days we secured a grant to add a Physical Fitness/Workout Room to the Social Room.

In 2006 a Truck Committee was formed to replace our 1984 Hahn Pumper and 1978 Hammerly Tanker. The fire company applied for a grant in 2007 from Homeland Security and was successful in obtaining a grant for \$250,000.00 for a new Seagrave Pumper/Tanker with company paying the difference. The Seagraves Pumper/Tanker was delivered in October 2007 and put in active service in April 2008. A Truck Housing Parade was held in May 2008. After the Seagraves Tanker/Pumper was put into active service we joined the Schuylkill County Tanker Task Force to assist our neighboring communities as well as protecting the Borough of Shenandoah. We also have a working agreement with DCNR – Bureau of Forestry to supply tanker water to area brush fires. The 2007 Seagrave was paid off in 2010 by intense fund raising and the securing of numerous donations and a \$15,000 grant from Jeld-Wen.

In 2008 the Junior Firefighters program was initiated in the Shenandoah Fire Department and that helped the company to gain a few young active members.

Today, we can proudly say the company is solvent, and in very good health and sound condition.

Organized by a few members in 1915, today after 100 years we have over 150 active members including three active female firefighters with the first who was voted into the company in 2004. We now have a newly painted and renovated three story building and two story building addition on the corner of Center and West Streets. The buildings have a spacious meeting room, recreation and physical fitness room, two truck rooms that could house two trucks each, and a newly remodeled grille room.

At the base of the Statue of Liberty is an inscription which reads in part: “I stand beside the golden door, give me your poor, your homeless and your distressed.”

We in the Polish American Fire Company of Shenandoah, in the year of the Lord, 2015, could well repeat in essence these words to the small group of Polish men who in 1914 would not be denied their right to be volunteer firemen and aid their community.

To the memory of these men and the many others who saw the fire company through its struggling years, especially the 1914 to 1946 era, we say, “THANK YOU, truly by your example, you have shown us the way, you lighted and kept the torch burning and we humbly pray that we may be worthy to keep the torch burning, the fire company growing in the next half century, as you did before us.”

There are no statues erected in memory of the young group of Polish men who had an idea and desire in 1914, which culminated in the founding of this fire company in 1915 as there is to that great Polish patriot, General Casimir Pulaski.

We are the first and only Polish American Fire Company in the United States and their memory will always live in us.