

Project to mark firefighter graves lesson in history

As part of a Memorial Day observance last month, active and retired Twin City firefighters placed flags on the graves of former members of the Bloomington and Normal fire departments.

This annual rite, now organized by Bob Wills, a retired Bloomington firefighter and vice president of the Bloomington and Normal Association of Retired Firefighters, has become even more meaningful as a concerted research effort in the past several years has greatly increased the number of documented gravesites.

So far, Wills and others have expanded the number of located graves from 75 to 232. Evergreen Memorial Cemetery is the final resting place for 90 identified Bloomington and Normal firefighters. There are also 75 such gravesites at Park Hill; 33 at East Lawn Memorial Gardens; 27 at St. Mary's; 5 at St. Joseph's; and 2 at Holy Cross Cemetery in Normal.

The Memorial Day weekend tradition takes on special significance when it comes to firefighters who died in the line of duty. In the history of the Bloomington Fire Department, eight members and one volunteer made the ultimate sacrifice, either combating a fire or from injuries sustained at the scene of one.

The department's first fatality occurred in 1912. On March 7 of that year, Maurice Luby died of a heart attack while carrying a ladder during a house fire on the 1400 block of North Morris Avenue on the city's west side. The 47-year-old had been a Bloomington firefighter for 22 years, making him one of the longer serving members of the department at the time.

Luby's funeral was held at Holy Trinity Catholic Church and he was laid to rest at St. Mary's Cemetery on the city's far west side. "The sacrifices incident to the life of a fireman for public safety and for public welfare are as worthy the crowning laurel as are those of any who give up their life for their country's good," noted The Daily Bulletin, a Bloomington newspaper, of Luby's death.

"Sorrow-stricken" firemen flanked a stretch of West Washington Street as the funeral cortege headed to St. Mary's Cemetery. The fire department's full complement of horses, wagons, and ancillary equipment—"with which the dead fireman was so familiar"—also lined the street, "while a fire gong toiled a doleful requiem." Engine House No. 5, Luby's last assignment, was draped in black for the week.

On Jan. 15, 1922, Lawrence F. “Larry” Burns suffered a fatal fall fighting a fire from the roof of Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church. “Burns had only fairly got a hold on the hose when it filled with water and jerked backward,” reported The Bulletin. “His feet slipped on the ice-coated roof and he was hurled from his position.” Falling to the ground head first, he sustained a fractured skull and was taken to Mennonite Hospital, where he died a few days later.

Funeral services were held on Jan. 20 at Holy Trinity. The Rev. C. H. Medcalf led the requiem mass and delivered the funeral sermon. Medcalf made special note of Burns profession. “To labor is to pray,” he said.

“And in this manner,” added The Bulletin, “Larry Burns had lived a prayerful life.”

May 7, 1928 remains the darkest day in the Bloomington Fire Department’s long and storied history. On that night, a 40 foot wall of the burning, multistory J.E. Will & Co. furniture store collapsed, burying more than a half-dozen firemen in a shower of bricks, timbers and other debris. Two were killed on site, and five more injured, including the father of one of the dead firefighters who himself never recovered and died three weeks later.

Despite the wall collapse and missing comrades, firefighters continued to battle the blaze, successfully containing it to the Will & Co. building, which was located on the 500 block of North Main Street, the longtime “furniture row” of the Twin Cities. One fireman, Charles “Gunboat” Smith, was pulled alive from the debris two hours after the wall gave way. Yet as rescue efforts continued through the night and into the next morning, and as volunteers from the Chicago and Alton Railroad Shops and elsewhere pitched in to speed up recovery efforts, hope of finding the two missing firefighters alive slowly gave way to despair.

Walfried Moline’s lifeless body was found the following afternoon astride a fire hose. “He had evidently died with the nozzle in his hands,” noted The Pantagraph. The 31-year-old had been with the department for 3½ years.

It was almost two full days after the fire that Louis Payton’s remains were freed from the ruins. The 29-year-old Payton was a volunteer, though he was posthumously made an honorary firefighter by the city. His father, Frank Payton, hospitalized with a leg broken at the hip, among other injuries, died nearly three weeks later, on May 29.

Thankfully, the Bloomington Fire Department has not lost another firefighter in the line of duty since the J.E. Will & Co. fire 91 years ago.

Bloomington firefighter Rich Batka, whose research greatly added to the number of firefighters honored with flags on Memorial Day weekend, also wrote the recently published, profusely illustrated coffee table book, "Bloomington Fire Department: Highlights of the Department's History from 1855 to 2018."

With the July 4th holiday this week, Miller Park will be packed with picnickers and thousands of folks hoping for clear skies and a rousing fireworks show. It's a fitting day as well to visit the Bloomington firefighters' memorial on the park's north end. It features the bell from the first fire station, and a life-size bronze statue of a present-day firefighter, saddled with heavy gear. This detailed, evocative work by Bloomington artist Andrew Jumonville was unveiled last October during Fire Prevention Week.

"His bravery was equal to that of the soldier who fell in battle, and he is as deserving of our respect and gratitude," eulogized Rev. Medcalf back in 1922 on the life and career of Bloomington firefighter Larry Burns. "We should appreciate to a greater extent the invaluable services rendered us by our public servants, the firemen and the police."