

## **“Do you Remember—“ and “Home-Coming” Interviews**

August 18, 1913 State Journal

“Lansing’s first fire department was a bucket brigade,” said Gotlieb Berner whose reading of The State Journal’s recent account of the fire department inspired a reminiscent mood. “During the early fifties the only bell in the Middle Town,” as the present city was then called, was on the Presbyterian church on North Washington ave. This served as a fire alarm for the village.

“I remember an early fire, which broke out across the road from what was then known as the state house block” continued Mr. Berner. “It started in George Grove’s hardware store. I heard the fire bell and ran from my home in the fourth ward, along with other residents, all of whom carried pails. A bucket brigade was formed and after a short fight the fire was extinguished.

### Lynching Threatened

“A little later there was a fire, which started in a marble shop conducted by Charles Butler, where the Hotel Downey now stands. After the fire was put out by the bucket brigade an investigation was made and people said ‘we’ve got fire bugs in Lansing.’

“Shortly after this a villager living at Teetertown, west of this city, caught a man running from a barn which had just been set afire. It developed that he was the same man who started the Lansing fires. The man was brought to Lansing and a crowd rapidly gathered. When they were in front of the state house somebody cried: ‘Hang him!’ A large flag pole stood nearby and he was taken to this and a rope tied around his neck, and the crowd started to pull him up.

“Dr. Shank who had heard the noise from his office an Allegan st, ran across to the square and seeing the situation pushed through the crowd. He jumped onto the rope, and pulled the man down. Turning to the crowd he shouted: “Hold on men; do you know what you are doing? Give him to me, I’ll take care of him.’ The doctor was one of the prominent citizens of the town and the crowd obeyed him. They took the fellow off the rope and carried him to the doctor’s office where I saw him laying on the lounge. The man was prosecuted and sent to Jackson for a term of years. It developed that he was a dad man and wanted in several parts of the state.

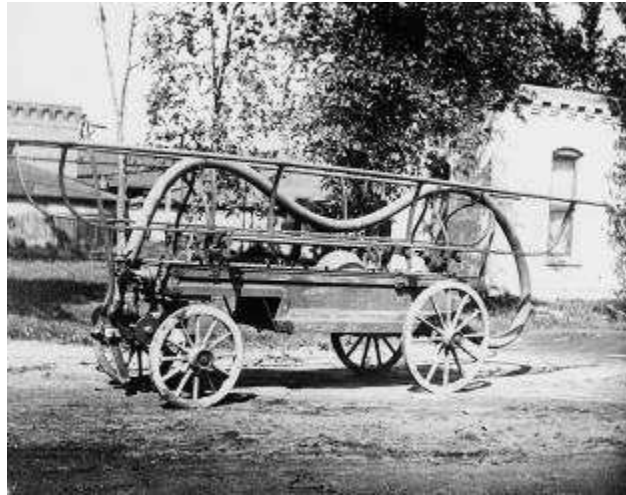
### **Barn First Engine House**

“Along about 1854 people began talking about getting a fire engine and they finally bought the one which is now on exhibition at No. 1 station. The hand engine was first placed in Lerue’s livery barn, until an engine house was provided for it. The livery barn was on East Washtenaw st. and across the street from the

old stage barn. An engine company was organized with Mr. Larue as chief. When a fire station was provided, Mr. Wescott was made chief and served for a number of years.

“In the meantime North Lansing was without fire protection of its own until after the burning of the Hart flour mill which also took Parmalee’s woolen mill in 1876. No. 1 engine company came down to this fire, but the men neglected to put a basket over the suction and a stick of wood was drawn into the hose putting the engine out of commission. Nobody thought to dislodge the wood or investigate the trouble, but left the engine and devoted themselves to carrying wool out of the Parmalee mill across the river.

North Lansing then brought a fire engine and organized an engine company. I was a charter member of the company and at the first election was made second assistant foreman and in less that two months was made first assistant to succeed Mr. Cline who was advanced to foreman. At the next election I was elected foreman and remained in that position for several years.



### **Fighting was Infrequent**

“I do not recall a fight that ever occurred between the ‘Dutch’ as they called us at the north end and the Middle Town company at a fire or on parade,” said Mr. Berner in refutation of a recent interview. “On the other hand I’ve always noticed that when they had a big fire in the Middle Town, Chief Wescott was always glad to see Gotlieb Brener and his ‘Dutch’ firemen.

“I remember a fire which occurred behind where the present Bijou stands. We went to the fire and had the first stream on the fire before No. 1 which had only to come from Allegan st. arrived and then No. 1’s engine was out of order.

“The nearest we ever come to having a real fight between the two companies was at a fire which broke out in the basement of the Cedar st. school one Sunday. I had just come home from church and was at dinner when the bell rang. We ran to the engine house got out the engine and dragged it to the fire.

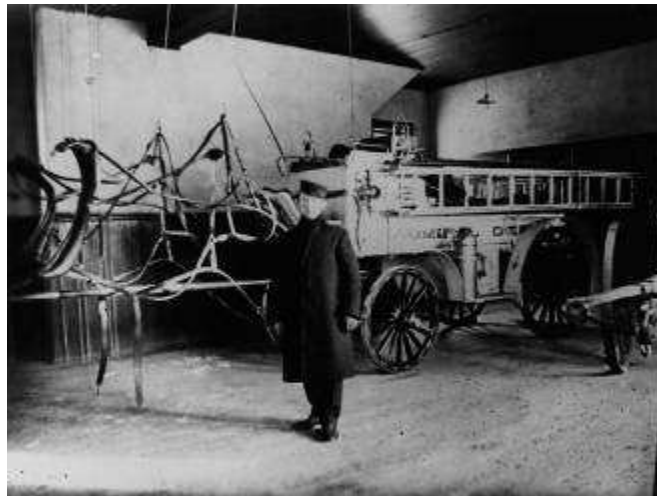
“The only water available was from Bryce’s creek where we had dug a dam to hold the water and had the fire well under control when No. 1 arrived. Chief Wescott ordered No. 2 to take off their pipe line and attach to the box of No. 1.

“I stationed Cole, an assistant foreman beside No. 1 with a trumpet to let us know when they were ready. The signal was given and we went to work. Before long No. 1 engine was rocking and jumping the men from the men from the ground at every stroke, while the water, which overflowed from the pumps, drenched the men, who had to leave the engine.

“No. 1 boys were mad, but we walked up and laughed at them. There was no fight. I told Wescott never to order No. 2 to play in No. 1 engine if it was not necessary for we would wash them every time. We said that if there was a fire where it was necessary to put the two engines together we would give them only as much water as they could discharge. We parted friends.

### **Lansing Buys Steamers**

“Lansing at large felt the need of steamers and to were brought here for trial. They were Silsbee engines and we tried them out on the ice below Michigan ave. bridge. Jim Mitien, and alderman from the first ward, came to me on the ice and asked: ‘Gotlieb, which would you have?’ I said, “If you buy any buy both, for if you buy a steamer for Middle town, you can’t expect us to drag an engine through the mud following a horse-drawn engine to a fire.



“The next morning I got word to get my team and hitch onto Capt. Jones engine and take it to the North Lansing Station. After a little trial and exhibition at the north end, the steamer was placed in the engine house. Until the purchase of a team by the city, I always hitched my own team onto the engine whenever a fire broke out.

### **Strategy Wins Contest**

“It was proposed that the engineers had to practice, so we came up every Saturday afternoon for exhibitions on the ice at Kalamazoo st. No. 2 had a man named Rogers for engineman and he knew his business well: No. 1’s engine was operated by a Mr. Bemer, who was a tinsmith. It was frequently observed that No. 2 engine frequently threw water higher than No. 1 so John Robson ordered that at the next test both engines should have just 60 pounds of steam and than an accurate test of the two machines could be made.

“Next Saturday when we started to pump water I held the nozzle for we had no hose men. The pressure was so great that the hose squired and dragged me about the ice so that I dropped it. A crowd of school boys standing nearby took hold of it and had great fun. It was observed that the No. 2 engine was throwing water from 50 to 60 feet higher than No.1.

“I went to No. 2 engine and saw the steam gauge registered just 60 pounds pressure. I said to Rogers: ‘You can’t fool me any longer, you’ve got more that 60 pounds.’ He said: ‘We’ve got nearer to 120.’ I said: ‘She’ll blow up’ but Rogers assured me that he knew the Capt. Jones. Robson came up and said he was satisfied with the tests, that we need not come up any more.

### **Still Has Old Trophy**

“A trumpet, which I have was won by No. 2 company in a tournament between Ann Arbor and Ionia and the two Lansing companies. Dr. Shank was chief at that time. I suggested that the tests be made in North Lansing at Franklin ave and Cedar st. where was a large self-filling reservoir, and an intersection of streets which permitted water to be thrown in any direction, according to the wind.

“Each company was given 15 minutes in which to lay their pipe line, set their engine and play a stream of water. Ionia and the visiting companies were first. When No. 2’s time came their engine was set and as soon as the water turned on a hose burst. Another was substituted and the pressure blew the nozzle off. Meanwhile Ionia company was shouting encouragement and we had seven minutes remaining of our time. A third time we made ready and threw a stream 25 feet farther than any competition.

“The first prize a \$50 trumpet was awarded to No. 2 company. When the company disbanded I was presented with the trumpet, which I still have. At my death I have arranged that the trophy shall be given to the Lansing fire department as a relic.