Firefighting in Minnesota: A Salute to the Fallen

[Shannon Ryder] In 1993, I was in a serious car accident and the City of Vadnais Heights Firefighters saved me from the wreck. I was pronounced dead on scene and, obviously, I didn’t die…So 11 years ago I started on the Vadnais Heights Fire Department, serving with the very guys that pulled me from my wreck.

Firefighters: Heroes who rush in to save lives and property during our worst moments.

[Shannon Ryder] I have left Christmas dinner, thanksgiving dinner, you know, I’ve left it all, and why? Because I serve the community. Because it’s in my blood and it’s what I do. It’s who I am.

Honor, bravery, camaraderie, and tradition all comprise the rich legacy of firefighting in Minnesota.

At the end of September, the Minnesota Fire Service Foundation is dedicating a memorial to Minnesota’s fallen firefighters on the State Capitol grounds, just a short walk from the Minnesota History Center.

[George Esbensen] It is all about the history.

From devastating forest fires like those that destroyed Hinckley in 1894 and Cloquet in 1918, to urban fires like this one at the Jewell Hotel in St. Paul...Firefighters have been there.

[George Esbensen] What an amazing journey the fire service has embarked on.

Today they use modern equipment and high tech chemicals, but not so long ago, firefighters had to make do with far more primitive equipment. Firefighting has changed dramatically since the days of carrying water in buckets and climbing wooden ladders, wearing leather gear and driving a horse-drawn apparatus.

[George Esbensen] They didn’t have self contained breathing apparatus—that’s why a lot of them had the long beards, because they’d wet their beard and put it over their face and go in.

Sometimes, despite all the best efforts, lives are lost and families are torn apart.

[Shannon Ryder] Things are affected when heroes go down doing what they do...they all deserve to be honored.

George Esbensen, Shannon Ryder, and many others have worked on this memorial, remembering the Minnesota firefighters who have died in the line of duty. Over time, the project has become very personal to everyone involved.
[George Esbensen] it started out building a memorial...the collateral benefit has been all these great stories that have come to fruition that we never had heard before.

[Shannon Ryder] no matter what was asked of me, it was a done deal—I was hooked into the memorial project because these names became people and these people became family members and they had family members.

[George Esbensen] When you talk about any family, and this is just a giant extended family, it’s very important to know where you’ve come from—what your history is, and in Minnesota, that history starts in 1881 when we had the first recorded line of duty death.

Records of all of Minnesota’s line of duty deaths are in the care of the State historical society. The Minnesota Historical Society connects the people of Minnesota to their history.

[Sondra Reierson] We collect and preserve things. Some of that is right here. We have photographs of fires and firefighters from around the state, a film collection from the St. Paul Fire Department, books about firefighting and fire departments, and then manuscript collections, like this one from the Waterous Company. They manufactured fire engines in St. Paul. And then of course artifacts that document just how much the fire service has changed in its equipment and apparatus.

[Shannon Ryder] On September 30th 2012, there’s going to be a mark left in everybody’s lives who attend.

[George Esbensen] I think that’s really the fire service’s mantra is: whatever it takes, just make it happen. Our customers aren’t really concerned about how we do it; they just want it to get done and hopefully bring order from chaos.

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Film and Video Courtesy of:
Minnesota Historical Society
Saint Paul Fire Department
Minneapolis Firefighters Hall and Museum
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