

The Poole Fire Cave

by Rod Stover, Dec., 2003

As a youngster growing up in Poole, the fire cave was just one of many play grounds within easy range of a tricycle, a home-made cart, or just walking and skipping without wheels. In fact, it was within a short stone's throw of the huge mulberry tree at the back of Gram Stover's lot, on the sandy road just beyond Minnie Perry's chicken coops and across the road from the Parker house foundation. The 'sandy road' was actually 'A Street,' but we didn't know it had a name. 'A Street' continued east, past the apple trees, past the Whitcomb place, intersected with North Avenue (we didn't know it had a name, either), past Gruhn's and the future softball diamond to Hanna Avenue, then on past Bert Standage's house, where it became a private lane to the Eggleston's.

The cave was just off the path that Dad (Glenn Stover) took daily to and from the store. The path varied south from the cave depending upon the season and a crop of corn; sometimes south to the sidewalk west of the bank, sometimes straight across the field to just east of the bank.

The cave was built into a sandy bank, but the mound of the cave provided a steeper play hill than any natural hill around... for climbing, tumbling, or rolling down. The front portal was concrete, with two massive wooden doors arched at the top and, at one time, painted red. Although the doors could be barred, they were never locked. The portal wings provided imaginary fort walls for hiding, shooting and snowballing sometimes imaginary foes. The front of the cave acted as a snow fence creating a deep drift just perfect for leaping from the top of the concrete just above the doors. The vent pipe is probably still clogged with clods.

The interior of the cave was probably 8' x 12' or more and housed two hand-drawn engines. We'd climb on the wheels, clang the bells, crank the cranks, sit astride the tanks or in the hose baskets.

When the cart was in motion, the bell was driven by two cogs on the wheel and a spring-loaded clanger; two clangs per revolution of the wheel.

There was a white powdery substance stored in the back corner of the cave; I assume this was soda used to generate pressure in the tanks. I don't recall ever being burned by the stuff; apparently it wasn't corrosive. I don't recall specifically any acid bottles in storage, but I was aware of how the tanks worked. A hinged and threaded hatch near the rear of the tank could be opened for dumping the soda and a bottle of acid could be placed in a metal basket or cannister that hung from the hatch. The acid bottle was broken with a special hinged hammer inside the tank that was activated from the outside with a lever. The hammer struck a plunger in the bottom of the basket, which also served as a container for the broken glass. There was a crank at the rear for keeping the chemical reaction churned.

Somehow we never got seriously hurt in spite of the hazards of our playgrounds. We'd trip across the South Loup bridge girders, about eight feet above the roadway and at least fifteen feet above the river bed. We'd scrounge

around in abandoned foundations that became other people's dumps, and explore abandoned buildings, including the *upper stories* of the Whitcomb elevator. I remember tossing a lit firecracker from the top of the cave towards a playmate. It landed in the brim of his new straw hat and blew a hole in it. His ears may have rung for a while and the hat was trashed.

The fire cave still served a necessary purpose when summer storms threatened to become tornadoes. On several occasions in the 1940's and 50's the Stover family and Grandma May would head for cover in the musty cave.

Sometime in the 1950's it was discovered that the brass nozzle from one of the engines was threaded the same as an ordinary garden hose, and made a nifty water stream sprayer. The nozzle was 'borrowed' for yard & garden use by the Stovers.



The fire cave and carts had been abandoned forever, it seemed. Little did we know that they were in their prime only 25 years before, during the heydays of Poole.



A Poole engine in a Kearney parade in 1976...
purchased about 1920 ?



We're fortunate to have the original minutes of the meetings of the Board of Trustees of the Village of Poole from its inception through December of 1914.

Poole was incorporated on the 28th of April, 1910.

Four years later, in 1914, the first mention of fire protection is recorded:

At a July 6 meeting, there was a general discussion of the water plant proposition, and it was "moved and carried that we submit to the people of the Village of Poole the proposition of voting \$2500 for fire protection."

There's no record of approval of that proposition, but \$2500 was a significant expenditure in those days. Part of the costs of running the village was defrayed by a levy that raised \$300 per year in 1910 through 1914:

Village expenses to be defrayed by a mill levy were: Salaries - \$35, general fund - \$165, streets and alleys - \$100. The mill levy decided July 23rd was 13½ mills upon each dollar of assessed valuation...

Motorized fire fighting equipment was available by 1900; perhaps the \$2500 proposition was intended for something more ambitious than a pair of hand-drawn chemical wagons.

The levy necessary to raise \$300 translates to a total assessed valuation of about \$22,250; the proposition amount was more than one tenth of the assessed valuation of the village ! Wages in those days were 25¢ per hour; twice that for a man and a team.

The total budget is unknown, but the village had other sources of income in the way of taxes, licenses and fines. Peddlers were taxed \$2 per day, a circus paid \$10 per day. It cost \$1 a year to keep a dog and \$5 per year for a dreyman and team. Pool tables were taxed at \$10 per year, but only \$5 per year for additional tables. All able bodied men between 21 and 50 were required to contribute 2 days labor per year; 1 day with a team.

The Poole "engines" were eventually purchased about 1920. They were manufactured by Obenchain- Boyer of Logansport, Indiana. A similar chemical wagon has been restored by the [Chili fire department](#) of Morgan County, NY, formed in 1919...



...when five men decided to purchase an Obenchain-Boyer Chemical Engine to provide fire protection for North Chili. The cost of the equipment was \$500.00, which was to be equally shared...

And, from the [Rheems, PA Fire Department](#) "About Us:"

After a devastating fire in 1919, the citizens of the village of Rheems and surrounding areas decided that a fire company needed to be closer than those in Elizabethtown and Mount Joy. In February 1920, the Rheems Fire and Improvement Association was organized. It consisted of volunteers from the village, and the first President was B. H. Kreider. The first piece of apparatus was a No. 80 Sixty Gallon Obenchain-Boyer Hand Drawn Chemical Engine that was purchased for \$500 from the Buffalo Chemical Fire Extinguisher Company on 15 March 1920.

The workings of the chemical wagon is described in the [New Jersey Fire Engine Museum project](#), "Museum Collection:"

This is a classic example of the bi-carbonate of soda chemical rig. This design provided a small amount of fire fighting power in the form of a chemical mixture instead of water. The firemen created the mixture at the fire scene by dumping a container of sulphuric acid into the tank of Bi-carbonate soda. The resulting chemical reaction pressurized the tank and created a flow of liquid which was directed at the fire from a hose attached to the tank. It worked well when the fire was small and

within reach !

A portion of the instructions are still legible under the tool box lid:



There's little record of actual use of the Poole engines, but one legend is told more than once.

From the 12 June, 1985 issue of the Ravenna News, an article entitled "Poole Was A Thriving Community In Early Days" by Lois and Birney Hughes:

"A well known fire cave in Poole contained two, 2 wheeled fire carts, that contained chemicals to fight fire. When the school house caught fire in the excitement of getting there, one upset. One of these is now kept in the fire department building at Ravenna."

From Winona Snell's "Poole, The Beginning, The End, and Beyond"

1926: "1 November - The three room frame schoolhouse at Poole burned to the ground. One of the hand-drawn pump carts from the fire cave tipped over going around the corner on the way to the fire. The fire spread swiftly and totally consumed the building. It started in one of the chimneys after Mr. McClary had started fires in the three stoves and gone home for breakfast. Students arriving early at the school discovered the fire and spread the alarm. "

The original school was a good half-mile west of Poole; quite a haul for a hand-

drawn cart. I wonder how effective it might have been had it reached it's destination. Other fires are mentioned in Winona's history with no mention of the fire engines.

From a 21 Oct., 1970 Omaha World Herald article entitled "Poole Still in Danger of Being a Midlands Ghost Town":

"Poole still has a few possessions of other years. Among them: two hand-pulled fire engines of long ago, lodged in a cement-lined cave. A sign on one of them reads: "Last used in 1925."

I recall no such sign; perhaps someone added it later. Besides, probably it should have read "Last used in 1926."



The village of Poole became unincorporated in 1972. Before this time the fire engines were discovered by the outside world and began a shiny, clean and active life in parades and on display. As previously stated by Birney & Lois Hughes, one of the carts is in the care of the Ravenna Fire Department.

The other:

more From Winona Snell's "Poole, The Beginning, The End, and Beyond"

Bob Harvey and his twin brother (.. Ron, sons of Clinton Harvey and Hazel Perkins) visited their Grandparents, Walt and Lizzie Harvey.... in Poole... and were quite taken by the Fire Cave at Poole where the two hand-pulled fire carts were stored. One cart had a bent wheel from tipping over going around the corner to the fire at the Poole School November 1, 1926.

These carts made enough of an impression on Bob that when he was attending college at Kearney, he asked permission to use the damaged fire cart. He took the fire cart to Kearney, where he had the bent wheel repaired. His fraternity was trying to earn money to rebuild a 4-H camp that had been destroyed by fire when there was a forest fire at Halsey, NE.

As a money-raiser, he and his fraternity brothers took the fire cart to Halsey, and pulled it by hand to Kearney, picking up donations at the Fire Stations along the way.

To preserve the rims, used canvas fire hoses were wrapped around them. They wore out a lot of canvas hoses before reaching Kearney. The project was a success. TV stations picked it up, thus increasing donations at all the firehouses along the way. The fire cart was then left at the Kearney Fire Department where it was on display for many years. It was given to the Trails and Rails Museum in Kearney...."

...where it resides today.

In June of 2002, former students of the Poole school enjoyed

a reunion. We toured Majors Cemetery and Poole, and although we rummaged through the old bank building, we had to observe the school and the fire cave from afar, as they are both now on private property. The sandy road ('A' Street) now dead-ends in overgrowth, and the path to the store is a farm yard with the fire cave in use for storage. Although unincorporated, people still find Poole a pleasant place to live.



Reunion of Poole School alumnus, 14 June, 2002. Left to right: Kristi (Bohn) Lemburg, Tim Bohn, Peg (Paitz) Graham, Pat (Rockford) Standage, Pat (Whitcomb) Jones, Roger Standage, Rod Stover, Eldine (Bock).

Prior to touring Poole, the group met at the Trails and Rails Museum to inspect the Poole fire engine, an event reported in the June 17 issue of the "Kearney Hub:"

Antique fire nozzle finds way home - by Joe Straatmann

KEARNEY - Rod Stover has returned something his family borrowed

from a next door neighbor 45 years ago - the nozzle of a historical fire hose. ...Friday morning, Stover put the nozzle back in place at a ceremony at the Trails and Rails Museum in Kearney. Several Poole residents attended...

Stover ... had trouble tracking down the cart. The hose cart had been donated to Trails and Rails Museum in 1988.... He said he had no problem with giving the nozzle back. "It belongs there."

