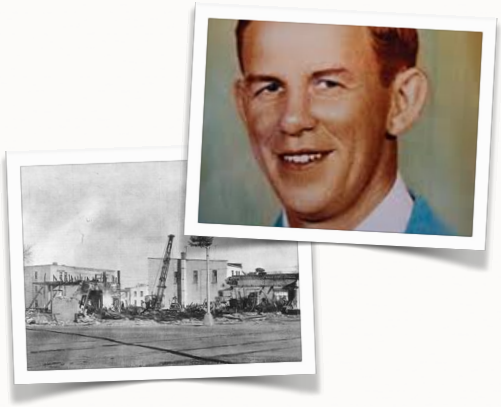




On September 30, 1959, a fire happened at the Schesso-Hughes Auto Dealership in downtown Shakopee. Max Wermerskirchen became the first and only firefighter who died in the line of duty. Picture from the Huber Collection, Shakopee Heritage Society.



Maximus Guido Wermerskirchen was born in New Prague, Minnesota on January 2, 1931, son of Peter Paul Wermerskirchen and Clara Marie Beckius Wermerskirchen.

His family moved to Shakopee after a few years. After grade eight, Wermerskirchen decided he was done with school. He quit and took a job on the Grommesch farm at 14 years old. While working on the farm, Max fell in love with the farmer's daughter, Beatrice, known as Bea.

In the 1950s, Max took a construction job in Alaska for several years. He saved enough money to buy a home. He proposed to Bea, and when she accepted, he moved back to Shakopee. They had three children, Sandra, Steven, and Larry.

He had been employed at Rahr Malting Plant in Shakopee in a maintenance job for the last three years of his life. Max volunteered for the fire department in December 1958.

Why did he volunteer? It just seemed to be the right thing to do. It was a way to help others.

Max was always helping others. When his parents called, he would be over in a flash. They lived nearby, and he helped install storm screens, mow the lawn, or take care of anything that was needed.

Max's younger sister, Clareen Ries, remembered that "He knew everybody in town, knew everyone's names. He would do anything for anybody." The whole town liked him.

Max left his home and his family very early in the morning of September 30, 1959, to fight a fire at Schesso-Hughes Auto Dealership in downtown Shakopee. He never returned.

It was a difficult fire to put out. Explosions from gasoline tanks, grease, and oil made it more difficult. Firefighters from Shakopee, Carver, Chaska, and Jordan fought the blaze for over five hours.

Max, who had joined the fire department nine months before, offered to take the place of an older firefighter and climbed to the roof of the building. He had to help ventilate the garage and douse the flames from above. "But, just before 2 a.m., the roof collapsed, sending Wermerskirchen below into the smoke. He hit the roof of a large, concrete vault within the building—likely used as an office or for records storage—but nobody knew about it, and Wermerskirchen's fellow firefighters couldn't find him in time to save him."

According to the *Shakopee Valley News*, Max died quickly without the breathing equipment which now is required. In 1959, there were only three or four packs for the whole department.

In the *Jordan Independent*, "Eighteen cars inside the structure including five new models, along with tools and equipment, were destroyed. Cause of the blaze which started about 1:30 a.m. is not known. Firemen said it apparently started near the center of the garage."

Heroic rescue attempts were made by Fire Chief Art DuBois and other firefighters, who entered the burning building again in vain search for the victim. The body was brought out about 4:30 a.m.

The garage, which covered a half-block on Lewis Street, was a complete loss. The damage was estimated at $200,000. In today's time, this would be nearly $1.7 million!

Maximus Guido “Max” Wermerskirchen was only 28 years old, and left behind his wife, Bea, and three preschool children. He was the only firefighter to die in the line of duty in Shakopee.

Every year since, the Shakopee Fire Department, Wermerskirchen family, and past members of the fire department meet at the Catholic Cemetery in Shakopee, where they have a graveside service. Then they head to Fire Station 1 where they grill steaks and have a buffet-style dinner. It is a time to connect the younger guys to history and pass on the values and traditions that have shaped the department.

Max Wermerskirchen was added to the Minnesota Fire Service Memorial at the Capitol in 2012. It commemorates the firefighters who have died in the line of duty.

Bibliography

Jordan Independent, 1959.

Shakopee Valley News, 1959.







Max Wermerskirchen is buried the Shakopee Catholic Cemetery.

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Maximus Guido “Max” Wemerskirchen 1931-1959

Compiled and written by David R. Schleper, Shakopee Heritage Society © 2020