



**Does anyone recognize any of these firemen from 1948? The person in white may be Chief Murton Vandermolen.** - Submitted by Mike Wagenmaker (Call Brian Zwart at 231.788.2989)

## Myth Busters: Fruitport History Edition

By Brian Zwart

For anyone that has done any amount of traveling, they know that every small town has its fair share of secrets, legends and myths. Well, Fruitport is no different. As I've been studying local history, I've come across several examples of this in our little town. The Fruitport Historical Society has fielded many of these questions, but I thought it would be worthwhile to dispense with some of the most notorious ones for all to hear.

One of the most popular stories that I've heard involves the 'Fruitport Gold'. Ron Cooper brought me in on this several years ago and I spent some time researching it for myself. The story involves a stagecoach robbery, a death bed confession, and of course, Fruitport's Pomona House. In August 1874, five men from Muskegon headed north to White Cloud and robbed a stagecoach loaded with payroll for the logging camps. Dressed as Indians, the men got away with \$74,000 worth of gold coins. Today, that amount would be worth over \$1.5 million. One of the men, Sam Norris, worked as a janitor at the Pomona House and hid his share of the loot in the cellar wall of the hotel. A year later the hotel burned. The story seemed to end there; until Ron Cooper received a letter from a woman in Florida in 1986 that included a copy of the original 'deathbed confession' that told the story. The author of the letter was Sarah Norris, Sam's sister who was filled with shame and regret that her brother would have done such a thing. Apparently, the hotel burned before the gold could be removed. This myth, according to my research and that of Ronn Mann Sr., is true. The robbery really happened and part of the gold was more than likely hidden in Pomona Park as indicated by the letter.

However, it is highly unlikely that it is still there. After extensive renovations, the Pomona House reopened about a year after the first fire, which means carpenters and construction workers would have torn down walls and rebuilt most of the remaining structure. After the second fire in 1876, the cellar was left exposed in Pomona Park for decades. More than likely, someone would have found it and never said a thing about it. In the summer of 2012, I was present for an archaeological dig seeking the foundations of the Pomona House. Many people stopped to ask if we were looking for



**This is the Fruitport Township Fire Department when it was located in the village about where the Village Salt Barn is now. It was taken in 1948.** - Submitted by Mike Wagenmaker

gold. No, we weren't; nor did we find any. So, this myth is true. But don't waste your time looking for it, because it's long gone.

The next myth is a fun one. It involves secret tunnels that run under the Village Park Bed and Breakfast. The bed and breakfast was at one time the home of Joseph Ford, manager and operator of the Spring Lake Iron Company. Many older residents recall Furnace Town, well, that was it. Ford built his home in the early 1880s and lived there until his death in 1912. While there is no historical indication that the tunnels actually exist, previous residents claim to have found them and even admit to playing in them as children. I was invited by the current owners to investigate this a few years back, and found it very interesting. While I did not find the entrance to the tunnels myself, there is indication that they are there, or once were. Some stories have been floating around about the purpose of these tunnels. One explanation was that they were used by John Dillinger to rob the Fruitport bank. According to local legend, one tunnel ran east from the current bed and breakfast directly under what is now Fifth Third Bank. Well, John Dillinger was born in 1903 and died in 1934. The bank wasn't

built until 1963; so that one is bunk. The next one claims that bootleggers used another tunnel, this one extended south under the road into the basement of the Pomona House, to steal and transport booze. Again, the dates don't add up. The Pomona House was gone for nearly twenty years before the Ford home was even built. Another version of the story gives a possible use of the tunnels as part of the Underground Railroad. Most northern towns would love to say they contributed to this noble cause, however, it is not likely. Again, the dates simply do not add up. Thanks to the 13th Amendment, slavery was officially ended in 1865. Michigan did play a part in the Underground Railroad, but the furthest stop north was in the Jackson area. Also, the house wasn't built for another fifteen years. While we haven't found any tunnels, they very well may be there. However, their purpose was more than likely something innocent and not nefarious. This myth is plausible.

The last myth that I'll cover is one that may strike a chord with most Fruitport residents. It is one of the most impactful and longest lasting of the local myths; the bent Oak tree. For those who don't