



# The Signevierist

Issue Number 2025-4

The Official Newsletter of the Fire Mark Circle of the Americas

## The Purpose of a Fire Mark

Ever since I joined the Fire Mark Circle a question repeatedly pops up that has drummed up debate from members over the years: What was the purpose of a fire mark? While some have said it clearly was just to identify the property as insured against fire others have argued it was also a way to advertise the company to new customers in hopes of gaining their business. I think it is safe to say that both were main purposes of fire marks. This got me thinking about previous articles about how fire marks were used as advertising pieces. The most obvious one I could come up with was advertising cabinet photos from insurance companies picturing women adorned with tin fire marks on their dresses or marks made into a belt or hat. See issue 2023-4 for an example from the Forest City Insurance Company. I decided to dive a little deeper and see if I could find other specific examples of fire mark images displayed in advertising. Below are some of the best examples I could find along with their respective Bulau number.



Here is an example of B.282 from Adams Insurance Agency, Warren, Ohio. Notice how the image on the calendar is almost the same as the tin fire mark issued by the agency except for the wording “Insured By” above the agency name.



Another example I found was a rare sign from the Lumbermen's Insurance Company of Philadelphia depicting the logo of the company which also closely resembles the company's fire mark (B.442).



I could show many more examples but here is the last and probably one of the best examples that I found of an image of a fire mark being used on an advertising piece.



Pictured above is a tin agency sign advertising the Vermont Mutual Fire Insurance company of Montpelier, Vermont. On the bottom right is clearly the depiction of the convex tinned sheet iron fire mark issued by the company (US-VA-1). Interestingly the font for “Mutual.” is exactly as it is on the mark with the only difference being the date of the company’s origin on the bottom. Maybe there is a variant of the fire mark out there with the date? Keep your eyes peeled or double check your collection. You never know!



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## FIRE MARKS IN SITU

The print below comes from the Library Company of Philadelphia's lithograph collection. The two Philadelphia buildings displaying the Fire Association's fire marks stand on the west side of South 2nd Street, just below Market Street, at numbers 30 and 32. Trotters Alley, seen to the left of Sharpless & Sons, still exists today, and the Sharpless building now houses a Pennsylvania State liquor store. Needless to say, the original fire marks are no longer present on the current structures.



The Library Company's lithograph collection includes more than 3,000 prints, many of which feature fire marks. For the fire Matic enthusiast, the collection also offers an extensive and easily searchable array of Philadelphia membership certificates, images of hand and steam fire engines, and Civil War fire company ambulances.

Explore the collection here:

<https://digital.librarycompany.org/islandora/search/lithograph?type=edismax&cp=islandora%3Aroot>.

*Bob Shea*



## Sharing an old email from Bill Evenden

One of the main goals of the Fire Mark Circle is preserving the rich history of fire marks and fire insurance. One of the best ways to do this is documenting information passed down from members that have been in this organization much longer than I. Members that knew Bill may have remembered him from his thick exterior or his “My way or the highway” mentality. While this was true, he was also a fountain of information especially on collecting fire marks here in the states and abroad long before it became popular. His passion and information about German marks always impressed me so I made it my goal to find rare German marks and reach out to Bill not only to help him procure something he didn’t have but also to learn the history of these rare marks. I would search Germany’s eBay site high and low and when I found something of interest, I would email it to Bill and ask him to share his knowledge. Below is a picture of a mark I couldn’t identify until Bill told me it was in the supplement, so a mark that was discovered after he published his work. Below the picture is a lengthy email I received from Bill in 2019 that has a lot of history in it that I thought would appeal to our organization even though it isn’t about American marks.



Hi Michael,

Thank you for this. I almost lost it, but in the end, it worked out because there were no other bidders. I usually wait until the final half hour to bid, but because I forgot the end time was at 4:47 in the morning while I was happily asleep and did not set the alarm, it was over by the time I looked. This was partly due to too many things going on with maintenance on our house, which kept me distracted, and partly due to old age forgetfulness. Anyway, I immediately wrote to the seller that I wanted to buy it, and he responded that he reentered it as a Buy It Now at the same price he had set for the start of bidding before. So, I lucked out and bought it. It is in transit now from Poland. The seller seems like a friendly guy; very responsive to all my questions. I sent him a list of German marks that were used in Poland before the war when much of today’s Poland was part of Germany, so I am hoping that he will find others for me in the future. One never knows. It is a long shot because the Poles took down all street signs and any other signs in German right after WWII.

We took Lore’s mother with us in 1979 to see the houses and sawmill/engineering company property that belonged to the family in the city of Sorau, where Lore was born, which then was in the Prussian Province of Mark Brandenburg and east of the Oder-Neisse Line, which the Allies agreed to as the new border between Germany and Poland at the end of WWII. When we visited the churchyard cemetery where her grandfather was buried, all the gravestones had been destroyed and were piled up in the corner of the lot. One could just make out parts of German names on the broken pieces.

That is a direct result of the hate the Poles had for the Germans when the war was over. It was a terrible time. Lore's family lost everything, and she was lucky that her mother had the courage to round up all the family members and organized their company's tractor with two trailers hooked up and driven by a Pole who worked for them. When they pulled out of their street Russian tanks were already on the next street, so they just made it.

We spent 5 days driving around Poland looking for fire marks, and the only ones we found were tin ones which had been painted over with house paint or were rusty so the German writing on them was almost unrecognizable. We visited a Polish guy in Opeln, Upper Silesia, who I had exchanged letters with previously, and he had obtained 2 enameled iron ones (124E & 124O in my book) for us from a flea market prior to our coming. He and a friend who spoke German spent a day driving around the countryside with us looking for marks. We only found one, which had been painted over, and they negotiated with the farmer to take it off his house for the price of a bottle of vodka. That was No.124A in my book. My main objective on that day was to drive to the city of Glatz near the Czech border to try to find a Glazer fire mark like Bulau No.1380. But no luck, for reasons stated above: all things written in German were removed. Painted over tin ones, or very rusty ones, were not removed because one could not read the German script on them, but it is easy to understand why the enameled iron ones in all their colorful luster would attract attention. The best marks we got on that trip were Nos. 108A and 108B, which you can see that we restored them. In this case, because the Province of Posen had become part of Poland after WWI, and the Germans were not driven out, like they were after WWII, many of the older people in that area spoke German, so I could communicate with them. I'll interject here: that was the day we ate a bowl of soup and had a cup of tea for lunch in a community type restaurant that cost us the equivalent of 17 cents apiece! I always think about that when I think about finding those two rare marks that day.

The next day we were farther north in Scheidemuehl, and I got a Grenzmark tin mark off a house, which was very rusty, and because the details are not raised much, I could hardly read it, even up close. Years later after one of these in original colors was acquired by a collector friend of ours from a dealer, I used it to restore ours. His original one is shown in my book as No.45A. Shortly before the book was published, the enamel coated iron variant of this came to light and I was able to get it included in the supplement on page 139, as No. 45B. I knew then that after we had been in Schneidemuehl, we drove through a nearby village where we saw several of those tell-tale spots on buildings where these enamel Grenzmark fire marks had hung.

On our final day in Poland, we drove north to Stettin, because I wanted to try to find a Bulau No 1337, which would have been used only within the city. This is where reality hit home. Most of the buildings in the city center had not been renovated and one could clearly see the spots left on the front of them where a fire mark had once hung there. It was a big disappointment, and to this day only two of these marks are known, the one in Footprints, which is stored in the basement of the NY City Fire Museum and a slightly damaged one that showed up on German eBay years ago, and one of the German Club members managed to contact the seller as soon as he saw it and offered him enough money to get him to agree to withdraw it from the auction and he bought it, but I don't know how much he paid. It was during the years when fire mark collecting in Germany hit its peak and many Germans went almost crazy paying ridiculous prices. Anyway, this Stettin mark has been at the top of my wish list for 50 years, but I don't ever expect to get one. The Home got their mark by writing to the company before WWII and the company sent it to them free, just like most of the marks they had from all over the world.

The day we left Stettin, we drove across the border into East Germany. This was in the north, which was the Province of Pomerania (Pommern in German), and in the first village we came to we were rewarded with the discovery of No.107D, which is a much darker blue than the other variants in the

book. The owner was a lonely widower who had a daughter living in West Germany, so he was happy to have visitors. He invited us in for a cup of tea, and during the discussion he revealed that besides the mark on his front gate, he had a second one in his shop, and he ended up giving us both of them.

When we drove to Poland for 5 days in 1979, there were no other known fire mark collectors in Germany, and we had already been collecting for 10 years, so the field was more or less wide open for us, and we took advantage of this in my spare time. However, after we found out about a few other collectors in 1983, we formed the club in 1984 just before I published my first paperback booklet on German fire marks. The widespread marketing of that book in the insurance industry in Germany did a lot to publicize the hobby, and within a few years we had 150 members. When word got out that these small signs were in demand, it caused the dealers to get involved. Prior to this, the closest thing on the market, which enjoyed a wide amount of interest, were the beer, cola, and other advertising signs that people had been collecting for years. The result of all this was that prices started to go through the roof, especially for ones that appeared to be rare. Dealers with contacts in East Germany and Poland started showing up with some of these German fire marks from those areas, and later eBay became a good source of fire marks. So, when I had the opportunity to acquire a Danziger Feuersozietat No. 27B and a Glatzer No.62A that I could not find myself in Poland, I had to pay a dealer a lot of money for them. Now that market has also dried up.

Well, I have rambled on far more than I intended at the outset. Thanks again. We do hope to get to Washington in October.

Best wishes,  
Bill

**--If any members have interesting emails that they have had with members that have long since passed please forward them to the editor so that I may share them with the membership. --**

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**ATTENTION MEMBERS!! PLEASE VISIT OUR NEW AND UPDATED  
WEBPAGE! NOT ONLY IS IT MUCH MORE USER FRIENDLY BUT THE  
LAYOUT IS BEAUTIFUL!! YOU CAN SEE PREVIOUS AUCTION  
RESULTS AND READ PREVIOUS NEWSLETTERS!! CHECK IT OUT!!**

<https://firemarkcircle.org>

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## PRESIDENTS MESSAGE

Well, another year has almost come and gone. Hopefully life finds you in good health. As some of you know I recently had triple bypass surgery and am doing very well.

The FMCA just concluded our 52nd annual convention in Memphis, TN. in October. Eleven members attended, a far cry from the hundred or so from back in the 1980s. It has been decided by the board that this will probably be our last convention as we have known them. This convention came close to breaking even with cost and revenues being almost equal, with a little changing of the convention itinerary. A huge thank you to member, board member and convention host Tom Hewitt for all his hard work in arranging our conventions over the last several years. However, Tom has decided his time has come to an end. If any member wants to take his place, please contact me.

The board recently decided to try a virtual convention to be done by computer/phone with the silent and live auctions and meetings done remotely. We are planning to have this in October around the same time as we would have had our regular convention. Tom Hardy and Gabe Laubacher are working hard to get approximately 50-75 auction items photographed, cataloged and ready for the live auction and 25 or so for the silent. We also discussed having a Spring virtual auction to do as a "test" auction with around 25 lots probably around the beginning of March. These will be available to all our members the same as the auctions in the past. More to come!

I want to also congratulate Secretary Bill Pope for his hard work along with our new Webmaster in doing a complete overhaul on our FMCA Website. If you haven't been there, it has put us in the modern age. The site is way easier to navigate and the information is easier to find and access. There is still more to come as we get the auction items and bids added, convention info and photos and lists of up-coming auctions and virtual conventions added.

I am asking all members to try to find two new members in the up-coming months. We are hovering in the mid 70 membership range, as some of you may remember at one time, we had approximately 300 members. Congratulations to Mike Brankowitz for finding a couple of new marks this year that have not been seen before, and these were added to the addendums. Also, as our Editor for the newsletter for a fine job getting out the four issues. Please send him articles for the newsletter of your collection, finds, whether marks or fire/insurance memorabilia.

Thanks,  
Dave Oldham  
President

