

**FRIENDS OF HARBOUR TOWN, INC.**

**1307 STATE STREET,**

**VERMILION OHIO 44089**



Date 15 June 2020

**To:** President of Vermilion City Council  
**From:** The Friends of Harbour Town, Inc  
**Subject:** Placement of Thin Blue Line Banners on Public Property

Sir,

The Friends of Harbour Town, Inc. respectfully requests an official resolution from the Vermilion City Council to allow the placement of one, or two, "Thin Blue Line" Banners upon public property in honor of and to show respect for Vermilion Police Officer Francis Smolka.

On April 16, 2001, the Vermilion River Bridge was dedicated to the memory of Vermilion Police Officer Francis Smolka, who died Oct. 29, 1978. It is our desire to have a "Thin Blue Line" banner placed at the east entrance of the westbound lane of the bridge and to also place a second flag directly in front of the Vermilion Police Station. I have spoken with Chief Hartung on this request and he has indicated favorable support for it.

Thank You in advance for your immediate consideration upon this formal request. Respectfully submitted;

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K M Baughman".

*Kenneth M. Baughman*, President  
Friends of Harbour Town, Inc.

## History of the Vermilion 6 PM Siren

By Kenneth M. Baughman

In 2006 I had a lengthy conversation with, then Fire Chief, Eugene Kropf. He worked as an electrical contractor in Vermilion, then 29 years for Motorola Communications. He joined the Vermilion Fire Dept. in 1962, becoming Chief in 1976 and retired as Chief in 2006. He had also worked as a part-time electrical and building inspector. "The chief" also had the responsibility of maintaining the electronics which regulated the 6 PM siren. The reality is the system was in fact an electronically modified Radio Shack style alarm clock radio typically used in the late 1960s and early 1970s, made of plastic with a fake wooden veneer. It sat on a homemade wooden shelf in the basement of City Hall, next to the air conditioner unit.

On one particular morning, while working in the basement of City Hall, Chief Kropf arrived to fix the device because it had failed, and residents noticed it was nonoperational. After fixing the device we talked at length. He explained how the radio was modified to activate the siren on top of the building. The siren, a relic from the early 1960s was placed upon what was then the Erie County Bank building, a site that was officially designated as a federal Civil Defense Shelter. The Chief explained how the old coal bunkers under the sidewalk were converted to store Civil Defense supplies. We then examined some of the five-gallon metal canisters still stored there. They still contained lozenge sized iodine candy. While still in an edible condition neither of us had any desire to see how they tasted.

In the late and waning days of the 1960s and early 1970s, the Civil Defense Program which brought the siren to Vermilion in the early 1960s was quickly fading away. The siren was repurposed to be used as a warning for tornados like the Lorain Tornado of 1924 that went from Sandusky to Lorain, killing over eighty-five people. In an era of limited technology, the siren was also used to call out the Vermilion volunteer fire department.

Less officially, it was also repurposed by the mothers of adventurous children as a warning signal that it was dinner time in Vermilion Ohio, and you had best get home by 6:30 P.M.. Over the years several urban legends have grown around the use and placement of the siren. Some will suggest that Vermilion was what was known as a "sundown town" and that it was the origin of the siren's placement. This is simply not the case as the siren was placed new when sundown towns were quickly disappearing from the area. The last factually verifiable "sundown town" in the area was a small private beach community several miles west of Vermilion, (and well out of siren range) which removed signage from their properties in the very early 1980s. The Civil Defense Shelter caves under the sidewalks outside Vermilion City Hall are also gone now as well. They were filled in just over a decade ago as part of a Liberty Avenue repaving project.

### SOURCES:

1. Oral history by Gene Kropf, Vermilion Fire Chief of Vermilion Ohio in 2006; as given to Kenneth Baughman, Friends of Harbour Town, Inc..
2. History of the National Fallout Shelter Survey Records

The first thing I would like to say is I love Vermilion. I grew up here, have family here, and I spend quite a bit of time in town. It truly is one of my favorite places. Moving onto the siren testing issue I don't think we should get deep into the history, but touch on it as it relates to the matter at hand. We all understand that the past is gone, and while the words weren't included in the article - I believe Vermilion has made great strides in the last 30 years. It continues to get better and I think changing the time of the siren helps it get continue in that direction. The racial stories of the past weren't given to me at school by teachers, but by the citizens themselves. Some of those citizens thought it was distasteful and we'll just say others didn't find it quite so distasteful. Certain times throughout the year I hear the jokes of who has to leave when the siren blows. Now Amherst has better documentation than Vermilion on being a sundown town, but that's quite sparse also. However, in online postings about it, one citizen of Amherst had an interesting theory about their siren. They didn't believe it was put there as the actual sundown town signal. Those sirens became an easy way for minorities to know that it was getting late and time to return to friendlier territory. Then comments such as who has to leave town started - turning a joke, to a myth, to a perception. Vermilion has had a perception problem with surrounding communities even though it is much better than it ever was. It has been called prejudiced. That's the reputation that the town has. People have told me their stories of uneasiness being non-white in town. Others have had stories about African Americans having a slight panic when they hear the siren, before being talked down. The backlash against starting this open discussion has made me the face of other people who can't speak out so publicly.

The best thing out of all of this is discussion, some people are learning about the stories for the first time from both perspectives. In this last week I have read multiple biographies on a town siren. The original siren was placed between 1957-1962 (I've heard multiple dates) and it was designed to work with the technology of the time. The decision to chose 6PM may have been completely innocent. The fantastic oral history about the siren written by Friends of Harbour Town mentions that there were nearby sundown town communities. So Vermilion should have been more aware or sensitive at the time chosen for the testing. Otherwise to the outsiders that don't understand the town, it would seem Vermilion follows the same practices as those nearby communities.

I speak out only because I have empathy for the stories of what people have told me one on one, not what I've found online. I did say I was willing to protest to get attention on this issue and was quoted as such. I don't have to do that anymore. There already is a protest and discussion over this issue, by those that are refusing to accept the siren does give some citizens or visitors pain. That group has over 300 members. If we go off the 2010 census data for Vermilion, that group has 10 people for each person that filled out the census information and identified as African American. That protest group wants to be the vocal majority and peacefully protest. I applaud that. I am speaking for the silent minority of citizens and visitors not having their experiences shared or heard.

The whole council realizes that life is about perception. You can make certain statements and not others because you need to maintain a certain appearance. Part of this issue is that many people over the last 30 years have stated that this has been mentioned to city officials, but it's been done quietly, behind the scenes and always they've been told it's a non-issue. Many of us are tired having to deny the rumors about Vermilion being prejudiced. Even if it was that way once, it's not now. It's an appearance problem which we can start to resolve by addressing the time of siren testing. It doesn't mean much to some people, but to others it means a lot. It would allow those jokes in poor taste, the perception, and maybe even the legend itself to finally disappear. Bringing this to light and at least discussing it is the only way to begin the healing process of such negativity.

Submitted by:  
Brent Guch