

Fire on the square roused Bloomington in 1883

Fire bells roused Bloomingtonians at 3 o'clock in the morning of March 16, 1883. The Saturday *Courier* reported that flames shooting up on the southwest corner of the square could plainly be seen from almost all over town.

The crowd that quickly gathered discovered that the fire was burning in the three-story Mullikin Building on the northwest corner of Kirkwood and College avenue. According to the newspaper, the property belonged to a three-man partnership, W.P. McNary, W.J. Allen and J.H. Loudon.

Its occupants were Kahn & Tannenbaum, clothiers, and J.W. Shoemaker's drug store. To the west of the Mullikan Building was a frame building, Dunn & Company, a grocery. It was soon gobbled up quickly by the flames that were also spreading northward to the McCalla dry goods store.

The *Courier* described what happened next. "Next door north of Shoemaker's was McCalla & Co.'s dry good store. John McCalla, John Ehni, his clerk, and Robert Foster entered this room for the purpose of remov-



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

ing goods. Presently a crash came, and the walls of the Shoemaker building fell in on McCalla & Co.'s room."

Were the men lost? The watching crowd was horrified, believing that perhaps all three were surely dead. The firemen directed a stream of water on the ruins.

Miraculously McCella and Ehni walked out of the building, but Foster was trapped by fallen timbers. Several brave men went to work on the debris, and it took them 30 minutes to free Foster. According to the newspaper, he was carried to the Lindley drug store fully conscious and "apparently not seriously injured."

Foster was just as brave as his rescuers. "With the fire, head and smoke surrounding him he calmly said, 'Boys, if you see that you

can't save me, save yourselves.' " Later, resting in his home, Foster reckoned he was the luckiest man in town.

The fire did not stop at the McCalla store, and spread to C.R. Perdue's boots and shoe shop, E.P. Cole's bookstore, J.O. Howe's jewelry store and finally to W.P. Reed's harness shop. The latter store was along the alley in the middle of the block. That's where the fire topped three hours after it began.

The *Courier* enumerated the financial status of the merchants: Kahn & Tannenbaum, lost \$17,000 of merchandise (insured for \$5,500); Frank Hunter, John Graham and J.F. Pittman, who had law offices upstairs, had to find another location and order new furniture and a set of law books; Shoemaker, the drug-gist lost \$14,000 (insured for \$7,000); C.R. Perdue reported a loss of \$6,000 (all insured); McCalla, \$4,000 loss and \$2,000 insurance; Howe's valuable jewelry safe in the safe; and most of Reed's harnesses carried out before the fire engulfed his store.

In the aftermath of the fire, the *Courier* printed a column of a variety of little items

about the excitement and the cast of characters on that early morning in March, 1883.

"Greencastle was ready to promptly respond with her fire department, the flames did their work so rapidly the service was not needed. The kind offer will be gratefully remembered however. New Albany telegraphed here last Friday, asking what was needed. She will never forget a friend in need.

"All sorts of rumors were afloat this week to the effect that threats had been made by unknown parties to harm the town. One firm sold 15 revolvers in one day since the fire. The buyers wanted to be ready for suspicious looking characters."

And still another item: "While carrying Mr. Foster home, his vest was dropped on the way. A daughter of Dr. Axtell found it on the street next morning and took it home. In a pocket was found about \$80 in money and a receipt for subscription to the *Courier*. The owner of the vest was thus identified by the receipt, which is another argument in favor of keeping your subscription paid up."

A - T

5/30/95