

Ellettsville recovered from devastating blaze

"Previous to the sounding of the alarm a telegram was received from Ellettsville saying that the town was on fire, and asking that a steam fire engine be sent at once."

— (Bloomington) *Saturday Courier*, Aug. 7, 1886.

The threat of fire or disease were two of the fears that plagued our ancestors before the turn of the century. Most of the dwellings were made of wood and heated by wood stoves or fireplaces with the hazards of sparks or defective flues.

Given that problem, the fathers of cities and towns did the best they could to provide fire-fighting equipment. When the telegram about the Ellettsville fire arrived in Bloomington, the city responded as quickly as possible.

According to the *Courier*, "Preparations were made to respond promptly. The fire department was called out, and a switch engine made up a train of flat cars for transportation. On the cars the steamer and hose cart were loaded, and the train pulled out."

It was a short run of eight minutes to Ellettsville, but by that time the fire was more or less "under control." It was centered in what the newspaper called the "northwest"



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

part of town.

The *Courier* gave its readers an account of the origin of the fire, which apparently started in Shook & Faulkner's Wagon Shop, "located in the rear of the principal business houses on the north side of Main Street."

Since the building had two floors and was filled with material that burned easily, in a stiff breeze it became a furiously-burning torch. Ellettsvillians of all ages jumped from their beds and went to the scene to help. As the *Courier* put it, "Every man and boy and many women at once went to the flames or to assist in removing the contents of the threatened buildings."

Before the arrival of the steam engine from Bloomington, their efforts consisted of

climbing to the roofs of adjacent buildings and covering them with salt and wet blankets. Fortunately, a heavy rain had fallen earlier in the day, and the roofs were already quite wet.

The efforts of the Bloomington fire crew were not futile. According to the *Courier*, "The steamer from Bloomington was kept, throwing streams upon the burnt buildings for about two hours, when all further danger was over, and the fire department returned to Bloomington."

At dawn Ellettsvillians had the leisure to survey the damage, and it was extensive. The newspaper gave its readers a run-down of the losses.

The Perry brothers, who were also in the stone business, had operated a general store, "which had a good patronage." They wisely decided to rebuild with different materials, mainly limestone.

On one side of Main Street the store of W.H. Jackson (in addition to the Shook & Faulkner business) was lost. The fire had jumped across the cross street to the Perry brothers store, W.T. Harris' drug store, Mays' barber shop, the Odd Fellows Hall,

R.C. Harris' home and a small dwelling behind it. A second building used by Shook and Faulkner behind the Perry store was also ruined.

The *Courier* added that "Jamison's store and Masonic Hall on the opposite side of Main Street from Jackson's were also damaged, principally by removal of goods."

There followed in the article an approximation of the dollar losses to Ellettsvillians and the insurance coverage: Shook & Faulkner, \$8,000 (insurance \$2,500); W.H. Jackson, \$3,000 (\$1,400); Harry Copenhagen, \$700 (\$500); Perry Brothers, \$1,500, (\$400); W.T. Harris, \$700 (none); Odd Fellows, \$700, (\$600); J.A. May, \$200 (none); R.C. Harris, \$800, (none); and J.M. Harris, \$700 (\$200).

Within a few days, insurance adjusters from the various companies involved arrived to work on the claims. The *Courier* noted that "W.H. Jackson had a \$900 policy to expire on July 30th . . . but he will claim the amount as it was an understanding between him and the agent to renew without further notice."

And the town philosopher had the last word, saying "It was whisky and the devil."

H-T 6/28/93