

Spate of fires at end of century sparked speculation

A fire out of control is a matter for concern any time, but it is particularly frightening in the middle of the night. The *Bloomington World* of July 15, 1895, made it clear that the fire on East Kirkwood Avenue was not an accident.

The front-page article began, "Fire bugs got in their work yesterday morning about 2:30 o'clock." It was a policeman by the name of Smallwood who spotted the fire.

Ordinarily the fire bell would have alerted everyone, but it was, as the newspaper put it, "cracked." So the bell of the Walnut Street church was used instead.

Calling for help from the firemen was better than standing and watching a building burn, but sometimes not much better. Bloomington had had its share of fires, two of them involving university buildings.

Finding a source of water was of primary importance. The *World*



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

explained, "The engine was placed at the Third Street cistern and in a remarkable short space of time was throwing water."

To be more precise about the location, the fire started in a barn belonging to C.R. Worrall between Kirkwood and Fourth Street. Continued the newspaper, "It was the work of an incendiary, as the entire upper part was in flames when discovered and showed that it had been fired in the loft."

Fortunately, a pony was rescued from the barn by Edmund Allgood, an employee of Worrall. According to the *World*, the barn had also contained 100 bushels of

oats, 100 bushels of corn, a ton of hay, four sets of new harness and two saddles.

Allgood's house was near the barn and was damaged to the extent of \$75. The fire quickly spread to other buildings.

John Robertson's barn also caught fire. He lost machinery valued at \$125. Benjamin Smith had stored some household goods in his barn for the summer. He reckoned they were worth \$275. That figure didn't include Smith's damaged garden and fruit trees.

Then there was the woodshed belonging to Addison Smith. He thought it was damaged enough that it would have to be replaced.

As the minutes went by, and fire spread, the firemen must have known that they could not even hope for containment. Their equipment could only do so much and no more.

The fact that the university

building in Seminary Square was gutted by fire in 1883 was not the firemen's fault. It had been struck by lightning during the night, and fire smoldered for a considerable time before it was discovered.

There would be later fires almost as devastating. Wylie Hall, a brick building in the new campus at Dunn's Woods, burned in 1900. In James A. Woodburn's *History of Indiana University, 1820-1902*, there is a dramatic photograph of that particular fire. On the left side of the picture is an engine, puffing out smoke as it pumped the water from a university cistern.

Twenty-two years later, the State Fire Marshall posed the question of how the fire at the Bloomington square's southwest corner could have gotten out of hand so quickly, especially when there was no wind blowing. The question was also debated in the City Council.

In his book, *Relive It*, C. Earl

East suggested that the firemen underestimated the blaze, rushing into the grocery with fire extinguishers. The *Daily Telephone* office, called the Bradfute Building, was also destroyed. That newspaper editorialized that more rigorous inspections would have prevented the fire.

It is not likely that the firemen who got up in the middle of the night to fight the 1895 fire were paid very much for their effort. Perhaps their only compensation was a few kind words from a local newspaper. In fact, that issue of the *World* said it adequately: "Much credit is due the fire company for their efficient work. It was a fire that was hard to fight and had a start. One section of the hose busted and caused a delay of some moments. Outside of that, the boys covered themselves with glory."

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