

# Fires posed big problem in rural Monroe County

In 1907, Bloomingtonians whose houses burned had a reasonable expectation of salvaging some of their possessions, because the city had a professional fire department. Not so in the outlying parts of the county.

A \$2,800 fire loss at Clear Creek was reported in the Feb. 19 edition of the *Bloomington Evening World*. The front-page article began, "Fire at 10:30 this morning destroyed the large two story residence of James N. Robertson at Clear Creek, and for a time threatened the destruction of the entire village."

There was a gap between the value of the loss and the extent of his coverage. In fact, Robertson was able to cover only half — \$1,400.

At press time for the *Evening World* the cause of the fire was unknown, but Clear Creek residents had their suspicions. As the newspaper put it, "...it is thought the blaze started from a flue in the kitchen."



## LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

Mrs. Robertson was putting the weekly wash on the line when she looked toward the house and discovered it was on fire. It already had a head start, and was fanned by a stiff northeast wind. In fact, there was real fear that the flames would be fanned toward other houses.

Fighting a fire at Clear Creek in those days consisted of a volunteer bucket brigade water was drawn from the nearest wells and cisterns.

In spite of the fact that the house was destroyed, the efforts of the volunteer firefighters did not go unrewarded. As the newspaper put it, "Ladders were secured, and in a

short time a line was formed to a number of good wells and cisterns, and as it was already too late to attempt to save the Robertson building, attention was directed to adjoining houses. But for the effective work of the men and women, the Ezra Mercer, and Fowler houses and Dillman store would have been consumed."

Finally, a Bloomington fire engine arrived, pulled by four horses. It was just in time to put out the smoldering ruin.

The *Evening World* did enumerate what was left. "The only household goods saved were a folding bed, couch and stove. They planned to rebuild. The Robertsons and other citizens of Clear Creek were quick to reward the firemen by passing the hat and cooking them "a sumptuous meal."

Only a couple of days later there was a fire in Stinesville. The Feb. 22 article explained that the fire started in Millard Easton's barn and caused \$1,000 worth of damage. In that case, too, the insurance was inadequate. A

fire brigade was formed and for a time it was thought that the business section would also be destroyed.

Naturally, the authorities were looking for a cause of the fire, and their suspicions at first turned toward the possibility of transients. For some reason, known only to "Marshall Dunning," George Shumaker, son of the Baptist minister at Stinesville, was hauled out of bed, arrested, hustled onto the 10:10 train for Bloomington and locked up in jail.

Shumaker was interviewed by an *Evening World* reporter. "He stoutly denied the charge. He said that he went to his home about 10 o'clock, and was awakened by his wife who first told him there was a fire." He also claimed that he had been in bed asleep for three hours prior to that time.

If that particular Stinesville fire was arson, there was no arsonist to show for it. There is no record of Shumaker being tried for starting the fire. His attorney was R.J. Miller.

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