1887 sees a hot time in Bloomington

Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

"Bloomington's sensations come often, and they hardly ever come singly. This time our sensation comes in the shape of the fire fiend who get in his work pretty well, and that, too, in broad daylight."

— Bloomington Saturday Courier, April 9, 1887.

It was a bad time for Bloomington, and "sensation" wasn't really the right word to describe what was happening. To begin with, most of the city's structures were made of wood and heated with fireplaces or stoves. That made them particularly vulnerable when flues were defective or sparks went flying out of chimneys.

On April 5, at 10 o'clock in the morning, the main building of the county "poor house" caught fire. The Bloomington *Saturday Courier* described its location as "at the extreme western corporation limits and over a half mile from the center of the city."

The cause was a faulty flue. Although the firemen were somewhat slow in responding to the alarm, it is unlikely that they would have been able to put the fire out anyway. (The problem was explained in the newspaper: "The steam fire engine was delayed several minutes on account of the horses refusing to be hitched up."

The firemen were able to save the two frame wings built onto the main building, and the 28 "inmates" were housed temporarily in the wings until a new building could be erected. One of them, a man obsessed with motion, had been building a little perpetual-motion machine and was distraught until he learned that his machine was untouched by the fire.

The Bloomington firemen were still at the poor house about noon when they got word of another fire at the Bollenbacher spoke factory, located where the Third Street park is now. In addition to the fact that the firemen were still at the poor house, there was another factor involved. Most of the spoke-factory workers were out for lunch.

A bucket brigade was formed, utilizing bystanders, but, as the *Courier* put it, " . . . but the flames fed by the piles of dry shavings had made too much headway, and in a few minutes more the entire main building was enveloped in flames and all of the valuable machinery destroyed."

The spoke factory was not a total loss. According to the newspaper, volunteers who watered down the spoke storage sheds saved a large part of the company's inventory. Commented the *Courier*, "A fierce wind was blowing in a northeastern direction, and the flames swept everything in their way, but fortunately they had but little to feed upon. The sheds that contained the largest number of the spokes were to the north and out of the sweep of the flames."

Only two hours later, there was a fire on the roof of the old Berry property along the railroad. As the *Courier* put it, "The wind was still blowing briskly, and if the flames had gotten a good headway, the fire would have swept its way toward College Avenue and the public square, and the result would have been very disastrous. The men who put out that small flame on the roof did a grand thing."

Margaret A. Dunn was not so fortunate. Her house on the corner of Third and Henderson streets burned to the ground, even after the Bloomington firemen's best efforts. They had a serious handicap that was later corrected by the laying of water pipes to all parts of the city.

Explained the *Courier*, "The steamer (fire engine) arrived early and was stationed at the fire cistern near the Third Street bridge. It was hard work, however, to force a stream about three squares up a steep hill."

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