

True heroism saved trapped man in 1883 fire

It is relatively easy to write about the infamous behavior of human beings. Infinitely harder to describe are those occasions when individuals discover hidden inner strengths.

Such an occasion was March 13, 1883, in Bloomington. The dramatic event began as a tiny fire in the basement of a store in the Mulligan Bulding on the southwest side of the square. After the discovery of the fire, the loud town bell brought Bloomington's hand-drawn water pumper and a host of helpers and onlookers.

Among them was Robert Charles Foster, a relative of the McCalla family which operated a very much endangered dry goods store next to the Mulligan Building. As he and John Ehnle were frantically helping McCalla to remove his mer-



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

chandise, a wall collapsed.

Foster was thrown into the basement, where he was pinned under some beams. As he struggled to free himself, the flames licked closer and closer to him.

Several brave men who came to his rescue tried unsuccessfully to dislodge the beams and called for a two-handed saw.

In his book, *Relive It*, C. Earl East, yarn merchant and collector of the

lore of Monroe County, described the dramatic scene.

"When (the saw was) brought Ren Smith, town marshal and Jack Denton, bricklayer, were first to grasp its handles. But soon the timber pressed so on the blade the steel could not be pushed back and forth. Meantime the flames were licking closer."

Foster, who was at least as brave as the men attempting to rescue him, saw the gun strapped to Marshal Smith's belt and screamed, "Shoot me! Shoot me! Everybody run! Save your lives!" No one heeded him. On the contrary, Foster's rescuers redoubled their efforts.

Meanwhile, a bucket brigade was formed and the volunteers kept pouring water on the relentless fire.

Others manned the pumper. Wrote East, "Volunteers had been working in relays, pumping frantically. As one group became exhausted, another jumped in its place."

Firefighters kept the hose of the pumper pointed at the men in the basement. At that moment, still another hero, a local tailor by the name of Benjamin McGhee, discovered the courage to do what needed to be done. He crawled under a giant timber and arched his back enough to raise it.

The saw could move again, and in 20 minutes Foster was free. Although he was not badly injured, Foster was carried to his home on East Sixth Street. East wrote that on the way some \$80 dropped from his pockets. It was found in the

morning by a doctor's daughter, who returned it to Foster.

The dawn revealed a desolate scene on the square. The southern half of the west side was gone — from Kirkwood Avenue to the alley. Related East, "Touched by word of such a loss, and grateful for flood relief once given by Bloomington, New Albany now presented to the college city its old Sanderson steam pumper."

And what of Foster? His rescue proved to be another indirect blessing for the Bloomington area. Before he died in 1899, he had served Monroe County in the offices of clerk and auditor and the city as a councilman and school trustee. He was secretary of Indiana University for 25 years.