

# Big residence fire in 1904 started in the barn

**T**he *Bloomington Evening World* of May 12, 1904, called it the "Worst Fire Of The Present Year." Although the owner was H.T. Swindler, it was being occupied by Mr. and Mrs. C.H. Marxson at the time of the fire.

It was an afternoon fire, having started at around 12:45 in a barn at the rear of the residence. The newspaper explained that at press time the cause was unknown. "The origin of the blaze is a mystery. Mr. Swindler's folks had just returned from a drive and had gone to the barn with the horse."

The house stood at the corner of Third and Washington streets. Shortly after the horse was put into the barn, someone saw flames shooting out of the hayloft.

A stiff breeze fanned the blaze to the residence and in a short time the house and barn were all afire.

Nearby in the area now called Third Street Park, stood a wagon wheel spoke factory. An employee sounded the alarm. "The alarm was first given by the blowing of the spoke factory



**LOOKING BACK**  
By Rose McIlveen

whistle ..."

Perhaps the firefighters' response was not all it should be. The newspaper mildly reported that "the department was a little slow in getting out," but "excellent work was done as soon as the hose was connected with the hydrants."

The Bloomington Fire Department tactics included playing streams of water upon the fire. The alarm had drawn a large crowd, including a former fire chief, Dick Kerr.

According to the *Evening World*, Kerr pitched in to help. Explained the newspaper, "Mr. Kerr's splendid work on top of the house when the blaze was the most threatening elicited the admiration of several hundred

onlookers."

The top of the two-story house was heavily damaged. No household items that had been on the second floor were saved.

Among the things lost were the belongings of two female student roomers, Mabel and Hattie Reed.

In those days, Bloomington newspaper readers were very interested in what the insurance companies would do. In the case of the Swindler's house, the damage was estimated to be over \$1,000. He was covered by the Wooley and Barnhill Agency.

But Swindler was not the only sufferer. Marxson lost a considerable amount, too. The newspaper informed its readers that "The inside was thoroughly soaked with water."

Marxson was only partially covered by insurance. His agent's name was H.A. Axtel.

Firefighter's had to work to save some neighboring houses as well. There were those of Mrs. Roseberry, Mrs. Orchard, Squire

Stephens and Mrs. Spicely, all to the east of the Swindler house.

The newspaper described the scene: "... ladders were placed to the roofs and the flames were subdued with a few buckets of water."

The most unusual part of the story concerned two unplanned firefighters. Commented the newspaper (as if it were an everyday occurrence)

"Two small boys did good work several times by climbing to the roof of Mrs. Roseberry's house and putting out the fire by striking with their caps and hats."

In conclusion the newspaper noted that the real firefighters deserved a lot of credit for "getting the fire under control so soon."

Swindler announced that he would rebuild as soon as he had the insurance check in his hand. Certainly there would be no problem about blueprints, since the house was one of the local ones designed by Nichols, a local architect.

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