

Watching a burning building a major spectator sport

Sunday, Jan. 11, 1903, was a bad luck day for the Bloomington Fire Department. After midnight several young men who were downtown, spotted some smoke coming out of the grating in the sidewalk on the west side.

There was a fire in the Boston Store. In those days, watching a building burning was a major spectator sport, drawing crowds to the spot during the day or night. On occasion, they assisted the department. Not on this occasion.

The *Bloomington Telephone* reported, "A severe northwester cut deep in and added to the chill with the thermometer down to 8 of zero." The article added that the cold wind also brought a heavy snow.

"Because of the cold, stormy night but few people responded to the alarm, and the firemen waged their efforts to stop the flames from 3 to 7 o'clock," added the newspaper.

The fire was largely confined to the brick building which housed not only the Boston Store but the local offices of a couple of political (or former) office holders. Their papers, fortunately, were not destroyed by the gallons of water sprayed on the building.



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

At press time the firemen had not determined the origin of the fire. Prior to its discovery, the proprietor of the Boston Store, a Mr. Wolf, had been having what he called a "social chat" with George Atkinson and Moses Kahn. They left the building about 11 p.m. Wolf told a newspaper reporter that he had just received \$1,000 of new goods. He reckoned that the loss was around \$12,500, and he had about \$9,500 in insurance.

Ironically, that side of the square had been seriously damaged by another fire nearly 20 years earlier. In that fire several firemen fell through the floor of a store, but managed to rescue a person who was pinned under a beam in the basement.

It was predictable that the Eagle Clothing Company, a neighbor of the Boston Store, had a sale of items that were smoke-damaged. An

ad in the Jan. 20 edition of the *Telephone* offered boys' two-piece suits for 98 cents to \$3.48, ladies nightgowns for 39 cents, all-wool overcoats for \$3.85 and other clothing that smelled of smoke.

Four years later, there was a fire on North Lincoln near 10th Street that did draw a crowd. The occupants of the house were Jackson Nunn and family.

Though the fire was in November, the weather must have been considerably better than on the night of the Boston Store fire. The *Telephone* informed its readers that "A large crowd collected and worked with a will in moving the household goods out of danger. Despite their efforts, some of the furniture was destroyed."

The cause of the North Lincoln Street fire was a defective flue. The newspaper revealed that "The fire department ran two lines of hose from the water plug at 9th and Lincoln streets and succeeded in putting out the fire in a short time. When they reached the scene, the roof was a mass of flames."

The houses of two neighbors — Mrs. Ben Wilson and Mrs. Jackson Moncrief — were also damaged. The Nunn home was insured

with the Hill, Huntington & Thornton agency, according to the *Telephone*.

Another fire of 1907 broke out in an area southwest of Bloomington. The place was called McDoel and is today remembered in the name McDoel Baptist Church. In 1907, it was the location of the Monon Railway yard building. On the first floor was stored repair supplies, and the office was upstairs.

According to the *Telephone* of Dec. 15, the fire might have been controllable, except for the explosion of a gasoline lamp in Fred Fulk's nearby restaurant. When the lamp exploded, it spread flames everywhere.

Henry Cassidy, the night waiter, called in the alarm.

Commented the *Telephone*, "The fire continued blazing in a dozen different places following the explosion and from the start doomed both the restaurant and the Monon building." The railway officials said they would rebuild, but Funk, did not hear about his loss for several hours, since he was at his other restaurant in Greencastle.

Today fires still draw big crowds, but spectators are not allowed to rush inside to help rescue furniture, papers or equipment.

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