

Brave firefighters fight to save the square

Of all the calamities that could happen in Bloomington before the turn of the century, fire was probably the one most feared. The fear stemmed not so much from lack of expertise on the part of the men of the department. It was rather from the fact that firefighting technology had not advanced to the point that it could give the men at least an even chance against big fires.

After a major fire broke out on the square, *The Courier* paid tribute to the firemen in a headline. "\$20,000.00 FED FIERY FLAMES LAST NIGHT. HEROIC WORK BY BRAVE FIREMEN SAVE THOUSANDS MORE."

It was Aug. 23, 1897. At about 9:45 p.m. Bridge Nichols and Frank Fee discovered the fire on the second story at the back of J.C. Worley's livery barn on North College Avenue and turned in the alarm.

The Courier of Aug. 24 described the scene of the fire. "Owing to the extreme dry weather, the flammable material of the buildings and their contents, the fire soon gained considerable headway, and for many minutes it appeared that the brave



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

fire boys were only fighting against the odds, in vain."

A long dry spell was the bad news. The good news was that during the fire the wind was not blowing. Otherwise the damage would have been even greater.

Bloomington firefighters were dependent upon a cistern for the water they used. As the newspaper explained it, "The engine was set at the big cistern near the fire hall, and three lines of hose were lain almost in a twinkling."

Even so, the fire was in control for about three hours. Continued *The Courier*, "Spectators held their breath expecting to see the entire block from the Star store on the west

to the Waldron block on the east, including THE WORLD office and the May livery stable destroyed, also the handsome residence of Mr. John F. May, corner of Walnut and Seventh Streets. The big Wicks Bee Hive building was on fire several times and had the appearance of falling prey to the greedy flames, but Chief Gilmore's boys were equal to the occasion and waded through fire and smoke with the hose to reach the big building."

They succeeded there, but the flames leaped to the roof of the *World* office, and employees and volunteers began carrying out business records, desks and galleys of type for the morning issue. Interestingly enough, that building had fire shutters on the back side, and they closed, saving the building after all.

When the fire and smoke had died down at last, there was a time of toll-taking. *The Courier* listed it for the readers: the Worley livery barn, loss \$4,500; a cottage owned by W.T. Hicks, \$500; the residence and office of Dr. P.C. Holland, \$600; John F. May's barn and outbuildings, \$900; J.C. Worley's vehi-

cles and fixtures, \$3,000; Mrs. T.L. Gregory's millinery shop, \$500; vehicles of private individuals, \$1,200; C.C. Turner's funeral hearse, \$1,000; L.V. and P.K. Buskirk's two surveys and buggies, \$300; Bee Cron's dairy wagons, \$500; Howard's dog and pony show properties (in the Worley stable), \$750; the Telephone Exchange, \$150; the Electric Light Co., \$100, C.E. Worrall's private rigs and sleigh, \$500; and the Bee Hive (store) roof, \$600.

Volunteers ran into the flaming livery stables, freed the 200 horses and slapped them on the flanks to get them to run outside to safety. Some of them tried to run back into the buildings, but they were chased back out again. During the fighting of the fire, no effort was made to corral them.

Despite the financial losses, partially covered by insurance, Bloomingtonians had a lot to be grateful for. There was no loss of life and the buildings could be replaced.

The Courier article also contained some one-sentence reflections at the end. One of them was "If you find a stray horse this morning, you know where he belongs."

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