

Disastrous Fires

Disasters appear in many forms; some are natural, and some are manmade as a result of human error or carelessness. Our area has experienced nature's wrath over the years in the form of tornados, blizzards, droughts, hail, and flooding rain. Arguably, none have been as locally destructive and devastating as fires; of which the city of Fairmont has experienced its share throughout the course of its history.

On December 31, 1914, a fire destroyed thirteen Fairmont businesses with losses at that time totaling \$80,000.00. The fire was located on North North Avenue, now Downtown Plaza, and was discovered by young men returning from a dance in Granada. It was known as the "Syndicate Block Fire of 1914."

A fire in July of 1949, discovered at 1:15 a.m. on a Sunday, caused damage estimated at \$100,000 to Wallace's Department Store and Koenig's Ben Franklin Store. The fire was said to have been caused by an automatic electric steam iron left on in one of the stores. Fireman battled this blaze for over seven hours with an estimated 500 onlookers, some dressed only in pajamas or bathrobes. Smoke and water damage was the primary cause of losses in this fire.

In November of 1952, a fire destroyed the Park Motor Company on Blue Earth Avenue. Extensive damage was also caused to other nearby businesses including the Style Distributing Warehouse, Thorpe Wallpaper & Paint, and Olson's Standard Service Station. Fireman battled the blaze in near freezing temperatures for over eight hours. The fire was believed to have been a result of defective wiring in a wrecked car that had been towed into the garage earlier that day. Losses were estimated to be in excess of \$200,000.00.

In December of 1963, fire destroyed Harold's Shoe Store on North North Avenue, now Downtown Plaza, and ten other shops or offices located on the first or second floors of that building. According to a *Sentinel* article from December 24, 1963, the fire was reported to the police officer on duty by a teenager. Firefighters contended with ice glazed streets and an estimated 1,000 onlookers from the Christmas shopping crowd that had been downtown prior to the fire.

Another memorable fire took place in December of 1966 involving the Stokely Van-Camp's Plant No. 1 warehouse and canning department. The fire alarm was sounded at 2:45 p.m. on this 10 degree December day. It was finally being brought under control by 7:00 p.m. The fire, of undetermined origin as of the date of that article, resulted in the loss of work for over 100 employees. In fighting this fire, the fire department even

broke out its 1923 American La France fire truck, now located in the Pioneer Museum. The fire was discovered by two teenagers from Minneapolis visiting relatives in Fairmont that lived nearby the plant.

In January of 1969, a fire described at that time as “one of the most disastrous fires in Fairmont’s history” destroyed Nu-Tech, Inc., an electronics factory located at 1205 North Dewey Street. Early estimates pinned losses at \$150,000 to \$500,000. That same year fire destroyed the Fairmont Junior High School.

Interlaken Ballroom, fondly remembered by many Martin County residents, succumbed to fire in April of 1972. The fire, apparently started by an electrical short in a neon light, destroyed the famed ballroom in less than an hour. The exact loss was estimated to be \$100,000.00. The owner of the structure stated at that time that it was only partially insured. Nevertheless, this loss was perhaps far more significant to many in terms of memories and nostalgia. A number of well known musicians, including the nationally known Lawrence Welk and Duke Ellington bands, played at Interlaken Ballroom to throngs of young people over the course of its illustrious existence.

Another major fire took place in June of 1972 in Fairmont ravaging a popular downtown landmark. The fire started mysteriously about 3:00 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon in the Sweet Shop Restaurant, virtually ending the memorable existence of this popular eatery. Other businesses sustaining damage included the Lake Theater, Roger’s Jewelry, Ben Franklin Variety Store, and Mahowald’s Hardware. The Sweet Shop owner, Michael Boosalis, estimated his losses to be about \$140,000.00.

These were but a few of the local disasters caused by fire over the years. Fires seem to strike quickly and unexpectedly, and frequently during the most inopportune weather conditions. They often involve much more than financial losses that are insured. As evidenced by some of the preceding examples, for many local citizens the losses include many intangibles; such as memories and experiences that can be neither insured nor replaced. However, perhaps most notable and assuring in all of these accounts dating back to 1914 is the unconditional willingness of local people to provide assistance to those in need in the wake of those untimely and disastrous circumstances.

For more information on this topic, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.



Firemen contain stubborn blaze at Sweet Shop



5 June 1972

Crowd of several hundred ringed fire area to watch blaze destroy Sweet Shop