

The 1883 Fire That Established the Need for a Fire Department in Brownwood



West side of 1883 Brownwood Court House Square. Many buildings were destroyed by the September 1883 fire. This fire prompted the creation of the first Brownwood Voluntary Fire Department

BROWNWOOD

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Brownwood, Sept. 27, - The principle business portion of Brownwood is in ashes. Last night, shortly before 1 o'clock, a fire broke out in the rear of Lawrence & McFarland's drug store, a stone structure on the west side of the square. The flames flowing from building to building on the upper side, and in less than two hours the entire block, consisting of nine handsome and lasting buildings, were reduced to ashes, besides destroying twelve business enterprises of stores.

A general alarm was sounded by bells, whistles and shooting of pistols. The citizens and visitors turned out en masse, and with wonderful rapidity and remarkable good order, saved considerable goods, and many times at the risk of their lives. Lawrence & McFarland where the fire originated, were the only total losers, their building being enveloped in flames before an entrance could be effected.

Adjoining this, on the south, was the immense grocery and liquor house of N. A. Altman, a large stone structure. The fire soon ignited with the liquors and rendered the saving of the goods impossible. Adjacent to this was the immense frame building of the First National bank, occupied by Brooke Smith, cashier, on the corner of the street; Ragsdale & Somers, jewelers and Chas. Steffiins & Co., a large dry goods, clothing and grocery establishment.

The bank sustains but a small loss; so also do the jewelers and Chas. Steffiins & Co. The latter house had nearly all saved from the flames. Contiguous with the building, where the fire started, was a bakery in a frame building which fed the flames to the handsome and commodious frame structure of Sharpe & Smith, occupied by them as a furniture store, and in an instant it was all ablaze and impossible to save but a little of the stock.

Next to this, was the saloon of Altman & Bell, a frame building, which was soon devoured by the fiery element, and led to the same results for the next building used as a barber shop. Adjoining this was the large and elegant frame building occupied by Dr. Johnson as a wholesale and retail drug house, and by Drs. Johnson & Bettis as an office.

The fury of the flames at this place made quick havoc, and but a small amount of stock was saved. Then came the imposing two story stone building of Leon Brin, on the corner of the street, and occupied upstairs by a family, and to be occupied by himself in a few days, for a dry goods store. Nearly all the contents were saved.

Kinnebrew's Flour Mill and Knight's store were saved only by the almost superhuman efforts of Major Rankin and the assistance of citizens. The Coggin Opera House, a stately stone structure, narrowly escaped and could not have been saved except for the telling work that preserved it.

The cause of the fire is not yet certainly known, but is largely suspicioned to be the work of an incendiary. It is impossible to estimate the amount of the loss yet. The insurance on all is \$27,500. Had it not been for the recent rains and the prevailing calm the whole town must have been destroyed. No water works, engines or facilities for extinguishing fire being here, the dazzling flames, shadowed by smoke, and the intervening, long, blue, curly blaze of the burning liquors, accompanied by the roar of the fire and the frequent crashes of falling buildings, made this a scene of wild magnificence seldom beheld.

The public square was tilled this morning with the roofless stocks of the many burnt-out merchandise, drug, clothing, grocery liquor and furniture houses. Numerous wagons have been carting goods all day, to a more available place for storage. The opera house is full and barns are now being sought. The merchants declare their intention of prosecuting business as best they can, until they can erect buildings of adorning architecture on the old ruins.

A sad and sudden death was occasioned by fear of the fire. Mrs. Mary Hall, aged seventy-five years, was assisting in removing goods from her son's house when she dropped dead.