

The Great Boom—Washburn Ablaze

Washburn suffered repeated depredations by that great engine of destruction, the fire monster, threatening on more than one occasion to destroy the village. Wooden buildings provided an immense reservoir of combustible materials, while candles, oil lamps, and sparks from innumerable chimneys supplied ready sources of ignition. But people tended to be indifferent about the constant threat of fire; warnings went unheeded, and fire prevention and control, the necessary elements of fire suppression, were neglected.

The first fire occurred two weeks after the settlers arrived in May 1883, destroying a boarding shanty. Numerous blazes followed, including a boarding house in November 1883, the kitchen of the Washburn Hotel in December 1884, a roller skating rink and the Railroad Hotel in July 1885, the Cook Mill in October 1886, and in August 1887, a large feed and flour mill. Finally moved to action, the town board ordered a complete hook and ladder outfit in June 1888, but apparently did not establish a fire department to use the

equipment. These fires were mere pinpricks compared to the catastrophe of September 14 1888. All of the buildings and houses in the block between Bayfield Street and Omaha Street and Center Avenue and First Avenue East were destroyed, leaving only the burnt out brick shell of the opera house,

CS 9/11/09
**Lars
Larson
Guest
columnist**

and iron stoves and safes, standing forlornly among the ashes. Men worked heroically to control the fire but without an ample supply of water and with inadequate fire fighting equipment, it was a hopeless task. Many people considered the fire an exciting spectacle and an excuse for a wild celebration, refusing to help the firemen. It was a miracle that the fire did not jump the streets and avenues, igniting the entire village. As it

was the Washburn Hotel, across Bayfield Street from the inferno, barely escaped destruction. Merchants lost much of the merchandise that they had moved out of their stores to the wooden sidewalks when these were consumed by the flames, while what remained was ruined by rain during the following days.

In response to the disaster, the town board established a fire department and purchased a chemical fire engine, which sprayed frothy soda water from a pressurized tank onto a fire. The hook and ladder cart, chemical fire engine, and other fire fighting equipment were pulled by men to the scene of a fire. The completion of the water system with hydrants located around the village and the organization of a fire department with volunteer firemen greatly improved the chances of controlling a fire. But little was done about prevention, and fires that endangered the entire community continued to occur. In April 1889 a furniture store burned down, in September another business was destroyed, in August 1894 a fire at the coal

dock was brought under control only by the strenuous efforts of the fire department men and the ferry and dock crews, while in March 1895 a large boarding house, in April a saloon, and in June a jewelry store were burnt to the ground.

But an even greater danger was the forest fires that raged through the north country, devouring villages, farms, and thousand of acres of timber in a matter of hours. In September 1894 a series of fires in Barron County and southern Bayfield County joined together into an enormous fire storm that swept northward at an estimated 60 miles an hour. The fire was barely contained at the edge of the village, but sparks spread to the lumber stacked on the docks of the lumber mills, the Bigelow mill narrowly escaping destruction. The fire continued to smolder for weeks, threatening to break out anew, and casting a suffocating pall of smoke over the city. Once again, but not for the last time, Washburn evaded destruction by the fire monster.