

The Great Boom: Washburn ablaze, the sawmill fires 25

The first sawmill fire occurred in October 1886, completely destroying the Cook mill, the first of Washburn's three mills, which began operation in June 1885. From then until the end of the lumbering era, mill fires, large and small, were so frequent as to be almost commonplace. The mills were located close to each other, along the bay shore from the Thompson mill at the foot of Sixth Avenue West to the Hines mill at the foot of Tenth Avenue West. With wooden mill buildings, storage yards and wharves stacked high with millions of feet of lumber for shipment, accumulated waste from the milling operations, and numerous sources of ignition, the mill area constituted a vast potential burning ground of several square blocks. The mills did not have adequate fire prevention and protection arrangements, nor was the village fire department equipped to deal with the dangerous fires in and around the mills. It was only by sheer luck, favorable wind conditions and the almost superhuman efforts of firemen and volunteers that mill fires were brought under control before they spread to the surrounding community.

In years past it was widely believed by people in Washburn that when the timber was exhausted the mill companies had deliberately set fire to their saw mills to collect the insurance money—"sold to the insurance company," as the saying went. A rash of mill fires when the pine timber on the Bayfield peninsula was depleted seemed to confirm these suspicions. In June 1900 a fire broke out in the storage yards of the Thompson mill, destroying a large amount of

finished lumber, and threatening to spread to the mill. Then in November 1903 the small Jacobs-Fowler mill was destroyed by fire and in June 1905 the Akeley-Sprague mill burnt down. But the Akeley-Sprague mill was inadequately insured and the Jacobs-

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Fowler mill was uninsured, so it was more likely that these fires were accidental rather than purposely set.

The total destruction of the large Hines Company mill, the former Bigelow mill, in July 1906, was another matter, however, for the suspicions of arson, while not confirmed, were lent considerable credence by circumstantial evidence. The company's timber was exhausted and there were rumors that it intended to sell or dismantle its mill. Burning down the mill and collecting the \$70,000 insurance was, people believed, easier and more profitable than trying to dispose of a worn out and obsolete mill. It was also noted that the fire had occurred on Sunday morning when the mill workers and firemen were in church, or otherwise occupied, not immediately available to fight the fire, adding to the suspicion of arson.

All of this was conjecture and proved nothing. Then in 1912, Benjamin F. Runkle, employed as a detective by the state fire department, wrote a letter to the Hines

Company's insurer, claiming that he had proof that the July 1906 mill fire had been purposely set by a man to whom the company had paid \$700. The Hines Company reacted strongly and immediately. A man pretending to be from the insurance company, but in reality a detective employed by the Hines Company, came to Washburn to confer with Runkle. Runkle was persuaded to go with him to Eau Claire, supposedly to meet an insurance adjuster, but when he arrived there he was arrested on a warrant sworn out by the Hines Company, charging him with criminal libel. A trial was held in the Eau Claire Municipal Court, during which officials of the Hines Company denied Runkle's charges. Runkle was found guilty and fined \$200 or six months in jail. Apparently anticipating this outcome in a city in which the mill company was an influential employer, Runkle did not present any evidence in his defense, stating that he had a good case and would win on appeal.

And this is indeed what happened: in September 1912 he was found not guilty in a trial in the Eau Claire County Circuit Court. But Runkle's exoneration did not undisputedly prove his allegation that the Hines Company had destroyed its own mill, and his evidence that it had done so was not made public. The company had the last word, blacklisting Runkle, who then moved to Canada to work.

Meanwhile, the Hines Company erected a portable mill to saw submerged logs from around its mill site. This mill and the company's mill in Ashland closed in November 1906, ending Hines Company operations on Chequamegon Bay. With the destruction of the Akeley-Sprague and Hines mills, at the end of 1906, Washburn was left with two mills, the small, rebuilt Jacob-Fowler mill and the large Thompson mill, plus the Kenfield-Lamoreaux woodworking factory, which made boxes, wire reels, and shingles.