

The fire monster sows destruction—the city

CS-4/28/11

As in former years, Washburn was repeatedly threatened with destruction by the fire monster during the 1920s, and as before, little effort appears to have been made to improve fire prevention or to provide a modern fire department. On several occasions the business section of the city was threatened with devastation. In the early morning of December 10, 1920, fire swept through four business buildings and was only prevented from destroying an entire block of businesses by a firewall. Losses were estimated as \$50,000. On May 19, 1922, again early in the morning, five business buildings and an adjacent barn were destroyed for an estimated loss of \$45,000. In the afternoon of February 4, 1924, during what the Times called a "raging blizzard," a garage was totally destroyed, while only "a hard fight" by the firemen prevented the destruction of adjacent buildings. In addition to the other contents of the garage, 16 automobiles were destroyed. In the early morning of August 29, 1925, fire swept through boarding houses, and adjacent buildings on Omaha Street, before it was brought under control. And in the early morning of November 15, 1927, again during a "raging blizzard," two stores were destroyed and several damaged, and only the valiant efforts of the firemen prevented the fire from spreading. Washburn's small facto-



Lars Larson
Guest Columnist

ries did not escape the fire monster. The plant of the Northland Products Company was destroyed along with the stored goods of other businesses. And two fires at the Chicago Box Company plant were discovered before they had spread, limiting the damage to the plant. Residence fires were even more numerous than business fires, at least 17 homes being destroyed or heavily damaged during the decade. In two cases the occupants barely escaped with their lives. The Methodist Episcopal Church and the DuPont club were damaged by fire, while the unoccupied Tremont House on Omaha Street, one of the oldest boarding houses, was totally destroyed. This fire provided a thrilling spectacle for the people of Washburn, the Times noting that "It made a great fire and lighted the entire city." Alarms were often not heard and that plus the hand-

drawn carts often caused the firemen to arrive at a fire after it was well underway. As a result, the building in which a fire began was usually destroyed, so the only thing the firemen could do was to try to prevent the fire from spreading. The men were certainly not adequately prepared to fight fires in the dark, during snowstorms, or in cold weather—in one fire the temperature was 28 degrees below zero.

In June 1926 the fire department, essentially unchanged since the war years, consisted of 24 volunteers, and a part-time paid chief, two city fire stations, one "hand hook and ladder truck," and four "hand hose carts," the word "hand" indicating that the truck and carts were pulled by the men. A hand-operated bell on each fire station sounded the fire alarm, until an electric fire siren was purchased in 1928. The conditions that provided fertile breeding ground for fires had changed little—highly flammable structures, wooden shingles, inadequate chimneys, overheated stoves, and ignorance and carelessness. With grossly inadequate fire fighting equipment, and a continuation of the conditions that bred fires, Washburn, as in previous years, repeatedly teetered on the brink of a fire cataclysm.

By the 1930s the fire monster appears to have been brought under control. Buildings were upgraded with fireproofing, while

many people re-roofed their houses with asphalt shingles. The city's fire fighting force appears to have remained the same, except that in March 1932 the first fire truck was purchased. In contrast to earlier years, there were no major conflagrations that threatened to burn down the business district. In two instances the fire proofing of part of a business building prevented potentially dangerous fires from spreading. In one case, film in the projection room of the Rex Theater in the Rait Building caught fire but was prevented from spreading by recently installed fireproofing. In another case a fire in a commercial garage in an area with supplies of gasoline, oil, and other flammables was also confined by fireproofing. Other businesses were not so fortunate, however, and were heavily damaged or destroyed by fire. There were also fewer residence fires than in previous years, with only one house being totally destroyed and several damaged. Sawdust and slabs burning underground at mill sites resisted the efforts of the fire department for several years, occasionally spreading acid smoke throughout the west end of the city or breaking to the surface and igniting grass and bushes. The fire was finally extinguished by water piped to it from an artesian well.