

Fighting an 1871 Fire with Snowballs Tales of Earlier Days By Bob Dewel

Yes, it's true. Fire fighting in early Baraboo was once so primitive that the volunteers resorted to snowballs to fight a fire! They also saturated blankets and carpets, hung to impede the fire. It is hard to believe that 150 years after Ben Franklin organized the first American fire dept in Philadelphia, some of the ideas had not filtered down to Baraboo.

We've already written of the great fires of 1872 and 1878 that destroyed most of a full block of frame structures on both Fourth Avenue and Oak Streets. There was an earlier one, however, on Dec, 3, 1871, that should have been a warning to the business people. In three hours, this one destroyed six frame structures on Third Avenue, plus another on Oak.

Third Avenue is hit Next.

Spared, remarkably, was one of the first buildings ever erected on the square--the structure at 137 Third Avenue currently occupied by attorneys Viney and Viney. Also spared was the historic Taylor Hall on the SE corner of Third and Broadway. A vacant lot helped save both structures. The newly erected Sauk County bank on the SW

corner was spared thanks to the solid brick wall that it presented to the fire.

Only four years before, the bank had been burned out of its original location at 135 Third Avenue, now the South Central Educational Association location. Skipping around the new bank building in 1871, Camp's Drug Store on Oak also burned, raising fears that all of Oak Street would go also. Both sides of that street were quickly evacuated of merchandise. Inventories were small then.

As was customary in fires those days, nearby buildings, away from the fire but destined to be consumed shortly, were literally torn down after the meager contents had been removed. They were wood frame structures, easily collapsed by removal of supporting beams. The compacted remains presented less opportunity for the fire to continue to spread.

Unlike the other fires on which we have reported, this fire occurred during a snowstorm, though wind is not mentioned as a factor. The fire is said to have spread more slowly than most due to this. The usual bucket brigade was supplemented, according to historian Joe Ward, with a snowball barrage from the assembled crowd. The fire alarm was sounded just as the churches were letting out, and thus a great crowd had assembled.

A Near Fatality

This fire almost claimed a victim, for one owner, Obert, failed to completely escape some falling timbers, and was nearly buried in burning debris. Thanks to fast action by Hank Brisco, he was dragged from the embers with his clothing on fire. It is said that "Obert's face was badly swollen and blackened, half of his hair is burnt off, aside from his eyes being terrible inflamed".



This picture was taken several years after the fire and rebuilding.

The four buildings on the right survived the fire. The first three on the right have since been veneered with brick and present a fine appearance today. The fourth from the right was recently restored, looking much the same today as in pioneer days. It is believed to be the oldest building on the square.

All of the other buildings, except the bank on the far corner, were constructed after the fire and look much the same today, albeit new fronts for the lower level.

As it would in other fires, the Republic newspaper all but welcomed the fires as a way of eliminating ramshackle buildings, and then presenting the city with the consistently nineteenth century two story facades we now enjoy. Tourists liken us to a Normal Rockwell painting.

Taylor Hall

Three buildings are believed to have escaped other early fires, the present Viney and Viney structure, now restored and the most intact. A little of the original structure is said to remain under the veneer of the frequently remodeled and enlarged Baraboo National Bank. The old Taylor Hall on the corner of Third and Broadway is likewise unrecognizable from its early days, and is handsomely veneered with brick.

It might be noted here that the first Sauk County Fair was held in this Taylor building Oct. 16, 1855. In its first two decades it served as sort of a civic center, ranging from the county fair to dance hall and public meeting hall. At one time August Ringling had his wagon and harness shop there, with the young family living upstairs.

There were other downtown fires in the early days, and also in modern times, but none as spectacular as the three we have reported. Our modern fire fighting control, plus building and wiring codes, reduces not only the frequency but the severity of our fires, downtown and otherwise.

This comfortable belief was tested significantly on Feb. 2, 1957 when fire destroyed a substantial building on the NW corner of Oak and Second Streets. We've already written extensively on that blaze, which consumed the Masonic Hall and the McGann Furniture store. It threatened

not only the adjacent buildings but also those across the street East.

Perhaps in the future there will be an article on major fires away from the business district. There are dozens. How many can you name?