

Another Disastrous fire, Oak Street Tales of Earlier Days By Bob Dewel

The previous article detailed Baraboo's business losses in the great fire of 1872, which destroyed eight frame buildings on Fourth Street. Of primary concern then was saving the three story frame Western Hotel on the SE corner of Oak and Fourth. It was across the street from the fire, but endangered.

Baraboo's finest then, its classic frontier facade would make a great set for a Western movie today. Covered sidewalks sported a wrap-around porch on the second story. Its wood frame construction was virtually an invitation for a monstrous fire.

Saving the hotel had been a primary object in dealing with the Fourth Street fire across the street in 1872. Little did those valiant volunteers know that their worst fears would be realized just 6 years, with an equally disastrous fire on Oak Street.

On a chilly November morning, November 13, 1878, fire broke out shortly after 7 A.M. in a frame building located on Oak Street owned by Charles Sumner. The news report speaks of it as being in the center of the block, which it developed was the space occupied by the Corner Drug Store today.

Like the Fourth Street fire six years previously, wind was a factor, so

much so that it "conveyed the flames southerly to other buildings in the block...the heat was so intense as to cause the fire to back up against the wind and take out the buildings to the north" also.

The latter action involved not only Pfannsteil's Bakery but the Western Hotel itself. Crossing the alley to the South, next to go was the Gatticker building, housing the Junge and Kartack barber shop, the saloon of P.J. Luther. And A. Ringling's harness shop.

Ringling was known as the father of seven talented sons, who would bust upon the American scene in just six years with their first circus performance just two blocks from southwest of this conflagration. No one guessed this then, of course.

It appeared now that there was no stopping the fire with the primitive fire fighting equipment of the time. Three buildings remained on the block, the southern-most being the Grocery of W. Barrington. Should it burn, the fire might spread across the street south, effectively destroying a significant portion of Baraboo's downtown.

The solution was clear. Husky men quickly cleared the two intervening buildings, a grocery and a jewelry store, and physically tore down the frame structures. No doubt horses and ropes were employed to pull down rafters and other supporting structures. This successfully defeated the progress of the fire.

The rapidly evacuated contents had been carted over to the Courthouse lawn always referred to as the Courthouse Park in those days. There they could be claimed by the distraught shopkeepers. The jeweler was probably the most concerned. The Republic played down the serious blow the fire



Sauk County Historical Society photo

After the fire, larger and grander structures took the place of the earlier frame structures. Construction quality was upgraded, and all of the replacement buildings are in use today, both on the main and second stories.

Like the other downtown streets, nearly all buildings on Oak Street are of a similar era of construction. Thus the core of the downtown presents the cohesive atmosphere of a specific historic period.

made to the business community, remarking that the buildings lost were “mostly old, and of comparatively little value.

Even the Western Hotel would not be missed, having been closed only two weeks previously after 31 years on the scene. Mrs. E.A. Wright of Prairie du Sac was the owner of the replacement building she had constructed. It remains today, housing the Oak Street Antiques and the Amber-Moon. Her name is on the building

The intensity of these downtown fires was illustrated during the height of the conflagration, when embers ignited the cupola of the courthouse across the street. This old brick and frame construction was saved only by “a brave rush of men to the rescues. Ladders came from all quarters...men reached the fire both from the inside and the outside, and the building was saved.” In 25 years it too would burn

In a concluding paragraph, the Republic said the fire had been anticipated for years, and “must ultimately result in a great improvement of the city’s busies center”. One needed only to look at the rapid replacement of buildings on Fourth Street. Handsome brick structures had risen since the great Fourth Street fire of 1872. Standing proudly on the corner was a new and sturdy structure, housing the Cornerstone Gallery today.

True to its prediction, two story structures still extant today occupy the once devastated block. There are more spectacular fires ahead in the tinder-box frame structures of early Baraboo. Maybe one more fire article, involving snowballs!