

# Iberia's Disastrous Fire - April 22, 1939

By Gary Knehans

Several area communities have had their turns at suffering tremendous losses of life and property caused by devastating blazes. Iberia's turn came on a lazy Saturday afternoon, April 22, 1939, at around 4:45. A gasoline tank truck was in the process of filling an underground tank in front of the Adams Produce Company on St. Louis Street when a passing high school boy struck a match on the metal elbow of the fuel hose to light a cigarette. The small match flame was all it took to ignite fumes from the tank.

The fuel truck quickly was engulfed in flames, prompting its driver to jump out for fear of an explosion. Meanwhile, a well-meaning employee of the produce company grabbed the fuel hose and removed it from the tank but aggravated the situation by accidentally spraying the front of Adams Produce Company with gasoline. The blaze quickly leaped to the wooden building.

Meanwhile, the truck's owner, J. A. Eads, alertly rushed to the scene with a fire extinguisher, shut

off the gasoline at the tank and bravely jumped into the truck and fearlessly drove it away to prevent it from igniting other structures. When he had driven it to a safer location, Eads stopped the truck and put the blaze out with the fire extinguisher.

By now, the hungry flames at the produce store had spread to the Arthur Jones Garage, which was occupied by the Harry McGill Truck Line, and to Brose Dickerson's adjoining two-story building. Citizen fire brigades were quickly organized to keep the conflagration from spreading, but to no avail. The fire spread to the Irwin and Perkins garage, office and supply building, the C. L. Casey office building and the Bank of Iberia.

Then came the most devastating development of all. Fed by a brisk southeasterly wind, the fire made the leap across St. Louis Street to the Adams and Casey Mercantile Company.

"When this building caught fire, the entire business district of town seemed inevitably doomed," wrote the editor of the Iberia Sentinel. "And had it not been for the heroic effort on the part of



Looking northwest on Main Street in Iberia.

many, the business block on the south side of Main Street would have been destroyed. Practically all the glass fronts of business houses on Main Street facing the fire were broken and the Nixdorf building caught fire one or two times from the intense heat, but a

well organized bucket brigade stationed upstairs in the front windows kept water applied to the scorched weatherboarding and extinguished the flame as soon as it started."

Despite this small victory, the fire soon engulfed the Rowden Hotel

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and several private residences and threatened to cross Highway 42 and spread to the Farnham Store and other structures there. Finally though, some good luck intervened. The concrete walls of a building at the corner of the block held the raging inferno back and prevented it from jumping across the highway. This gave firefighters the foothold they needed to begin to bring the blaze under control.

By the time the last flicker was extinguished, fourteen buildings had burned with a loss of fifty to sixty thousand dollars, much of which was not covered by insurance. The three heaviest losers were Adams and Casey (about \$9000), Adams Produce Company (about \$4000) and M. E. Kinder (also about \$4000). Fortunately, there was no loss of life.

The blaze knocked out Iberia's light and power system, plunging the community into darkness that night. The few remaining merchants were swamped with people wanting to purchase kerosene lamps and lanterns.

"Practically every family in town had to hunt up the old discarded kerosene can to fill same, in order that there might be light in the homes and business places," the Iberia Sentinel reported.

Merchants who were financial victims of the fire scrambled to stay solvent and to locate unoccupied structures to regenerate their affected businesses. For a while, the Adams Produce Company was forced to conduct its business out on the street.

When word spread about the devastating fire, a flood of sight-seers converged on Iberia.

"Iberia had more visitors Saturday night and Sunday than we have seen here for many years," write the Iberia Sentinel editor. "They came from far and near to view the ruins of the big fire Saturday evening. We had people here from St. Louis, Kansas City, Jefferson City, Sedalia, Rolla, Russellville, Dixon, Richland, Eldon, Crocker, Tuscumbia, Brumley, Ulman, and many other places. Local restaurants and cafes did a rushing business."

People who lived as far away as 25 miles to the northwest said they could see the smoke boiling from the raging inferno that almost destroyed the entire business district of Iberia. But for a few walls of concrete, the careless striking of a match might have caused catastrophic devastation and suffering in this Miller County community.



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