

Great Balls of Fire

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Last Monday morning about 8 o'clock the people of our little town were startled by hearing a report that seemed to come from an immense cannon, and those who live in the vicinity of the hotel were almost blinded by what seemed to be two large balls of fire, one at the south end of the hotel and the other just over the croquet grounds in the Public Square. Immediately a dense volume of smoke was seen issuing from the hotel, and by that time the majority of those living in town were there examining every part of the house, thinking the lightning (for such was the cause of the report) had struck it and set it on fire. The smoke still continuing to pour out, someone ran upstairs and discovered that it came from a room in the southern end of the house in which a telegraph instrument was placed and which was connected with other instruments at the residences of Dr. M. M. Lane's and Mr. G. W. Colley's.

The instrument was used up - the wall where the wires ran were blackened and torn, pieces of brick and plastering were broken from the flue nearby, and the battery of the instrument broken to atoms. Immediately on seeing the cause of the damage there several persons thought of Merton Lane, who also has an instrument, and, as he is an invalid, his bed was so placed that to operate he need not get up. Everyone expected to find that the shock had seriously injured, or perhaps killed, Merton, but he was not at all hurt nor scarcely frightened, though his instrument and battery were broken to pieces, the same as at the hotel. It is thought that if

the current of electricity has been as strong there as at the hotel the result might have been serious to Mertie. As it was it is a wonder that he was not hurt. Opinions differ as to whether the telegraph wire was the cause of it all, or whether the lightning struck the house or wire first, some thinking that the latter saved the former from being burned up. We think that the lightning struck the wire and house at the same time, as near the chimney, the weatherboarding was torn loose and the wall bulged in on the inside.

A stove-pipe running through the upper room was followed down into the room below, tearing a hole in a piece of zinc under the stove. After striking the wire it followed it along about a hundred yards, melting all it touched. In the court house yard, where still others think it struck first, it formed an immense ball of fire, from which radiated bright streaks

which at last broke into millions upon millions of sparks, making a display which far excelled in grandeur any display of fire-works we ever saw. For an instant we were blinded by the brightness, and several, with ourself, at first thought it was a meteor or aerolite that had fallen from above.

It was a terrific explosion and everyone expected to find the inmates of the hotel hurt or killed, but they were only shocked pretty severely. Right Hale and Laura Logan, who were sitting in the north room, could hardly see or stand, while Miss Phoebe Black, who was in the same room, could hardly walk for several hours. Collector Skaggs was standing in the door of Burchard's drug store, and his forehead was burned as if by powder.

Several others who were in the same place had to hold to something to keep from falling down. Mr. Colley and his son Charley, were in the store at the time, the forehead of the latter and the back of the head of the former being burned or hurt. John Christeson, who was

standing directly between the two, hardly felt the shock. In less than a minute after the report came the streets were alive with people, bareheaded, running thither and thither, so excited that they hardly knew what they were doing or what they were seeking for.

Waynesville has never experienced anything like it before, so the old settlers say, and we trust she never will again, for it surely was a miracle that someone was not killed. Had it come two or three hours sooner seven persons would have stood a fair chance of being rushed into eternity, as that number were sleeping in the room in which the explosion occurred, four of them in close proximity to the instrument that was broken. We do not pretend to know whether the lightning first struck the house or wire; but if the former, it certainly was saved by the latter carrying most of the electricity off in another direction. If the latter, neither would have occurred had the instruments been open, but they were carelessly left closed during the



On the porch of the Black Hotel, ca. 1899, are (sitting) Eliza (holding unidentified baby) and Lewis Black; standing (left) unidentified woman and daughter Amanda Black.

storm and that might have been the cause. Anyway telegraphy in Waynesville is at an end, and we are thankful for the intervention of a kind Providence.