

Richland Fire and Water

compiled by Terry Primas

[We have had the picture at bottom center for several years but never came across any information about the big fire, at least not up to 1911. On a fine fall day last year, the editor was in Richland and determined that he would not leave until he had some information about this fire. Beginning with one source, which led to another and another, he wound up talking to a group of longtime Richlanders. Their collective memories could not agree on the year of the fire but there was some consensus that it was in the 1940s, early or late. Finally, one suggested that the editor talk to Mr. Al Lercher at the Tri-County Nursing Home. We found Mr. Lercher in his room and he was most affable, as well as knowledgeable about Richland's history. He mulled it over some and then said there was a big fire in the business section just before he came to Richland in 1932. He suggested looking at the newspapers between the years of 1929 and 1931. As you will read, there wasn't one fire but two less than three weeks apart. They didn't quite add up to \$100K but exaggeration was part of the business or there may have been another big one in the Forties. All of the following news items are from the Richland Mirror of 1930-31. We thank Mr. Lercher for pointing us in the right direction.]

July 10

**THE RICHLAND FIRE
Friday Morning, July 4,
1930, Richland Was Visited
By a Most Destructive Fire.**

SEVEN STORE BUILDINGS ENTIRELY DESTROYED, WITH CONTENTS

Last Friday morning, July 4, 1930, at about one o'clock occurred the most destructive and costly fire in Richland's history. Our citizens were awakened to find almost the entire block of business houses on McClurg avenue, facing the railroad, in flames.

The fire was first discovered by Mrs. Bert Cunningham, of the Richland Cafe, with a glare of light in her bedroom window. Both Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham at once gave the alarm; a large number rushed to the scene; guns were fired and the Gem Theatre siren sounded, but being the Fourth of July some were

slow to respond thinking it was fire works. Soon, however, the glare of light and sound of falling timbers awakened many.

The telephone operators, Miss Chrystina Bradford and Mrs. J. N. Goss, turned in a call to neighboring towns and to the country around, and to them much credit is due in getting so many to the scene. They remained at their post even though several times the heat was intense and the building seemed in danger.

The fire originated in O. M. Davis' meat market adjoining Bryant's general store on the west. Just how it started will never be known. It is thought by many that it was from crossed wires between the ceiling and roof while others thought that it caught from firecrackers.

When men arrived at the scene the interior of the Davis Meat Market and Grocery was in flames, which were fed by the meat and lard, and made such an intense blaze that it was impossible to save any of the contents.

The fire next swept its fury on the Teeple Undertaking and Music room adjoining which was entirely destroyed, nothing saved but the books and two birds hanging in front windows. Mr. Teeple had just received a shipment of fine caskets and two new Maytag washing machines, which together with the other stock were destroyed.

Next in line was the large general

store of J. A. Tanner, which occupied three store rooms. Mr. Tanner had also received a shipment of goods which had not yet been marked. His entire stock, together with the buildings, was destroyed.

The Morgan Hardware, a large double store room with a large stock of hardware, paints, etc., came next, and in a short time was nothing but a mass of ruins. Some few light articles in the front part of the room were saved by the valiant fire fighters, carrying them across the street.

The *Richland Mirror*, in a two-story brick building, came next and it was thought for a time the high brick wall would check the flames, but the intense heat from the paints and oils in the hardware store, which burned with such fury and lapped over the high wall and onto the roof catching fire to a skylight in the roof, the flames soon penetrated to the upper floor and gradually dropped through, completely destroying the contents. The high double wall on the west of The Mirror building, together with the fact that the contents being mostly machinery and metal type helped to check the flames and here the havoc stopped.

Rooms over the Mirror office were occupied by Dr. T. B. Tayman's dental office, Art Bryan's insurance office and C. N. Noe, manager of the Federal Loan.

Everything was bone dry and the flames raged with fierceness and speed assisted by a stiff breeze, the workers were driven from their tasks.

J. A. Tanner owned five of the burned buildings, the O. M. Davis market,

Teeple Undertaking store and the three rooms which he occupied with a general merchandise stock. His loss is estimated at \$35,000 with only \$17,500 insurance.

E. K. Morgan's loss including the building and stock is about \$18,000 with about \$9,000 insurance.

R. B. Teeple is in St. Louis and we have been unable to learn his loss, but everything was destroyed and only partially insured.

The City Meat Market, owned by O. M. Davis, was a complete loss, estimated at about \$4,000, with small insurance.

Dr. T. B. Tayman's loss was about \$600 with no insurance.

Art Bryant's loss on equipment was about \$100 and C. N. Noe's loss was small.

The west wall of Cowan & Bryant's store was considerably damaged by the intense heat and some of the stock damaged by smoke.

Charles J. Seeburger's drug store [see picture on next page] sustained some loss to stock and fixtures in being carried out to the railroad park and after the fire, by being replaced in the building.

The Richland Cafe, Lippencotte Barber Shop and Richland Cigar Store were completely cleared of their contents, with little or no damage.

This disaster is an inestimable loss to Richland and the owners of the property are undecided about rebuilding on the burned district.

People for miles in every direction rushed to Richland to help in checking the flames. Crocker, Swedeborg, Wet Glaize and Hazelgreen were represented at this early morning fire disaster.

It took hard work to save the buildings on the west side of Pine street as some of the sheds in the rear of buildings caught fire several times, and it was feared that this row of buildings would also go up in flames.

Bucket brigades were formed and the wells along the street were soon pumped dry and water was even carried from the City Hall well. This disastrous fire certainly showed that Richland should have a water works. This loss, which falls to a very few, could much more vastly have been borne by all the tax payers of the town, for



The scene that sparked our interest in Richland's big fire also led to Richland's interest in building a municipal water system when the smoke cleared. This appears to be the first fire of the business row along McClurg Avenue. Courtesy of Jan and Terry Primas.

with a water works system these buildings could have been saved.

July 17

MIRROR LOSES FILES

In our write-up of the fire last week we in some way released one sheet of copy which told of the Mirror office and equipment being entirely destroyed; nothing saved but a few books, the subscription book, ledger, order book and the Mirror files for this year. We thought we had the book containing records of business done from January 1 to July 1, but in the dark we got an old book dated 1927-28.

One great loss, and one which every newspaper man mourns, was the files since the *Mirror* was first established. Those files were not only treasured by us but were sometimes referred to by some of our subscribers in settling legal matters. They were a weekly history of Richland and vicinity for twenty-two years and their loss is inestimable.

The *Mirror* office was well equipped, the Linotype being practically good as new and the loss was heavy with only small insurance.

We were indeed fortunate in getting *The Laclede County Republican* to print our paper until we can get new equipment. Anyway, we "stepped on the



This is a view of the western end of the charred block of businesses in the 1920s, prior to the fire. Charles Seeburger's drug store is at the extreme left at the corner of McClurg and Chestnut streets, the light brick store behind the car and boy, mostly hidden by the large tree. To the right of it is J. A. Warren's real estate and cigar store. Next to it is the Pulaski County Bank building, housing Dr. T. B. Tayman, dentist. Courtesy of John Bradbury.

gas" and never missed an issue.

July 24

A \$45,000 FIRE

Richland Suffered From a Second Visitation of Destroying Flames.

THREE LARGE STORE BUILDINGS AND CONTENTS BURNED

At 1:30 Wednesday morning our citizens were awakened by the firing of guns and cry of fire! fire!

The fire started in the rear of the Gem Theatre building on Pine street and when first discovered, the interior was a mass of flames and in a very short time was in ruins.

The next to go was the building south of the Gem, Mrs. Lizzie York's

restaurant. Here, too, everything was lost.


The fire was stopped on the south by the Steward & Chalfant Meat Market and Grocery, located in the Payne building, which had a concrete block wall.

On the north of the Gem Theatre was the large double two story building occupied by the Richland Hardware and Furniture Company; also the Masonic and Eastern Star Lodges. It commenced here with renewed force and the men worked heroically and faced danger to save the other buildings. With a bucket brigade and the few chemical fire extinguishers, it took hard work to save the Steward & Chalfant Meat Market and Grocery in the row of burned buildings and the Parsons Motor Company across the street from the hardware store. Here considerable damage was done by the breaking of plate glass across the entire front. The Chalfant building adjoining the Parsons Motor Company was also damaged by cracking of plate glass. Roofs of both buildings were damaged. The wall of the Payne building was also badly damaged.

The Gem Theatre, owned by Roy Parsons, had only recently installed expensive talking machines. It was an up-to-date small town theatre with

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The loss was \$6,000 and Mr. Parsons had no insurance.

The *Mirror* had taken a fine desk and chair from their home, after the *Mirror* office was destroyed by fire July 4 and had desk space in the lobby of the Gem Theatre. This furniture, together with valuable records, were totally destroyed. We had been carrying subscription book and ledger to and from our home and these were again saved. The *Mirror* loss here is hard to estimate. [*The Mirror was operated by H. S. Rittenhouse, Editor and Mrs. Rittenhouse, Assistant.*]

Mrs. York lost everything in the restaurant including a piano. Loss \$900 with no insurance.

The hardware building was owned by Mr. E. Lingsweiler and was one of the landmarks of Richland. It was a double store and two stories. The Richland Hardware and Furniture Company used the first floor for hardware and part of the second floor for furniture, the other part of second floor being used by the Masonic Lodge and Eastern Star. These lodges lost all of their furnishings but we believe the records were saved. The loss to lodges is \$2,500 with \$1,000 insurance. Mr. Lingsweiler's loss on building is \$15,000 with only \$6,000 insurance.

The Gem Theatre Building and one occupied by Mrs. York's restaurant were owned by H. E. Warren, Jr., and H. R. Cowan. Loss \$6,000 with \$4,000 insurance.

The Richland Hardware Store had only last week taken over the Morgan hardware stock saved from the fire of July 4. Their loss is estimated at \$10,000 with \$7,500 insurance.

The Parsons Motor Company building is owned by H. E. Warren and damage is estimated at \$1,000.

The Missouri Light & Power Company a loss of about \$300 of equipment.

The ruins from the fire of July 4 on Main Street and now these three large store buildings speak more than we can possibly do as to whether Richland needs a water works. Men worked, at the risk of their lives, on adjacent buildings and on buildings across the street, fighting with buckets of water to check the flames and save practically the entire section from destruction.

The flames spread with such terrific speed that it was almost impossible to save anything. Some few articles from the hardware store were carried out.

The fire raged for two hours before the walls of the hardware store fell; then the blaze subsided.

People came from Lebanon, Crocker, Swedeborg and the surrounding country.

The origin of the fire is unknown. It was first discovered by A. W. Smith, an employee of the City Bakery.

July 31

SOME AFTER FIRE NEWS

Our writeup of the fire July 23 was written before daylight, hence some items were missed.

Considerable stock on the first floor of the Richland Hardware Furniture Company, owned by James O'Halloran and Clarence Hendricks was saved. This stock was carried to the basement of the fine new M. E. church diagonally across the street. By noon the day of the fire they had rented the Chalfant building next to Parson Motor Company and will move their goods there as soon as Mr. W. H. Jones, undertaker, vacates. They also had a list made out for order of new goods. Mr. Jones will move to the cottage occupied by Rev. Murphy next to Mrs. Croatia Cunningham's as soon as Rev. Murphy's son, Judson, who has typhoid fever, is able to be moved into the fine new parsonage. The Chalfant building front which was destroyed is being repaired.

The Payne building, occupied by the Steward and Chalfant meat market and grocery and the City Baker, was considerably damaged, practically all the upper windows being broken. The building was saved only by tearing the porch down. Work of remodeling is being done on this building.

We are informed that the following will be rebuilt as soon as possible:

E. Lingsweiler will erect a large two-story where the hardware store was located.

H. E. Warren, Jr., and H. E. Cowan

will build where the Gem Theatre and Gem Restaurant buildings were.

C. W. Warren is building on the lot where the *Mirror* office was formerly located.

E. K. Morgan and J. H. Tanner will most likely build on their lots but have not fully decided.

The Woodward building occupied by Missouri Light & Power Company and McCann & Chalfant cleaning and pressing was considerably damaged by heat.

Mrs. Eva Forner's restaurant building across the street was badly scorched by intense heat and some slight damage done to the S. H. Winsor building occupied by Bryant Bros. Barber Shop.

Burned and charred pieces were carried quite a distance. The *Mirror* family noticed pieces in the yard at their home.

The roof of the H. E. Warren & Sons, Inc. store caught in several places but as watchers were on the roof the blaze was soon extinguished.

The *Mirror* has "table" space in the rear of the Bryant Bros. barber shop.

For Sale - Some surplus office keys by the *Richland Mirror*.

J. M. and Clair Chalfant are having a new front put in their building.

Mrs. Eva Forner is having the front of her building renovated from the fire damage.

Parson Motor Company is keeping "open house," all the glass in the front of the building being out.

August 13

Fire Siren

A fire siren was placed on the roof of the Missouri Standard Telephone office Tuesday of last week and is operated from the switch board. The siren is

sounded one time each week day at 12 o'clock; and in case of fire will be sounded several times.

Roy Parsons purchased the siren for the city, and work of installation was donated by R. Rebery, of the Missouri Electric Company. A. A. Parson, Jr. of the Standard Oil Company, donated the red paint and Mr. J. W. Goss of the Telephone Company, wielded the paint brush.

August 21

WATER WORKS NECESSARY

On Tuesday, September 2, 1930, there will be held in the City of Richland, a special election to vote on a bond issue of \$50,000 for the purpose of building a water works system in our town.

The *Mirror* believes that every citizen who has at heart this advancement of Richland will go to the polls and vote yes on this very necessary need of this City.

September 4

WATERWORKS CARRIED Bond Issue of \$50,000 Voted at Richland Five to One

March 13 [1931]

The Richland Water Works system is completed, and on last Thursday was officially turned over to the city by the H. Proserpi Construction Co. of Springfield, Mo. contractor.

For several days previous, tests had been made of the well as to the supply of water, one test was pumping 130 gallons of water a minute for thirteen hours without lessening the flow of water. This test alone was conclusive evidence that we have a fine well of water. The well is 900 feet deep, the water is pure and clear as a crystal, and is also soft. [*This is hard to believe.*]

After the reservoir and tower had been filled, all fire plugs were opened in order to flush the pipes of any foreign substance.

The pressure was tried at one fire plug and was strong enough to throw water over the top of the Richland Hardware store building. The contractors had the water mains patrolled for several days to see if there were any leaks, but none were found. There were, however, three minor leaks found at fire plugs, but were soon stopped. All this was done before the contractor turned the job over as completed.

Friday morning, March 6, 1931, the meters were opened at the different homes and places of Business and our citizens experienced the sensation of getting water by the simple turn of a faucet, thus deriving the benefit of a real water system.



East Pine Street, looking east, in 1923, before the fires in 1930. The large building at left was a hardware store, with an interesting ladder construction on the awning leading to a second floor window. The fourth building, tall and narrow with a second story awning, housed the telephone company office. The object in the street at right appears to be a partly constructed (or dismantled) roadside gasoline pump. Courtesy of John Bradbury.