

A DIXON DISASTER

BLAZE LEVELED HOTEL

By Gary Knehans

Lacking today's modern firefighting equipment and methods, early settlers in Pulaski County lived with the fear that any fire could become a blazing inferno.

Each community's history is charred by a great fire that destroyed homes and businesses. The city of Dixon has had more than its share of disastrous fires. A conflagration did much damage to downtown Dixon in 1913.

Some years earlier, fire destroyed the largest hotel in town, the Pulaski House, which was built by John Dawe and was the second hotel built in that fledgling community.

The fire broke out about nine-thirty in the evening on November 2, 1889. By the time the blaze was discovered, it was too late to save this grand structure. The people of the community were forced to direct their efforts to save as much of the hotel's contents as possible. However, the great heat of the blaze drove many back.

The community's attention quickly shifted to attempting to keep the fire from spreading to adjoining structures. The greatest danger was to a block occupied by W. L. Wilson, William Heller, Sr., T. J. Lewis, and Franklin and Company. These buildings

were saved, but the building occupied by Heller's business was on fire several times.

The owner of the Pulaski House had to be carried to another hotel, the Frisco House. Dawe was in bed with pneumonia and was totally unconscious of his loss. The hotel was not insured.

The cause of the fire was determined to be due to the negligence of a servant girl, who was believed to have tossed a lighted match on to the floor of her room. The match was believed to have caught a nearby dress on fire and quickly spread from there.



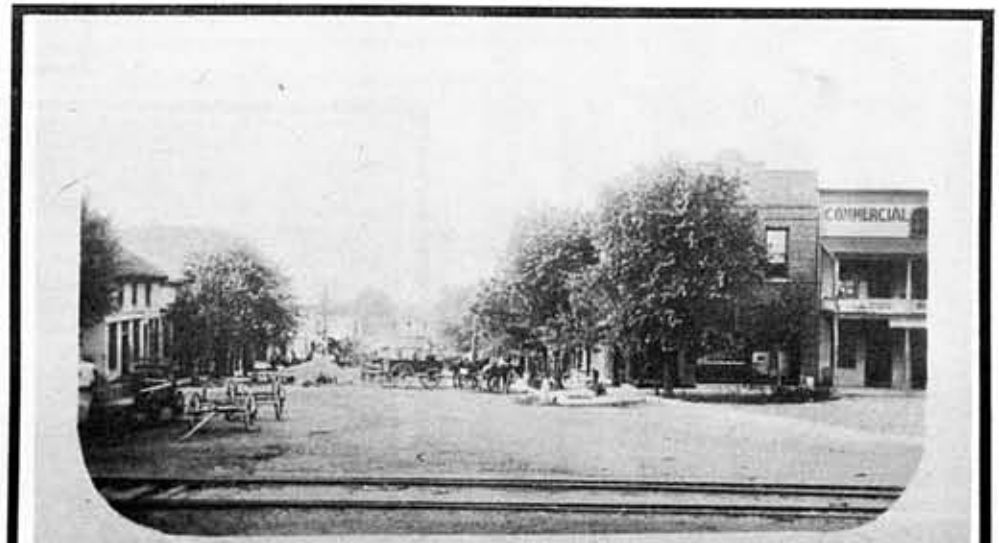
Downtown Dixon Square featuring the old bandstand.

(Photo courtesy of Lois Kreiser)



Nostalgic Dixon street scene looking east from the Methodist Church.

(Photo supplied by Lois Kreiser)



View from the past looking north from the railroad tracks in Downtown Dixon. Brick building on the right is the old Masonic Hall. The Commercial Hotel is on the far right.

(Photo furnished by Lois Kreiser)

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WRECK OF WORLD'S FAIR SPECIAL

By Gary Knehans

It was billed as "The Fast Mail Train, The World's Fair Special". Yet here it was on this early spring morning in 1902, its cars strewn along the railroad tracks west of Dixon, its proud engine lying in the mud, its faithful roadmaster crushed to death.

Killed instantly when the train derailed that March 28th was Roadmaster Parsons, a resident of Newburg who had a wife and two children. Scalded by the escaping steam from the locomotive's engine were Engineer Robert Lyons and Fireman Charles Wagner, both of Springfield.

The passengers of "The World's Fair Special" were much more fortunate. None of them was seriously hurt, although they sustained some bruises and were badly shaken up.

Two Dixon doctors, Harrison and Von Gremp, rushed to the scene and dressed the injured men. They were helped by a Texas doctor who was a passenger on the train. The doctors supervised the transfer of Lyons and Wagner to hotels in Dixon for further treatment of the severe burns.

One victim was taken to the Commercial Hotel while the other was taken to the Frisco Hotel.

The cause of the accident was a broken rail. The train, which was behind schedule at the time of the derailment, was running at 45 miles per hour when it rounded a curve. The force of the train when it struck the broken rail turned its engine on its side. The baggage car mounted the tender of the engine. The second car was thrown into a ditch and left standing on its end. The next car was turned

straight across the track and the front tracks of the next coach were thrown from the rails. The rest of the cars did not leave the track.

In time, the wreckage was cleared away and the tracks were repaired. But it was a long time before the passengers on that train and the residents of Dixon forgot about the fateful events on the morning of March 28, 1902, the day "The World's Fair Special" met its fate. For survivors of the Roadmaster, memories lasted a lifetime.

EARLY POPULATION FIGURES

Entering the twentieth century, Pulaski County continued to enjoy steady but unspectacular population growth. An article in the April 17, 1913, edition of "The Pulaski County Democrat" placed the 1900 population of the county at 10,394, a gain of about a thousand from the preceding census.

The published figures indicated the population explosion of the 1870's had slowed dramatically at the turn of the century. County population of 4714 in 1870 increased to 7250 residents

counted in the 1880 census. There were 9387 residents counted in the 1890 census. And by the time of the 1910 census, the county population stood at 11,488.

Very few blacks and foreign nationals lived in Pulaski County in 1910. Census statistics show the black population was just 22. The most numerous of the foreign nationals were 84 Swedish and 609 Germans. The Swedes settled around what is now Swedeborg. This was on land purchased from the railroad by a Swedish Company.