

IBERIA'S WORST

FIRE!

By Peggy Smith Hake

On April 22, 1939, late on a Saturday evening, the village of Iberia had her most devastating fire.

Jimmie Eads, driving a gasoline truck was filling an underground fuel tank in front of the Lev Adams Produce Company on St. Louis Street. While the tank was being filled, one of the town's young men came along and struck a match on the metal elbow of the hose to light his cigarette. The fumes from the tank were ignited and started a disastrous blaze. One of the produce company's employees grabbed the hose and removed it from the truck, spewing liquid fuel all over the front of the wooden building. In an instant the whole front of the produce store was in flames. The building and contents including books and money were destroyed.

Alfo "Alf" Eads, father of Jimmie, rushed to the scene; jumped into the cab after shutting off the gasoline and drove the truck all ablaze away from the burning building. The flames on the truck were extinguished by Mr. Eads in the flight of the truck.

The produce company which was only two years old was a large frame structure and burned quickly. Flames spread to the Arthur Jones Garage occupied by the Harry McGill Truck Lines and onward to the Brose Dickerson two story building adjoining. The fire spread backward to the Irwin and

Perkins Garage, then to the Clarence L. Casey office building...and to the Bank of Iberia, a one story structure located on the corner of the block.

The wind shifted, or the entire residential district east of the bank would have burned.

A brisk wind from the southeast carried the wall of fire across St. Louis Street and enveloped the George Adams and Clarence Casey Mercantile Company, a large frame building with a funeral home on the second floor. The Nixdorf building caught fire a couple of times from the intense heat, but a well organized bucket brigade of town residents, located in an upstairs window, kept the building saturated and finally saved the scorched, weatherboard building. From the Adams and Casey Store, the flames continued on their path westward. Destroyed was the old Rowden Hotel, occupied by the Oscar Wilson Restaurant on the first floor with rental rooms upstairs and the W.P.A. Sewing Room. The old Rowden residence at the back of the hotel was also destroyed along with a large two story structure built by Arthur Jones. A home owned by Melvin Perkins was destroyed and a building occupied by Hedges Beauty Shop was also a loss.

Next in line was M.E. Kinder's new private garage and the two story concrete building with Kinder's Restaurant and meat market inside.



Iberia before the disastrous fire!

(Photo courtesy of Peggy Smith Hake)

Black smoke could be seen billowing high in the skies and was seen for 25 miles. In all, 14 buildings were burned covering practically two business blocks, and only a small portion of these buildings were covered by insurance due to the fact that so many were wooden structures, constructed very close together. The three heaviest losses were incurred by Adams and Casey who had approximately \$16,000 stock in merchandise and funeral supplies; Lev Adams' Produce with a loss around \$4,000 and M.E. Kinder's Restaurant and living quarters with a loss of about \$4,000.

The town was in total darkness that Saturday night because the light and power systems were put out of commission by the fire. Local merchants reported a complete sell out of lamps and lanterns as the town reverted to a time of candlelight and kerosene lamps.

Following the fire, sightseers swarmed from St. Louis, Kansas City, Sedalia, Jefferson City, and Rolla.

History almost repeated itself in 1941 when another gasoline fire broke out at the same location..the Adams

Produce Exchange. An employee of the Exchange was filling the tank of a gasoline engine, which operated a hammermill inside the main building and it burst into flames. The tank ran dry and while trying to refill it from a five gallon can, the heat from the exhaust pipe ignited the gasoline in the tank and in the can. The employee was badly burned on his arms, hands and face. The flame was extinguished with the help of another employee and it burned itself out in the street in front of the produce exchange.

