

Licking's Great 1895 Fire

By Gary Knehans

On a muggy late June night a hundred years ago, residents and merchants of the peaceful Texas County farming community of Licking were jolted from their sleep by cries of "Fire! Fire!"

The first alarm was sounded at midnight by Miss S. E. Mansfield. She was abruptly awakened in her bedroom at Mansfield's Hotel by the intense light of the flames across the street and by the sound of glass popping from the heat. Miss Mansfield jumped out of bed and rang the hotel's dinner bell. One of the first men to arrive on the scene fired a loud blast from his shotgun, which effectively raised all but the soundest sleeper. Awakened citizens rushed to the burning downtown area from all parts of town. When they arrived, their hearts sank in despair. The battle to save Licking appeared lost before it had begun.

The fire, which apparently started in the notions department of W. S. Nichol's store, had already spread throughout the downtown area. One of the first men on the scene, Robert Marr, kicked in the front door of Nichol's store, but found the entire contents of the building ablaze.

It took only a few minutes for the fire to burst through the walls into Fancher's store. So quickly did the contents ignite that nothing could be saved.

Hungry flames rapidly spread south to Vanderbilt's Harness Shop, Miss

Fannie Weller's Millinery Shop, J. D. Julian's Hardware Store, and Moran's Clothing Store. Residents watched in horror as the fire also struck Dr. S. L. Mitchell's Drug Store.

About the same time Vanderbilt's Harness Shop ignited, first flames could be seen flickering from J. L. Campbell's Store across the street on the west side. The fire quickly jumped to Dr. B. F. Craven's drug store to the north. On the south, the fire burned the bank and traveled to W. A. Mansfield's Hotel, the Post Office, W. L. Arnot and Son's Store, A. Bradford's Hotel, and then to A. L. Ragland's dwelling.

People flocked to the downtown area from all directions. Men, women, and children were organized to save goods from the burning buildings. Nothing of course could be saved from the first structures to be ravished by the fire. Onlookers did save a few racks of harness from Vanderbilt's, much of the goods from Julian's Hardware and Moran's Clothing, and most of the contents of the two drug stores. In the rush, however, the rescuers had no time to target the most valuable items to save, many of which were lost to the fire.

Very little was saved from Campbell's. The fire destroyed all the outgoing morning mail at the Post Office. W. L. Arnot and Son was able to remove most all the contents from that store. Most everything was lost at

Mansfield's Hotel, but some furniture was saved at A. Bradford's. The loss was minimal at the Ragland house.

There was no attempt at first to make a stand against the fire. Its rapid spread and far reaching fury turned even the most courageous souls into fainthearted spectators. However, on the east side of the street, where the blaze originated, its southward progress was halted at a vacant lot where Baxter's livery stable once stood. The leaping flames could not jump this open area to structures to the south. With the threat on this front diminished, firefighting citizens led by Frank Mautz made a successful stand at the Cline residence, located on the northwestern edge of the fire. Their heroic efforts saved D. M. Meadows' store, a flouring mill, carding machine, and many adjacent buildings. Attention then turned to save the school house and to stop the southwest spread of the blaze at S. H. Rodgers' house.

The fight to save the schoolhouse was a dangerous mission. Heat from the burning buildings blew directly upon the firefighters. With cinders raining upon them and scorching heat bearing down, citizens led by the Campbell and Craven families managed to drench several sheds and barns near the schoolhouse to block the fire's advance on this front. Armstrong, the Baptist preacher, "handled water manfully," according to one report.

Thus contained, the devastating fire finally burn itself out. But as the townspeople surveyed its smoldering ruins, they could count only one store, one blacksmith shop, the carding

machine, and a flouring mill as all that was left of the business portion of Licking. Although no one lost his or her life in the tragedy, there was little reason for optimism as the flickering light of the dying flames finally surrendered to the darkness of night.

Investigation by next morning's light led to a general conclusion that the fire had been set by someone who had robbed W. S. Nichol's store. That person's identity was not known.

The losses were staggering. W. S. Nichol, in whose store the fire started, reported a loss of \$10,000. His insurance covered only \$1750 of the loss. The loss at J. L. Campbell's store was in the amount of \$8000, with insurance for only \$2000. The bank lost \$600 with no insurance coverage. In total, the fire inflicted \$33,195 in losses. Only \$6250 of this was covered by insurance.

The local newspaper, "The Licking News", narrowly averted disaster. Its proprietor had planned to move his operations, but a wedding feast delayed the relocation effort. Had it not been for that event, "The Licking News" would have been among the casualties of the big blaze.

Despite their monetary losses, town merchants rushed to bring much needed, replacement supplies into the community. For a while, until new buildings were constructed, the streets around the devastated downtown area came alive with groceries, drugs, and household goods.

The 1895 fire was the second disaster to hit Licking. The community was devastated by a tornado in 1881.

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