

1909 fires ravage towns, but Presbyterian church is saved

By Nancy Dingler

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It was a typical hot summer in the year 1909, when a conflagration of massive proportions began early Tuesday morning on July 13, behind the Munroe's Fairfield drugstore.

A few days earlier, on Sunday afternoon, the historic Raleigh Hotel was destroyed by a fire of such magnitude that it threatened many homes and the Presbyterian church in Vacaville. Both of these fires caused extensive property damage, but luckily no one was killed, though there were some nasty injuries.

Downtown Fairfield suffered the larger loss, in that most of the business district was destroyed. Around 1:45 that fateful morning, Mrs. O'Neill, whose home was next the drug store, sounded the alarm. Mr. and Mrs. Munroe lived in an apartment above the store, along with their tenant, Dr. B. Collenet. Thanks to Mrs. O'Neill's shouts, they awoken from their slumbers to find the store below engulfed and no way to exit their living quarters except to jump out the second-story windows.

Miss Gertie Lawler, upon hearing the shouts of fire, bolted from her bed, ran barefoot for two blocks to the fire house, where she rang the fire bell. On her way back home after having alerted the volunteer firefighters, Gertie stopped to help Ray Miller, ladder in hand, to assist the trapped Munroes and Dr. Collenet. Mr. Munroe kicked his bare foot through the window and in doing so, drove a piece of broken glass through his foot. He managed to get wife, tenant and himself down the ladder, but then had to be carried to a neighbor's home to be attended by the doctor.

When the fire engine came upon the scene, the fire was so intense and moving so rapidly, that the firefighters were overwhelmed. A call went out to the Suisun fire department, which responded with a gasoline-powered fire engine.

Through the firefighters, and town people's efforts, the fire was brought under control. Unfortunately, The Munroes lost everything, as the two-story building burned to the ground. D. Silverstine lost his store building, warehouse and stable, along with his entire stock of general merchandise.

Next door to Silverstine's, Mrs. Mean's residence and millinery and notions store was

also destroyed, along with the cottage, occupied by the County Recorder. The O'Neills were unable to save much; most everything was lost, except for a few clothes. Mrs. C. Elkerenkotter's and Joe Enos' hay-filled barns were also leveled.

Mr. Henry Goosen, the local prominent hardware store owner and water works proprietor, had a close call. The Goosen hardware store and residence narrowly escaped total destruction and were only saved by the foresight of Mr. Goosen to have a private well with a large pump installed just for this type of emergency. A steady stream of water was pumped onto his building, saving most of it.

The Raleigh Hotel in Vacaville was not so fortunate. By the time the alarm was sounded mid-day, the entire building was engulfed. First on the scene were G.B. Larose and Sam Bentley. The only means they had to quell the fire were chemical extinguishers, which were inadequate to the task.

When the fire department's hose carts arrived, one was sent behind the hotel and the second to the roof. The hand pumpers soon determined that they were inadequate to the task as well, for the fire was very fierce. The hose to the roof was withdrawn in a few minutes, the men not being able to withstand the intense heat.

Then further disaster struck. The power line in front of the hotel melted in the heat and the power had to be shut off. These lines ran the pump to the well for Main Street, which was supplying the water to the pumpers. Unable to get enough pressure, the firemen were almost helpless in face of the flame's onslaught. The firemen stopped their assault and turned their attention to helping people in adjoining buildings remove their belongings.

Just across Parker street stood the Presbyterian church, one of the handsomest houses of worship in Vacaville. The great heat began to scorch the east side of the church. The only way to reach the fire was from the roof. A hose was dragged onto the steep structure, where enough water was expelled to keep the roof wet. Watching crowds breathed a sigh of relief when the fire was finally halted. Had the church burned, it was believed that the flames would have spread to the parsonage, which would have led to other homes and the possibility of losing the entire town.

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