

## William Becker Fire - Part 1

The Monroe Evening Times reported on Friday afternoon, September 6, 1912 that William A. Becker suffered a \$30,000 loss by fire in 30 minutes. His lumber and feed shed as well as his store, located on the southeast corner of what is now 17th Avenue and 12th Street, were totally destroyed by flames. The fire that started about 3:00 p.m. was the most devastating fire that Monroe had seen in years. The fire also destroyed the feed barn of Thomas Curran, which was just east of the Becker property.

The historic home of George Spangler, immediately south of the Becker property, caught fire a few minutes after the Becker lumber yard was enveloped in flames and firemen struggled to save the residence. The lumber yard was almost a total mass of ruins 30 minutes after the fire started.

The fire was discovered by the family of Fred Maeder, who operated the tavern [now the French Quarter] across 17th Avenue from the Becker property. They called Herbert W. Becker to let him know his buildings were ablaze. He saw the hay on fire when he rushed outside. The entire lumber and feed yard was in flames before the firemen arrived. The flames were so hot that the firemen were unable to get any closer than across the street from the burning buildings. About 100 tons of hard coal, 400 tons of soft coal, and 200 bales of hay were stored in the barn. It was expected that the fire would probably smoulder for some time. The Curran feed barn and the Becker store, lumber yard, and buildings were a smoldering mass of ruins by 4:30.

Hundreds of spectators watched the fire from a distance as the blaze was extremely hot due to the lumber, oil, and paint that sent out a blast of flames and huge clouds of coal black smoke hundreds of feet in the air. The loss to Mr. Becker, who carried \$12,000 insurance, was estimated to be at least \$20,000.

Mr. Curran, who had little insurance, was expected to have a loss of about \$4,000. His house was also badly scorched on the west side next to the fire. The household goods were taken out of the homes of Mr. Curran, Ed Keehner, and Fred Leiser, who lived just east of the Curran barn. For some time it looked as though the flames would not be kept from sweeping up 12th Street and wiping out the entire row of houses on that block.

The roof of the Spangler house was damaged as was the roof on the home and saloon of Fred Maeder. The homes of J. H. Weber and Hugo Einbeck east of Spangler's and south of the Curran barn were scorched, but the damage was slight. The absence of wind prevented the fire from consuming dozens of buildings. The flames could have spread in any direction had the wind started up, but the dead calm saved thousands of dollars worth of property.

That afternoon it was surmised by some that the fire started by spontaneous combustion in the soft coal in the Becker coal shed since the flames seemed to break through the buildings almost instantly. The flames were under control about half an hour after the fire started.

The firemen responded in the course of a few minutes, but the flames made such rapid leaps that it seemed like ages to the bystanders before water was thrown. A shortage of hose crippled the fire department and the lack of more streams allowed the blaze to spread rapidly. Fred Musselman, one of the firemen, was overcome by the heat while fighting the fire.

A mare and colt belonging to Becker were burned in the fire as they stood in the middle of the group of buildings where they could not be reached in time. Four other horses just inside the entrance to the feed barn were burned, one of them returning to the barn after it had been chased out of the entrance on the east side of the barn. One of the teams belonged to Matt Elmer, who lived northwest of the city. He was severely burned on the hands while trying to release his team.

A large telephone cable was melted, which put a large number of phones out of commission. The electric light current was shut off on wires near the fire to prevent any accidents.

The Times printed more about the fire the day after the fire, with what is probably more accurate information. They really didn't have much time to put the information together on the day of the fire. They felt that this was the biggest fire in Monroe since the Fitzgibbons plant burned in January 1899. Parts of the ruins had smoldered all night and some small fires broke out in the debris the following day. Two streams of water were played on the fire until 11:00 p.m. on the day of the fire. At that time one crew of firemen was taken off duty and only one stream was used for the remainder of the night.

It was felt that the alfalfa hay was one of the biggest problems to the firemen on watch as a new blaze would start up in it as the bales of hay broke open. The large piles of soft and hard coal burned most of the time, but that fire was practically out the next day.

Updated numbers for the losses and insurance were also shared. The total loss to Becker would be about \$15,000; he carried insurance of \$7,000 with \$4,500 on his stock and \$2,500 on the store, sheds, and warehouse.

There will be more updated information next week.



This photo of the William Becker store on the southeast corner of 17th Avenue and 12th Street was copied from a collection at the First National Bank. After this photo was taken, the Becker building was destroyed by fire on Friday afternoon, September 6, 1912.