

William Becker Fire - Part 2

Thomas Curran's loss from the "Becker fire" that took place on September 6, 1912 would be about \$4,000. His feed barn, which could accommodate at least 200 horses was entirely burned to the ground; not a board of the building remained. He had \$1,000 insurance on the barn to the north and \$500 on the one to the south.

The heat also cracked the windows on the north side of George Spangler's house. The home caught fire several times along the roof, but was successfully put out by firemen who were stationed there to save the nearby homes. The Curran home was saved by firemen and citizens who hurled buckets of water onto it to keep the flames from starting. When they had moved the household goods from the houses, they placed them on the lawn south of Mrs. Susan Chandler's residence. Fred Maeder's home and saloon caught fire several times, but the blaze was put out each time before much damage was done.

Several of the firemen were scorched through their rubber coats and on their faces. Harry Keegan, Fred Musselman, Joseph Jones, Otto Kundert, Emil Weiss, Robert Blumer, A. E. Mitchell, and others were among those scorched and were suffering from blisters raised from the heat.

Becker was able to save about \$600 worth of goods from his store, including his credit bookkeeping system, a scale worth \$150, and a costly coffee grinder, which he moved into the stone building just north of where his store had stood. He opened in the new stand the day after the fire. At that time, he planned to conduct his store in this location for a while, possibly all winter, and then probably rebuild his coal and feed sheds on the ground where they formerly stood.

At that time Thomas Curran also planned to rebuild his feed barn as soon as possible. His loss at the time would deprive him of a good business during fair week, where he generally took in at least \$400. Fair week was always "the harvest of the year for him."

M. E. Baltzer saw the smoke while he was in Freeport and telephoned to Monroe to learn if the fire was here. Ray A. Young was in Monticello and saw the smoke. J. B. Pierce, of Brodhead, was returning from Orfordville in his automobile and saw the smoke soon after he left Orfordville. Chris Roth and Joseph Acherman were in Hollandale and saw the smoke. L. G. Legler, who lived four and a half miles southeast of Monroe, saw the smoke from his farm and drove to Monroe in his automobile in nine minutes.

Becker had built up an extensive fuel, lumber, and grocery business in the 12 years that he had been doing business in this location. He had added the store to the lumber and fuel business about five years before. He had kept one of the best systems of double entry books in the city and had trained his sons, John and Herbert, in the business. The updated information said that his stock consisted of a line of groceries and paints kept in the store, about 250 tons of soft coal, 150 tons of hard coal, 40 tons of baled hay including alfalfa, Timothy, and two kinds of wild hay, a small amount of oats, and some ground feed. John Becker was alone at the store when the fire was discovered. He ran to the shed where he saw the flames lapping up through the hay and then went back to the store to put the books in the safe and locked it. The books were intact when the safe was opened the morning after the fire.

Praise of the firemen's work was heard on all sides. It was just six minutes from the time the firemen left the downtown firehouse until they had a stream of water on the blaze, according to C. T. Meythaler. Their main fight was to prevent the fire from spreading, which they succeeded in doing. All of the firemen were fatigued by their hard work. Becker and Curran were especially outspoken in their thanks to the firemen and citizens for the excellent services rendered. Among the many outsiders who assisted the firemen in every way possible were Hannaway and Fosser, two of the Monroe ball team, who worked like beavers.

Two United Telephone cables, carrying 170 wires, were burned in two. That put about 100 telephones in the south and east parts of the city out of commission. The cables were to be spliced so that all phones would be working by Monday noon. Some of the phones were even expected to be working by Sunday night. Two telephone poles were also burned; all of the Bell toll wires leading into Monroe from Janesville, Brodhead, Shullsburg, and Darlington were cut off by the fire. Those were repaired by the morning after the fire. Monroe Electric lost one meter and two poles.

The six head of horses that burned in the Curran barn were tied at the west end, which prevented them from being taken out before the fire became too hot. Edward O'Neill and George Kirk, of Chicago, who were visiting Currans, succeeded in getting five teams that were tied on the east end out. One of

these teams belonged to Matt Elmer, who lived near the Junction House. The horses, unfortunately, ran back into the building and were killed. John Cross, of McConnell, Illinois, who was hauling wheat to Monroe, lost the other team. Becker also lost a mare and colt in the fire in his stable. Many remarked how fortunate it was that it did not occur the following week during the fair as Curran's barn would have been filled with horses that would have perished in the fire.

The final installment about this fire and the rebuilding will appear next week.



This photo of the fire at the William Becker store on September 6, 1912 was copied from a photo belonging to Marv Ruff. First reports said that Becker suffered a \$30,000 loss, but later estimates were for half that. He had about \$12,000 of insurance.