

OH, FOR THE LIFE OF A FIREMAN

Winter months are the busiest season for fire departments – for cold weather means buildings must be heated, and the friendly, warming glow of the fire sometimes turns into a blazing inferno destroying life and property – as recent news stories show. But fires can strike at any season. The story of some of the spectacular fires in New Albany’s past will be related . . .

On a chilly February night 35 years ago the summit of the Knobs northwest of New Albany presented a spectacular sight – tongues of flame leaped high into the black sky while hundreds of New Albany residents gazed upward at the fantastic scene. So bright was the blaze that it was visible in many areas of Louisville.

The mansion of George D. Todd, built on the highest spot of what is now Altawood, was afire. Todd, owner of the Todd Hame & Chain Co., was a Louisville resident and used his Knobs home only during the summer months. The flames in the home, occupied only by a caretaker, were raging out of control by the time the fire was discovered. Firemen, hampered by lack of sufficient water, only could stand helplessly by as the huge, rambling structure was reduced to a smoking ruin. The loss totaled \$150,000 in 1923 values, the greatest residential fire loss in local history. In fact, the only fire losses exceeding that of the Todd home have been two tremendous infernos at the Wood-Mosaic Company – one in 1913 and another in 1930.

The 1913 blaze resulted in the greatest fire loss in New Albany history - \$200,000. The first, on August 1, caused damages of \$180,000 to the plant and

to the valuable wood used in manufacturing. But so fierce were the flames that 20 nearby cottages in the area south of Main Street and east of the K & I Bridge were destroyed, adding \$20,000 to the loss.

In 1930 there were actually two fires at the Wood-Mosaic plant – one on October 1 resulting in a loss of \$188,000 and another five days later totaling \$80,000. That October of 1930 is remembered by New Albany firemen as probably the worst 30-day period for fires in the city's history. In addition to the two fires at Wood-Mosaic, a \$75,000 blaze was sandwiched between on October 3 at the Hopkins Fertilizer plant along the river bank, and then the following month a \$40,000 fire struck the Floyd County Veneer Company. Fires at wood-working plants always are difficult to fight with all the wood used in the manufacturing processes adding to the intensity of the flames. The New Albany Box & Basket Company has been struck by two major fires – one on January 31, 1924 totaling a \$30,000 loss and another in June of the same year causing damages of \$15,000.

New Albany in its early history was luckily free from the disastrous conflagrations that swept large areas of many other communities in the days of primitive fire-fighting techniques and volunteer firemen. One blaze which did threaten to get out of hand was stopped by the prompt action of New Albany housewives.

The date was July 9, 1863 and all of New Albany's able-bodied men were patrolling the Knobs, guarding against an expected attack from General John Hunt Morgan, the Confederate raider who was sweeping through Southern Indiana. Then fire was discovered in the [Sweet Gum Livery Stable](#) in the business district. The greedy flames, fed by the large quantities of straw and feed, licked at the sprawling wooden structure. Horses whinnied in terror while sparks ominously spiraled upward threatening nearby buildings. Then the city's women came to the rescue, rushing to the fire stations and dragging the hand-drawn

equipment to the fire, manning the hand pumps and playing streams of water on the blazing stable. They kept the fire under control until firemen and equipment from across the river could be rushed to New Albany on a ferry boat. New Albany's women saved the city from a fire that might have leveled the business district.

Two years later, at the close of the Civil War, a regular paid Fire Department was established by the City Government. Perhaps the lesson of the Sweet Gum Stable pointed up the gaps left by volunteer firemen in an urban center. Today five fire houses, in strategic locations, are ready to send men and equipment instantly to the scene of a blaze . . . ready to keep fire loss figures as low as possible.

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