One of Our Best Business Blocks in Ashes

The Loss About $60,000 – Eleven Buildings Destroyed and Ten Firms Burned Out

Peoria Fire Department Comes to the Rescue and Saves a Much Worse Conflagration

About one o’clock last Monday morning our citizens were rudely awakened from their sweet dreams of rest and somnolence by the ever ominous clanging of the fire bell, and rolling out of their pleasant and warm couches, they hurriedly donned the most convenient pieces of apparel and hastened toward the already luminous spot at the business center of our city; and as people rushed from all directions, the flames increased with frightful rapidity, sending their long forked tongues of lurid light far up toward the sky, where their brilliant sheen had already painted the heavens in gorgeous tints of pink and red.  Adding to the fearfulness of the scene were the great columns of blackening smoke, made to look like upward-moving demons as they were partially permeated by the reddening glare of the flames that had become almost demoniac in their destructiveness.

Starting in the Fair Store of J.M. Powers, the breeze tho light, being a little south of west, fanned them quickly into a mighty roar of flames, the two-story frame structure being dry and filled with goods of the class that are readily combustible when started; the flames moved on from house to house in spite of the most heroic efforts of the fire department assisted in every way possible by the great out pouring of our citizens.

At times the flames would stream almost directly upward and then they would assume a half circular form, like a huge electric arc, and curl downward to the roof and sides of the next building, melting it down with the great intensity of the heat, seemingly determined to destroy everything within reach. Shingles and pieces of lumber were wafted upon the breeze every-whither, until the heavens seemed one mass of floating fire, falling upon the roofs of adjacent buildings, some carried squares away, endangering all the residence portion of the eastern part of town.

When the Paskell House, one of the land-marks of our town, stood up for a moment, one vast sheet of flame, it was to many a sorrowful picture, and one that will be sadly missed, but its doom had come upon it, and there was no mercy, and only a moment of two did it stand in its magnificent picture of farewell and then it crumbled into irretrievable ruins, and was licked up by the devouring flames until but a charred and burning mass marked the spot of the old time place. But the mastering element spent no moment of lingering even here, for with a sudden pressing of the breeze into a gale, the flames leaped forward with greater speed; spreading and threatening everything before it.

At this junction seeing their inability to cope with the mighty element now raging like a demon, the fire department telephoned to Peoria for assistance and received reply that they would respond with a steamer and crew at once, which they proceeded to do. Leaving Peoria after some delay because the engineer would not assume the responsibility of a fast run without an experienced fireman which it took some time to obtain, they made the run in 30 minutes, and locating the engine at the river, they turned on the steam and sent a stream of water up the hill and to the scene of conflagration, that soon assisted in putting a check to the dangerous out-stretchings of the scattering fire-brands.

Our own fire department with both engines and hook and ladder had done all men could do with the implements at hand to stay the course of the raging element, but all to no purpose, for the entire block of business houses, from the brick building of Joseph Schick occupied by Mrs. Kinnear and Jacob Fosbenner at the other corner of the block, were left but heaps of coals in smoldering ruins, and the building of Mr. Jones, tho standing, is thought to have been damaged by the excessive heat, and that of Mr. Schick was also much damaged. So intense was the heat that the paint on the buildings directly opposite was crisped with crumbling blisters, and every glass of the fine French plate fronts was broken and cracked and shivered to atoms, and also every other kind of glass from the alley to Second street.

While much of the goods in the stores of the upper half of the burned block was carried out and saved, still the loss cannot fall short of $70,000, and many place the estimate at a higher figure. Of the massive stock of groceries, chinaware, notions, etc, usually found in a store of his kind, scarcely anything was saved from the Power’s Fair Store, the rapidity with which it was enveloped in flame precluded the possibility of reaching the goods.

This was by far the most destructive fire our city has ever had, and only for the timely arrival of the Peoria crew and steamer, no conception can be formed as to possible spreading and destructiveness of the fire, for cisterns were all pumped dry, and a hand engine cannot force the water up the hill from the river, so our own department was almost completely handicapped as to further efficient services. The Peoria boys charged nothing for their services, only expenses of the trip, but they went away loaded with appreciable presents from our businessmen, and loud in their praise of the generous spirit of the Henry people.

Below will be found individualized statements of losses, insurance and other items of interest connected with the fire.

The Firms Burned Out

1. J.M. Powers, Department Store
2. Frank Baer, Sample Room
3. Warren & McAleer, Restaurant
4. Paskell House, Hotel
5. J.N. Krenz, Harness shop
6. Frank Yanochowski, Bakery and Restaurant
7. Mrs. J.S. Burt, News Room
8. Theodore Hartwig, Merchant Tailoring
9. J.J. Hartley, Barber shop

10. George Daniels, Photographer

**Supposed Origin of Fire**

It is surmised that the origin of the fire was from burning soot in the chimney, which under certain directions of the wind did not draw so well, as it was lower than the peak of the roof and would at such times fill up with soot and later under a brisker draft burn out. It appears that Saturday night a smoldering fire had been left in the store, which had been repacked Sunday forenoon, and everything so far as could be seen perfectly safe.

The last time Mr. Powers was in the store was 3:30 Sunday afternoon when he went in to telephone Dr. Hall about choir practice, and then fire in stove was low and as usual. He and sons did not know of fire until all was burned to Yanochowski’s store. During Sunday night it will be remembered that the wind changed to the southwest and blew quite briskly for awhile, and it is thought that the fire brisked up and set the soot blazing, or it may be the stove filled with gas and suddenly flashed, as it sometimes will, and set fire to it and also blew out a stop in the upper part of the chimney, letting sparks fall out upon the floor, which, as Mr. Powers used the upstairs for a storage room, was probably more or less littered with papers and packing material and all highly inflammable.

Frank Coan, now here, owner of the building used by Fair Store, confirmed his belief in the chimney burning out and firing the room on second floor. He says it was in the habit of burning out, and one time he detected the flue stopped up and red hot, and soot falling out while the chimney was burning out. There had been a stove on the second floor, but this winter he had taken it out to avoid fire from it. A partition shut off the front part of the building and the fire might have burned for some time before its discovery. It may have burned thru the floor, and as near the chimney sat the kerosene tank, the falling cinders communicated fire to it which was the cause of the explosion heard, tho a few fireworks stored upstairs might have caused the explosion. This theory seems to be the most plausible as it is universally admitted by all who first saw the fire that the upper story was in flames before the lower story.

The Fire In Detail

The block on which the fire fiend did its fell work contained 18 buildings fronting Edwards street, and 11 of these were destroyed. Ten business firms were burned out. At either end of the block were two brick buildings both of which were saved. Cannah Jones’ two story brick dry goods store on the south end and Joseph Schick’s brick grocery building and annex on the north end. The brick annex occupied by Mrs. Kinner & Wald as a Ladies Bazaar, stopping the fire at that point.

The block was thickly studded with residences, barns, sheds, and small frame structures, including the Paskell House barns and sheds on its other sides and a dangerous one in time of fire. It was a miracle the entire block had not been fired and consumed, as it was covered with flying embers during the fury of the conflagration.

Losses and Insurance

Cannah Jones’s stock of dry goods, clothing, shoes, etc., suffered from fire, smoke and water. He is insured for $2500. The building owned by J.H. Jones, was more or less damaged by heat and water. Amply insured.

Mr. Powers had both stores packed with goods from floor to ceilings and even on ceilings and with extra counters and shelves on counters. The second floor had deep shelves on each side from floor to ceiling, and in these were stored boxes of surplus goods with row of boxes of goods thru the center of the room. The basement had large stock of window, glass, vegetables and surplus goods. Total loss $14,000 with $10,000 insurance. Nothing was saved except cash register and about $75 worth of rings in small case. Mr. Powers feels very deeply his loss, especially considering that he had been seven years getting the business to its fine condition. He anticipated turning the principal business over to his son Ralph as soon as he graduated from high school. Mr. Powers feels as tho this work must now be started over again and no doubt will build or buy and try to recover lost efforts. His financial affairs were in fine condition. He did a cash business and kept no book accounts, and virtually no outstanding bills against him unpaid. Some firms of whom he had bought goods for 25 years were first to telegraph sympathy.

From the *Henry News Republican*, January 31, 1901