

Disaster and Deliverance

The night Platteville's Majestic City Hall burned down

By Dennis A. Wilson

It was a cold and windy night. The thermometer read five degrees below zero. Newspapers were sporting headlines reading “COLDEST WEATHER OF YEAR IN STATE” and “MERCURY DROP SETS NEW MARK.” The Manitowoc Herald-News reported the next day that the temperature had fallen 52 degrees in 24 hours. Wet or exposed fingers and toes froze quickly in the blowing night air. It was a night for getting the chores done fast and getting inside to stoke up the fire. There were only twelve days left until Christmas. Then as now this was often the coldest time of the year. It was a good night to go to a movie and stay warm.

The smoke wasn't noticeable at first to the moviegoers watching the late show at the Strand Theater, which occupied the second floor of Platteville's beautiful city hall. About 150 people were oblivious, focused on the images flickering across the screen as a slight scent of smoke wafted up the stairwell. We don't know what the movie was that night, but it was not interesting enough to delay for long the sight of smoke entering the theater. The crowd panicked. They could not go down the stairwell and live. Reporter J.H. Lewis, who was in the audience, led them up stairs to the balcony. Several women were overcome by “smoke and fright”, and had to be carried out, but were revived. Faced with death, even the most timid of the rest clamored in turn down the fire escape and into the icy cold. Now it was a matter of fighting for the building, the police department's equipment, and the city's records.

Frank Goodell, the Chief of the Platteville Fire Department was not in town. He was deer hunting in the north woods. He would not see the aftermath until the next afternoon. Mayor Adam Miller quickly assessed the situation and realized the city would need help. With the wind blowing from the southwest, fire could spread to the whole east and northeast sections of the city. He appealed to Dubuque for help.

The memory of fire and death was still fresh in the memories of the citizens of Platteville. In 1919 the Forehand Block, one of the largest buildings in the city had burned to the ground, killing eight who were crushed below a collapsing wall. Merchants were called upon to open their stores and provide warm mittens, gloves and socks to the firefighters. Others brought pails of hot coffee and sandwiches. It was misery nonetheless for the firemen. They became encrusted in ice from head to foot and could only move about in stiff, mechanical motions. They were forced to retreat inside time and time again to warm frostbitten hands, ears and cheeks. The old world styled building, constructed in 1883 was a fire trap. The theatergoers were fortunate to have made the escape by the only route available. As soon as the flames were controlled in one quarter, they broke out in another. When the fire broke through the wall behind the Strand Theater stage upstairs they knew the battle was

lost.



1926 American LaFrance Fire truck

Acting chief Nuremberg, and Fire Chief Fisher of Dubuque decided to give their full attention to saving the adjoining properties by trying to contain the fire within the walls and guard against incendiary outbreaks from hot flying ash. The loss was about \$80,000.00, twice the amount of insurance on the building and contents. It was thought that the furnace had overheated, being taxed to its limit by the intense cold. Now the improvising and rebuilding began.

A reporter for the Dubuque Telegraph-Herald wrote two days later; “the city is practically disrupted as an organization because of utter lack of a place at which at this time to transact any business in any of its departments.” The city fire trucks were kept at the Eagle Garage. There was no fire alarm system left, so the Methodist Church tower was pressed into service to sound fire alarms with the church bell. There was no suitable space to serve as a temporary home for the city offices and the police department, so they were placed wherever possible. No time was lost in deciding that a new city administration building would be constructed, and that it would be, as far a humanely possible fireproof.



By December 19th it was decided to build the new complex where the English Lutheran Church stood on North Bonson Street. The estimated cost to purchase the church property and construct the building was \$150,000.00. The actual cost was \$180,000.00. In today's dollars that would be \$2,348,032.37. Plans were discussed in May 1927, but it was not until October 11, 1928 that the cornerstone was laid for the new building. It was completed in August of 1929, and was lauded as one of the finest municipal buildings in Wisconsin. It still serves the city.