

The Forehand Building in Platteville covered an entire block. It was one of the biggest buildings in the city, and was only about ten years old on that cold February day in 1919. It was three stories high. On the first floor there was a cafeteria, a grocery, a shoe store, and G. Vanderbie's jewelry store. The second floor held offices and apartments, and the third a tobacco factory operated by C. A. Rafter, the owner of the building.



At about one o'clock a fire broke out in the basement. Its cause was unknown but later speculation credited spontaneous combustion of rags. The fire spread rapidly. Volunteer firemen rushed to the scene and began dousing the building and neighboring structures with water.



School boys came forward to assist Vanderbie in removing jewelry from his store. They rushed in and out with hands full of precious items. Then an explosion rocked the building. The south wall and corner collapsed into the street crushing those below beneath thousands of bricks. John Kopp, then a 16 year old high school student was blown out of a window. Miraculously he suffered only minor injuries. Many others were not as fortunate. People began digging the dead and injured from beneath the brick.



The building was completely consumed leaving only a smoldering heap by five o'clock. In all eight were dead and eleven injured, some gravely. The injured were taken to Doctor Wilson Cunningham's Hospital. All night the ruin was searched with flashlights, but no more bodies were found. The dead included Vanderbie the jeweler, and Rafter the building owner. Four Volunteer firemen died. The dead also included Milton Rotzoll, age 12, a shoe repairman's son and Esty Dunn, the 15 year old son of Doctor E.A. Dunn. Other students, including the fortunate Kopp were injured. They ranged in age from 12 to 18. In one of the photos of the smoldering ruins you can see the old Platteville City Hall in the background. It was to suffer a similar fate, burning down in December 1926, with many moviegoers (the second story was used as a theater) narrowly escaping.



In the days following sad funerals occupied the citizens of Platteville. In 1976, retired firefighter Don Pothour recalled that day thus: "My most vivid memory of that fire was the explosion. There were four firemen there with a hose, and the wall just covered them. I remember you could see into the rooms and there was the furniture in the apartments. I can also remember Al Jones crying because he was afraid his father (a firefighter) might be among the injured. I remember getting a good scolding from my parents for watching that fire. I guess they figured an 8-year-old had no business being there."

There is a plaque in Platteville that commemorates the four firefighters who died: S. Austin Hale and Fred Steinhoff, both farmers, Charles Gilmore, a store owner, and Ernest Dickson, a laborer.