

The Syndicate Block Fire of 1914

The last day of 1914 proved to be quite eventful in the history of Fairmont. It marked what was up to that date, the worst fire in the history of the city, according to the accounts given in the January 1, 1915, edition of the *Martin County Sentinel*.

The fire occurred in the Syndicate Block, a name given to a single structure that contained several businesses. It resulted in the loss of a meat market, two drug stores, a department store, a jewelry store, and two doctors' offices. The total loss was estimated to be \$80,000.00, and only half was said to be covered by insurance. At the time of the fire in 1914, the building was owned by Dr. Johnson and Ward & Company.

The Syndicate Block, built in 1892, was located in the approximate center of the west side of the 100 block of what is now Downtown Plaza. It was considered prime property by business owners of that time. What was referred to as "The handsome and substantial new brick business block" by the September 16, 1892, edition of the *Martin County Sentinel*, was the vision of J. W. Daniels and G. T. Houseman, businessmen of that era. The article further stated that, "When completed it will be one of the handsomest and most thoroughly equipped business blocks in Southern Minnesota." The Syndicate Block was occupied initially by J. W. Daniels' furniture store, Fred Houseman's meat market, E. C. Hyde's tonsorial parlors, a mercantile business operated by A. Knautz, Harry Knautz, and E. J. Wheeler, and drug stores operated by E. Ramsdale and A. Holcombe. Barber shops were referred to as tonsorial parlors at that time.

The fire was first noticed at 3:00 a.m. on that cold December day by some young men returning from a dance at Granada. At that time, people living in the overhead rooms had been awakened by smoke, and an alarm was subsequently turned in at 3:40 a.m. By the time the fire department arrived on the scene, the fire was raging. To further complicate the matter was the fact that nearby fire hydrants weren't working properly. At first, the fire seemed limited to the Barto Drug Store, however, it soon became apparent that the losses would not be contained to that location.

The fire scene was a very cold December morning with the temperature hovering near zero. Spectators on the scene were noticeably suffering from the frigid conditions. The firemen were covered with ice from head to foot.

There were frequent loud bangs heard as a result of containers of drugs and chemicals catching fire and exploding, as well as the detonation of fireworks from Bomboy's Department Store, which added a somewhat unusual dimension to the atmosphere surrounding the fire.

Some recalled the account given by a fortune-teller at the *Haynic Theater*, known as the *Fairmont Opera House* today, several months earlier. His prediction that a disastrous fire would strike on North Avenue within the year had now come to pass. It would seem that this would have undoubtedly created an eerie uneasiness at that fire scene as the events began to unfold during that frigid December morning in 1914.

The most effective means of controlling the fire appeared to be from the roofs of several neighboring buildings in which streams of water were used to control the flames. However, the efforts were to no avail according to newspaper accounts of that time, as the Syndicate Block was eventually reduced to debris and ashes.

Fire Chief Serle missed the first big fire during his service to the department as he was visiting his daughter in Ceylon. However, the *Martin County Sentinel* stated that, "The boys handled the situation well despite the absence of the *old man*."

Several nearby businesses removed their belongings for safe keeping until the situation was safe enough for them to return. Also, a number of crates of chickens, some suffocated and some still alive, were carried out of the meat market.

The fire continued to smolder for several more days, and there was no immediate answer as to how the fire started.

For more information about the Syndicate Block fire of 1914, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.