

At Bowdoinham:

Flames Devastated Village 120 years ago!

by Frank Connors

Gale-driven winds drove a massive fire of questionable origin through the very heart of Bowdoinham Village on Saturday/Sunday, December 13/14, 1902. For more than five hellish hours, flames ripped unchecked through the defenseless, downtown business district, and when it was finally over, fifteen major buildings were leveled, some 30 people were left homeless, and property losses were expected to exceed \$35,000. Most fire victims reportedly had little or no insurance.

In this one terrible night, Bowdoinham village lost four of its six grocery stores, the Town's only hotel, its funeral parlor, municipal offices, a hardware store, drug store, two barber shops, a blacksmith's shop, a carriage shop, several fraternal organizations, at least ten private residences and several business offices.

Theo Lang, a youthful resident in our Town in 1902, reported walking past the downtown Purington-Hinkley block about 12:10 am, Sunday morning. He later affirmed that all was quiet and "seemed right," when he passed the stores at that late hour, but he admitted his "head was low" against the driving wind and wet snow, and that he was walking near the center of the deserted street, trying to dart around the steadily drifting snow.

Most agree the inferno started in a downstairs corner of that wood-framed, three-story Purington- Hinkley block, located at the corner of Main & Bridge streets, (where Bowdoinham's Masonic Lodge stands today.) In 1902, two small stores occupied the block's ground floor, with William Gould renting both fronts. He sold hardware from one, general provisions from the other. The floor above Gould's businesses held the meeting rooms of the T.T. Rideout Post, GAR, (Grand Army of the Republic) another hall rented by the Merrymeeting Grange, and a smaller room retained by the local chapter of Gospel Missions. Bowdoinham's venerable Masonic Order, one of the State's oldest, held its meetings on the third floor of the block.

Ira Williams was night-watchman that night at the Kindling Wood Factory, which was located just east of the Village between the railroad tracks and the Cathance River. He later reported he was marking his rounds of the sawmill when he paused at a door, probably to relight his pipe. When he glanced through the snow-filled darkness towards the village, the ominous, orange-yellow glow he spotted must have nearly stopped his heart! He remembers chucking his pipe into the snow, and running to the plant's steam whistle, which he tied open, hoping the shrill, constantly screaming signal might awaken his sleeping village.

Flames had broken through the roof of the doomed Purington-Hinkley block before Williams

had slipped and slid his way down the tracks to the railroad's Main Street gate house, which he remembers was empty. About the same time Williams rounded Main Street, the bell in the Second Baptist Church started to ring. William Salie had spotted the blaze from atop Main Street hill, had burst into the church and was repeating the alarm.

H.G. Schoff was one of the first residents to reach the fire scene. The day after the fire, while stunned neighbors walked among the smoldering ashes, Schoff described his terrifying night to a reporter from the Lewiston-Journal. "I was started awake by the mill whistle," he said, "I jumped out of bed and looked at my watch, it was exactly ten minutes past one!" Reflections of flames were ominously dancing on the walls of his School Street home. He woke his family, pulled on his pants, his boots and a great coat. He grabbed two pails and ran down the ice-shrouded street toward the now billowing flames. "Gould's store was wrapped in flames when I arrived," he reported, "it was through the roof and beginning to spread. Rideout's house and store was the second place to go!"

William Rideout told his own story. "I was awakened by the mill whistle," he said, "at first, I guessed the alarm might be for a fire at the mill...those steam-driven saws are always starting little fires," he added. But Rideout stood there in the dark and, to his horror, realized that he could hear the unmistakable roar of flames! Wherever the fire was, he knew it was closer than the sawmill.

The storeowner dressed quickly, called out to others in the house, and climbed through the pitch dark attic to place his ear to his chimney. He heard nothing in the attic, and may have enjoyed a moment's relief when he touched the brick and felt no heat. He stumbled back to his bedroom a floor below, and opened a window to peer out. At about the same moment Rideout raised his sash, flames first burst through the sidewall of Gould's store, and started lapping hungrily at the side of Rideout's building. The two places were less than ten feet apart.

"I didn't know what to do," Rideout remembered, "I felt like a lost soul! I could think of nothing upstairs I wanted to save, so I went downstairs to the store, there, I didn't know where to begin." By the time Rideout entered the store, a fiendish, yellow glow illuminated the entire first floor. "It was light as daylight in the store," his voice became unsteady, "I was getting scared!"

Rideout sent his family to the relative safety of the street, and returned to his store to open the safe, expecting to retrieve some cash and his business ledgers. "I must have been more nervous than I remember," he said later, "each time I got the combination around right, it would slip past and I'd have to start over again." he said he worked unsuccessfully on the tumblers for maybe 15 minutes, until he was driven away by the flames. Too late, Rideout remembered he had \$400 cash in a bag under his mattress! He ran upstairs to save it, but the room was a mass of flames when he got to the landing. "I knew I was too late... no use," he said. He fled helplessly to the street, saving nothing.

The Lewiston Journal reported, "It was a terrible night for a fire. The gale was blowing from the northeast, snow was falling, and the temperature was near zero."

There was a volunteer fire brigade in Bowdoinham, but it was sadly lacking in hose and other basic equipment. The Town did have two fire pumpers, the Phenix and the Water Witch, but aside from these horse-drawn relics, the firemen's only remaining tool was the ageless, if inefficient, bucket brigade.

In his History of Bowdoinham, Silas Adams writes, "the Water Witch is a large machine and in good shape, and the Phenix, a smaller one, had already been in Town over a half century." The Lewiston Evening Journal reported "the Phenix is an ancient affair" and added, "for years it had been unused, but was taken out as a last resort. It proved useless."

Volunteers gamely rolled the hand pumpers up Bridge Street (no horses being available) Fire Chief (and local barber) Charles Henry McEwen was barking orders. (The village fire house was maybe 100 yards from the Purington-Hinkley Block, on the corner of Sampson's Creek and Bridge Street.) But fate would soon work against McEwen and his volunteers this frigid and terrible night.

Newspaper accounts said an early cold snap had the midnight temperature below zero, and the Phenix had frozen solid before her old hoses could bear on the flames. In fact, local traditions suggest water left in the old wooden pumper was frozen solid before the men rolled her to the street. The Water Witch pumped bravely into the morning, but crews couldn't keep her filled with water. The Witch lost pressure again and again, and was finally abandoned in disgust. Several of the downtown wells and cisterns were frozen solid, so the only water left to use against the blaze had to be carried by pail and barrel from the ice-rimmed Cathance and Sampson's Creek.

The Kennebec Journal reported, "Two women escaped from their burning homes in their modest night clothing, and many people were frost bitten while trying to save their personal effects," The KJ added, "the fierce gale took up the burning embers, and before the fire had been burning ten minutes, a dozen buildings were ablaze," in the village center. The up-river paper summarized, "the fire was like a fiend, trying a multitude of ways to defeat the brave but futile efforts of the inhabitants who would stop the spreading holocaust...the wind howled across the tops of buildings, carrying the sparks from the top of one to the roof or another. As men on one side of the street opened doors to carry out possessions, sparks would follow them through the open doors like dogs, kindling new fires everywhere. There was no escaping the flames."

END. Part one,
more to come.....

1902 Fire History

By Frank Connors

Part 2

The Carr coat factory, corner of Main & Elm streets (where the Three Robbers Pub is today) was the next building consumed by flames. State Insurance Commissioner Stephen Carr had his business offices in the building, and a shop where he'd operated a coat factory since before the Civil War. Other tenants in the building were fire chief McEwen's barber shop (he managed to save several shaving mugs as the place burned), the meeting rooms of Bowdoinham's Modern Woodsmen Assoc., a sales office for Capt. Ben Adams (a dealer in coal and wood), and a corporate office for the Standard Wood Company, managers of the kindling wood mill.

The fire blew next into and consumed Mosher's store on Main Street, then jumped to the Sampson's Store on Elm. L.D. Small's drug store "exploded" at 1:45 a.m., and flames moved next to Dr. Charles Palmer's office. Both places were leveled in minutes. Small was also Bowdoinham's long-serving Town Clerk. His quick action to save official Clerk's records was some of the first and only good news the Town would receive this awful night. John Carney's cigar manufacturing shop, with its prized stock of domestic and Cuban tobacco leaves, was lost with Small's drug store.

Flames from the Carr block doomed the three-story Stinson House Hotel (where the Town's Soldier's Memorial stands today) Innkeeper George Hinkley watched helpless from the street as the famous, 25 room hostelry, "where liquor was never sold," flattened in just minutes. Fire Chief McEwen led his tired brigade of firefighters to the long carriage house behind the hotel where they decided they had to stop the fire or lose the homes and businesses beyond. The Richmond Bee reported, "those harried men knew if the flames were allowed to pass that stable, then the greater part of this beautiful village would be wiped out of existence before the sun came up on the next fateful morning." Men soaked horse blankets in the river and carried them in freezing hands to be draped across the stable roof and walls. The squat old stable steamed but never burned. Boys and girls ran among houses on the hill, swatting out sparks that lit hungrily on many of the Town's old, wood-framed buildings. For the moment at least, the upper town seemed safe.

But weary firefighters had no time to cheer or rest. Flames consumed the large, old Sampson house, and threatened the depot of the Maine Central Railroad, and the elaborate residence of local businessman Edward P. Kendall. Inside the railroad station, telegraph operator Emma Snell was busy sending desperate telegraph appeals for assistance from other towns. "Our town is ablaze," she wrote, "send help!" Everyone knew if the telegraph lines went down, contact with the outside world would be lost, though next day's reports claimed the flames were visible in Topsham, Bath, Richmond, even Gardiner!

Bath responded immediately, saying help would be sent, "as soon as we can locate a locomotive," Augusta rang an alarm for Bowdoinham, and crews dutifully pushed their fire engine onto a flat car, but they also had to wait for a locomotive to run down from Waterville. Topsham rang an alarm, but no crews or equipment started up the dark and slippery road. Gardiner was wired, but the fire chief lamented that, "equipment could not go out of town without Council approval." Brunswick loaded two hand tubs and 50 men onto flat cars about 3:15 a.m., but the only locomotive in town had been dispatched to Bath to pick up that City's steamer! Old Bowdoinham was on her own.

The Kendall house, a local show-place called "the Red Castle" was the only place in town with interior plumbing and its own water source. Men climbed onto the roof of the place, making sure it did not burn. Most guessed if the Kendall house went, sparks would spread to the fertilizer mill, its warehouses, and the residences on Spring and Center streets.

A Lewiston Journal report said: "The scene was like a great forest fire. The business section of Bowdoinham was a solid mass of flame. No one could pass up or down Main Street, or along certain portions of Bridge or Elm street. Men whose property was going up in flames could not stand and grieve, there was simply no time. They all knew the loss of a moment's time might spell doom for the whole village."

Firemen finally checked the fire's progress around 4 a.m., or maybe there was little left to burn. The weather cleared some, and a hose from the sawmills was pulled under the train track, finally offered enough river water to relieve the exhausted crews. Bath's steamer number three made Bowdoinham about 5 a.m. on a relief train through Brunswick. Fresh volunteers were reported stunned by what they saw. Sunrise brought men from Bowdoin, Richmond, Topsham and Brunswick, all offering their services to victims of the fires. Belongings that some people had saved by piling them in the streets were loaded on wagons, and carried to homes and barns of friends for safe-keeping.

Church services in the village that Sunday were cancelled.

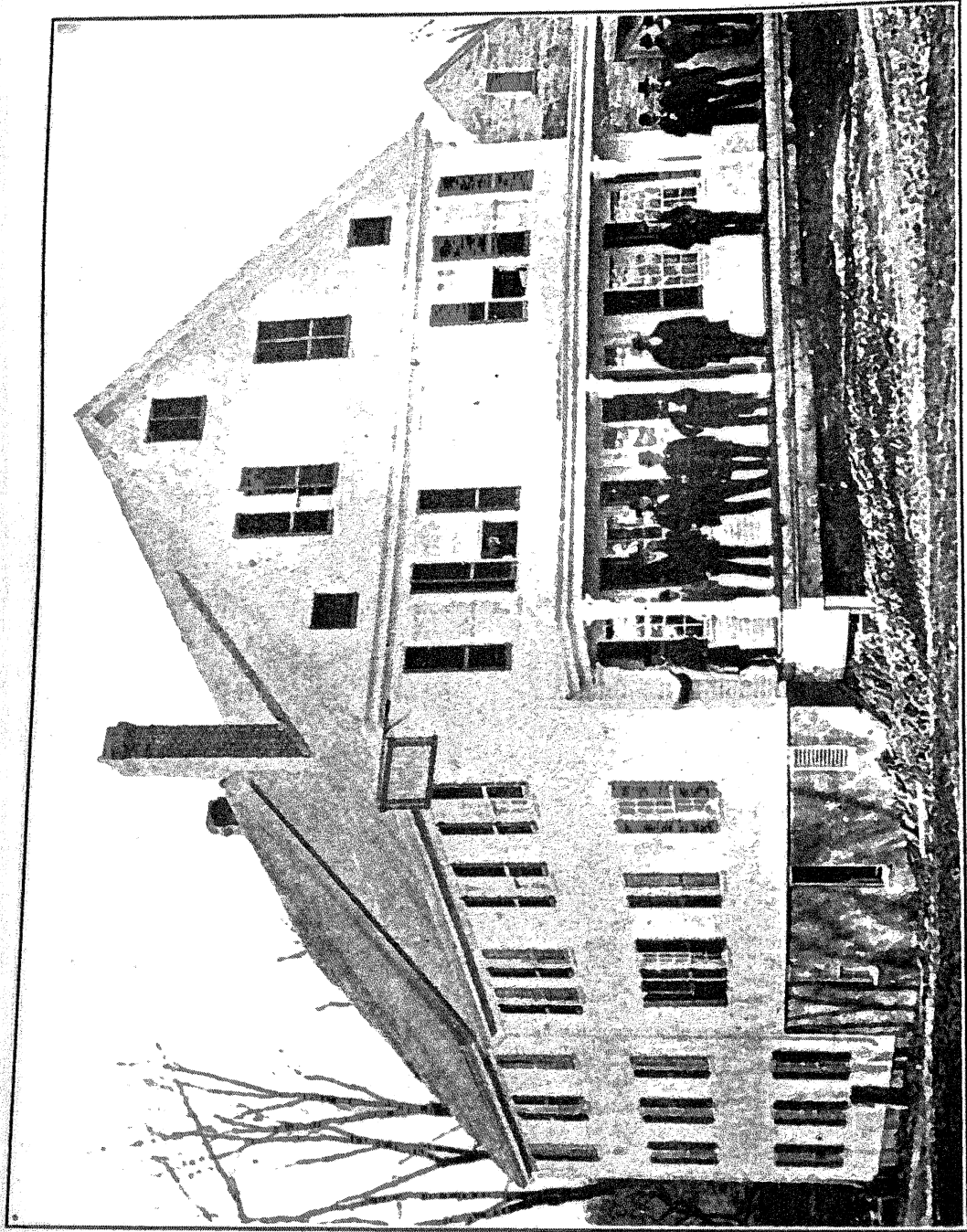
No cause for the fire was ever proved, though many residents suggested arson was the initial cause, that a fire was set to destroy evidence of a robbery at Gould's store. The December 15th summary in the Lewiston Daily Sun was typical: "this little village was visited in the middle of night with the worst fire (imaginable)... but for the way in which the wind was blowing, the whole town would have been destroyed." The Kennebec Journal added, "such a fire loss to such a small village is considered a calamity, and the citizens are much depressed, especially as the Town before was not one of the most thriving."

Bowdoinham residents were always thankful that no lives were lost in this "greatest of conflagrations," but most also agreed, "... old Bowdoinham would never again be the same!"

Property of
John & Paul Mitchell
Snowdonham after 1911 fire

Gauld
after fire





STINSON HOUSE.

The Burned District

