

Recalling Edgerton's great 1916 fire

Submitted by Bev Witzel

On Tuesday, March 7, 1916, Night Watchman Campbell was making the round in the Parson's newsstand at 2:15 a.m. when he discovered a small blaze above the store. Campbell quickly turned in the alarm before the Edgerton fire department arrived on the scene with their hose, the fire worked its way up the side and into a vacant room over the Hitchcock Jewelry store. The fire was now as a roaring furnace and it continued to spread to the Titus Drug Store on the corner of Fulton and Henry streets. The twenty-mile-per-hour gale winds fanned the raging fire, making it appear that the entire block would be destroyed.

Wisely directing four lines of hose at vantage points enabled our brave firemen to get the blaze under control. Thinking all was now over, many departed. To the surprise of the remaining volunteers, the fire broke out in the rooms over Leary's Cigar Store. The rooms had been used by Mrs. Gertrude McCarthy as a hotel as were the rooms above the Dallman Drug Company Store and D.D. Brown's Saloon. All were a part of the old U.S. Hotel building.

Soon the massive flames were once again threatening the entire block. The fire was spreading along the overhanging cornice and making its way under the roof. When the blaze was at its peak a hurry up call was sent to Janesville for help. Chief Klein and three of his men arrived in town on a special (train) at 5:30 a.m. By their arrival time our fire fighters once more had it under control, allowing the Janesville men to return home. Our hardworking fire fighters distinguished themselves by the manner in which they handled this raging fire for four early morning hours. At times they used as many as seven leads of hose showing that our city is fairly well prepared to meet any emergency.

The massive water damage from drenching the stores below the blaze would greatly exceed the fire loss. The Bon Ton Hotel and Restaurant of Mrs. McCarthy was pretty well gutted. All of the damaged property was amply covered by insurance. Some very extravagant figures had been sent out to the daily press that may have made the recipients believe our whole town had been wiped out.

By March 17, 1916, most of the insurance losses had been adjusted except for the Titus Drug Store's loss. Inventory had not yet been completed. The satisfactory settlements agreed upon were as follows:

The Pollard Estate, owners of the buildings, were paid about \$1,300;
D.D. Brown Saloon in the neighborhood of \$2,000;
C.H. Hitchcock, jeweler, \$700 on his stock;
Edgerton Cigar Company, \$800 on stock alone;
Dallman Drug Company, George Dallman, manager, fire damage, \$300;
Ratzlaff Brothers Dry Goods and Shumway's Barber Shop received a slight payment on water damage;

Mrs. McCarthy was taken care of by her insurance.

The total amount which the fire cost the insurance companies scarcely exceeded \$8,000. Many residents felt the fire had proven to be one of the most fortunate ones ever experienced in Edgerton. All the property lost had been more than covered by insurance. Better buildings were to replace the damaged ones adding to the attractiveness of the street.

C.H. Hitchcock sought a new place of business in the Frank Ash Store. M.E. Titus moved his store into a portion of the Ellingson Hardware Store on Henry Street across from the Post Office. The work of rebuilding and repairing the fire damage began immediately with only a few delays. On Wednesday, November 24, 1916, George Dallman's Dallman Drug Company and the Stewart Jewelry Company celebrated their grand opening in the newly-built block on the corner of Fulton and Henry Streets, only 262 days after the great Edgerton fire.



Aftermath of the 1916 fire. Titus Drug Store, Hitchcock Jewelry store, Parson's Newsstand, Leary's Cigar Store.



The new corner building that housed the Dallman Drug Company, Stewart Jewelry Company, and the Badger Restaurant.