Algiers Inferno

On the windy night of October 20, 1895, a score of Algiers residents lay peacefully sleeping in their dilapidated tenement building, situated on the corner of Morgan and Bermuda Streets and called the "Old Rookery." Little did they know that soon after midnight their sleep would be rudely disrupted by the terrifying sounds of a crackling fire, which would sweep the central portion of the tiny, but thriving community of Algiers.

The fire had its origin in the temporarily unoccupied room where Paul Bouffia and his family of four resided. As the alarm was turned in, residents were quickly aroused and evacuated—and none too soon. Before the fire engines arrived, gale force northeast winds turned the two-story wooden structure into a seething inferno.

Algiers employed three steam engines to fight fires and as they came upon the scene, one engine was promptly set up at the Mississippi River and the other two at nearby water wells.

Firemen battled the blaze for nearly 30 minutes and it looked as if they had it under control. But, Algiers (and New Orleans) was in the midst of a severe dry spell, and to the horror of the spectators who had come to witness the spectacle, the water wells suddenly went dry.

As the flames went unchecked at the Old Rookery, firemen discovered that an old invalid woman was trapped on the second floor. Fireman James Reynolds courageously raced up the fragile staircase, rescued the woman from her smoke-filled room.

By this time, the wind had pushed the blaze down Bermuda Street, and firemen were frantically trying to control it with the one hose leading from the river. It was useless. People in the area of the fire could be seen hurriedly removing their possessions and depositing them on the battice of the river.

The fire, when it consumed a row of houses on Bermuda Street, jumped over to Morgan Street. Chief Daly now called for help from New Orleans, but more than an hour passed by the time the 26 engines from the city could cross the river on the ferry.

Under the command of Chief O'Conner, city engines were placed along the river, where they could draw water. Already, an entire block of Algiers lay in destruction and flames were inching their way towards the courthouse.

Firemen and volunteer citizens alike did not believe that this historic building would succumb to the ravaging flames, but nevertheless, they began piling old records and documents in the halls for evacuation.

Before their task was accomplished, the fire had crept up to the block immediately behind the courthouse, and pushed further by the winds, began to engulf the historic structure. In no time at all, the courthouse, along with most of the documents, lay in ruins.

Chief O'Conner later told a reporter: "With the flames leaping from house to house, I was confronted with the discovery that there was a scarcity of water... I had made a stand to prevent the courthouse from burning, but the water gave out on the line I was depending on..."

And, through the night, the fire, melting hoses at times, relentlessly fanned by gale winds, wiped out entire blocks, leaving in its wake "destitution, devastation, and desolation."

By Sunday noon, after $600,000 worth of damage, 12 blocks of Algiers looked like a desert prairie. About 200 homes were burnt to the ground and 1,200 people, some of whom barely escaped with their lives, had only the river battice to live on.

And where was Paul Bouffia and his family that fateful Sunday morning? Bouffia, a man who was heartily disliked in the neighborhood, was arrested in Algiers Sunday morning and charged with arson.

A neighbor, and "bitter enemy" of Bouffia's, Pete Calderoni, told authorities that he heard a noise in Bouffia's room as the fire was breaking out, then an explosion.

As Bouffia told police that he was in New Orleans with his family when the fire broke out (trying to see a doctor for a rheumatic condition), hundreds of irate Algiersians clamored for a lynching.

Bouffia's story was attested to by a landlady whose house they had slept at. But, while newspapers carried no story on the outcome of the arson charges, they more or less implied that it was Bouffia, whose home had caught fire three times before, who "threw the torch" upon peaceful, sleeping Algiers.