Donaldsonville Past Plagued by Share of Destructive Fires

Flames Play Havoc in Town's Past

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DONALDSONVILLE, La.—It has been 96 years since the date of that disastrous Chicago fire on Oct. 8, 1871, but memory has made it part of history and the week in which the anniversary falls has come to be called "Fire Prevention Week."

This city on the banks of the Mississippi River and Bayou Lafourche has felt its share of flames and the destruction that came in their wake. The early 20th century here brought considerable fire havoc to this community.

One such holocaust came in the 40th anniversary year of the Chicago fire, on Feb. 22, the birthday of George Washington, in 1911. It originated on the kitchen roof of the two-story frame Nicholls hotel on Mississippi street.

FIRE RECALLED

Historian Sidney Marchand, a former Donaldsonville mayor, recalls that the day was a Wednesday, and that at 10:30 a.m. when the fire broke out, there was a stiff north wind blowing that rendered the firefighters almost helpless despite ample hose and water.

Virtually unchecked, the flames from the defective flue in the hotel kitchen rapidly spread from the hotel to other buildings on the block, until all buildings on the north side of the street were destroyed.

The newspaper office, a hat shop, the Western Union headquarters, a livery stable and the old police stables that stood in the middle of the street fell victim to the fire. Then the fire crossed to the south side of the street to devour a department store, bank, jewelry store and several residences.

LOCAL FIRE CHIEF

Henry Schaff was chief of the local fire department at that time. To help him in this monumental task Fire Chief Frank Bergeron of Napoleonville with about 100 volunteers came by special train. It so happened that an official of the railroad was passing through this city by special train at the time of the fire.

It was this train that he sent to Napoleonville for the firefighters. The Napoleonville volunteers also brought hose to add to the local supply which was no longer adequate.

Fire Chief Schaff's regulars and the visiting volunteers checked the fire on the west side of Lessard street. However, sparks were snatched by the wind and carried to the roof of the Sisters of Charity convent annex in the rear of their main building. This annex was destroyed.

SEEMED SUBDUEd

Controlled for a second time, the fire seemed subdued until again sparks flew to Paytaville Plantation south of the city destroying five buildings there.

Then, finally the conflagration was brought under control by the men who had been battling it without rest for many hours.

Fred Rogge, owner of the hotel, set about rebuilding it at once and other businessmen joined the fire department. The city council with Charles A. Maurin as mayor held a special meeting to thank all persons who helped extinguish the fire.

In the spring of 1913 another large fire swept through this city. It was May 24, a Sunday afternoon. It originated in a vacant building and was said to have been caused by children playing there with matches.

POINT OF ORIGIN

This time the point of origin was a two-story building on Railroad avenue, a livery stable. Residences went down in the flames.

The building in which the fire started had been built in 1888, had served as a church, a wholesale grocery and finally a stable, until for some time it had been unoccupied.

Maginnis Land Company of New Orleans owned it and valued it at $800. These fires of the past were no doubt, as great to the size of Donaldsonville as the great fire of Chicago to that enormous city.