

"Schaeffer Lumber Company Fire"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Fifty years ago Westminster suffered a devastating fire in the Liberty Street business district which, for a time, threatened nearby residences. The January 2, 1948 issue of the Westminster Democratic Advocate carried a front-page story about the devastating December 29th fire under the headline of "Schaeffer's Lumber Yard Fire Very Costly":

"The citizens of Westminster were aroused from their slumber at 12:30 Tuesday morning by an alarm of fire that damaged the Schaeffer Lumber Company, the Lincoln Manufacturing Company and the warehouse of O'Farrell Antiques and other property.

The fire was the most disastrous since the Smith & Reifsnider lumber yard fire on John street, on July 3, 1938.

More than 400 volunteer firemen from three counties, working in subfreezing temperature, halted the blaze as flames threatened to engulf a score of Liberty street dwellings from which families had to be evacuated.

Noah Schaeffer, head of the lumber company, estimated damage to his property at \$100,000, while Mrs. J. J. O'Farrell, who operates a nationally known antique shop here, set her loss at \$25,000.

Among some of the late suspicious fires were several garage blazes and a florist shop fire. In all cases, firemen asserted, investigation showed that the blazes started outside the structures.

One policeman described the arsonist as "cunning, with only a native's knowledge of every nook and cranny in the city."

Surveying the rubble-filled shell of what was once their warehouse, one of Mrs. O'Farrell's sons remarked: "And we are only fractionally insured." Another declared that the fire was "deliberately set." "It couldn't have been anything else," he added.

The fire started in the center of a 200-foot building that had been used by the Lincoln Lumber Company, which makes stepladders. That company, which belongs to Harry Bair & Sons, was in the process of moving to new quarters in the B. F. Shriver warehouse at New Windsor, and according to Mr. Schaeffer, still had an unknown quantity of machinery in the building.

A cement-block two-story forty by forty-foot building and a frame warehouse, both of which were filled with antiques, were totally destroyed. These belonged to Mrs. O'Farrell, who numbers among her customers, such luminaries as Dorothy Lamour and Mrs. John Nance Garner.

The Schaeffer office was not touched but the 60 by 100-foot lumber shed in the rear filled with lumber fell prey to the flames as well as a 40 by 60-foot cement block shed and 80 by 20-foot warehouse along the Western Maryland railroad tracks.

The Westminster Fertilizer Company office escaped the blaze although the precaution was taken to move out the furniture and records. On the Liberty street side the Wade Office Equipment Sales and Service office and Mrs. Lillie Myers boarding house escaped damage, but the rear of the double house occupied by Donald Van Fossen and Grover Haines was scorched and the roof on the Haines side caught fire but the blaze was checked by efforts of the firemen. The garage at the rear of the brick house occupied by Roy Strine was destroyed together with the auto. The double house occupied by Roger Lindsay and Woodrow Raver was scorched and roof smoking at times. Furniture was removed from these homes and then returned when the conflagration was brought under control by 2:30 a.m.

The Westminster firemen remained at the scene to check outbreaks until 5 p.m.

Freight trains, one going each way, passed during the fire, and a telegraph fire pole caught on fire but no telegraph or phone service was interrupted.

The lumber yards, formerly conducted under the name of the Lumber, Coal and Supply Company, were purchased by Mr. Schaeffer in 1913, but were not in operation since before the war years until after the war. His sons, David and Edgar, were associated with Mr. Schaeffer in the business.

In support of the incendiary origin authorities and Mr. Schaeffer pointed out that the ladder manufacturers had not been in operation for at least ten days, while preparing to move to the new location.

The section of the building in which the fire was discovered, firemen asserted, was known as the cutting department, and was littered with piles of shavings.

"It was an ideal spot for the firebug to start the blaze," a fireman said.

Patrolman Leroy Day, of the Westminster police, was among the first to discover the blaze about 12:20 a.m.

"Flames were shooting out of two windows, and within a matter of minutes the entire building was enveloped," he said.

Leister Green, fire chief, ordered his deputy to begin calling for assistance just as soon as he reached the scene.

Flames were shooting more than 50 feet into the air and across the Western Maryland Railroad tracks, which adjoin the lumber yard on the south.

Unable to cope with the rapidly spreading blaze, firemen had to retreat as the flames hurdled an alley on the north side of the building and ignited a 60 by 100 foot warehouse, containing doors and hardwood flooring, a row of six garages and the two-story warehouse of the O'Farrell concern.

Fanned by a slight westerly wind, the flames licked at, and in several cases set fire to the rears of the Liberty street dwellings, which were from 3 to 50 feet more to the north. Firemen sprayed water on the houses constantly.

Meanwhile, the blaze, after engulfing the building housing the Lincoln concern, crossed a railroad siding on the west and fired two more of the lumber company's warehouses, one of which was filled to capacity with gypsum board and sacks of lime.

During the height of the blaze an explosion, attributed to accumulated gas and smoke, lifted the roof from the east end of the Lincoln firm's building. It dropped back with a splintering crash, causing firemen near by to drop hoses and rush for safety.

When the blaze was finally under control at 2 a.m., Westminster firemen were being assisted by volunteer units from Hampstead, Manchester, Owings Mills, Reisterstown, Arcadia, Mount Airy, Union Bridge, Pleasant Valley, Glyndon, Sykesville and Frederick.

Fern F. Myers, who lives on Liberty street, and is a volunteer fireman, managed to get his car out of one of the destroyed garages, but Roy Strine's automobile was a total loss.

Union Bridge and Hampstead Firemen said they could see the reflection of the fire in the sky 10 miles away. Approximately 2,000 persons from all over the county were attracted.

The Red Cross workers provided hot coffee and sandwiches for the firefighters.

During the early phases of the fire, which for a while looked like it would sweep unchecked into the residential section to the northwest, Liberty street home owners began moving out their household furniture."

Photo caption: The ruins of the Schaeffer Lumber Co. in Westminster still smolder in this image by Earl Davidson taken on the morning after the December 29, 1947 fire. Photo courtesy of Bob Porterfield.