

"Smith & Reifsnider Fire in 1938"

Carroll County Times article for 5 July 1998

By Jay A. Graybeal

Sixty years ago Westminster residents witnessed the devastating fire at the Smith & Reifsnider Lumber Yard. The story was front page news in the July 8 issue of the Democratic Advocate newspaper:

"The Blaze Was of Incendiary Origin--Fear Was Entertained That the Fire Would Go To Main Street, But Was Confined to the Yard--16 Fire Departments With 19 Pieces of Apparatus Poured Tons of Water on the Blaze and Was Conquered After Three Hours' Battle--Several Firemen Overcome--Chief Brown and All Firemen Are commended for Their Heroic Accomplishment--The Loss is Heaviest in the County's History.

Westminster citizens had the scare of the their life time Saturday night when a fire from an incendiary origin was discovered in the lumber yard of Smith & Reifsnider, which caused an undetermined loss, but estimated at \$125,000. Mr. John L. Reifsnider, Jr., is the sole owner of the above firm.

Night watchman John Baile, who make his rounds every hour did so at 11p.m. and everything was in order as usual. An alarm was turned in at 11:45 p.m.

The fire had gained such a headway that upon the arrival of our local company with two pieces of apparatus that Chief Leroy Brown had a call put in for the following fire departments: Union Bridge, 2 trucks from Hampstead; Manchester, Taneytown, Pleasant Valley, Sykesville, Emmitsburg, Catonsville, Reisterstown, 2 trucks: Owings Mills, Glyndon, Pikesville, 2 trucks.

First to arrive was Union Bridge, making the run in 14 minutes, and was hooked up at Bond street, which was followed by Reistertown with two trucks, who also broke all records for speed.

Hampstead arrived a few minutes later with two trucks, who were soon hooked-up; one at the railroad and the other at Cover's Stock Yards. Manchester was soon on the scene and were coupled up at Klee's Garage. Taneytown was pumping from a hydrant in the lumber yard at one of the coal sheds. Pleasant Valley from Liberty street and Westminster on John and Main streets.

Chief Brown was in charge and by his masterly generalship in placing his men with the hose brought the fire under control at 3 a.m., which was a raging furnace. Every fireman fought as if it depended upon his life, knowing if the fire was not held in the lumber where it started the city was in for a big loss and would sweep to Main street. A high wind kept blowing the debris over the city and fear was entertained for the buildings in its path, but citizens protected their homes and buildings by pouring water on the roofs.

The local company kept on pouring water into the smoking ruins until 5 p.m. Sunday before leaving. About 7 o'clock another flare-up was noticed and the firemen returned and in a short time drowned out the last of the fire.

It was estimated that more than 200 volunteers fought the flames.

Thousands of feet of lumber and building materials stored by the company were destroyed and a row of frame houses opposite the lumber yard were badly charred and windows cracked by the heat.

Residents from all sections of the community joined the firemen during the night in carrying furniture from the threatened house, while water was poured from hoses on the roof tops to protect them from embers scattered widely by a strong winds.

Firemen entered the garage after it was set afire by sparks and heat from the sheds and removed seven tucks.

William McCoy, a volunteer fireman from the Sykesville company, was overcome by smoke and burned about the face and hands. Dr. S. Luther Bare set up an emergency station and treated McCoy and the others.

One fireman from the Hampstead company, suffered a broken nose and three others from the same company were burned when the supports of one of the sheds gave way and the poles struck them.

The other firemen were treated for slight burns and returned to fight the blaze.

Despite the holiday week's end almost the entire Westminster fire organization turned out, including many of the old-timers who had gone into retirement.

The cause of the fire was unknown, but George Zepp, John street, said he heard an explosion in the center shed as he passed. He said that within ten minutes the whole shed was on fire, and added that persons living nearby told him they heard noises resembling the handling of lumber about 10:30 o'clock.

Other neighbors said several children had been playing with fireworks near the lumber yard.

State Police were rushed to the scene immediately to handle the traffic. Two freight trains of the Western Maryland Railroad were halted at Cranberry for about an hour by some of the estimated 17,000 feet fire hose which had been stretched across the rails to fire plugs. One autoist was arrested when he ran his car over a line of hose.

One sad feature of the fire was that Mr. Edward Little lost a sum of money during the removal of his personal belongings.

Mr. George Sinnott not only lost considerably through thievery but his furniture was smashed by being thrown out of the window by negroes. This should be investigated as such actions should not be tolerated. It was outsiders and not firemen who do this kind of deviltry.

In the William Sinnott house while fighting the fire with hose, after chemicals had proved futile, one fireman dropped through the attic floor to the second story. Unhurt he got to his feet smiling and resumed his post of duty. This room had been newly papered and repainted. The fire was deliberate is the belief of our citizens and firemen, as the handling of lumber and an explosion was plainly heard before the alarm was given. No fire could spread as rapidly as this one in such a short time unless fed by some inflammable material. A strict investigation should be made.

The destroyed lumber was the most costly in the yard and each department was filled to the limit.

The citizens highly commended all the fire departments who so gallantly stuck to their post against the unbearable heat and smoke from the fire, and especially praise Chief Leroy Brown's management in handling the most destructive fire in the city's history.

The office force was ordered by Mr. Reifsnider to remove the books and equipment from the office on West Main street.

The fire on April 9 and 10, 1883, when the square from John street to Carroll street was destroyed. It occurred at the same hour, 11:45 p.m., causing a loss of \$80,000 with \$40,000 insurance. This fire started on the same street, John, and was caused by four negroes fighting over the stakes in a card game by upsetting candle in a livery stable, which ignited some straw. The sad feature of this fire was that two lost their lives, Robert Thomson and Aaron Shaeffer. About 21 buildings including the Lutheran church were reduced to ashes and badly damaged.

The reflection of Saturday night's fire brought people from York, Hanover, McSherrystown and Frederick. The crowd was estimated at about 5,000 that watched the firemen from the railroad tracks and surrounding points.

Chief Brown is desirous that the public should know that the destruction and ransacking that took place in the Sinnott and Little house was done by outsiders and not by any of the firemen.

A force of men from the Gas and Electric Company responded when it was reported that several wires were down carrying the electric power and were promptly taken care of.

A group of frame houses on John street, opposite the fire section, had been painted on Saturday morning. Water was kept constantly on them and steam rose from them much of the time.

Four of the Hampstead fire fighters were injured: Fire Chief John W. Murray and "Bud" Arbaugh were overcome by smoke; Charles R. Williams and Oscar Armacost suffered cuts and bruises from fallen timber, and Stewart Thompson bruised.

Mr. John L. Reifsnider served the firemen with sandwiches and coffee at the American Restaurant after the fire was brought under control."

Despite the damage, the firm survived the fire and rebuilt its warehouse buildings and replaced its stock of lumber supplies.

Photo caption: The ruins of the July 2-3, 1938 Smith & Reifsnider buildings still smolder on the morning after the fire. Historical Society of Carroll County collection, gift of Betty Smith Yingling, 1992.