

# Grinnell's Great 3-18-1889 Fire Of 1889

Forty-four years is not a very long time in the history of a community but it is long enough so that most of the people who were settlers here at the time of the great fire have passed out of existence.

The fire which destroyed pretty near all a business block of Grinnell started at noon Jan. 12, 1889. It was supposed to have been started from a spark from a Rock Island engine which was switching on the track south of one of the grain elevators. A pretty stiff wind was blowing and almost in seconds after the fire caught on the roof the elevator was in flames and it swept across Commercial street and was attacking the buildings facing south. The first buildings to be taken by the flames were The Herald office and the Miles hardware store which were directly in the path of the flames. These buildings were shingled with pine shingles and the fire spread with wonderful rapidity. Before the flames had been brought under control all the buildings on the east half of the block were ablaze and the fire was rapidly spreading to the buildings south of Commercial street and east of the elevator.

Companies from Marshalltown and Brooklyn brought relief as soon as possible but that part of the town was doomed.

A good supply of water and the activity of the local and visiting firemen saved the block to the north of Fourth avenue and some of the buildings on the south side of Fourth avenue. The stores were emptied as rapidly as possible and most of the contents were carried into the park by willing hands.

The fire started at noon and in two hours that part of the town was either in ashes or just smoking ruins.

The few people now who lived in Grinnell at that time remember the devastation which the fire wrought. It was believed as I stated before that the fire started from a spark from a passing engine and later suit was brought by some of the business men in an effort to prove that this was true. It was shown reasonably conclusive that there was little or no fire at the elevator at the time it broke out and that an engine was switching back and forth at the time the fire started. But to prove that the sparks from an engine caused the fire was a different proposition and about a week was spent

in the suit against the Rock Island railway company in an effort to show that the loss was caused by the sparks from an engine.

But it was not proven and the company was not required to pay any damages for losses. The contents of the stores were taken out into the park and almost immediately rough board buildings were put up and people who had stores on the east side of the block were engaged in doing business in what came to be known as "Oklahoma Row." Oklahoma row was so named from the new state of Oklahoma which had just been opened up to settlers and the buildings were put up so rapidly that the new lumber buildings very much resembled the buildings in the park.

It would be impossible to name all the stores that located in the park but the entire west side of the park was a complete town occupied by the new buildings. Most notable were the Herrick hardware store, the Proctor jewelry store, a clothing store, restaurants, and so forth. Also the justice office of Squire Chafee was in this row.

Some of the buildings destroyed were never rebuilt. Most notable was the Miles hardware store which occupied the southwest corner of the block. The fire was the most disastrous event which had happened in Grinnell since the cyclone. There was not sufficient insurance to cover the entire loss but following the fire the brick front which now faces the park was made by the architect as one continuous front and it has been in existence for forty years. Among the buildings destroyed was the Seaman restaurant, the office of the lumber company and a number of smaller buildings between Commercial street and the railroad.

At the time of the fire Commercial street was one of the most popular in town. There were stores on both sides and all doing a good business. Commercial street was a very narrow street and immediately after the fire people owning property on both sides contributed part of their own property to widen the street and that is how Commercial street came to be more than an alley.

Buildings put up on Commercial street immediately after the fire were the old Herald office and Chafee block. Both of which buildings are now in use.