



Historic Middleton *The Great Fire of 1900*

"Tuesday night, June 19 [1900] will long be remembered by Middletonians. At about 6:30 p.m. on that date, W. Hoffman's mill ominously tooted the fatal toot, and there was a rush for the mill from all directions. Men and women, boys and girls trying to outstrip each other in their eagerness to get there first, some had chemical fire extinguishers and some buckets, but all had blanched eager faces, for they knew danger was ahead of them but at that time few realized the terrible strain they would have to undergo before the night was past and the desolation old Sol would reveal when he next showed his shining face."

This colorful passage was part of a long article that appeared in the June 29, 1900 edition of the *Waunakee News* describing the great fire in downtown Middleton and its aftermath. Middleton's newspaper, the *Times-Herald* was unable to publish for a while because the print shop had burned along with many other business structures; therefore, the story was featured on page one of the *Waunakee News* which was also published by *Middleton Times-Herald* Publisher/Editor, Thomas A. Everill (who most likely wrote the dramatic copy).

The June 19 fire destroyed a large part of downtown Middleton with about 19 buildings and 12 barns or outbuildings going up in flames. The blaze started in William Hoffman's grist mill (Middleton Roller Mills) located on the south side of Elmwood Ave. (in the 7400 block, near today's Senior Center). With a strong east wind, the fire quickly spread to other buildings on Hubbard Ave. and Parmenter St. Weisenberg's blacksmith shop next door caught fire and windblown cinders and flaming debris were soon everywhere as building after building was consumed. The fire burned all buildings on Elmwood west to Parmenter, and all of them on Parmenter's east side north to University Ave. (including the Middleton Hotel). It also turned south and burned everything along the east side of Parmenter to Hubbard Ave.



Viewing the ruins soon after the fire in 1900. Today, buildings A, B and C still stand along Parmenter Street and are part of the downtown business community. (photo from Middleton Area Historical Society archives).



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The fire also jumped across Elmwood from the mill site and soon burned John Dahlk's blacksmith shop, the Coolidge barn (but spared Dr. Coolidge's house) and the wheelwright's shop next door. The wheelwright, Henry G. Wolf, saved his home with the aid of all family members. He placed a large carpet, ripped from the living room, onto his roof and wet it down with well water provided by his wife, son and three daughters who formed a bucket brigade. The old carpet, with a few burn marks, has survived and is now on display at the Middleton Fire Station on University Ave.

The fire jumped across Parmenter St. at the University Ave. intersection and burned another large building on the southwest corner containing mattresses and furniture stored there by the building's owner Frank



The Fire's Origin ... In Hoffman's Middleton Roller Mills

Durkopp. In addition, the building also housed Thomas Everill's printing shop where he published the *Middleton Times-Herald*.

At the time, Middleton had no Fire Department, and soon, as the fire raced through the village, word went out to Madison for help. Although Madison firefighters hopped on a train, they arrived about an hour later and had forgotten to bring hoses long enough to reach a big well beneath the distillery. Therefore, they provided little assistance to the desperate bucket brigade volunteers. Later that

evening, as the fire died down, some looters arrived on the scene and caused added problems for the police and property owners. Business losses from the fire ranged from a few hundred dollars to \$17,000; insurance payments helped some, but not everyone had coverage.

But out of the ashes a new Middleton soon rose up; construction began throughout the commercial section of downtown. As the *Waunakee News* story suggested, "... part of Middleton will soon assume a new garb that will put to shame the old even as it appeared before the fire ... steps have been taken to rebuild on a larger scale than before..." This optimism proved true as many business owners quickly started to rebuild: Dahlk, Gruen, Prien, Brumm & Brumm, Muetz, Durkopp and DuFrenne Brothers were among those who soon began the reconstruction of downtown Middleton.

Most of the new buildings were of brick construction and many of the remaining commercial buildings are dated to after the fire ... 1901-1902. Several prominent buildings survived the fire along Parmenter St. and some are still used today. Three notable structures can be seen in the photo on page one (labeled A, B and C) ... can you identify them? Building A was first the Weinberg Bldg. and by 1890 the Schroeder Bldg. (or Hall), Building B was the DuFrenne Bldg. and Building C, the American House.

In the same *Waunakee News* story, Publisher Everill pleaded for Middleton to organize a "...hook and ladder company with a small hand engine and plenty of ladders, 'long enough'..." His plea was soon heeded and on February 4, 1901 in August Schroeder's Hall, Middleton Fire Company No. 1 was officially organized. Article I of the Company charter stated that the first 22 signers (Village residents over 16 years of age) would become Department members. Ironically, the following meeting notice had appeared in the *Middleton Times-Herald* on May 26, 1899 (one year before the great fire that started where the meeting was to be held):

There are quite a few of our citizens who are desirous of organizing a fire department for the benefit of this village ... A meeting for this purpose will be held at William Hoffman's Hall Saturday evening ...



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