

BIG FIRE AT CENTRALIA

Introduction: A terrible fire struck Centralia's commercial district in the early hours of Friday morning on December 4, 1908. It left in its aftermath a smoldering mound of ashes where a block of buildings once stood. Estimates placed property losses at \$50,000, and in 2002 dollars this would be equivalent to at least \$900,000. Area newspapers all carried stories about the disaster. *The Morning Press* in Bloomsburg described how the resident rallied in a Herculean effort to save the buildings across the street from where the fire raged.

The bucket brigade, assisted by nearly every resident of the town, secured all of the available blankets, rag carpets, and comfortables. These were nailed and tied along the fronts of the buildings and were kept continually saturated with water from wells and from every available source. In this manner the buildings were saved from being burned, although the fronts were badly blistered, and every glass in all the windows along the west side of Locust Avenue was broken. It was an heroic flight, in which numberless hands were blistered, hair singed, and clothes ruined so hot were the flames, and so determined were the efforts of the residents to save the rest of the borough. It was a success. The fire after blazing for four hours burned itself out.

The Mt. Carmel *Daily News* believed that this effort along with a wind blowing from the west saved the west side of Locust Street. Furthermore, it felt that if the other side of Locust Street went up in flames, then it was likely the entire town would have been destroyed.

Centralia with a population of approximately 3,000 faced a huge challenge to deal with the fire's aftermath. Very quickly the borough leaders organized a relief committee to help the victims and by the third day had raised \$400. It also made pleas for assistance from neighboring communities. The losses due to the tragedy and the winter conditions created great hardships for the forty families, leaving two hundred people homeless. Over half of them were suddenly forced into poverty by losing everything they had in the fire. An article in the *Daily Mail*, a Bloomsburg newspaper, reported that relatives and friends of the displaced families opened their homes to provide a place for them to stay.

The *Daily News* published an article on the third day after the fire listing 121 contributors who gave \$600 in relief funds and with two other nearby towns, Ashland and Shamokin,

providing \$300 and \$400 respectively. In addition to the money, people were sending clothing and food to the stricken community.

Bloomsburg's two newspapers carried articles urging people to contribute to the Centralia Relief Fund. The Farmers' National Bank volunteered to accept donations of money, clothing and food. *Daily Mail* reported on December 8th that only seven contributors had given \$100. Two days later the newspaper admonished the people of by stating they "are not responding as well as they should in the manner of contributions to the Centralia Relief Fund. The people of the lower end [of the county] are suffering greatly from the lack of bedding and clothing as well as other necessities of life and while other towns are during their share toward alleviating the suffering Bloomsburg is falling behind, only a few so far having contributed."

What were some possible reasons for the disappointing response from the Bloomsburg area? Bloomsburg was nineteen miles from Centralia whereas Ashland, Mt. Carmel, and Shamokin were much closer. The distance factor created a separation that was further compounded by the difficulty in traveling to Centralia due to the mountainous terrain and lack of good roads. This contributed to Centralia's isolation from the rest of the Columbia County. Furthermore, it was coal mining community with a much more diverse ethnic population making it quite different from Bloomsburg. In comparison, Ashland, Mt. Carmel, and Shamokin, all coal mining towns, had a far greater affinity with Centralia than Bloomsburg.

The following article describing the Centralia fire appeared in the *Catawissa News Item* on December 10, 1908. It identifies a major reason why fire became a conflagration that caused so much destruction. There were some spelling, punctuation, and capitalization changes made in the text for clarity purposes.

Centralia's Big Fire

Columbia County's Coal Town Has Destructive Early Morning Fire

About two o'clock last Friday morning two young men passing the Oscar Fetterman building on the east side of Locust avenue in Centralia discovered fire at the back and of the vacant storeroom, recently occupied by a moving picture show. They at once gave the alarm and though there was a prompt response to their cries of fire nothing could be done to stay the process of the flames, as the water mains were empty, the water supply having been shut off the night before at six o'clock. This was due to the scarcity of water, enough being gathered in the reservoir over night to afford a scanty supply for the day.

In a few moments the flames had gained such headway that the entire town was threatened, and calls for help were sent to the surrounding towns. Meanwhile a bucket brigade was working heroically to save the buildings across the street, and utilizing what little water remained in the pipes succeeded in preventing the flames from communicating to the buildings on the opposite side though the fronts were badly scorched and windows cracked.

The fire burned for four hours, going down the east side of Locust avenue to Railroad Street, and down Railroad Street several houses until stopped by tearing down a building in its path by the Ashland hook and ladder company, and down Locust Avenue and out Centre Street to the alley. It left nothing but ashes in its wake, as the buildings were all framed and burned like tinder.

In all thirty-four families, containing about 150 people, were rendered homeless. The buildings destroyed are as follows: E. J. Flynn, attorney-at-law, office and residence; John Colihan, saloon and restaurant; Mrs. Owen Cain, residence; M. J. McDonnell, grocery store and residence; Mrs. A. C. Rooney, saloon and residence; James Flynn and family, residence; Mrs. P. F. Burke, residence; Mrs. Elizabeth Collier, residence; Miss Ellen Gallaghel, store and residence; John Conway, store; Charles Schaum, tailor store and residence; John McDonald, tailor store and residence; A. E. Fetterman, general store and residence; John Haley, residence and saloon, John Smolke, residence; Seth Thomas, residence, and eight Polish families, living on Railroad Street.

The contents of most of the buildings were saved, those at the point where the fire started losing the most. At E. J. Flynn's the efforts were concentrated upon saving his valuable law library, which fortunately were successful.

It is a question whether all the burned district will be rebuilt, as this is the section that has been undermined and is caving in. Some have already started the work of rebuilding, others being undecided or unable to rebuild.

The origin of the fire is a mystery and can only be accounted for on the theory of incendiarism, as Mr. Fetterman, in whose unoccupied storeroom the flames started, says that there had been no fire in the room for several days. It may have been due to imperfect electric light wiring.