

Ole Bull and the Fire

In February, 1872, the *Press* was vigorously advocating the establishment of a Holly Water Works in Iowa City. The cost, according to the newspaper, would be \$75,000, but the danger from fire was so acute that the expenditure would be justified. In time the savings from diminished fire losses would more than pay for the plant, argued Editor John P. Irish. Like the warnings of Cassandra, however, the dire predictions of the newspaper went unheeded.

At the same time, the *Press* was advertising the concert to be given on March 18th by the world-famous violinist, Ole Bull. His troupe also included Miss Gertrude Orme, soprano; Mr. J. H. Chatterson, tenor; and Mr. Alfred Richter, pianist.

On the surface, there seemed to be no connection between Ole Bull's concert, fire protection, and a waterworks plant.

The concert was a success. Metropolitan Hall was crowded with an enthusiastic audience which, after numerous encores, went home extolling the performances of the great virtuoso and his company. The artists, after a late supper, retired to

their beds in the Clinton House, a hostelry noted throughout the region for the hospitality maintained by its genial proprietor, Colonel M. D. Wood. The hotel stood on the southeast corner of Clinton and College streets.

It was the quietest time of the night — too late for the “night owls” still to be about, and too early for the earliest risers to be astir — when the peaceful slumber of the guests in the hotel was suddenly disturbed by the vicious crackle of flames and the pungent smell of smoke. The alarm was sounded and the terrified sleepers hastily grabbed whatever objects first came to hand and rushed out of the burning building into the cold winter night.

The most precious possession of Ole Bull was, of course, his violin. The artist, forgetting everything else, tucked the instrument under his arm and dashed out of the flaming building with the tails of his nightshirt (in this pre-pajama era) flapping behind him. Having gained the security of the street, he remembered his watch which he had left in the room. It had a sentimental as well as a monetary value, and Ole Bull offered fifty dollars to George Herron, the negro porter, if he would go back into the hotel and retrieve it. Since he was perfectly familiar with the plan of the building, Herron accomplished his daring mission and won the fifty dollars. The night watchman,

George Andrews, was not so fortunate. He climbed a ladder into Ole Bull's room and saved the trunk, but he received no reward for this brave deed. Mr. Bull was grateful, but he had not requested this service and felt no obligation to Andrews.

The fire cost other persons dearly. Mr. and Mrs. C. W. Burlingame, who had lived on the third floor, lost a piano worth a thousand dollars. A Mr. Magee saw his belongings consumed, to the value of fifteen hundred dollars, and Henry Morrow lost goods worth five hundred. The building itself, almost a total ruin, constituted a loss of about \$35,000.

The citizens were helpless to extinguish the blaze. There was a strong northwest wind, and for a time much of the city was in danger of being swept by the conflagration. Embers were blown two blocks away, and several houses caught fire but these flames were soon put out. The next day the *Press* summarized the situation in a manner that left no doubt as to why the Clinton House burned down. "No fire apparatus, no water, no nothing, and the people could only fold their arms and watch the devouring element."

The *Press* had a right to say, "We told you so", for its prophecies about disasters from fire had come true. On March 20th, the paper hoped

that the city had learned its lesson. The magistrates had ignored the "public clamor" for adequate fire protection. Two things were needed — a well-equipped fire company, and an adequate supply of water. The Clinton House could have been saved if these necessities had been available.

There was no active fire company in Iowa City in 1872, and the only available water supply, besides wells, were the cisterns which had been constructed at intervals throughout the city. The cisterns were almost useless. The *Press* reported on March 25th that three fires had occurred within "spitting distance" of the reservoir at College and Clinton streets, "and yet we think never a pint of water has been taken therefrom for use". Every year the cisterns were filled, and then they were promptly forgotten until the next year when it was time to refill them.

A fire company had been organized in 1855 — the Iowa City Fire Company No. 1 — which was known as the German company, for its membership was recruited mainly from the German element in Iowa City and commands were given in the German tongue. Like most volunteer companies of the day, it was a private venture undertaken by public-spirited citizens who shouldered the burden of fire protection that the city was then unwilling to assume. There were other incentives

for joining besides the impulse of civic pride. To belong to a fire company in those days was to be recognized among the socially elite of a community. The volunteer fire company was as much a private club as it was an enterprise dedicated to public service. Besides enjoying the advantages of club privileges, adventurous fellows who loved dashing to fires could have a legitimate and official purpose if they belonged to an organized department. Perhaps it was more than an incidental attraction to be able to wear the brilliant uniforms that firemen so proudly displayed when on parade. Certainly the fact that the meeting place of Company No. 1 was the Iowa City Brewery could have had nothing to do with engendering the enthusiasm shown by men who desired membership in the company!

They purchased their own fire hose and pumping engine. This machine was later sold to the Amana colonies. During the Civil War the company dwindled, and by 1872 the Iowa City fire department existed only as a memory. Then the Clinton House fire, the expostulations of the *Press*, and the awakening of a few leading citizens, all combined in the spring of 1872 to provide an effective solution to the need for fire protection.

Fred Theobald, Henry Morrow, Henry Murray, A. G. Tucker, and George M. Kenyon met

the day after the Clinton House fire and began to lay their plans. Not until May 21st were the final steps taken. On the evening of that day the "Rescue Hook and Ladder Company" met in the council chamber of the city hall and formed a permanent organization. They drew up a constitution and elected the following officers: Henry Morrow, foreman; Dr. Henry Murray, first assistant foreman; Major Henry Gearkee, second assistant foreman; A. J. Rider, treasurer; and A. G. Tucker, secretary. Three days later the city council voted five hundred dollars for hooks, ladders, and buckets, and, when purchased, this apparatus was to be consigned to the care of the Rescues. All of these actions were taken under the provisions of a city ordinance passed in 1861 to provide for the organization of fire companies in Iowa City.

A few months later the Protection Hose Company came into being, and from that time forward Iowa City possessed a volunteer fire department ranking with the best in the State. The Sawyers, formed in 1883 and named after Fred Sawyer who purchased their uniforms, were for several years among the fastest teams in the annual firemen's tournaments.

A good fire department, even with the best of apparatus, can not work efficiently unless there is

a convenient and adequate supply of water. The events of 1872 revealed how deficient Iowa City was in this respect. But it required another decade of agitation before the city fathers and the citizens could be convinced of the need for a public waterworks system with pumps, mains, and hydrants. The initial cost was large only if fire losses, the added feeling of security, and the convenience of a water system were not considered. These advantages would more than offset the expense imposed upon citizens for use of the water and upon the city for hydrant rental. Not until 1882 did people finally realize this fact. In that year, an ordinance was passed providing for a waterworks system to be ready by 1883.

Thus, more than ten years after Ole Bull had run out into the street from the flaming Clinton House, clutching his violin and shivering in his nightshirt, Iowa City completed the steps necessary to provide for the protection of lives and property from the peril of fire. Perhaps the losses sustained by Mr. Morrow and Mr. Burlingame prompted them to support the movement for a fire company, but the fame of the great violinist, Ole Bull, helped dramatize the Clinton House fire, and concentrated greater attention on the lack of fire protection in Iowa City.

CARL B. CONE