



The Library Fire of 1897

by Mary Monson

Despite record temperatures in the upper nineties, more than two thousand firemen from across the state gathered in Iowa City on June 16, 1897 to participate in the Iowa State Firemen's Nineteenth Annual Tournament. Events such as this one helped compensate the volunteer firemen of Iowa City and other towns for their labors throughout the year, though at least a few local citizens objected to the gambling and the illegal sale of liquor that usually accompanied the summer celebrations. Their protests had been ignored previously, for most citizens welcomed the annual revelry and apparently condoned the casual enforcement of the law in these circumstances. But a tragedy during tournament weekend in 1897 intensified criticism of the firemen and threatened to

leave Iowa City with no fire department at all.

On the afternoon of June 16, all was festive. Townspeople along the route of the tournament parade decorated their houses and businesses, and ten thousand spectators turned out to greet marchers representing communities from various parts of the state. Delegations from several large cities marched in full regalia, including members of Muscatine's "Old Hooks" who wore silk badges reminiscent of badges they won in the tournament of 1881. They also carried red, white, and blue umbrellas, which—according to the *Muscatine Journal*—helped them "make up in appearance what they lack in style." Included in the marchers' ranks was their chief's little daughter, confidently driving a hose reel. Neither she nor the firemen impressed the judges suffi-

ciently, however, and another fire company won the \$75 prize for best appearance.

The parade ended at City Hall, where Mayor Frank Stebbins welcomed the visitors with a short speech. From there the festivities moved to the fairgrounds where, according to the *Iowa State Press*, "the boot-black, the ring-man, the soap vendor, and the Italian with bear and monkey" had already arrived.

In three days of competition for \$2,750 in prizes, the fire department teams participated in a variety of hose races and coupling contests. There was even a novelty race in which teams ran with a hose cart three hundred feet to a hydrant, laid two hundred feet of hose, uncoupled the fourth section of hose, dropped back and took out the second section and replaced it with the fourth section. The most exciting event was the horse hose race Friday afternoon. Although Clinton was the favorite of many, it could not match the pace set by an excellent Cedar Rapids team, which won the first prize of \$125. Clinton finished second, winning \$75. The Harlan Fire Department won the most money overall and carried away the championship belt. LaPorte and Corning companies also made strong showings, winning many badges and large sums of money.

Members of the host Iowa City Fire Department returned to the station Friday night, exhausted but pleased. The tournament had been a great success, and a storm building in the west brought hope of relief from the intense heat.

By three AM the storm was moving into the area. The lightning flashed more and more brilliantly and, at 4:10 AM, the University Library was struck by a bolt that hit the second chimney at the southwest corner of the building. Flames traveled along the roof and then down into the building itself. Ed Lodge, night porter at the Kirkwood Hotel, turned in the alarm.

The firemen rushed to the campus to fight the blaze and attempted to save what books

they could. But the water pressure was low that morning and the firemen could do little. At five AM, Second Assistant Librarian Mary Barrett and three firemen entered the building through a second-story window and broke into the librarian's office in an attempt to save books. Miss Barrett located the accessions register while fireman Lycurgus Leek ran into the main library room and filled his arms with books. Just as he was turning to leave, a portion of heavy timber and slate roof collapsed on him. His three companions were driven back by the flames. Soon the fire blazed totally out of control and the rest of the roof crashed to the floor. It was an hour before the flames diminished enough for the firemen to recover Leek's body. The community responded with great sympathy to the news of the heroic fireman's death, and Mrs. Mary O. Coldren circulated a subscription list to pay for the funeral, but University President Schaeffer asked that the university be permitted to bear all the expense.

In the aftermath of the fire, the largest academic library west of the Mississippi lay in ruins. In its forty-year history the collection had grown from 200 volumes to 33,600. Of those 33,600 volumes, over 6,000 had been in other buildings. However, of the 27,500 books in the main library, 25,000 were destroyed along with 15,000 pamphlets. The shelf list and 40,000 catalog cards were also lost. Fortunately, the librarian's office was protected by a gallery, which saved the records kept there.

The fire department's failure to save the library became the focus of a political and moral controversy that actually pre-dated the fire. It was suggested—although not stated—by the Republican *Iowa City Citizen* that more than one of the firemen had not fully recovered from the effects of the celebration by the time of the fire, and that had the firemen been working at full capacity, more books could have been saved. The *Iowa City Press*, a paper of



The Alert Fire Company of Iowa City, participants in the tournament of 1897 (SHSI)

Democratic leanings, disagreed and supported the firemen. In any event, as a third newspaper reported on June 23, certain facts were clear:

There were rumors afloat several days ago that the churches of the city would unite in an effort to stop the sale of liquors on the fair-ground during the tournament, and Jacob Mohr, who purchased the privileges, was warned and cautioned not to sell beer.

The warning was disregarded, however, and his arrest followed. Constable Jack Butler made the arrest last evening at 7 o'clock and brought Mr. Mohr before Squire Leasure, who placed him under a bond of \$500 to appear Monday afternoon at 1 o'clock. He is charged with selling liquors contrary to law.

Traditionally, of course, municipal authorities had ignored violations of the liquor laws during the firemen's tournament. But led by temperance advocates such as the members of the Ministerial Union, a number of vocal Iowa Citizens wanted to be sure that the blame for the tragic loss of life and property in the library fire was put squarely on "demon rum." The Ministerial Union had deplored the sale of liquor at the tournament from the beginning;

here was its chance to make the charges against alcohol stick.

The indignant firemen protested this criticism immediately, and soon moved to disband and to turn over all firefighting equipment to the city. A special meeting was called to discuss the idea, but a final decision was postponed for a second meeting to be held on July 6.

In the meantime, facing the possible loss of its fire department, on June 25 the *Republican Citizen* ran a conciliatory editorial:

That the annual tournament of the Iowa Firemen's Association is a worthy institution, organized for a good cause, is indisputable. It stimulates agility, quick action and proficiency as well as precision and cool determination. It quickens discipline, and strengthens every feature of proficiency, so much relied upon in emergencies—and the life of a fireman is one of emergencies. In small cities and towns firemen render their hazardous aid without remuneration, which everyone will

The Malvern Volunteer Fire Department's running team, typical of the entrants in firemen's tournaments held in Iowa cities around the turn of the century (Allan Wortman Collection, SHSI)

agree is generosity in its most acceptable form. That the public is constantly indebted to the firemen is indisputable. They stand between the people and grave calamities, risking their lives, at times, to save others. These things cannot be lightly looked upon. . . . The association affirms that without the annual tournament, the interest in the local firemen's organizations will soon wane, and the excellent service attained by many of our cities and towns be seriously crippled.

On the other hand, the ministers hold to the belief that such a lapse of morality cannot be allowed to pass unrebuked and the church maintain its dignity and consistency. Furthermore, they assert that this affair has been allowed to drift beyond reasonable restrictions, in which belief they are not without sympathizers.

The question that is to be discussed is just how many of the bars that divide law and order forces from the other fellows, should be laid down to maintain a necessary and useful institution.

Five days later, Fire Chief August Luez wrote a penitent letter to the Ministerial Union. He explained that the planners of the tournament had decided to sell privileges to

operate a wheel of fortune and to sell liquor in order to avoid a probable deficit, which would have been assumed by the different fire fighting companies of Iowa City. Apologetically, he explained that

this action of the committee was done hastily and under the fear that the tournament would be a financial failure, but ought not to have been done at all. The firemen of Iowa City regret that such privileges were sold and say that henceforth they will have nothing to do with such matters, nor promote any enterprise by such means. We feel that this statement is due to you and make it cheerfully, trusting that it may be the means of regaining your confidence and esteem.

The Ministerial Union was satisfied. That same day Edward N. Barrett and Motier A. Bullock, representing the clergy, wrote back that ". . . having secured, in the above acknowledgement, confession and promise, the substantial ends of justice; we hereby accept the same and consent to the dismissal of the cases against Jacob Mohr and F.H. Gifford." For their part, on July 6 the firemen met as planned and voted unanimously to retain their organization.





University Librarian Joseph Rich (seated) surveys the devastation, June 1897 (SHSI)

Although controversy and recrimination eventually subsided, the task of salvaging, sorting, and rebuilding the library was an overwhelming one. A volunteer corps of faculty, alumni, and students searched for books amid the wreckage of the burned building. Salvaged books were taken to the basement of the Unitarian Church (then located at the present site of Phillips Hall), where Assistant Librarian Bertha G. Ridgeway directed fifteen volunteers who dried, sorted, and recatalogued the books. Packaged according to their condition, books were inspected by bookbinder Zaccheus Seeman to determine the best method of restoration. His assistants spread wet books on racks and regularly turned and aired them to prevent molding. Meanwhile, Librarian Joseph Rich compiled a list of books that had survived the fire, most of them in departmental libraries. Included on the list of salvaged volumes was

the oldest book in the library, *History of the Great Councils of the Church*, a Latin work published in 1502. Quite by accident, Mr. Rich had discovered it in an ash heap.

The departmental working libraries of biology, zoology, geology, mathematics, and approximately three-fourths of the chemistry volumes had been housed in professors' rooms in other buildings and thus escaped the flames. Totally destroyed, however, were collections in political science, political economy, history, French, English, Greek, and Latin, along with hundreds of theses and 1,500 volumes in the German library—the latter collection a gift from Iowa's German-American residents. Perhaps the most shocking loss was the destruction of approximately one-third of the 4,200-volume Talbot Collection. Donated to the library in 1890 by D.H. Talbot of Sioux City, these books constituted one-sixth of the

library's total collection and nearly equalled in value everything else held by the library. Talbot's donation included works in natural history, explorations, voyages, travel, and biography, and also contained a number of books from the early sixteenth century. Of the volumes saved, many were damaged by fire or water and others were too charred to rebind. Things could have been worse, however. Closely shelved in one corner of the library room, the Talbot books had been surrounded by an eight-foot pine partition. Behind it were the only book cases left standing; a falling roof had overturned all the others in the library.

The library building (North Hall) had been erected just north of Old Capitol in 1865 at a cost of \$33,000. It was built to be used as a chapel, with provision on the first floor for the Chemistry and Physics departments. However, in 1882 the library moved into it, replacing the chapel on the second floor. The first floor was occupied exclusively by the physics laboratory. The laboratory did not catch on fire, but damage from heat and water was estimated at \$5,000, which seems paltry compared to the \$100,000 loss to the library.

For more than ten years librarians and university officials had feared just such a catastrophe. They repeatedly begged the legislature to provide them with a fireproof building. In 1886, Mrs. North, the librarian at that time, made such a request. It was repeated in 1891 by the Library Committee of the Board of Regents and by President Schaeffer. In 1893 Librarian Rich again asked for a new building and the request was repeated in the 1895 report of the State University of Iowa to the General Assembly.

In the aftermath of this great tragedy, everyone was confident that the legislators would at last allocate the funds needed for a suitable building. The state carried no insurance on any of its buildings, so a request for

\$150,000 was made for a fireproof structure. Members of the Board of Regents Executive Committee, headed by Chairman Albert W. Swalm, wrote to the governor, to every legislator, to major newspapers, and to hundreds of prominent men and women all over Iowa. President Schaeffer himself addressed a letter to alumni, asking them to contact their legislators requesting support for the necessary funding.

But the dream of a new building remained only that. The legislature accepted Frank Novack's bid of \$3,800 for the repair of North Hall and voted \$75,000 for the restoration of books, this amount to be expended at the rate of \$15,000 a year for five years.

When school opened in the fall of 1897, the Unitarian Church basement served as a temporary library and the State Historical Society offered the use of its library to university students on condition that the University provide a librarian to work those four days of the week that the State Historical Society Library was normally closed. By October 23, the repairs on North Hall had been completed and the books were moved back in.

By May 31, 1898, over 9,000 new books had been acquired through purchases and gifts, and the General Assembly of 1898 voted \$41,900 to buy more. By 1901 the library's collection had regained its pre-fire size. But it wasn't until 1941 that the state legislature finally funded a new library building. □

Note on Sources

Sources for this article included issues of the *Iowa State Press* and the *Iowa City Weekly Republican* published in 1897 (on microfilm at the State Historical Society) and records of the Rescue Hook and Ladder Company #1 of Iowa City (also at the Society). Also useful were Mildred Throne, "History of the State University of Iowa: The University Libraries," (M.A. thesis, University of Iowa, 1943), and *Staff*, 16 (Winter 1966), a magazine formerly published by the University of Iowa.