

FIRST PLACE: JUNIOR AND SENIOR HIGH DIVISION

“Engulfed in the Flames of Weston”

By Amanda Swift

Fire; like a wild, dangerous dance, the flames mangle together in a blur of flinching red. It consumes everything with which stands in the way, buildings, belongings, and lives. Though the flames seem beautiful from a distance, power and wiliness echo in the smoke. Weston, Missouri, a small town close to the Kansas and Missouri border, has had her fair share of devastating combustions.

The first fire bit into the charming town on March 8th, 1855. The chaos spread from Murphy's Ten Pin Alley and, like a sickness, devoured forty-one businesses, storage warehouses, and two houses. The town formed a “bucket brigade” and flattened the flames at Casper Beecher's store (The Town Mouse now). Weston rebuilt itself and replaced the wooden frames with brick.

On September 4th, 1858, Weston went up in a blaze once again. The cause of these fires was simply drunken Kansans who supported slavery and would do anything to make the new frontier a slave state. A large group of Kansas men gathered in Weston at several of the twelve saloons and consumed bulky amounts of liquor. Violence broke out and fire was set to several buildings within Main Street. The damages ended up costing Weston a weighty \$25,000.

The St. George, a rather popular hotel on Main Street, swam in fire on December 14th, 1890. At about 2:00 A.M., while the rest of the town slept, the building started to burn at a rapid pace. Henry Woods, a porter who worked at the hotel frantically swept the halls and rooms to warn guests of the danger. J.P. Reichard discarded a mattress from a window on the third floor and leaped, landing safely. Following his lead, J.P. Bretz and Henry Woods also jumped from the third floor, both landing safely as well. A woman named Nora Hogarth and her empty suitcase avoided the flames, though later she realized that her jewels and possessions were not so lucky. The building was lost because help had not been called soon enough.

Later that same year, Hauberman's Carriage Shop on Main Street ignited in a burst. The cause was thought to have been a tossed cigarette or match. The building was also lost due to the lack of communications. 121 years later, fire struck again in that same remodeled building, now called Old Geezer's Mantiques. The owner George Treese, was captured in the flames and was unable to escape to safety. Police say that fire was caused by electrical problems. Half of the building was able to be saved though Mr. Treese was not.

A gas eruption and fire flattened the American Legion Hall in April of 1959. Rubble and soot caked the streets as town members gathered to mourn at the site. One man was

killed and another was seriously injured by the sudden explosion. Shock played on a lot of faces in the aftermath.

“The town was saved only by the superhuman efforts of our fire boys and citizens.” The local paper of Weston, The Weston Chronicle, printed on the events in December of 1896. The winds of that day carried the flames from the second floor of an old furniture factory to the buildings located on the north end of town. Most buildings were able to be saved by the citizens of Weston. Nine businesses and one house were damaged while five other buildings in the downtown area were destroyed, including the Baptist church.

In October of 1914, the Perry Warehouse, a historical structure, suffered a burning fate. Though the outside of the building was essentially fire proof, inside those walls was not. Firefighters could only protect surrounding buildings from the same destiny.

The Fort Leavenworth and St. Joseph fire departments were called in to help the Weston’s firemen on August 7th, 1936. The flames were said to have been the quickest moving fire of Weston’s time, eating away at three warehouses, a curing barn, an apartment building, and two small buildings. Luckily, the wind had been non-existent that day and saved the town from more severe damages; The Weston Chronicle building was spared.

The apartment building was totally consumed by the fire. Charles and Ruth Bless lived on the highest floor with their three-month old son. Ruth and their baby were out of town luckily, though Charles was still at home. The 24-year-old couldn’t let his small family’s possessions go and kept going back into the fire. His friend, Noah Birch followed him in, picked him up, and dragged him out just as the building folded in on itself. Charles died after a long, happy life of 90 years.

Within the year of 1936, December to be exact, the Eureka Theater fell victim to the tongue of flames. The fire seemed to go on for quite some time before even being noticed, but by then, it was too late.

Once again the papers shouted fire within the town of Weston on March 8th, 1987. The Hull Mill and Lumber, a 130 year old landmark, was devoured by a blaze of three times as high as the building. The dry wood of the structure and the large amount of flammable material within only enraged the flames more. History was lost when the Hull Mill and Lumber fell.

On August 7th, 1991, more than \$100,000 worth of damages hit Weston. The Holladay Bar and Grill on Main Street was absorbed. The 75 fire fighters that responded fought a hard, three hour battle with the flames. The damages to the Holladay were restricted to the kitchen and stairwell on the first floor and the back half of the second floor. The two other buildings suffered water damages from the hoses drenching the fires.

The second to last fire that struck the tiny town of Weston sparked on April 6th, 1998. The fire bit around 11:30 p.m. while the weather held a warm atmosphere. The flames

were estimated to have reached 100 feet in the air and could be seen by the residents as they walked out in PJs to see what the sirens were about. Firefighters kept the blaze away from Sur-Gro and the rest of the town though couldn't save train cars parked nearby.

Fire is an amazing force, an element which shouldn't be teased. Though beautiful, it can weigh a heavy load on lives. The elegant town of Weston has been hit by that power more than a couple of times and the community still stands. That speaks highly of the determination and drive within the hearts of Weston's people. We are just too stubborn to be demolished, even by nature.