

Fire

Continued from previous page

to make their escape from the flames together.

Near Mr. Kemp's body was found his revolver, as he had been a deputy sheriff for Saratoga County. All the cartridges had been discharged by the intense heat and one of the bullets had gone through his wife's head, probably after her death in the fire.⁹

A horrifying scene, to say the least.

In 1957, 32 years after that tragic fire, Deputy Sheriff Wendell Townley, who at the time of the fire was also the village fire chief, spoke about that night and what may have started the fire. He speculated that, based on the positions of the bodies, it was possible that use of kerosene stoves in many rooms of the house had consumed large amounts of oxygen and that someone who was oxygen-starved may have fallen and tipped over one of the stoves. Or there may have been an accumulation of gases in the home and, when a draft of air entered the house, it may well have caused an explosion.¹⁰ But, he readily admits, we will never know what really happened.

The one survivor, Beatrice, in 1957 married and living in Saratoga, really does not remember much more than the fact that she felt very lucky to have even survived the fire on that day. Her recovery was a very long one, especially when coupled with the fact that she reportedly had typhoid pneumonia when first admitted to the hospital.¹¹ Reaction to the horrific fire was swift. In a day when news travelled far more slowly than in present times, the story was in newspapers far and wide. Healdsville, California, about one hour north of San Francisco, carried the story on the same day as the fire, November 6, but with a byline of Albany NY. Closer to home, Buffalo and Syracuse newspapers ran the story on their front pages, giving it top billing on the front pages. The local *Albany Times Union* carried the story the day after the fire and the *Schenectady Gazette* ran an article a few days later about businesses in the area closing during one hour in the afternoon of the funerals as a sign of respect to the family. Hundreds of people lined the streets through which six cars carried the bodies of the dead members of the family.

The Saratogian, a local newspaper, in a rather opinion-laced article the day after the fire, stated "Ballston Spa has been put to shame by visitors and residents of neighboring communities who have far better equipment with their inadequate firefighting equipment." The article continued by contrasting what *is* to what *should be*. "At that time, as pedestrians heard the fire alarm, theywould say, 'Here *comes* our boys' The trucks would then pass. With proper and up-to-date equipment, the same pedestrians could and would proudly say, 'There *goes* our boys.'"¹² (italics added by author)

The day after the fire, a group of thirty to forty concerned and influential citizens of the village met to discuss fire protection in Ballston Spa. This fire plus one earlier at the Ballston Knit Glove Company had made it clear that getting to fires quickly was not happening and

access to water especially for areas just outside the village was a problem. There was a need for a pumper as a water supply and for a system by which volunteers could be immediately informed of the location of the event, instead allowing them to reach a fire in a timely fashion. Officials who were involved in such alarm systems were actually present at that meeting. Fire Chief Townley stated that supplying each of the three stations in town, the Union Fire Department, the Eagle Fire Department, and the Matt Lee Fire Department, with a pumper would cost about \$20,000; many others said one pumper centrally located would suffice. A committee was established and they were to meet the following Thursday to discuss specifics and make recommendations for upgrading fire protection in the city.¹³

About a week later, there were petitions circulating in town to ask the village Board of Trustees to call for a \$20,000 bond issue to be floated at a special election. The bond would cover the cost of one pumper for the fire department, the installation of a fire alarm system, and the creation of a three man paid fire department. However, the village trustees made it clear they did not feel the bond issue would pass as the continuing cost of maintaining the equipment and the cost of the paid firemen would be beyond what the public was willing to spend. The other question discussed by people was what to do with the three existing volunteer fire companies and whether they would even be amenable to this new plan.¹⁴

So what does all this really tell us or, should we say, what has history really taught us? There are now many more safety rules for uses of stoves in the home, particularly in light of a stove being one of the possible causes of this fire. Also, much is made in recent years of having a fire escape plan with no obstacles in the way. Maybe if the placement of the chiffoier had been different, the end result of this fire, too, would have been different. And, quite obviously, fire equipment has improved dramatically, the procedures by which the fire trucks get to the location of the fire today have been improved, and most large population areas have paid employees trained to fight fires, a demand of the petitioners in Ballston Spa after this event.

Location of hydrants for access to water as well as a backup plan to use in case the hydrants are at a considerable distance became a significant issues. Pumper trucks, as requested by the people in Ballston Spa village, become much more common.

And, coincidentally, six years later, July 23, 1931, the garage where George Kemp had worked, the Tuper Garage, had a fire. The garage was a couple of doors away from the Kemp house tragedy and this fire brought back memories of that fateful night six years before. In this latest fire, a freight train blocked the roadway that the fire trucks could have used to get from the Bath Street station to the fire in the Church Avenue garage; that probably delayed the firemen by a minute or two.¹⁵ However, "the timely arrival of the Ballston Spa fire department... prevented a serious loss."¹⁶ So the firemen's arrival, although inhibited a bit, did not seem to impact the situation

Continued on next page