

# HISTORIC BUSINESS DISTRICT FIRES OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

## PART ONE

In 1900, the population of Olathe was around 3,000 and OFD was about 30 years-old, consisting of a paid fire chief and about 20 volunteers. There were two stations at the time. The headquarters station was in the 100 block of North Chestnut and the other was in the 100 block of South Mahaffie. The 1890 firehouse on Chestnut Street housed a hook & ladder wagon and a fire patrol wagon, both horse-drawn vehicles. The fire patrol wagon had its own dedicated fire horse, which was kept near the firehouse. A team of horses or mules that belonged to the city was used to pull the hook & ladder wagon whenever it was called for. A man-drawn chemical engine and a hose cart made up the rest of the fleet. Old newspaper accounts tell of the firemen hooking two or three pieces of apparatus together in series behind the city's team on some of the longer responses. The Mahaffie station, which opened in the early 1870's, most likely housed a man-drawn hose cart, some buckets, and not much else. Around 1912, the new city hall fire station opened up on the southwest corner of Santa Fe & Kansas. It is believed that the Mahaffie firehouse was closed sometime in the 1930's. A future article will feature the "East End Fire Department" and fires on the east side of town.

It would be nice to have pictures of all the following fires, but as ironic as it sounds, many fire photographs and their negatives were probably destroyed in fires of their own. There are records of fires that occurred in various photography studios that were located on the square.

What follows are just *some* of the most significant fires in Olathe's business district from 1900 to 1950. Keep in mind that there were many more fires that occurred that I haven't been able to find complete records of yet, including a \$100,000 fire at Hodges Lumber in 1909.

### **1903 GRANGE STORE & OPERA HOUSE FIRE**

November 8, 1903

The Grange is a national organization that was formed in 1867. This organization was established as a kind of farmer and rural resident cooperative – a national organization representing farmers similar to a union. Many farm towns across the country had Grange Stores that were much like department stores in larger, urban towns. The Olathe Grange was built in 1876 and had an opera house as well as a department store. This three-story brick building took up most of the 100 block of North Cherry Street, just across from what is now the Sheriffs Department. The Grange Store and Opera House was packed with 700 people in its auditorium watching a play when this late evening fire broke out. The newspaper article mentions a three minute delay from OFD due to the constant ringing of the fire bell outside the firehouse which excited Prince, the fire horse. Chief Garwood had a hard time hitching Prince due to the commotion. People in the audience fled the building using every opening available. Some even jumped out upper story windows. The fire spread rapidly and the roof collapsed shortly after all the occupants evacuated. No civilians were badly injured, but many of the firemen were burned severely, according to "The Olathe Register". The building was written off early in the game and lines were deployed to protect exposures, but an adjacent two-story wood frame structure north of the fire building burned to the

ground, anyway. Across Santa Fe Street to the north, Hotel Olathe caught fire from time to time, but bucket brigades kept it from burning to the ground. Sometime around midnight, an assistant chief with an engine crew from the Kansas City Fire Department arrived on a special train at the Frisco train depot near the East End Firehouse and prepared to unload their steamer. The steamer was left on the flatcar, though, as the fire had already done its damage. That night was probably the closest OFD ever came to having a steamer, by the way. The cause of the fire was not determined, but many thought that the wood flooring near the furnace ignited. The Grange store was rebuilt on the same location in the spring of 1904, only to burn to the ground again in 1936.

### **1909 SAUNDERS BROS LIVERY STABLE**

June 8, 1909, 0300 hours

Ed and his brother, BH Saunders owned and operated a livery stable on the northwest corner of Kansas and Park. This stable was almost fully involved when the alarm was turned in. While the fire companies played their streams on the stable, a civilian bucket brigade protected WC Keefer Hardware, an exposure across Park Street to the south. Keefer Hardware lost all its plate glass windows and a few buggies, but Saunders loss was great, with 43 of the 45 resident horses perishing in the flames. Most of the horses were privately owned by Olathe families, but Wells Fargo lost a draft horse in this fire, as well. The \$50,000 loss fire included many items stored in Saunders barn, such as a Ford automobile, two hearses and an ambulance belonging to Duffy & Julien Undertakers. Several privately owned buggies and carriages were lost, as well. The fire was thought to have been started by a spark from a passing Santa Fe train, but it was never proven. Saunders opened up for business the next morning in a barn across the street, just west of Keefer's. Not long after the ashes cooled, the Strang Line Railroad built a depot on the Saunders fire site. The Saunders operated out of the barn next to Keefer's for a short while before relocating to the north side of the square.

### **1914 B.H. SAUNDERS LIVERY STABLE**

April 9, 1914, 0230 hours

B.H. Saunders had moved his operation directly across Santa Fe Street from the courthouse only a couple of years before this devastating fire. This fire also happened in the middle of the night, killing all 35 horses that were boarded inside. Hotel Olathe, the next building east of Saunders caught fire, temporarily displacing all forty of its residents. Former fire chief AE Moll, the proprietor of Hotel Olathe thought his building was doomed, but Buss Knox and his boys were able to keep the damage down to about \$2,000. The flames spread to the north and burned down Sheriff Cave's garage. The city jail, located north of Cave's garage, also took some heat. The "Mirror" reported that the inmates "pleading piteously" to be taken from their cells. Saunders' loss was estimated at \$20,000. A month after the fire, B.H. Saunders sold what was left of his livery and transfer business to James Cosgrove, who owned several barns and stables in the 100 block of South Mahaffie, as well as a building across Santa Fe from the "new" city hall fire station. After 17 years, it was the end of the Saunders Livery business in Olathe. B.H. Saunders moved to Texas to join his brother in a similar business.

### **1915 HIGH SCHOOL**

November 28, 1915, 0500 hours

The Olathe High School Building occupied the northeast corner of Water and Loula. This early Sunday morning fire caused \$3000 damage to the auditorium. Buss Knox

and his boys knocked the fire down using lines off the year-old Velie fire engine before flames spread to other parts of the building. All 300 brand new opera chairs and a piano were destroyed. The cause of this fire was not determined. In the weeks following the fire, teachers held their classes in makeshift areas while all the rooms of the school were repainted.

### **1916 BLANKENBEKER'S "BIG RACKET"**

February 16, 1916, 1900 hours

It took Buss' Boys about 30 minutes to control this early evening blaze at this department store on the south side of the square. When they arrived, the entire \$25,000 inventory of the store was involved in fire. OFD managed to keep the damage to the building down to \$3,000. Fire cause was not determined.

### **1920 CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

January 25, 1920, 0900 hours

Established in 1865, this Sunday morning fire reduced the building and most of its contents to ashes. The only items that firemen had time to drag out of the inferno were the piano and one pew. The fire was blamed on an overheated furnace. Church members met for weeks after the fire and decided not to rebuild, but to merge with a Presbyterian Church to form the Reformed Presbyterian Church.

### **1922 OTT'S MILL**

June 16, 1922, 0100 hours

Currently one of Olathe's oldest buildings, this flour mill was built by C.M. Ott in 1869 on East Cedar, at the Mill Creek crossing. Ott's Mill changed hands several times and was used as a rubber mill in 1906. Car tires and jar rings were manufactured at that time. In 1919, The late C.M. Ott's sons, Charles and Albert bought the mill and planned on remodeling the mill into an apartment building. This middle-of-the-night fire gutted the building before OFD got on scene. Apparently, the shell of the building was saved, as the building was used later on as a nursing home, and then remodeled into the apartment building that it is today.