BAS 060 1912 fires

Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The original 1886 Thomas Block on Park Street between Main and Dakota Streets burned down September 1, 1912 in one of the most costly conflagrations in Butte’s first 75 years, with losses estimated at nearly $221,000 in dollars of the day. In addition to the building itself, businesses such as Oechsli’s Furniture Company, Everybody’s Shoes, Harry Krueger Cigars, Pallas Candy, and banks in and near the block suffered losses. The Miner’s Savings Bank was burned out, but announced no need for concern by depositors, since “the vault is standing. The safe is secure and will be opened as soon as it has cooled off sufficiently.” They built their own building the following year, just west of the Thomas Block. Today, that’s the Miner’s Hotel.

The American Theater, not fifty feet down the block to the east, bragged that thanks to their “fire proof and practically non-destructible building,” their sell-out audience enjoyed one of the best shows of the season the evening of the day the Thomas Block was destroyed. But the American Theater did succumb to fire in 1950.

Fire Chief Pete Sanger was certain the Thomas Block disaster was the work of a “firebug,” but no arrest was made. No one was killed in the that fire, but engineer Patrick Duffy died when a special train bringing firefighters to Butte from Anaconda derailed in Durant Canyon.

Another 1912 fire exceeded even the huge cost of the Thomas Block fire. On April 10, 1912, a cigarette tossed into a hay bin at Campana Feed Company’s warehouse at Iron and Nevada Streets quickly spread to consume two entire blocks, from Aluminum to Iron and Nevada to Utah Street.

Although Campana’s was on the edge of the warehouse district, many homes and boarding houses occupied those blocks in 1912. At least 200 people were made homeless and the financial loss was estimated at $350,000 at the time, later revised downward to $295,000. The Olsen Block, a two-story rooming house at 741-747 South Wyoming, was destroyed.

The Anaconda Standard reported that “a solid wall of fire crashed in windows. Sleeping roomers, many of them railroad men just off shift, fled in terror. A 200-foot runway furnished an opening for the flames and in 10 minutes the scene was one of terror. Nearly 100 roomers, some clad only in nightrobes, ran in a panic just as the rear wall caved in.”

The National Hotel on Utah Street was threatened, but a change in the wind and the four-hour efforts of firefighters saved it. The National survived until August 2010 when it was consumed by an arson fire allegedly set by two of its residents.

The Thomas Block was rebuilt in 1913 to the design of prominent Butte architect Herman Kemna for developer Adolph Pincus. Pincus told The Butte Miner on July 30, 1913, “I am a firm believer in the future of Butte, and the fact that I am investing $75,000 in the new Thomas Block is very certain that I look to see this city keep right on growing and advancing. Butte is getting better every year, and this is going to be the best business year the city has ever had.”

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.