

1898 fire leads to fire department formation

By BARBARA BENSON

(This is the 15th article in a series based on the letters written by the occupants of the Octagon House at the end of this past century.)

In telling the story of the family that lived in the Octagon House in the late 19th and for part of the 20th Century, and relating that story to some of the people and events that are an important part of Barrington's history, it is necessary to turn the calendar back and spend a while in what was one of the most progressive years of this community—1898.

At that time Emaline Hawley Brown and her husband Joseph had lived in that odd-shaped house on west Main Street for some 16 years, at least according to the title records. They had raised two daughters—Laura, now married to Joseph Nightingale and living in Fairmont, Minn., and Hattie, married to Ren Porter, living closer to home on a farm at what is now the intersection of Buckley and Oak Knoll roads. The correspondence of Emaline and Hattie to Laura, on an almost weekly basis from 1889 to 1904, has survived. It is through those letters that a vivid picture of life in Barrington in those years can be added to already published and documented materials.

In 1898 the Village of Barrington began its reach into the modern world. It might also be said that the modern world reached Barrington, but the alternative is preferable because all accounts indicate that there was a groundswell from within the community to have some advantage of the newly developing sciences and technology to improve the quality of life for the citizens of this rural town. And so it was that everything seemed to happen in 1898. The introduction of electricity, the building of the present village hall and the laying of the water mains have already been reported through the words of Emaline and Hattie and other available accounts. And the need for mains, deep water wells, pumping stations and hydrants has also been noted in connection with the continuous threat of large fires downtown which often became a reality in the 1890's.

With respect to the present publishers of this series, the following editorial was taken from an 1898 edition of the Barrington News, which at that time was published in competition to the Barrington

Review. J.B. Coykendall was the editor and his publishing effort was not to last, but his editorial of March 16, 1898 was part of a campaign which got results.

FIRE DEPARTMENT. Does Barrington need a Fire Department? It looks so. In the last five years there has been in the neighborhood of \$35,000 worth of property destroyed, and two lives suffered death, one of which might have been saved if we had had a properly organized fire department. We do not attempt to say that all of the property could have been saved if we had had a fire department, but a good proportion of it could have been. One life lost ought to be sufficient reason to set our worthy citizens working to this noble cause. It would be a small expense in comparison with the losses already sustained and would protect the village in

There was always keen competition for teams of horses to be the first to get to the engine house on Station Street to haul the hook and ladder combination truck to a fire. The first team there got \$5.00 for its service.

the future. It would have a tendency to bring more enterprises here and it would lessen the high rate of insurance now being paid by our citizens. We understand that the rate has been raised to 5½ percent, and it may be raised again.

Some people who live on the outskirts of town may say that they don't need a fire department, we are too far out. Did you ever consider that your house would burn just as quick a mile away from the depot as it would if it stood in the center of the town? By investing a few cents you may save dollars.

Let our citizens think this matter over and make up their minds one way or the other. We will gladly publish any communication in regard to this matter that may be mailed or handed to us, giving your opinion of the situation and the plans that you would suggest in securing a first class department and the necessary wells, etc. Send or hand them to us at your earliest convenience. It is not necessary to publish your name. Two heads are better than one is an old saying, and it is pretty near correct. Let us all discuss this vital important question.

The editorial was timely, but not timely

enough. On March 30, Emaline Brown began one of her news-filled letters to Laura, completing three pages that day. On the 31st she had much more to write about:

There was a big fire here last night, broke out between one and two o'clock, four buildings were burned, August Meyer's great nice brick store and a blacksmith shop, a wagon shop and George Foreman's establishment (from the northeast corner of Main and Hough, east to the tracks). His was the last to take fire so they had time to save all their things. His saloon was on the lower floor and the family lived upstairs so he is burned out of house and home saloon & all. The east part of August's store was occupied by Mr. Shroeder, a hardware merchant, he lost everything, and upstairs

had a windmill & plenty of water and kept the water playing on both house and livery. A keg of powder that was in the store exploded and smashed in all the large plate glass windows in that large brick building across the road from August's store, and they say if the store had not fell in just as it did that building would have gone too. After the windows were broken out the heat was so intense that it burned their curtains.

(Emaline was referring to what is now the Gallagher Building across the road.)

August's store cost about eight thousand dollars and he had some eighteen or twenty thousand dollars worth of goods, and he is insured for twenty two thousand dollars. Vermilya's folks have gone in Shubuel Kingsley's house. His furniture and things are all there and they will use them till they get so they can get some of their own. The women went to work and made Mrs. Vermilya some clothes. The first we knew about the fire we heard the explosion. Pa got up to see if he could see anything unusual and then saw the fire and immediately started out to see where it was. August's parrot (pretty Polly) and a cat and two kittens perished in the fire.

They are all going to build up again, the wagon maker and blacksmith have already commenced. August's store was nice enough for anybody but the others will build nicer buildings than the ones that were burned. August's little four-year-old girl said she was sorry papa's store was burned up for now she could not have any more candy. How quick anyone can lose thousands of dollars.

Emaline's next letter to Laura was postmarked April 11, 1898 and was begun on Easter Sunday. It contains a further reference to re-building, which seems to have begun immediately after the fire:

The men that lost their buildings are all going to build again, the blacksmith and wagon shop are already up, and are a good deal nicer buildings than those that were burned. August and George Foreman will commence to build soon.

The results of the rebuilding remain on that block to this day. August Meyer's new store was rebuilt as a one story building



This 70-year-old hose reel, once used by the Barrington Fire Department, was moved to the Ice House Mall for display in the fall of 1980. Retired firefighters Pete Ahrens and Ken Grebe, volunteer fireman Jack Nightingale, then Paramedic Chief Harold Martens and Heidi, the department's dalmatian, moved the wagon that year.