

MAJOR FIRES IN HAMMOND

by Valera Bickelhaupt – 1977

During my lifetime Hammond has experienced some major fires. The first one was in 1915 when the block where the bank and town hall are now located was destroyed. It was always referred to as the Laidlaw fire. William Laidlaw owned a department store where the bank now stands and his home was where Paul Truax lives now. The fire broke out in the store and soon spread to the old town hall which was between the store and his home. The flames crept along the street to the printing office which was the next to go and the last to fall victim was the Laidlaw home where the firemen were able to stop the blaze from further progress. At no time did the flames cross the street. The entire loss was estimated to be \$50,000.

In November of 1915 the Presbyterian Church and manse on St. Lawrence Avenue burned. The fire started in the manse and then spread to the church and both buildings went up in flames. Nothing much can be said about that fire except that Dr. Ferguson was clerk of the St. Lawrence Presbytery and kept the records at his home and they were destroyed. Within the next two years the church and manse were rebuilt and the new church was built of stone.

Another major fire happened on January 23, 1936 when one started in Frank Demick's hardware store. In a matter of minutes the fire was out of control and it was impossible to save anything from the store. The flames had gone through the partition into the Charles Robinson grocery store. When it was apparent that the Demick store could not be saved, the lines of water were directed to the Robinson store and Dr. Empey's building to prevent the fire from wiping out the whole block. Five families living in the block were forced to evacuate. Four hours later

the fire was brought under control. Both Redwood and Brier Hill had been called to assist. The weather was below zero with a storm raging and many of the men suffered from frostbite. When Redwood and Brier Hill were ready to return to their stations it was necessary that the snowplows go ahead of them.

On March 25, 1951, Easter Sunday morning, occurred one of the worst fires of all with the loss of one elderly citizen and a \$100,000 financial loss. Six stores were wiped out and the body of Clarence Story was not found until the following day. Cause of the fire was not known but was believed to have started in Carrsâ food market. Seven businesses were lost as well as the post office and four apartments which were all occupied. The only two businesses in the block not to be damaged were the hardware and grocery stores which were saved by the fire wall which was built after the fire in 1936, which destroyed that end of the block. Clarence Story, 74 years old was awakened by the smell of smoke, alerted his daughter who turned in the alarm and thinking her father was on his way out went to assist her mother. At first it was thought Mr. Story had reached safety and a futile search was made for him throughout the village.