



Madison County Genealogical Society



Madison County Genealogical Society
P.O. Box 1031, Norfolk, NE 68702-1031
mcgs@telebeep.com

www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nemcgs/ www.nesgs.org/~mcgs

Chicago Lumber Co. Fire by John Kielty

I had decided to remodel the closet in my bedroom. I took the old door down and made about a 6 ft. opening. I took off the wallpaper, the plaster, the lathe, and inside the wall was a yardstick. It was an old wooden yardstick, labeled the Chicago Lumber Co. I told my parents and they said they both remember the fire the lumber company had in the 40's.

The end of May can be a beautiful time in Nebraska. The 27th of May, 1948 was partly-cloudy, with a high of 75 degrees and a low of 50 degrees. My grandparents Donald and Marie Dempster brought their 5 children from Tilden to Norfolk for a picnic. My mother was 12 at the time and was looking forward to a picnic at Ta-Ha-Zouka park just south of Norfolk. Her father Don had planned on going into town to buy the lunchmeat and fruit needed for a lunch. When he heard the fire alarms going off about 12:30 that afternoon everybody got to go.

They arrived downtown to find the Chicago Lumber Co. in flames, with the devastation to consume the Yellow Cab Co. office, Bill's Camera Shop, and soon to take the Garden Cafe and the Corner Bar. It was quite a spectacle. It's always something to watch a fire. As a young girl she had a special treat. The electricity needed to be shut off and the stores across the street must have been on the same grid. Two of the stores across the street were the A&R Supermarket at 509-11 Norfolk Ave. and the Sunshine Food Market at 513-15 Norfolk Ave. Suddenly those stores had no electricity and freezers with ice cream in them. Her special treat came in the form of free ice cream, how could life get any better?

Five fire companies brought the fire under control, but the dry lumber and the wood buildings were a total loss. The article in the Norfolk Daily News, 28th May, 1948, page 1 states, "The fire attracted a huge crowd while it was destroying the block, and an even larger throng gathered in the business section last night to view the wreckage. Scores of persons from out of town were among the spectators."

One of those persons was my father, Jerry Kielty, a young man of 20. He recalls being able to see the smoke plume from his parent's farm east of Tilden. They came to Norfolk to see the fire. He later heard that there were patrons sitting in the Corner Bar that noon time. The fire was moving very quickly, the bartender picked up the cash register and told whoever was sitting there that he was leaving. It would have been an open bar for a few minutes, until it all went up in smoke.

I was surprised to find a family history story inside the wall of my bedroom. Who would've known?