

Lake City Fire (July 1888)

A Constant Danger

Forest fires and smoke were a continuous presence in the days of lumbering and all-wood buildings. Lou D. MacWethy, a Lake City resident at the time, describes a certain numbness to the constant threat of fire.¹¹⁴ He describes an everyday journey between Lucas and McBain:

Between us and McBain was a belt of burning timber, through which the road passed. It looked ominous, but we were young and so we went ahead. The livery horse, a solemn plug, made no objections. The forest was smoldering under a windless atmosphere, trees were alive with coals, occasional crashes warned that the fire had cut the final cords and the heat grew more intense as we neared the center of the conflagration, and a tree blocked the road. We led the horse over the tree and then, one on each side, we lifted the front and rear wheels of the buggy and went on our way. It was merely an incident to be expected.

Towns with wooden buildings surrounded by pine forests are in constant danger of burning. Forest fires and open flames used at home and industry bring danger from within and without. In February 1884, for example, the barn of the Lake City Hotel burned to the ground. According to the *Lake City Journal*, at 11pm Saturday, February 15, the alarm was raised, and every available man reported in good time at the scene of the fire. The barn, several tons of hay, oats, and feed, a top buggy, a cow, a pig, and various articles were lost to the flames. Superhuman efforts and a favorable easterly wind were credited with saving the surrounding buildings and the entire business portion of the town. No particular cause was ever identified.

Fire! Fire!
That was the cry that resounded thro' Lake City on Saturday night last about 11 o'clock, when it was discovered to be the Lake City Hotel barn that was on fire, and every able bodied man reported in good time at the scene of the fire. It is hard to tell how or where it originated. The barn was a total loss, including several tons of hay, oat, feed, a top buggy, a cow, and a pig; besides various other articles used in a barn. It was insured, we understand for \$200. The loss, just at this time falls heavy on Mr. Murphy, but we learn he intends to re-build immediately. It was with the most superhuman efforts that the Lake City Hotel, and Morrison Bro.'s wagon shop was saved, and only that an easterly wind was blowing at the time, or the entire business portion of the town would have been swept away.

Figure 72: *Lake City Journal*, 19 Feb 1884, Page 1

Summer Heat

On 25 June 1888, a small fire started at the Missaukee jail, next door to the courthouse. Quick action put it out before it could spread to the courthouse. It was the third fire in as many weeks. The most recent fire had threatened the town's railroad station, a few blocks away. Daniel Reeder and other town leaders vowed to install a better municipal water works to fight fires in the future.

¹¹⁴ See MacWethy, Lou D., "Michigan Forest Fires," *The Palatiner*, Vol. 3, No. 9, St. Johnsville NY, September 1953, page 1, 6-10

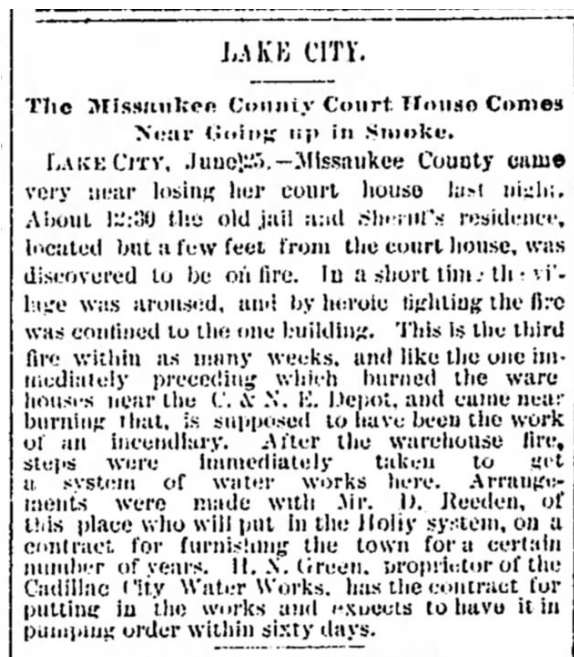


Figure 73: Detroit Free Press, 26 Jun 1888, Page 8

Holiday Fire

Presumably, Wednesday the 4th was a typical July day, with families, picnics, and sunshine. Late that night, as holiday revelry was winding down at the dance in Buckley's hall, a fire started in the saloon owned by M. VanArsdale in the center of Lake City. The saloon was in the middle of

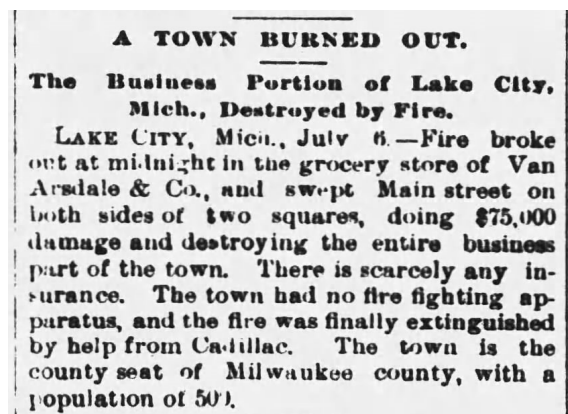


Figure 74: Benton Harbor Palladium, 6 July 1888, page 3

A week later, on Tuesday, 3 July 1888, the Missaukee *Independent* newspaper published a routine issue, recording Missaukee life as usual in anticipation of the holiday. Haying season was nearly over. M.D. Richardson was in town on business. W.J. Roche's drug store was being painted. Arthur Morris was celebrating his wedding to a woman from Howard City. A boys' baseball club was being organized. There were complaints about ungentlemanly behaviors surrounding the men's baseball games and public drunkenness on Sunday nights. A reprint from the *Grand Rapids Democrat* regarding a pre-historic mound in Crooked Lake near Jennings made wild speculations about Native Americans. The *Independent* had published a day early to free the staff to enjoy the Independence Day holiday on Wednesday.

the block on the north side of Main street, between John and Prospect streets. It started in the rear pump room, the outside door of which had been propped open with a stake in the ground, a fact which later would be regarded as evidence of potential intention.

The first alarm was raised by Margaret Spencer Stout, wife of Abraham Stout, who saw the fire from her bedroom window. Her house was on the backside of the block, behind the saloon to the northeast. The *Detroit Free Press* reported she raised the alarm about 2:30am.

By the time the people remaining at the dance could be warned and gathered, the fire was spreading. The first responders pulled the door-stake and closed the door of the pump room, but it made little difference. John Riley, the bartender, lived above the saloon. When he was awakened, he found his exit via the stairway was impassable, so he went out the front window.

The Fight

As the alarm was raised, people attempted to remove as much property from the buildings as they could, filling the streets with furniture and inventory. It was a chaotic effort. As the *Independent* noted, in the confusion people carried sturdy items like iron pokers and bedding down the stairs, while glass mirrors, bowls, and pitchers were tossed from second-story windows.

The fire slowly consumed building after building, storefront after storefront, going up and down the block. Grocery stores, druggists, the bank, medical offices, a law office, the town library, a candy store, and even the newspaper offices of the *Era* and *Republican* all burned.

The fire also moved to the back side of the block, destroying homes behind the businesses to the east on Canal street. The home of VanArsdale, who lived on the lot behind his saloon, was lost. Abraham Stout's home, which was the house on the corner of John and Canal and the spot from which the fire was first noticed, was destroyed. Two more homes were burned on the south end of the block, across from the jail and courthouse. The courthouse itself caught fire several times, but the blazes were all extinguished before becoming destructive.

To the south, the fire crossed Prospect street and burned the Reeder grocery and a small residence. Across the street to the west, on the southwest corner of Prospect and Main, the home of Washington Reeder was burned. On the northwest corner stood the Malone Brothers' Grand Central Hotel. At first, no one thought the hotel would burn due to its brick constructions, then it was on fire. What goods they managed to pull from it still burned in the street.

Some buildings next to the hotel were also consumed, but the post office and *Independent* newspaper office were damaged but left standing.

With all the chaos and goods-for-sale being thrown in the street, much of it was damaged, lost to flames, or looted by people who took advantage of the chaos.

The townsfolk fought the fire for hours. Martin Daniel Reeder, only a boy at the time, described the effort as the "back woods bucket brigade," a team of men filling pails from the lake and passing them on to the fire.

George Philp recounted in 1943 to Fred C. Hirzel that, fearing the whole village would burn, James E. Wright, the agent for Cadillac & North Eastern Railway, a narrow-gage line owned by Mr. Cummer, telegraphed the office in Cadillac for help. Mr. Cummer ordered his fastest engine to make the run to Lake City with the Cadillac bucket brigade, but it was late on a holiday evening. The steam engine was cold and put away in the roundhouse. According to Hirzel, the hostler made the thing ready in double quick time by burning resinous pine wood and black oil, while the men awakened members of the bucket fire fighters. Philp claimed that the little engine, equipped with vacuum brakes, reached 60mph on the flat stretches of the line between Cadillac and Lake City.

Around 4am, according to the Port Huron *Times Herald*, the Cadillac team arrived. Hirzel reports that “numerous flat cars arrived with men, buckets, axes, and other fire-fighting equipment.”

Only once these reinforcements arrived was the fire brought under control.

The Damage

The fire ultimately did not cross Canal Street on the east, nor John street on the north, but it burned most of the commercial buildings on Main street, requiring most of the business district to be rebuilt. The *Lake City Independent* carried a building-by-building account of which buildings were damaged and the cost of the loss.

Of the business district, only G.W. Wood’s hardware store, at the far southeast corner of Main and John, remained standing. The small building next door to the south was torn down to create a firebreak in an attempt to isolate Wood’s building.

To the South

Going south from origin at the saloon, the building next door was M.E. Boynton’s grocery, though the building was owned by E. Des Voignes. Very little of the food was rescued before the building burned to the ground. Between the food and building, the loss was worth about \$1700 (or about \$47,000 in 2021 dollars).

Next to the south was Will J. Roche’s drug store, which was being painted by D. W. Gustin. Upstairs in this building was Roche’s living quarters and offices for Dr. Erwin. The building, pharmacy stock, painting supplies, and medical tools were all lost.

William A. Minthorn owned the next building. The lower story was the Labar and Cornwell grocery, and the upper story included halls for the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (a guild for laborers) and the Grand Army of the Republic (a fraternity of veterans from the Union Army; there is still a GAR Hall and museum in Eaton Rapids). The loss was total.

Next was a one-story barber shop. The building was owned by Gaffney & Owens and occupied by W.M Day, a barber, with living quarters in the back.

J.K. Seafuse owned a two-story building that was next lost. The lower story was occupied by a grocer and druggist, George K. Peck. The upper story was an amusement hall.

To the North

The building to the north of the saloon was the Samuel B. Ardis dry goods store. About half of the stock was dragged from the building, with about an \$18,000 loss (which is about a \$500,000 loss in 2021 dollars). Upstairs were offices of the Frawley brothers, who were lumber agents, and the Misses Gibson, dressmakers.

The next building to the north was a druggist, Herbert A. Fischer, who lost the building and the stock, worth about \$500 each.

The Missaukee County Bank was lost and the safe was ruined, a loss of about \$1600, although the contents of the safe largely survived.

Next to the bank was a small wooden building owned by Mrs. S.A. Philp. As the fire crept up the block, this was the structure torn down to create a fire break, protecting the George W. Wood hardware store on the corner. Wood had time to carry out all of his stock onto the street, and with help of the break, his building was the only one left standing.

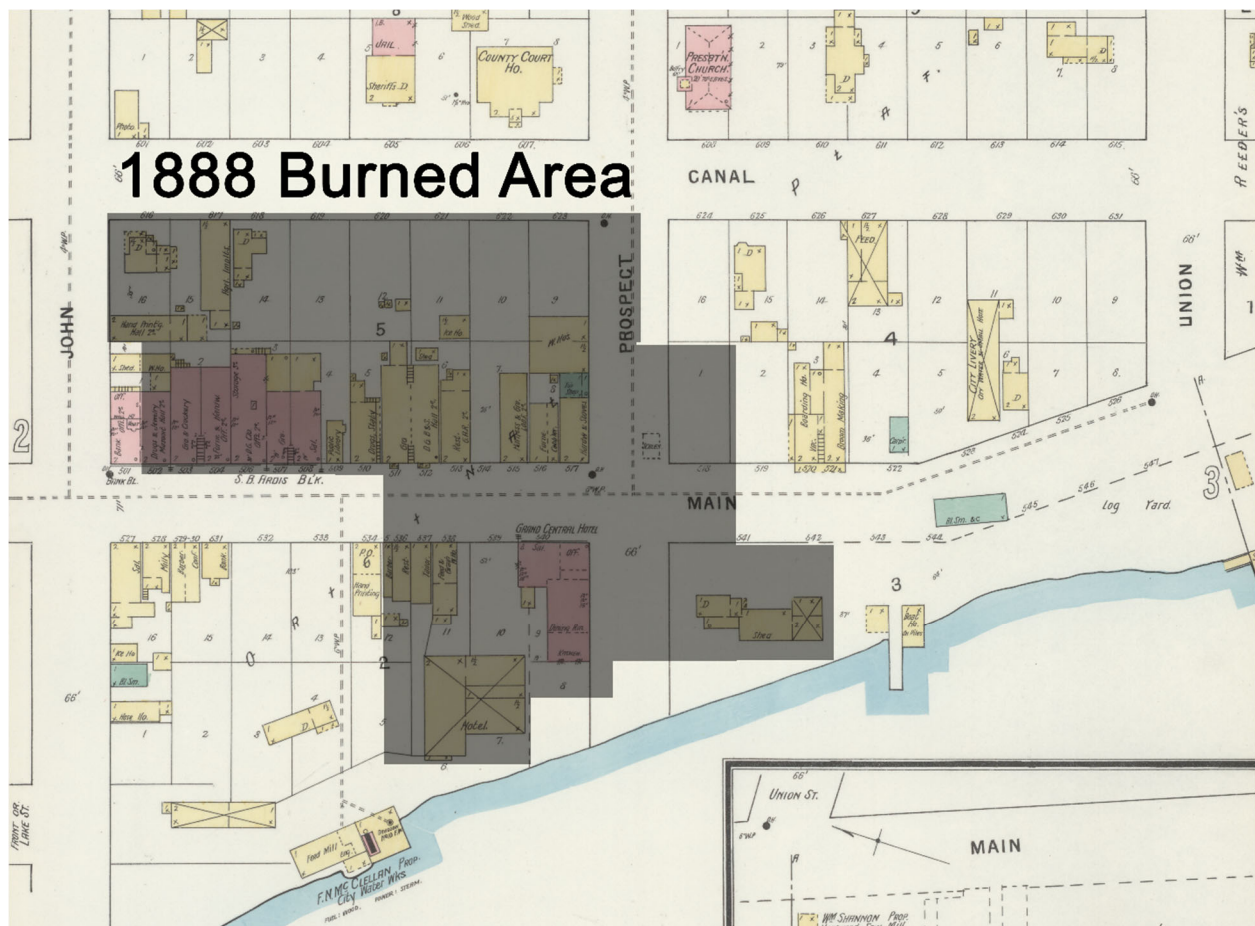


Figure 75: 1895 Sanborn map showing area of 1888 fire

Aftermath

In the end, the damage totaled about \$75,000 (about \$2 Million in 2021). The newspaper editors called for the block to be rebuilt with brick buildings and a wider main street.

Vina Dean Sherman Decker, who was a girl in 1888, arrived with her mother in Lake City the day after the fire. She said the buildings were in ruins and the streets were piled high with counters, fixtures, and other goods which had been dragged from the buildings.

A week later, on 11 July 1888, the town of Alpena, 130 miles to the northeast, had their own fire that resulted in a \$300,000 loss of businesses and lumber.

Within a few weeks, by 12 August 1888, a 9-ton boiler had been installed as part of the new Lake City waterworks. On 16 August 1888, twenty-two men volunteered to organize as a Volunteer Fire Department and the village council authorized the purchase to 1000 feet of hose, and a double-reel hose cart. In September, Washington Reeder was appointed chief of the Fire Department, which requested rubber coats, lanterns, and ladders. In November, Daniel Reeder was paid \$100 by the council for a lot on which to locate the Hose House.¹¹⁵

The fire fighters soon received a chance to put their tools into action. Around 10pm on 10 March 1889, George Peck awoke to find his bedroom full of smoke and his lower story all aflame. The Fire Department responded, and the waterworks put into action. "In a few moments, two streams of water were playing on the fire, and it was soon extinguished." Much of the lower story was lost, and the upper story was damaged by water and smoke. The firemen "had returned to the hose house, removed the wet and frozen hose from the cart, and had reeled on some new hose when a second alarm was given. The fire was in the attic of the same building this time. One line of hose was laid, which extinguished it in a short time."¹¹⁶

In September 1889, a house fire was so far from the nearest hydrant that the fire company had to return to the Hose House for more hose. By the time they returned, the bucket brigade had already extinguished the fire.¹¹⁷

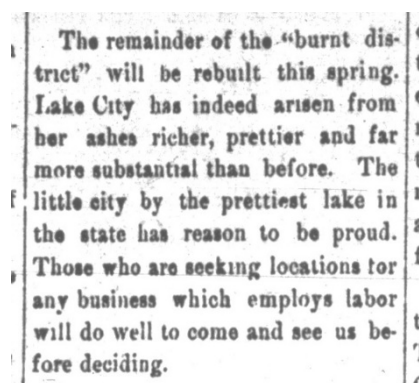


Figure 76: *Missaukee Independent*, 19 Feb 1890, p1.

The town began to rebuild quickly after the July 4 fire. Manley Stewart recounted to Fred Hirzel that he hauled lumber for weeks from the Moores' mill at Moorestown to Lake City for the rebuilding of the business district and homes. The lumber was mostly used as flooring and siding. The planer on which that lumber was milled was itself destroyed in the Moorestown mill fire the following year, in 1889. The machine was sold as iron scrap.

Nearly twenty months after the Lake City fire, a note appeared in the 19 Feb 1890 *Missaukee Independent* that "the remainder of the 'burnt district' will be rebuilt this spring. Lake City has indeed arisen from her ashes richer, prettier, and far more

substantial than before. The little city by the prettiest lake in the state has reason to be proud."

¹¹⁵ The 6 and 13 March 1889 issues of the *Missaukee Independent* carried the minutes of several village council meetings. The 20 March issue explains that the publication of last year's minutes was so delayed because the rivalry between the two town newspapers delayed the designation of the paper of record by the Lake City Council until the price reached zero.

¹¹⁶ *Missaukee Independent*, 13 March 1889, Page 1

¹¹⁷ *Missaukee Independent*, 4 Sep 1889, Page 1