

## **The Firebug**

When Sharon came into existence in 1889, the embryonic town soon attracted would be entrepreneurs desiring to make their fortune through the new rail line. Typical of urban growth church congregations follow the population, such was the case in Sharon when the Woodlawn Presbyterian congregation was organized the following year. Most of its members came from a small, but healthy, Harmony Church located between Sharon and McConnellsville. The desire some of its members saw the advantage of moving into the budding town where the action was taking place. A minority insisted on staying put and continued for a number of years.

By 1920 Harmony was no longer a vital congregation and services were intermittent. When the church burned to the ground during the night of January 1922, arson was immediately suspected since the members had not used the building for two weeks. The fire was especially suspected since a fire that destroyed the nearby Miller school in December was under still under investigation.

There was no doubt about it, someone had a grudge against the school--or someone associated with the school--since its teachers, Mrs. W. H. Morrison, Miss Alberta Garrison and Miss Carrie Love and forty-five students had been moved into Harmony to continue classes. Shortly after the school fire, Trustee J. M. "Mack" Brice, who lived nearby, reported he was the first on the scene and had found a bottle in the schoolyard that smell of kerosene. Without a doubt the same person had set both fires, but no one had the slightest idea who would do such a thing.

Thinking that someone might have a grudge against her, Miss Love offered to tender her resignation, but the trustees would not hear of it. "Miss Carrie" was one of the best-liked teachers the district had in years. During her tenure she had never whipped one of the children or sent them home because of misbehaving. No, there was no known trouble between the teachers and students or with their parents. The trustees discussed the notion that someone might have a grievance with the Compulsory Education Law or the County Compulsory Attendance officer, Belva Saunders.

County Superintendent of Education, John Carroll, wrote the secretary of the state Sinking Fund Commission, which insured the state's schools, asking about offering a reward for the arrest and conviction of the arsonist. There was no word about a reward, but the commission did send a representative to investigate the fires. About the same time the Pinkerton Detective Agency sent C. L. Holland to probe the case. When asked by a Yorkville man why he was working so openly, Holland said, "If I were looking into a similar case here in town, I might remain for some weeks hunting on the quiet; but under the circumstances there is nothing for it but to go at it open and above board." Holland talked like a politician who talked a lot, but says nothing; "I have talked with a good many people; but I am not able to tell you that I have got hold of anything worthwhile, and I am not making any brags as to what I may run across. I am persuaded, however, that I have a very difficult case."

Even with so many professionals looking into the case, community members were carrying on their own investigation. Many of these "amateur investigators" were angry and it was no telling what they might do if they caught the culprit. "I could see the man who has fired the three buildings," one of these said, "in the middle of those burned sills with a hot fire around him."

Another threatened, "If we can locate the person or persons who have burned those school houses, it is trouble for him. No fire fiend is going to prevent thirty or more school children from going to school in Miller district and that is all there is to it!"

Everyone in the district was extremely upset and some feared the firebug might not limit himself to schools and burn down private property. All sorts of rumors and street corner judgments were flying, but they all agreed the arsonist was "loony." One of the flying rumors concerned some older boys who did not want to go to school. Brice was quick to squelch the gossip, saying, "I don't believe there is a boy in the school who would burn the building. There has been no trouble in the school at all and while I have no idea as to who burned the...buildings, I am confident that it hasn't been the work of any school child."

When the Elders of Harmony figured it would cost \$3000 to replace the uninsured church, they decided the congregation was too small to carry out such a costly project. Though they had survived the departure of its members, there was no hope of surviving the fire. The congregation decided they were left with no other option than to be absorbed into nearby Presbyterian churches. The Miller School trustees however were planning to rebuild as soon as possible. James Latham's bid of \$1,650 was accepted and by the middle of January construction was underway with Trustees Brice, M. A. MacFarland and Edward Shannon supervised the work.

By the middle of the next month, suspension of classes ended and the students and teachers moved into the new schoolhouse though it was not fully finished. Within days the school was again torched and burned to the ground. Trustee Shannon's announcement was disheartening to the community, "Somebody is determined that there shall be no school building in Miller District and it seems to me that it would be a waste of time and money to try to build another."

Charles Dillinger came to the rescue offering a vacant tenant house for the school. F. E. Moore of Logan Limber came forward saying he and his workers would donate materials and labor to build the desks and benches. Because the Dillinger house was not centrally located, there was some discussion about erecting a tent on the site. Before the end of February, the Trustees decided to build a "shack" on the site, just adequate enough to last to the end of the term. By the end of the month a crude one-room "shack" fourteen by twenty feet was serving as a school. It has three small windows on one side and the door had to be left open "to keep the children from suffocating." Some saw it only as a trial to see if the firebug would try to burn it to the ground.

Brice posted an armed night watchman with orders to meet the "foul fiend with a load of buckshot and consign him to that home from which no traveler returns and where there is always a fire much hotter than any fire of his." The firebug, however, did not take the bait and in fact, (as far as we know) never demonstrated his skills as a pyrotechnic maniac. Maybe it was because spring had arrived: the only thing they knew about this arsonist was that he struck when the ground was frozen solid, perhaps to conceal his footprints. It was supposed the firebug was "obsessed with the idea of blighting civilization by prohibiting a school in that particular neighborhood." That said, the community comfortably settled into its own normality and as the county grew and school consolidation produced larger school districts, the Miller School faded into history.