

# The Disasterous Downtown Fire of 1872

## Tales of Other Days

By Bob Dewel

They don't make 'em like they used to when it comes to downtown fires. Our alert and handsomely equipped area fire department has seen to that. It sometimes seems like their more frequent calls these days are their presence at automobile accidents on our highways rather than at fires.

Not so in November, 1872, nearly 140 years ago. It is likely that the department consisted of one or two hand drawn wagons, perhaps with a hand-operated pumper mounted on one. Water was drawn from the town pump, or perhaps a nearby cistern.

That this meager equipment was drawn into service seems certain that fateful night, with the alarm going out at 10 P.M. in a strong Northwest gale. The cry was "Fire in the Sears Meat Market", and all able bodied men were expected to participate.

### The scene

The Sears Meat Market was located on the NE corner of Oak and Fourth Street, now occupied in a newer building by the Cornerstone Gallery. In fact, downtown Baraboo of that day would be unrecognizable today, it consisting then of mostly one story frame buildings thrown together in an age when building codes were unknown.

Stretching East from Sears Market along Fourth Street were a series of what we would now call ramshackle stores, occupied successively by a billiard hall, another meat market, another billiard hall, a furniture store, the Moeller Wagon shop, and the Gollmar blacksmith shop. Note those two names. Along with their Ringling cousins, they would soon become famous throughout the land.

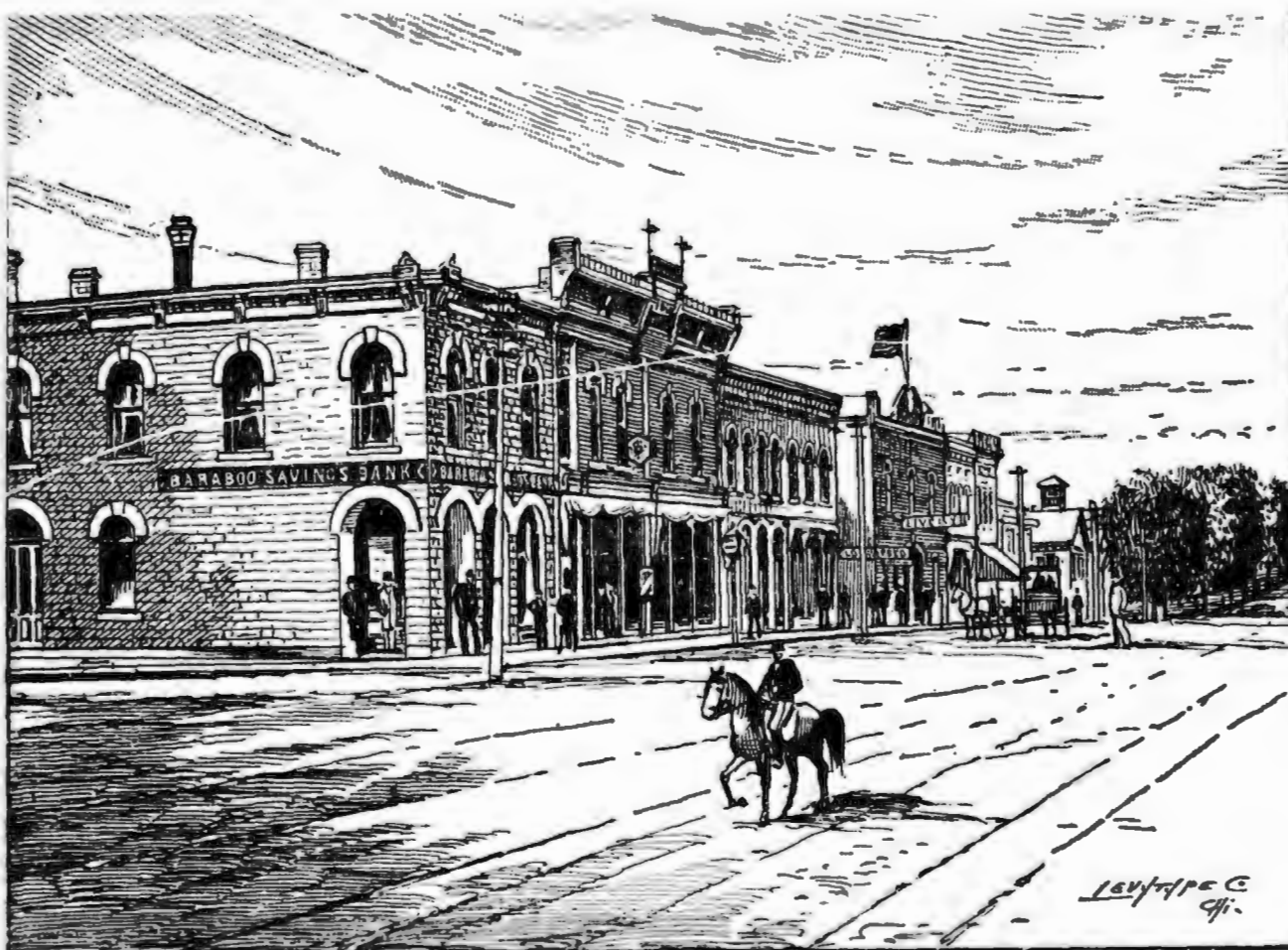
In moments the whole town was alerted by the primitive communications methods by those days. There were no telephones, radio, or DVD's to foul the silence of the night, nor was the home filled with the sounds of the television so distracting for us today. But the frantic clanging of the town bell meant only one thing—a local disaster, usually a fire.

If you didn't hear the fire bell, the sound of a horseman galloping by at that late hour told you that trouble was afoot—it was only 100 years since Paul Revere's ride made history. Every able bodied man made his presence known, with hitching rails filled for blocks around.

### The Conflagration

Next day the paper described the frantic scene: "the flames wee bursting from the font and sides of the meat market, and owing to the furious gale which prevailed at the time, no hopes were entertained of saving any of the buildings composing the block." Instead, "efforts were made to save the contents of the buildings and prevent further spread of the flames....but little time was allowed even for that."

Throngs of strong men quickly evacuated the meager good from stores in danger of being consumed. Though the newspaper does not so report in this instance, the common way to stop the flames in these early days was to rapidly



After the fire it took but a few years for the present structures to spring up. Though lower levels have been modernized, the upper stories generally appear as they did in the late 1800's.

The "City Hall" at the end of the block was an old schoolhouse, moved there to serve for a few years. It then was replaced with a two story brick building with a tower. That city hall was replaced in the 1960's with the present structure.

tear down a building a few doors down, in hopes that the flames would stop there and the rest of the town could be saved. Only the brick wall of the Gollmar blacksmith shop halted the conflagration, saving Capt. Ellsworth's livery stable to the East.

#### The Aftermath

The Republic dutifully reported the estimated loss for each business, ranging from \$500 for several of the stores to as high as \$3000 for the billiard hall and the Wild furniture store. If these sums seem trivial, the comparative rate of exchange might be over \$100,000 today. This was in a time when barter was common alongside currency as a medium of exchange.

The Republic recognized the loss of Mr. Wild in particular, and in the easy manner in which newsmen then slipped from fact to editorial, stated that "Wild has incurred the same misfortune three times---once in Pennsylvania and twice in this village. He is a hard-working honest German, and now he has but little as the result of an industrious life."

Venturing further, the Republic noted "All the losers are deserving of and have the sympathy of the community: and as the books, we believe, were all saved, this sympathy might be expressed in a practical manner by immediate payment of such sums as are due the losers." In other words, the accounts due were saved, so pay up!

Danger even lurked across the street South, occupied then by the town's principal hotel, the Western Hotel. "The great danger and fear was that the Western Hotel opposite would ignite from the intense heat, and convey the fire to business houses on the east side of the square."

This would be a major blow to the city, but "by superhuman effort this

latter calamity was avoided and the flames were confined to the block" across the street North. Little did they know of the fate of that hotel in 6 years, to be told in a future story.