Flames engulf the Flats

By Fred McGunagle

The flames, visible for miles, bright as 27,000 candles, lit up the Cuyahoga River. As they watched in fascination, the flames in the Flats crept closer and closer to downtown, engulfing lumberyards and bridges in their path.

To the consternation of firefighters, fire was falling from the sky on offices and homes as far away as E. 14th St. 4:00 p.m.

“Fires were breaking out continually in the Haymarket district from flying brands.” The Plain Dealer reported on May 26, 1914. “Companies were switched from one end of the city to another when the fans took fire. When there were a few additional 30 men at their new quarter received orders to go to another fire.”

Frank Hopen, the school superintendent, called in a volunteer squad of 50 school children to fireproof and Eagle schools, where they formed bucket brigades and saved a score of houses near E. 14th St. and Central Ave. City residents burst into gratitude for three hours to save 150 horses in the city stables.

Seven firefighters were overcome by smoke, but rescued. Six others were trapped on the Central Viaduct, and escaped by dashing through the flames of the east end. Soon after the viaduct collapsed and a 250-foot section of brick wall crashed down on the Nickel Plate Railroad bridge below. While the city’s two fireboats played their hoses, the flames scoured to push ships into the lake before the flames caught them. Around midnight, the wind provisionally changed and began blowing the flames back toward the burned-out areas. Still, it was the next afternoon before exhausted firefighters packed up their hoses and cleanup crews moved into the debris-filled Flats. There were, almost miraculously, no deaths. The Ringling Brothers Circus had pitched its Big Top near the Fisher-Wilson lumberyard, where the fire broke out, but panic was prevented by the quick action of streetcar conductors, who shouted: “Everyone off the line and forcible hustled them away, allowing the circus tents not to burn.”

Twenty-five of the 35 circus cars were destroyed, but manager Al Ringling quickly called in replacements to keep the show on the road.

The Flats fire did $81.5 million in damage, destroying 15 to 20 buildings and 1,000,000 board feet of lumber. It left a huge gash in the viaduct, one of the two major bridges across the river from downtown, and forced rerouting of trains, buses, and the city police, who could not get into the area. Coast Guard vessels assisted in the rescue effort.

Two lumberyards were destroyed and a third sustained heavy losses during the Flats fire on May 25, 1914. Here, the Central Viaduct is lit up with flames.

Looking at a Year

Central Viaduct collapse andowntown threatened.

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The Plain Dealer. May 26, 1914.