

Land, Sea, Air / Disasters

Community Life / Communities

By Jennifer Houdek

FAIRBANKS BURNS – 1906

Woodstoves and other open flames were the bane of frontier towns made of wood, and Fairbanks was among many that burned and rebuilt on the ashes of its first buildings.

Fairbanks was a new, but prosperous town in May 1906. Felix Pedro had discovered gold in 1902, and the region was flooded with prospectors, making E.T. Barnette's Trading Post a hub that grew into a town. Fairbanks was on the map, incorporated with Barnette as its first mayor in 1903, and the once unknown town soon became Alaska's largest city. By 1906 the population numbered 7,000. Fairbanks was considered the largest and most important city on the Pacific coast north of Vancouver, B.C.

Gold was the sole driver in the Fairbanks boom. In the year before the fire, gold production was valued at \$6 million to \$7 million. It was expected to double during 1906.

According to one report, the fire began at 3 p.m. on May 22, when a curtain brushed the open flame of a Bunsen burner in a dentist's office. The dentist was renting the space from Robert "Shorty" Geis, who owned a grand building on the corner of First and Cushman. Within four hours, the entire district was in ashes, from First to Third Avenues and Turner to Lacey Streets. The Washington Banking Company was gone, as were several saloons, two newspapers, clothing stores, hotels and restaurants, as well as the federal jail. The fire also consumed the First National Bank, which Sam and John Bonnifield had built a year earlier. It is said that Sam Bonnifield, a famed gambler from the Klondike, hired local miners to pan gold from the ashes.

“The burned district covers three and a half blocks,” reported *The Grand Rapids Tribune* in its May 30 issue. The Wisconsin newspaper included an unofficial estimate of a \$1 million loss. “The First National Bank, the Washington Banking Company, and the court house, located in the burned district, probably were destroyed, as were many of the retail stores and saloons and possibly one or two hotels. The most important of the financial institutions in the city, the Fairbanks Banking Company, is intact.”

While some papers speculated that the food supplies had been destroyed and suffering was imminent, others reported that the Northern Commercial Company had been spared and that three steamers of supplies were headed to Fairbanks. One woman died, said the Wisconsin newspaper. No lives were lost, wrote a Nevada newsman.

Bill McPhee’s saloon was among the businesses that burned to the ground. Known throughout the Klondike and the Alaska goldfields, McPhee had many gold-rich friends, among them Clarence Berry. Clarence and Ethel Berry were newlyweds when they crossed the Chilkoot Pass and settled briefly at Fortymile where McPhee had a saloon. Nearly penniless, Clarence Berry tended bar to buy food. When news of an upriver strike came to Berry and his brothers, they were eager to set out, but too broke to buy an outfit. McPhee gave Berry the key to his cache and told Berry to help himself, a kindness that Berry never forgot. Later, when McPhee’s saloon burned in the Fairbanks fire, Berry telegraphed from San Francisco urging McPhee to rebuild, restock, and name a figure for any money he needed. He also set up a life-long pension for McPhee.

One day after the devastating fire, the *Fairbanks News* headlines proclaimed: *Fire Can Not Stop Fairbanks; New and Better Town Arising from Smoking Ruins*. Before noon, several businesses had reopened in temporary quarters. Workers were clearing the rubble and planning when to reopen the Butte Café and the Senate Saloon, as well as many others.

“Without a single exception all of the property owners will rebuild,” the paper reported. “Ruins and debris are being cleared away on every side today to make place for the foundations of new buildings.”

The Palace Hotel, which once stood near the corner of Cushman and Fourth Avenue, was one of the few fortunate buildings that survived the fire. According to historical societies in Fairbanks the hotel survived “in nearly its original condition.” The saloon was later renamed the Chena Hotel in 1957 and during the Alaska Purchase Centennial in 1967, was relocated to Alaskaland, now known as Pioneer Park, along with other historical Fairbanks buildings for preservation.

Fire awareness was heightened after the May 1906 disaster, especially in winter months when stoves were stoked and candle lit the dark days. On December 20 that year, news of an attempted arson sent chills through the residents of Fairbanks: “Excitement was rampant last night when it was known that at 11, Roy Maddocks and Herman Miller had discovered what appeared on its face to be an incendiary attempt to set fire to the Pioneer Stable and the Fairbanks Horse-shoeing Shop adjoining. Miller and Maddocks were walking along First Avenue and were some distance away from the blacksmith shop when they saw the flames and, running to the scene, they found that in between the two buildings had been placed against the wall an old towel and some shingles and that the wall was saturated with coal oil and set fire to. The two men were able to put out the fire before any major damage to the buildings was sustained.”

LINKS:

Festival Fairbanks, the History of Fairbanks:

<http://www.festivalfairbanks.org/history2.asp>

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska’s libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about the Fairbanks fire of 1906. Visit your local library or go online to see what’s available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **FAIRBANKS FIRE 1906** or **ALASKA DISASTERS**.

RECOMMENDED READING:

Alaska Geographic Society. *Fairbanks*. Anchorage: Alaska Geographic Society, 1995.

Cole, Dermot. *Historic Fairbanks: An Illustrated History*. San Antonio, Tex.: Historical Publishing Network, 2002.

Cole, Dermot. *Fairbanks: A Gold Rush Town that Beat the Odds*. Fairbanks: Epicenter Press, 1999.

Cole, Terrence. *Crooked Past: The History of a Frontier Mining Camp, Fairbanks, Alaska*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1991, 1994. First published as *E.T. Barnette: The Strange Story of the Man who Founded Fairbanks*. Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., 1981, 1984.

Hedrick, Basil Calvin; Savage, Susan C. *Steamboats on the Chena: The Founding and Development of Fairbanks, Alaska*. Fairbanks: Epicenter Press, 1988.

Heller, Herbert L. *Sourdough Sagas: The Journals, Memoirs, Tales, and Recollections of the Earliest Alaskan Gold Miners, 1883-1923*. Cleveland World Publishing Co., 1966, 1967, 1977.